

York Region Food Network

Strategic Plan 2019 – 2022



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Background

York Region Food Network (YRFN) was started by area food banks in 1986 to coordinate food drives and liaise between organizations that provide emergency food access in York Region. Over time, YRFN's scope of activities evolved to include advocating for fresh, nutritious, affordable food for all residents. Several complementary initiatives included involvement in student nutrition (1990), community garden programs (1993), Good Food Box (2009) and community kitchens (2010).

In 2001, YRFN incorporated under the banner of offering programs to increase access to food, pursue research and engage in education about food insecurity. YRFN's solution-based vision of a food system that could deliver healthy food for all was manifested in a new Vision (2010) and subsequently with the adaption of the York Region Food Charter (2013) and creation of the York Region Food Council (2019).

Organizational Goal

York Region Food Network's primary aim is to advance education and understanding of food insecurity and advocate for income-based responses.

The understanding of household food insecurity in Canada has changed dramatically over the past six years with the release of peer-reviewed research from [PROOF](#) at the University of Toronto. Using data from the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), PROOF has released annual reports to offer a comprehensive look at the state of food insecurity in Canada. With this data, we now have a better understanding of the solutions to food insecurity. In Canada, 1 in 8 households is food insecure. This amounts to over 4 million Canadians, including 1.15 million children. Food insecurity negatively impacts physical, mental, social health and costs the healthcare system considerably. Communities need to recognize food insecurity as a serious public health issue.

Context

York Region is large and sprawls over 1,762 sq. km. With a population of over 1 million, the Region is slated to grow to 1.5 million by 2031 and 1.8 million by 2041. York Region has an aging population, with the senior population growing faster than any other age group. By 2031, 1 in 5 people in York Region will be 65 years or older.

York Region is made up of a mix of urban and rural municipalities. Public transit systems are becoming well established on major regional roads but, due to the geographic sprawl, residents remain car dependent.

Relatively speaking, York Region is affluent, with a median household income of \$97,776 (2016 Census). [Eighty-six percent of York Region households are owned](#) – the highest rate in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA). Rental housing vacancy in York Region is extremely low and consequently the cost of housing is extremely high. This puts a lot of York Region residents in a very precarious and insecure financial position. Fifty-two percent of renter households in York Region are spending 30 percent or more on housing – the highest in the GTHA.

Due to the perception of affluence in the Region and the lack of social infrastructure, poverty is hidden. From the limited data available, approximately 7% of York Region households experienced food insecurity between 2009 and 2014. In 2016, this represents [24,700 food insecure households](#) in York Region.

Opportunities and Challenges for Program and Service Delivery

Opportunities:

York Region is rapidly growing and becoming increasingly diverse. With an aging population, there are endless opportunities for seniors' programming to combat social isolation and improve nutrition. As a hub for newcomers to Canada, York Region also offers many opportunities for programs that embrace and celebrate cultures, people and culinary traditions.

As more research about climate change becomes available, we are beginning to better understand the impact food and agriculture have on the climate crisis. This is an opportunity to educate our communities about food and climate change, showcase innovative and environmentally-sound food and agriculture activities and advocate for climate positive policies.

Food and agriculture intersect with a wide range of issues, including planning, environmental sustainability, culture and celebration, economic development, waste, water, social justice and education. As such, food touches a wide mix of policies, strategies and action plans at the Region level, including the Built Environment and Health Action Plan, [Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy](#), and [Sm4rt Living](#). Political documents that make mention of food open opportunities for collaboration, conversations and a diversity of voices at the table.

Challenges:

York Region is a two-tiered government, with nine local municipalities. Two levels of bureaucracy pose challenges in program and service delivery. York Region Food Network works closely with many departments at the regional level, including Economic Development, Community and Health Services and Environmental Services. Politically,

there is an element of uncertainty at the provincial level, with the boundaries of Public Health expected to change by 2020. We are unsure what our working relationship with Public Health will look like moving forward.

York Region's vast geography makes program and service delivery difficult. There is a lack of public transit and accessible venues. As a small organization, marketing is a challenge. We are constantly balancing localized promotion with regional promotion, often resulting in gaps in our external communications.

York Region Food Network is a precariously funded organization, receiving project-specific grants and funding from a variety of sources. Moving forward, this will continue to be a challenge in program and service delivery.

New Directions for York Region Food Network

Over the next three years, we will strive to advance York Region's community food programs through a values-led approach to community development and policy leadership.

In the past few years, York Region Food Network has experienced a steady state of growth. As the organization experiences the learning curve of expanding operations, staffing, and influence in the Region, this strategic plan prioritizes beliefs and values. This will ensure our guiding principles are at the foundation of all decisions and actions.

Vision:

Food for Health – Food for All

Mission:

YRFN drives change through education and advocacy, connecting and empowering people to access healthy food.

Core Beliefs:

Our work is guided by the fundamental belief in the right to food. York Region Food Network believes that as a signatory of the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#), Canada has a legal obligation to “respect, protect and fulfil the right to food”.

We believe that good food is crucial for physical, mental, emotional and cultural wellbeing. Food is a powerful tool for community building. Healthy communities are developed when we have diverse perspectives and lived experiences sharing a meal at a table.

We believe that food systems and food sovereignty have an important role to play in fostering [Truth and Reconciliation](#) and in respecting the [United Nations Declaration on](#)

[the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (UNDRIP). As an organization, we are committed to learning the truth and integrating learning and teachings into our program and service delivery.

We believe that systemic issues that benefit a few at the expense of many can only start to be changed when we have a mix of people at the table. Participants in community food programs need to represent the community, thus we welcome a mix of socio-economic backgrounds, ages, cultures and languages in all our programs and initiatives.

Core Values

We value health, cooking from scratch, prioritizing nutritious foods and taking a whole foods, hands-on approach to food preparation.

We value equity and social justice, applying a poverty reduction lens and anti-oppressive practices.

We value the power of choice because people are healthier when they can choose what food they eat.

We value the conversations and connections made when people with different perspectives and lived experiences share a meal.

We strive to have a positive environmental impact, prioritizing local and sustainably produced foods, regenerative agriculture, plant-based meals and waste-free practices.

We value food literacy and skills, creating educational programs around growing food, healthy cooking and the local food economy.

Strategic Priorities

York Region Food Network has identified strategic direction focused on three priorities:

1) Drive Change

We strive to drive change by advocating for income-responses to food insecurity, food sovereignty and the decolonization of the food system. Education and awareness of food responses, including regenerative agriculture, local and sustainably produced food and waste-free practices, are crucial to combating climate change.

2) Connect People

People living on low incomes are six times more likely to be socially isolated. Community food programs, such as community kitchens and gardens, reduce social isolation and build confidence among participants, while improving food knowledge and dietary behaviour. These programs do not solve household food insecurity.

When people connect around food, they relax, share experiences and ideas, form friendships and become better connected to their communities. We intend to expand our networks and use food programs to connect more people across York Region.

3) Increase Access to Healthy and Local Foods

York Region Food Network is committed to better meeting people where they're at. We will partner with a variety of community agencies to make our services more accessible. We will continue to look for best practices and programming that is innovative, inclusive and responsive to community needs and interests across York Region.

Strategic Priority #1	Drive Change
Goal 1.1	Challenge inequities that hinder people’s access to food and food sovereignty
Goal 1.2	Create policies that reflect organizational values. Develop partnership agreements that endorse our values.
Goal 1.3	Drive change, influence policy and raise awareness of inequities through the York Region Food Council
Initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educate staff, Board members, volunteers and participants on anti-oppression principles and practices, Indigenous Cultural Sensitivity Training, Calls to Action in the Truth and Reconciliation Report, anti-racism, anti-sexism, language and power, decolonizing the food system • Reduce waste and educate about the role of food in the climate crisis • Add glossary of terms on to website with links to subject-specific articles and training • Ensure 25% of external communications address inequities that hinders people’s access to food and food sovereignty • Create policy review calendar; Research and develop policies on Green Office Practices, Food Donations Policy, Food Procurement Standards, Inclusion and Anti-Oppression Principles and Values, Organizational Stance and Actions on Climate Change • Use the York Region Food Council to educate community, stakeholders, funders and politicians on food system issues and seek opportunities for collaboration • Build long-term funding case for the York Region Food Council • Use the York Region Food Council to connect with influencers in every municipality • Map food activities and opportunities in York Region; develop and maintain a database of champions in York Region that support community food programs and healthy food and social policy
Outcomes	<p>Apply an anti-oppression and a poverty reduction lens to everything that we do. Develop new policies. Create long-term opportunities for community collaborations. Create new partnerships, initiatives and projects. A food system approach is taken to events, advocacy, communications and outreach.</p>

Strategic Priority #2	Connect People
Goal 2.1	Increase awareness of YRFN in the community to bring more people into our network and programs
Goal 2.2	Broaden volunteer positions to offer more opportunities for residents to get involved
Initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update social media strategy and develop public relations strategy including standards for content and frequency of communications • Build and retain stakeholder database to record conversations with influencers and connectors • Develop internal standards for marketing and communications • Develop mobile and user-friendly website that meets AODA standards (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act) • Develop and implement strategy to better integrate all promotional tools (e.g. Eventbrite, MailChimp, website, social media) • Develop standardized program registration • Update volunteer manual and establish tracking mechanisms for volunteer engagements • Build a case of support for a Volunteer Coordinator
Outcomes	<p>Increase communication of impact stories with funders, partners, participants and the broader community.</p> <p>Increase demand for YRFN programs and services.</p> <p>Build partnerships with community agencies.</p> <p>Increase financial and in-kind donations.</p> <p>Engage more community members in volunteer opportunities at YRFN.</p>

Strategic Priority #3	Increase Access to Healthy and Local Food
Goal 3.1	Partner with community partners to make our programs and services more accessible in the community
Goal 3.2	Develop innovative and responsive programs that speak to current trends
Initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with community partners to make YRFN's programs and services more accessible in the community, providing programs that meet people where they are at • Develop standards to improve accessibility to our programs • Ensure YRFN participates on community/sector-appropriate networks and advisory committees to stay up to date with what's happening in the community and provide food sector input • Develop and implement an evaluation framework for programs and partnerships • Conduct annual review of community food programs in each municipality to identify gaps and opportunities
Outcomes	<p>Partner with 12 community agencies annually to deliver community food programs. Increase the scale and scope of YRFN's work, reaching more people and neighbourhoods in the Region. Each York Region municipality has community food programs.</p>

Glossary

Anti-Oppression Principles and Practices: Anti-oppression principles and practices seek to recognize the oppression that exists in our society and attempts to mitigate its affects to eventually equalize the power imbalance in our communities.

Community Food Programs: Offer welcoming spaces for people to come together to grow, cook, share and advocate for good food.

Decolonization of the Food System: Recognition of the sophisticated land and food systems that existed prior to contact with Europeans and settlers.

Food Insecurity: Inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints.

Food Literacy: Goes beyond nutrients or knowing how to cook and makes connections between where our food comes from, how it's grown and prepared, where we eat it and the people that we share it with. It includes an understanding of why we make the food choices that we do and the importance of enjoying food and eating.

Food Skills: A person with food skills has the information, abilities, and practices to acquire nutritious foods and prepare meals and snacks that are safe, nutritious and culturally acceptable. Food skills include knowledge, skills in using the senses, planning and technical skills.

Food Sovereignty: The right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods. Individuals and communities have the right to define their own food and agriculture systems.

Food System: A complex web of activities involving the production, processing, transport, consumption and waste management of food.

Income-Based Responses: Responses that put more money into people's hands, including increasing minimum wage, social assistance rates, refundable tax credits and basic income.

Lived Experience: Personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people.

Local Food Economy: Involves relationships between food producers, distributors, retailers and consumers, where they work together to increase food security and ensure economic, ecological and social sustainability of a community.

Meeting People Where They're At: Refers to going out into the community, meeting people where they are in terms of their background, knowledge and emotional level.

Regenerative Farming: A system of farming that focuses on healthy, mineral-rich, biologically diverse soils that grow healthy, mineral-rich food while also improving soils, crops and the livelihoods of the farmers.

Social Isolation: Stems from the reduction of a person's social participation or social contact, which may cause loneliness or other emotional distress. Social isolation is associated with lower general wellbeing and health, increased chance of premature death, depression, disability from

chronic disease, poor mental health, increased use of health and support services, reduced quality of life.

Systemic Issues: Issues inherent in an overall system, rather than due to a specific, individual, isolated factor. A change to the structure, organization or policies in that system could alleviate the systemic problem.

Truth and Reconciliation: In order to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission made 94 Calls to Action.