

# Food banks: more deposits needed

Photos and text by Denise Ng

The financial tsunami has strained public donations to local food banks, which are facing an increasing demand for free food.

The announcement by Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen in July 2008 of a 100-million-dollar scheme providing short-term food assistance drew much public attention to food banks in recent months.

Lee Fong and her daughter get by mainly on free food provided by the Hong Kong New Immigrant Service Association (HKNISA). Since emigrating from the Mainland to Hong Kong six years ago, Lee has received free food twice.

The jobless single mother has no regular income but the HK\$2,100 Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) from the Social Welfare Department. Over half of this allowance pays for her daughter's tuition fee. She has difficulty in making ends meet.

She learned about the free food service provided by HKNISA in its carnival held in Tai Wo Hau near her home. She said many single parents which are in need like her either do not know about food banks, or find that they are too far away from where they live.

"Some of my friends like me are single parents and they don't know

where to apply for the service. They live in Tin Shui Wai and Tuen Mun. It is too far away and too costly for them to go to Tsuen Wan (where HKNISA is located) to get the free food," Ms Lee said.

Apart from new immigrants like Ms Lee, unemployed people, low-income families or families with sudden changes can also apply for free food.

HKNISA has a flexible policy in providing free food service to those receiving CSSA.

The activities executive officer of HKNISA Joshua Paul Ip Wai-keung said: "Basically people receiving CSSA cannot apply for the free food service. However, there are exceptional cases. For example, some low-income families may have to spend a lot of money on arranging a family funeral, which means that they may not have enough money to buy food. So we will help them even if they get CSSA."

According to HKNISA, the number of people to which they have given free food has doubled in the past two years.

From January to October 2008, HKNISA offered free food to 1,672 people, almost double for the same period in 2006. The financial crisis is not the only reason for the increase. Rather, it is inflation



Rice is stored in the air-conditioned room in People's Food Bank of St James' Settlement.



People's Food Bank of St James' Settlement receives different kinds of food from donors.

that has also contributed to the increasing trend.

“Most applicants are referred by the Social Welfare Department or other social service organisations, while others come to our office directly to apply,” said Mr Ip.

After evaluating the applicants’ family situation and also their assets, according to Mr Ip, they often immediately approve the application and provide free food for them. Applicants need to wait for no longer than two days. “They cannot wait any longer. HKNISA wants to provide immediate help to the needy,” he added.

Once the application is approved, applicants will receive food assistance for as long as eight weeks. Some special cases can last for two to three years. They mainly receive dried food including rice, noodles and canned

food. Families with babies or elderly may get milk powder or porridge.

While demand for free food keeps on increasing, there is also a need for a greater variety of food.

Ms Liu, who refused to reveal her full name, has been receiving free food for more than one year. Having two sons but no work, she gets free food like noodles and canned food twice a month. She wishes the food bank could provide fresh vegetables.

“I am worried that the canned food will adversely affect the health of my children. I usually cook more vegetables in order to balance their diet,” Ms Liu added. “I wish the food bank could provide some vegetables and drinks like milk or Yakult which can provide us with more nutrients.”

Candy Cheng Hiu-lam, a member of the Family Care Department of HKNISA, said they hope their donors could provide them with bread and meat, like pork and chicken, in order to solve potential malnutrition in the underprivileged.

She also suggested that vegetables retailers can donate vegetables of inferior quality to solve the problem.

Other food banks provide free food in many other forms. The People’s Food Bank, the first food bank in Hong Kong, which was set up by St James’ Settlement, for example, offers three types of food assistance: dried food, like rice, noodles, meat, eggs and canned food; free meals at the centre; and cash coupons which allow recipients to have meals at designated restaurants.

The People’s Food Bank, which runs a territory-wide service, also sees an increasing number of people asking for free food as a result of the financial tsunami. In 2008, it gave out around seven tonnes of rice in October compared



Joshua Paul Ip Wai-keung is packing the food.

to only four to five tonnes in May to August.

Meanwhile, the food bank is facing dwindling donations.

Supervisor of the People’s Food Bank Connie Ng Man-yin said donations to the food bank have dropped by 30 to 40 per cent due to the recent economic turmoil and the Sichuan earthquake last May.

She said all the food and money for the food bank comes from public donations, 70 per cent from individuals and 30 per cent from international schools and food companies, like Nestle, Lee Kum Kee International Holdings Limited and Wellcome Supermarket.

Some private organisations have recently held fundraising activities for the food bank. Two months ago, Vitasoy International Holdings Limited held a fundraising activity called “2008 Jump Festival”.

Ms Ng predicted that more people will need free food after Christmas and the Chinese New Year, which falls at the end of January.

She explained that in the first few months following the financial




Centre supervisor of People's Food Bank Connie Ng Man-yin is showing the packed rice in the store room.



- 1: Boxes of noodles are piled on the shelves at the People's Food Bank.
- 2: The amount of food a person-in-need will receive for a week from the Hong Kong New Immigrant Service Association (HKNISA).
- 3: HKNISA provides mainly rice, noodles and canned food for the needy.
- 4: Milk powder is offered to families with babies by the People's Food Bank of St James' Settlement.

downturn last October, people could still live on their savings. However, once this is exhausted, they have to apply for food assistance.

Another food bank also foresees more people asking for free food after Christmas or the Chinese New Year.

Service coordinator of the community food bank of Kwun Tong Methodist Social Service Kong Wing-sze said that the effect of financial tsunami will spill over to other sectors of economy, like restaurants and retailing, so it is likely that more and more people will go to food banks. 

### Amount of dried food provided by the People's Food Bank for one person

Days	Rice (kilogram)	Canned food (can)	Noodles (pack)
7	3	7	7
14	5	14	14
21	7	21	21
28	10	28	28
35	12	35	35
42	14	42	42

Source: People's Food Bank, St James' Settlement