



FASTFACTS



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The Christmas Hamper That Gives Twice

Recognizing that in the midst of plenty there are many who do not have enough food this Christmas season, Winnipeg is brimming with holiday spirit! In the next few weeks, millions of dollars will create more than 20,000 food hampers to be delivered to homes all over the city, in a massive show of generosity.

Christmas hampers do have an important short-term benefit for those who receive them. But does trucking in hampers filled with items purchased in the suburbs have any negative impact on communities and businesses struggling to survive in neighbourhoods with high levels of poverty?

And if we are really trying to help the poor, why is it that we choose a method that is gone in two weeks and has no real lasting, transformative impact on the situation of those receiving the free food?

There is an alternative model at work in Winnipeg that is meeting the needs of both low-income families

AND the broader community.

The concept is simple. Donations collected by LITE (Local Investment Toward Employment) are invested in the local community. Winnipeggers are given the opportunity to channel that burst of Christmas gener-

osity towards the community's longer-term benefit. People in need get their food hampers and employment is created in the inner city. A double bang for your buck!

LITE in Action

Neechi Foods, an Aboriginal owned worker co-operative located in the heart of Winnipeg's North end, opened just over 10 years ago and provides local residents with

a wide variety of healthy food options. Many of Neechi's customers come from the nearby Lord Selkirk Park development. Many look forward to Christmas hampers each year and nobody would deny them this much needed gift. But the dilemma for Neechi Foods is that their sales drop significantly each December as a result. For a small business like Neechi, this can be devastating.

LITE turns a long-standing charitable tradition into a community strengthening activity and people are catching the new vision! Since its inception in 1994, LITE has collected more than \$800,000, more than 2,500 families have received the "Alternative Christmas hampers," and many more jobs and skill development opportunities have been created through grants.



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Giving a box of groceries to those who are short on food is a wonderfully generous gift. Yet nobody wants their generosity to force places like Neechi Foods to close its doors. After all, Neechi creates good jobs, which remains one of the best ways to ensure that people don't need food hampers in the first place.

By purchasing food from Neechi Foods and other food producing community groups, the LITE model is making sure that both the food AND the money used to buy the food, are supporting people in the inner city.

For example, every year Andrew Street Family Centre gets together a group of women from Winnipeg's North End to bake more than 14,000 cookies for Christmas hampers. All ingredients are purchased at Neechi with LITE's help.

A new project will see LITE purchase honey from a beekeeping business located at Fort Whyte Centre and run by Aboriginal youth from Gordon Bell High School.

Jobs are critical to reducing poverty in the inner city and LITE also contributes by providing grants to inner city organizations that create jobs for local residents. This includes writing, design, editorial, and delivery jobs at several community newspapers; skill development and job opportunities for youth in the West Broadway, Spence, and North End communities; start up support for initiatives like Ojijiita Pimatiswin Kinamatwin (OPK), a unique project that partners at-risk youth with Aboriginal journeymen carpenters to form a renovation crew revitalizing homes in Winnipeg's North End. At OPK's first house blessing, one of the youth was moved to say, "Thank you for giving us a chance to prove ourselves when no one else would!"

Many of the jobs created through the LITE model are short-term. But it can be the first step on the road to something bigger and better and it provides the opportunity to give, as well as receive. One younger woman, after finishing a food handling training course through the LITE project, felt inspired to complete her grade 12. Another pursued a food-related diploma at Red River Community College.

"Sometimes all it takes is that one opportunity to find out that you actually can do things," says Lillian Richards of Andrew Street Family Centre. "Suddenly much more seems possible. And in the meantime

these women earn some money. They get to buy presents for their kids and maybe some nice food for a good meal with the family. And they feel good that they are making food for others rather than just waiting for food to be sent to them."

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LITE is just one more example of how people living in distressed neighbourhoods are coming up with their own solutions to their own challenges. They are creating economic opportunities that improve social conditions and they are doing it in a way that really builds capacity in the community. LITE gives Winnipeggers the opportunity to contribute directly to inner city revitalization by moving from charity to development, from band-aids to real solutions, and from a hand-out to a hand-up.

- Brendan Reimer

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