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The Quest for Plenty

Sub-Title

Wasted food helps the hungry

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Content

We Don't Have a Hunger Problem, We Have a Distribution Problem is the slogan emblazoned across the delivery truck parked in the back of Quest Outreach Society. Just inside the loading bay, a group of volunteers from Britannia Community Education are sorting food and getting ready to load it on the truck. The truck will deliver the food to Britannia Ice Rink, where a temporary market will be set up. Sixty registered families can then pick up the items they need for the week. The volunteers will be "paid" in food. A hot lunch will also be provided for everyone that day.

"We couldn't run our program without Quest. We get significant savings on the food we buy. It's critical to the success of helping families on the east side of Vancouver," says program coordinator Mike Evans.

Hard to believe people are going hungry in this province of plenty. Yet, the 2006 HungerCount produced by the Canadian Association of Food Banks reports that 81,248 people need to use food bank services in B.C. We also have the highest overall poverty and child poverty rates in the country.

Quest understands intimately that there is, in fact, plenty for all. Every day they rescue food from every sector of the food industry. The food is then sorted, processed, and redistributed to the hungry in the Lower Mainland.

In 2006 and 2007, thanks to 290 food suppliers, Quest recovered \$6.28 million worth of food—that's 6.15 million pounds of fresh vegetables and fruit, meat and fish, baked goods, and other staples that would have otherwise rotted away in a landfill.

"All our food is donated and it's all good quality," says executive director Shelley Wells. "We get surpluses, or odd-sized fruits or vegetables with slight blemishes. The packaging may be damaged a bit, or it's approaching the expiry date."

Take a walk through their warehouse and you'd think you were in a big-box supermarket. There are walk-in coolers, freezers, and row upon row of shelving laden with canned fruits and veggies, carbs, and even junk food. In the produce area, you may find beautiful, round, organic baby watermelons (most of the produce is organic), mixed leafy greens, and an unlimited supply of tomatoes year-round. There's something for every taste, even high-end gourmet fare like caviar, steak and lobster, and star fruit.

"It's a chance for people to try exotic things," says Wells.

They fill and empty their 575-square-metre warehouse every single day. The food goes out to social service agencies that then distribute it to their clients, feeding about 60,000 people per month. "But we're still capturing only one per cent of the food being wasted," Wells says.

The folks at Quest also prepare 8,900 hot sit-down meals, and even freeze and process a lot of the food in their commercial kitchen.

"We just received 12 tonnes of broccoli this week," says Wells. "It's being blanched and frozen now."

Thanks to the recent \$1-million Vancity Award, they'll be moving to a much larger facility and will be able to nearly triple their volume. Now, \$21 million worth of food will be redistributed to about 150,000 people in the Lower Mainland each month through neighbourhood houses, community kitchens, food banks, school lunch and food hamper programs, daycares, AIDS groups, and mental health organizations — 156 partners in all.

"Buying food from Quest really helps us stretch our budget," says Rhonda Alvarez Licon, program coordinator at the Helping Spirit Lodge Society. "One of our clients came in recently needing some cereal for her son just to get her to payday, and we were able to go to the participants' cupboard and make up a care package."

Quest also provides shopping services for its partner agencies' clients; the depot is not open to the general public. Four hundred customers a day shop at their warehouse store, paying 30 per cent of the wholesale price. They have a second "satellite" low-cost store on the Downtown Eastside.

"Every dollar we take in here generates \$13 worth of food and feeds six people," says Wells. She feels that capacity could be increased even more if there were more satellite depots throughout the Lower Mainland—that is, mini-stores set up at partner agencies to serve their own client base.

"That way we could move more food out of the warehouse faster and take more in. It would have a huge and immediate impact on the hungry population's ability to access healthy food."

Spring Gillard is the author of [Diary of a Compost Hotline Operator: Edible Essays on City Farming](#) (New Society, 2003), and a member of the Vancouver Food Policy Council. Find out more about Quest at questoutreach.org [1].



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[1] <http://www.questoutreach.org>