Narratives from the Frontline

Providing Emergency Food in York Region During COVID-19

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YORK REGION FOOD COUNCIL

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What is this research about?

During the COVID-19 pandemic existing food services ramped up and new food initiatives emerged. Between July 2020 and January 2021, a team of York Region Food Network (YRFN) staff and volunteers spoke with 46 York Region-based organizations. Each of these organizations shared their stories of working on the frontlines during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide food to their clients and communities. This research set out to identify gaps in services, document innovation and resiliency, better understand partnerships and collaborations, and explore opportunities for long-term coordination.

What did this research find?

All organizations pivoted how they delivered food programs during the pandemic by moving programming online, shifting to take out services or formalizing food access programs for the first time as an organization. Organizations faced several challenges in delivering their services including transportation and access to foods that were culturally and nutritionally appropriate for their clients.

Income was an issue for clients across all organizations, because inadequate income is why food insecurity exists. While food banks and meal programs saw an increase in first time service usage, the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) was viewed as the reason why service usage was not as high as anticipated. Alongside income security, housing and precarious employment were identified as key issues that intersect with food insecurity. There are inadequate affordable housing options in York Region and as such many households need to invest most of their monthly income into housing payments. This means that there is often not enough money left over for food.

Mental health, specifically the impacts of social isolation and loneliness, was also identified as a key concern for clients, staff and volunteers. Food was used as a social activity pre-pandemic, with a focus on community building. During COVID, some clients still used emergency meals as a time to socialize at a distance. Staff and volunteers experienced strain and stress in the long hours required, constantly changing circumstances, balancing work-life balance while working from home, and feeling pressure to not get sick.

As for organizational capacity, the pandemic saw an eroding of pre-pandemic partnerships, but for the most part, organizations spoke of positive experiences of organisations "coming together" during this crisis and a strengthening of communications between organizations.

How can we move forward?

We know that the playing field prior to COVID-19 was anything but level. The pandemic has revealed the massive gaps in our systems that leave many populations vulnerable under normal circumstance and even more so in emergencies such as a pandemic. This crisis has opened eyes and minds to the realities faced by so many people in our communities. As a society, we are at a pivotal moment and we have an opportunity to do things very differently moving forward. The analysis of these research findings has contributed to the development of recommendations for service providers, funders and all levels of government that would strengthen the local food security sector while also developing infrastructure to adequately monitor and reduce food insecurity.

At the community level, flexible funding and investment in increased coordination and communication within the food security sector, are identified as the way forward to build resiliency and to best meet the immediate needs of community. It has also been identified that all levels of government need to be responsible for reducing food insecurity and poverty. Governments need to work together to establish infrastructure and targets for food insecurity and poverty reduction, put through legislation that will protect the rights of workers and create income security programs that lift people out of poverty.

INTRODUCTION

Food Insecurity and COVID-19

COVID-19 has drastically changed food access and food insecurity in Canada by triggering income shocks that have left households in increasingly financially precarious situations and at an elevated risk of becoming food insecure or more severely food insecure. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a staggering 4.4 million Canadians, or one in eight people, were food insecure. [1] Despite the perceived affluence and wealth of York Region, an estimated 24,700 households faced food insecurity pre-pandemic. [2] In the first two months of the pandemic, food insecurity rates increased by 39 percent to impact one in seven people. [3]

Food insecurity takes a steep toll on every facet of a person's heath including socially, physically and mentally. Those who are food insecure face increased levels of social isolation due to strained finances that prevent gathering with friends or family or participating in cultural activities. [10] Physically, food insecurity increases risk of chronic illness, such as heart disease and diabetes, while decreasing lifespan. [11] Food insecurity also increases the risk of mental illness which is further worsened for those in environments that are high stress or socially isolated. [12] Similar to non-pandemic times, during COVID-19, those facing higher levels of food insecurity are more likely to report poorer mental health and increased anxiety than those in food secure households . [13] Feelings of stress and isolation have only been compounded during the pandemic as measures put in place to prevent the spread of disease have resulted in financial insecurity and social isolation for more people.

How Food Insecurity Impacts Taxpayers

Severe food insecurity costs the healthcare system twice as much when compared to those with sufficient access to food.[14] This cost to the healthcare system is preventable through ensuring everyone has sufficient incomes to purchase their own food with dignity.

We know the playing field prior to COVID-19 was anything but level. The pandemic has revealed massive gaps in our systems that leave many populations vulnerable under normal circumstances and even more-so in

WHO IS FOOD INSECURE

Food insecurity already disproportionally impacts Black[4], Indigenous[5] and racialized communities. Due to the same inequities and poverty that lead to food insecurity, these communities are also some of the hardest hit by COVID-19.[6]

Households headed by single mothers also experience higher rates of food insecurity.[7] During the pandemic women earning low incomes have been severely impacted, and the economy entered a "she-cession".[8] Women have experienced job loss, reduced hours, and unemployment compared to men, and at worse rates than previous recessions.[9]

emergency circumstances such as a pandemic. Inadequate social assistance programs and a lack of decent work i means the financial wellbeing of people in Canada is severely threatened. This has resulted in an increase in food insecurity rates.

During COVID-19, food security initiatives have been at the forefront of action from community groups, funders, and all levels of government. These initiatives have been designed to provide residents with access to food during this crisis. At the community level, food security initiatives have meant meal programs and food hamper services, and the creation of networks among service providers in the emergency food sector. While food security initiatives have been a vital response during the COVID-19 pandemic, they do not address food insecurity.

Food Security & Food Insecurity

Food Security is when "all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."[15]

Food Insecurity is the "inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints."[16]

Degrees of Food Insecurity

Marginal food insecurity is when households or individuals worry about running out of food and/or limited food selection due to a lack of money for food.

Moderate food insecurity is when households compromise in quality and/or quantity of food due to a lack of money for food.

Severe food insecurity is when households miss meals, reduce food intake and at the most extreme go day(s) without food.

Food insecurity will only be reduced when its root causes - poverty and systemic inequities - are addressed.

Food Stories Research

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Canada in March 2020 it caused major shutdowns, sending people and services scrambling. In the early months of the pandemic, food took centre stage. Existing food services ramped up and new food initiatives emerged. Recognizing a need for coordination and communication between agencies working in food, the Regional Municipality of York and United Way Greater Toronto formed an Emergency Food Access Cluster as part of their 3C Initiative. Agencies supporting York Region residents with food access had an opportunity to come together regularly, learn about who was doing what and explore ways to support one another so the community could be better served. These regular conversations among service partners led to new community knowledge about local and regional food initiatives, new partnerships and collaborations, and innovative approaches for reaching community. These conversations also inspired 'Food Stories'.

Through the 'Food Stories' research project we collected stories from community groups to highlight the experiences of service providers during COVID-19 and their perspectives on the experiences of their clients. The goals of this research were to:

01 Capture who was impacted, where the gaps were and who was missed by service providers;

02 Document the innovation and resiliency of the sector through stories;

03 Better understand if and how initiatives worked together;

04 Better understand opportunities for a more coordinated emergency food system in York Region.

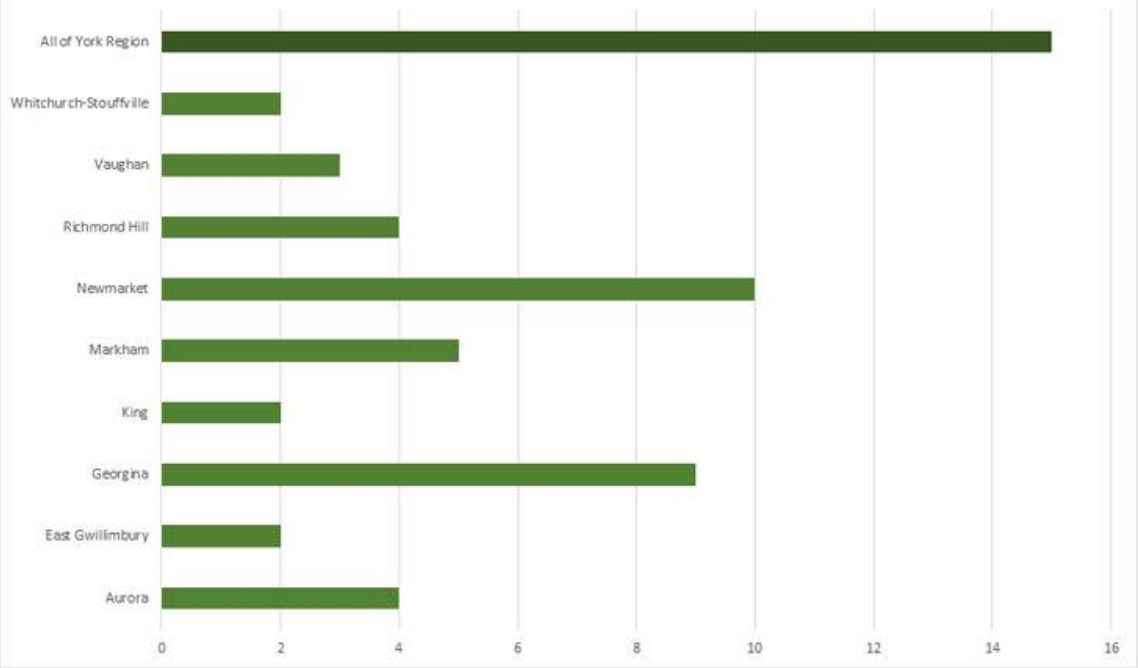
A diverse cross-section of food initiatives contributed to this study including food banks, meal programs, shelters, support networks and cultural associations. Since every unique initiative catered specific demographics, understanding each organizations' approach and needs was best understood through the collection of qualitative stories.

Upon designing and carrying out this research, voices of those with lived experience of food insecurity were not included. While the researchers acknowledge that this is a major gap in the research, as experiences of clients were relayed through service providers, this research was intended to be one piece of a large, complicated picture of food insecurity in York Region. Further research is needed to capture the experiences and needs of those who experience food insecurity.

Data Collection

Between July 2020 and January 2021, a team of York Region Food Network (YRFN) staff and volunteers spoke with 46 York Region-based organizations over phone or video call. Each of these organizations shared their stories of working on the frontlines during the COVID-19 pandemic providing food to their clients and communities. Each interviewer conducted semi-structured interviews that spanned 20-35 minutes in duration. Questions were developed by YRFN's food policy team in consultation with United Way Greater Toronto and the Regional Municipality of York. Organizations were approached for interviews based on a list compiled from United Way's Local Love Fund recipient list, YRF's Emergency COVID-19 Resource list, 3C Food Access Cluster participants and word of mouth.

Since interviews were conducted over the course of seven months, two waves of public perception and public policies were captured. The first round of interviews took place in summer 2020 between the first and second wave of COVID-19. At this time, students had not yet returned to school, the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) was ending and there was relatively low service usage compared to earlier in the pandemic. The second round of interviews were conducted in fall 2020. Students had returned to school, CERB transitioned into EI (Employment Insurance), COVID-19 cases were increasing as the second wave of COVID picked up and December holidays presented uncertainty for community members and service providers.



Through this research 65 organizations were contacted and with a 70% response rate, 46 interviews were conducted. Participating organizations served one or more municipalities in York Region. Number of Organizations Servicing York Region's Municipalities {Chart}

FOOD STORIES FINDINGS

Overview

Organizations that were contacted for this research operated food securityii projects in York Region during the COVID-19 pandemic. These initiatives sought to increase access to food for community members and clients. Participating organizations fell into three broad categories:

1. Those that include food security as a part of their mandate and work in food access regularly, such as food banks and meal programs.
2. Those that incorporated food into their other programming pre-pandemic but formalized or expanded their food security efforts due to the pandemic.
3. Those that are newly involved or pivoted to supply emergency food as an urgent response to community needs.

Generally, the organizations that fell within the first category ramped up their services by distributing a greater quantity of prepared meals, food hampers and grocery gift cards than they would have pre-pandemic. These organizations extended existing or added supplementary programming to meet the growing demand for their services.

Organizations that fell in the second and third categories did not typically focus on food; however, because of the pandemic, they shifted to focus on immediate needs such as food. Food access initiatives were either new to them or food was seen as secondary to their regular programming. Many of these organizations support seniors, folks who have compromised immune systems, newcomers and refugees, youth and young families. They invested more resources into food initiatives when their clients were struggling to access food during the pandemic. Newmarket African Caribbean Canadian Association (NACCA), for example, explained that pre-pandemic they did not include food initiatives as part of their services. Their food operations started following a Region-wide survey lead by Black community organizations to their networks that clearly identified the need for community food relief. NACCA swiftly responded by shifting resources from regular service and programming to focus on food: securing funding for grocery gift cards and fresh produce for their membership community, in the Newmarket, Aurora, East Gwillimbury.

Organizational Pivots

The pandemic resulted in changes to programming across organizations. The organizations we interviewed typically saw their client numbers rise throughout the pandemic. Some organizations such as YMCA, Jewish Russian Community Centre and the Georgina Pop-Up Breakfast Club initiated new emergency food services in the form of food banks and emergency breakfast/snack hampers as a response to the pandemic. All organizations pivoted how they delivered food programs. For example, many food banks that once offered clients an opportunity to shop for their food preferences, started offering pre-packed food hampers. Meal programs that once focused on community building and reducing social isolation shifted to takeaway meals to respect physical distancing protocols. Many organizations shifted in-person programming to online, such as group sessions and cooking classes.

Challenge to Service Delivery: Transportation

The pandemic highlighted transportation as a critical issue to food security. Transportation was a significant barrier for clients accessing both emergency food services and grocery stores. Service providers, such as Community and Home Assistance to Seniors (CHATS) and CAYR Community Connections, said their clients feared leaving their homes and/or taking transit. This was particularly true for seniors. Other providers, such as Women's Support Network of York Region, Concerned Citizens for the Homeless and Humanity First, shared that most of their service users have low incomes or rely on income supports. These supports are incongruent with the high costs of transportation in the Region. Many people simply cannot afford the costs of transportation.

Since transportation and mobility were noted as critical barriers to accessing services, many organizations started to offer home delivery to address site closures and to better support the needs of service users. Rose of Sharon and Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) cited their ability to connect regularly with clients through home delivery service as a positive outcome of this situation.

Based in Georgina, Routes Connecting Communities filled the need for delivery and transportation for many residents and organizations across York Region. The need for grocery shopping and grocery delivery was also prevalent during the pandemic. Organizations such as CHATS and the Chasdei Kaduri Jewish Food Bank either offered grocery delivery or organized volunteers to perform grocery deliveries to fill this need.

Challenge to Service Delivery: Access to Appropriate Food

For food to be appropriate it needs to fit clients' cultural needs and dietary needs. The food available as emergency food does not suit everyone's preferences, or dietary and cultural needs. Allowing clients to make their own food selection was the norm pre-pandemic for many organizations. However, with the need to physically distance, the increased demand for emergency food services and reduced capacity, many pantries and food banks opted to provide their clients with premade food hampers rather than customized hampers.

A small number of organizations provided customizable boxes for clients throughout the pandemic, maintaining self-determination for clients. These organizations included 105 Gibson, Humanity First, and the Chasdei Kaduri Jewish Food Bank. 105 Gibson made efforts to personalize the food boxes based on clients' dietary and cultural needs and provide as many fresh items as possible. Other organizations such as Markham African Caribbean Canadian Association (MACCA) and CHATS, though they did not provide customizable boxes catered pre-made boxes to align with the cultural needs of communities they were serving. For example, CHATS worked with two local organizations to provide specialized food hampers, catered to Chinese, Russian, Farsi and South Asian communities.

Income Security, Employment and Housing, Community & Mental Health

When discussing service users' experiences with food insecurity, three dominant themes emerged in the interviews: income security, affordable housing, and employment. Food insecurity occurs when households cannot access food due to financial constraints, making employment, rent and incomes a pivotal part of the conversation around long-term, sustainable food insecurity solutions.

By contrast, emergency food programs, such as food banks and hampers, were widely viewed as immediate, short-term or "band-aid" solutions to food insecurity. Systemic changes were discussed by multiple service provides and will be addressed in the Recommendations section of this report.

INCOME SECURITY

When somebody experiences a financial shock, their food budget is one of the first things to be impacted. Rent and utilities are fixed expenses – one cannot just pay a portion of their rent or mortgage. Food, however, is a discretionary expense. One's food budget can fluctuate – one can purchase less food or modify their food purchasing to accommodate other expenses.

Consequently, in our interviews with food security initiatives, income security is a theme that emerged repeatedly. Many organizations reported that they do not record their clients' income for data purposes or means testing. However, they know income is a central issue because of conversations with clients, working in socially marginalized neighbourhoods or the very fact that people reached out for emergency food support.

CANADIAN EMERGENCY RESPONSE BENEFIT (CERB)

On March 25, 2020, the federal government announced the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) to support workers and businesses during the COVID19 pandemic. CERB provided Canadians whose employment was impacted by COVID−19, with $2000 per month for up to four months to ensure peoples' basic needs could be met. This was a crisis response and a swift reaction meant to address the immediate needs of people at the beginning of the pandemic. An enhanced Employment Insurance and Canadian Response Benefit (CRB) eventually replaced CERB in late September 2020.

When speaking with organizations in the late summer and early fall of 2020, many were concerned about what would happen once CERB ended. Some organizations explained that they were not seeing as many clients as they anticipated, and they theorized that was due to CERB.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Several organizations including the Women's Support Network of York Region highlighted the continued inadequacy of Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). Many of their service users depend on these social assistance programs, and they were not alone in when they said, "people can't survive on OW and ODSP." ODSP and OW recipients receive a fraction of CERB, and the monthly incomes are too low to afford rent let alone food. This is a persistent concern that has been exacerbated by the rising costs of living during the pandemic. Examples of increased costs of living included sanitizer and masks, increased transit costs to take taxis over buses to decrease chances of contracting COVID-19, and the inability to shop for sales at multiple grocers. Clients on ODSP and OW have received little additional support during the pandemic.

QUICK FACTS

- According to the 2016 census, 12 percent of York Region's residents were living on low incomes.[17]
- Affordable housing is considered below 30 percent of a household's income before tax.[18]
- In 2016, 52 percent of people who rented in York Region spent over 30 percent of their incomes on rent. 27 percent spent more than 50% of their income on rent.[19]

EMPLOYMENT & HOUSING

Pre-pandemic, many people in York Region's communities were just making ends meet. Then lockdowns and closures created financial insecurity; jobs were under threat in unpredictable ways. During the pandemic, many emergency food services such as Aurora Food Pantry and Georgina Community Food Pantry saw a substantial increase in first-time clients. These new clients shared stories of recent layoffs, reliance on part-time jobs and precarious employment. With the high cost of living in York Region, organizations stated their clients regularly faced the decision of whether to pay rent for the month or buy food. Prioritizing affordable housing was discussed by participants as a solution to food insecurity and necessary for a just recovery.

In their report "Reimagining a Just Recovery" Social Planning Council of York Region flagged CERB as inadequate in addressing the high costs of living in York Region.

Nearly 2/3 of people who are food insecure earn their primary source of income through employment.[20] Employment is increasingly precarious as with fewer full-time stable positions with benefits, and increasing amounts of temporary, involuntary part-time work, and solo self-employed work.[21] According to 2016 data, 47 percent of people in York Region only worked "part-year, part-time."[22] This indicates that precarious labour is prevalent in York Region.

Social Determinants of Health & Food Insecurity

There are many factors that determine the health of individuals that range from genetics and lifestyle to social and economic factors.[23] Social determinants of health are non-medical factors that impact health and can create health inequities between individuals and groups.[24] This includes factors such as income, employment, education, culture, discrimination, race and racism.[25]

Similar to social determinants of heath, data shows food insecurity impacts some Canadians more than others. Low income is consistently a marker of vulnerability to food insecurity. As such, food insecurity is highest for Aboriginal Canadians, those who rely on social assistance income, single parent households headed by mothers, and households that rent compared to owning a home. [26]

COMMUNITY & MENTAL HEALTH

Client and community needs were heard and organizations adjusted their services accordingly. For example, many organisations reported transitioning their in-person programming to online video calls. Overwhelmingly, there was a need to reduce social isolation and loneliness for clients. We heard that clients were scared to leave their house to go grocery shopping or access services. Client isolation was a primary concern for service providers, especially among seniors. A handful of organizations, which included food as a minor part of their overall services, had initiatives in place specifically to reduce isolation among seniors (i.e. Neighbourhood Network).

Organizations, including CMHA, Hope House Community Hospice and DANI (Developing and Nurturing Independence), discussed how food was used as a social activity pre-pandemic. Still, they pivoted to offer individual meals rather than food in a congregate setting. Several organizations expressed their programming was typically focused around "relationship building" or "community building" pre-pandemic and with physical distancing and lockdowns, that element was removed from programs. This was especially the case for community meal programs.

Clients continued to use meal programs during COVID-19 to socialize at a distance with staff, volunteers, friends or other clients. York Region Food Network (YRFN), Welcoming Arms, and Krasman Centre highlighted, even with takeout meal programs in place clients used meal programs to socialize, especially in warmer months. They would chat with service providers or other people getting meals and eat together at a distance on a nearby lawn.

There was a mix of information from organizations about staff and volunteer's mental health. In a few cases where volunteer support was necessary for operation there was pressure on volunteers not to get sick. In one case, volunteers formed a 'bubble' where they saw only one another and no one else outside their households. They did this to protect each other from getting sick and ultimately to prevent their program from being temporarily shut down. In another case, the staff participant said their whole operation would go down if one volunteer got sick. Some organizations expressed that their volunteers, especially those in leadership roles, were exhausted and burnt out but there were ongoing fears of bringing new people onto the team. On the other hand, a few other organizations suggested their volunteers were doing well compared to the general population because their ability to socialize and do something purposeful.

In terms of staff well-being, we heard from some service providers, such as CHATS, that workers felt drained due to a reduction in volunteers and shifting services led to working long days and weekends, particularly early in the pandemic. Working from home also challenged some organizations' service provision and presented a learning curve for staff.

Organizational Capacity

Partnerships & Volunteers

A fascinating aspect of this research project was how collaborations, networks and partnerships developed and changed throughout the pandemic. In a few cases, the pandemic meant an eroding of existing formal partnerships or joint initiatives that needed to be put on hold. However, for most organizations, changes in partnerships were often viewed as a positive experience and organizations expressed gratitude for the new relationship(s). John Howard Society of York Region, for instance, shared their positive experiences with organisations "coming together" and a strengthening of communications between organizations.

Until the pandemic, many organizations reported operating in silos. The pandemic opened communication channels for many organizations out of necessity for information and resources. Collaboration tables, such as the 3C Food Access Cluster initiative established by The Regional Municipality of York and United Way Greater Toronto also resulted in greater service delivery coordination and a better understanding of community needs.

The mobilization of volunteers was vital to food responses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Volunteers organized fundraising initiatives, went grocery shopping for others in the community, delivered food baskets and gave many hours to prepare, pack and sort food. Pivoting volunteer opportunities was an option for some organizations, while other organizations paused on volunteer operations.

Funding & Donations

Organizational capacity for food programming altered due to funding opportunities and donation changes during the pandemic. Several organizations including Humanity First Canada, Hummingbird Hub Community Centre and Parya Trillium Foundation received funding through United Way Greater Toronto's Local Love Fund to deliver pandemic response services including food. The Local Love Fund helped them stay afloat throughout the pandemic while other funding sources were unstable or in flux.

The narrative around donations was organization dependent, though it was typically based on resource scarcity. Some organizations, such as the Chasdei Kaduri Jewish Food Bank, told a story of communities, businesses and farms coming together in a time of need. Other organizations such as Humanity First, spoke of long line ups, operating beyond their capacity and a desperate need of donations to meet the ever-growing demand.

ANALYSIS

This research has revealed opportunities to strengthen the York Region food sector.

Service Delivery

Throughout the interviews, two dominate approaches to service delivery emerged. At the core of the first approach is eradicating hunger. Many organizations supported the immediate needs of community members with food access. Due to contractual obligations and a scarcity of food stocks available, these organizations conducted a means test for access to service. In addition to fresh product, typically service-users received a large quantity of traditionally North American foods such as non-perishable pre-packaged foods in addition to some fresh and perishable foods.

At the core of the second approach is food as a right. This approach values inclusion, diversity and culturally appropriate responses to food security, and it prioritizes the service users' experience. As much as possible, service providers attempted to reduce stigma associated with accessing food supports. In this approach, food sovereignty – the right of people to healthy and culturally relevant food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food systems - is prioritized and service users are given autonomy and choice. Service users received customized food boxes, meal selections and grocery gift cards. Though this approach was more challenging for service providers, it increased clients' agency over their food choices. Organizations that held this perspective often supported community members' immediate needs (food and other) and endorsed policy and income solutions as ways to eradicate food insecurity.

Resource Scarcity

Access to fresh food and cultural foods were issues discussed in several interviews. When talking about fresh food (eggs, milk, meat, produce), organizations told a narrative of resource scarcity. There were limited quantities of fresh food available. While resource scarcity was extreme for fresh food, that narrative persisted across non-perishables too. Due to this scarcity, clients were at the will of donors and service providers to determine their diet. Organizations commented on the inefficiencies and inadequacies of this charitable model.

Lack of, or inadequate, culturally appropriate foods was also identified as a challenge in the COVID-19 food response.

Language

Throughout the interviews, it became very clear that as a sector, we do not use common language. This impacts our understanding of the issues experienced by community and how we assess and evaluate our collective response.

Food Security, Food Insecurity

Generally speaking, the terms food security and food insecurity are used as binary opposites. This is highly problematic because in Canada 'food security' and 'food insecurity' have very different definitions and understandings. 'Food security' is when "all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Community food programs may increase food security by giving people the ability to access safe and nutritious foods, but they do not reduce food insecurity. This is because, food insecurity, defined as "inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints" is about the economic means to access food.

At the onset of COVID-19 and mass work closures, the food sector expected disaster because as peoples' income levels are negatively impacted, food insecurity rates increase. This understanding is based on the premise that one's food budget is expendable. While rent, transportation and medications are fixed expenses, one can be creative with their food budget based on how much they have available. This may mean eating less, skipping meals, or purchasing different qualities or brands of food. Food insecurity thus, cannot be discussed in isolation to housing, decent work, income security and public infrastructure such as long-term care, childcare, and public transportation.

We need to be careful in how we discuss COVID19 food responses. These responses addressed immediate hunger and perhaps provided some food security to community members; they did not (and will not) reduce food insecurity.

The only response that directly impacted food insecurity rates was the CERB. Though not without its own criticisms, this direct cash transfer from government to individuals provided many people with a safety net that afforded them the ability to survive through the worst of COVID-19.

Personal Perspectives

Language across the emergency food and non-profit sector needs to incorporate anti-oppressive practices that allow for all food preferences and dietary needs to be supported without judgement or monitoring. Personal values of staff and volunteers surrounding food need to be left at the door and replaced with a sector-wide agreed upon language around food that has been taught through training to eliminate biases.

At times, individuals (volunteers or staff) in the emergency food sector brought their own biases, guided by Western cultural norms, to service delivery. Applying personal and cultural perceptions around income and food is dangerous because it directly/indirectly places judgements and stigma on service users. This may prevent service users from acquiring foods that align with their dietary needs and preferences.

Several organizations expressed judgement over how personal income was spent and questioned service users' choices. This could be identified as monitoring individuals' choices.

For the most part, organizations identified the need for culturally appropriate foods. Organizations that serve specific ethno-cultural populations were able to best respond to the need for culturally appropriate foods. However, most organizations identified challenges in adequately and appropriately responding to the need for culturally relevant food. Insufficient race-based data and lack of staff/volunteer diversity meant there was a lack of understanding of what culturally appropriate foods are needed and for whom.

Partnerships and Collaborations

Through formal structures, like the 3C Cluster Tables, and informal connections, COVID-19 has given agencies and initiatives the opportunity to connect regularly. Some agencies and initiatives were familiar with working in partnerships and collaboratively; and for other organizations, COVID-19 presented an opportunity for collaboration and to get to know other agencies better.

Agencies and initiatives partnered in a variety of capacities – supporting one another with food procurement, delivery and transportation, co-designing programs, identifying gaps in service delivery and seeking out conversations in order to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the sector moving forward.

During COVID19, partnerships described by participating organizations were frequently informal, short-term and involved the sharing of resources and information. While agencies and initiatives spoke positively about their experiences with these "collaborations", "networks" and "partnerships", there was no indication of what the future of these partnerships and collaborations could or should look like post-COVID-19.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the weaknesses in our social safety net and has shown that when there is a will, there is a way. When crisis hits and public health is put in jeopardy our organizations and governments can be decisive and efficient in protecting their residents.

From this research, a wide variety of recommendations emerged to better coordinate the regional emergency food sector. Policy recommendations also emerged to provide people with the income security they need to prevent food insecurity in the first place.

For the Regional Emergency Food Sector

Coordination and emergency planning within the regional emergency food sector may help to improve current service delivery and prepare the sector in case of future crises.

Service providers

Organizations and service providers are at the centre of ensuring services are delivered with dignity and respect.

For service providers it is recommended that:

- Moving beyond the pandemic, organizations in York Region need to continue to strengthen their communication and collaborations with one another through establishing a formal network, committee or working group. Through this network there will be the ability to:
  - Coordinate and share resources and information,
  - Understand the services and supports offered across the emergency food sector and non-profit sector more broadly,
  - Offer trainings relevant to the sector, such as anti-oppression and mental health for staff & volunteers,
  - Create a platform to hear the voices of service users and for future food security research initiatives in the Region,
  - Respond to emergencies more effectively in the future,
  - Form a collective voice for food security and food insecurity in York Region.
- The emergency food sector establish Best Practices based on service user voices and experiences.
  - Best Practices identify common language to be used sector-wide to better understand and represent service users, and to make assessments and evaluations collective.
  - Best Practices incorporate anti-oppressive practices and define what it means to provide culturally appropriate foods and respond in a culturally respectful way.

Funders

For funders it is recommended that:

- There is long-term investment into services and programming, with sustainability in mind. The non-profit sector, continually face the precarious nature of funding and the instability of employment in this sector. The emergency food sector cannot continue to rely primarily on volunteer labour and inconsistent donations. Flexible and core funding would let food security organizations adapt to new and unanticipated challenges, offer predictability and contribute to a more consistent level of service.
- Funding is focused on capacity building and the systemic change needed to lift people out of poverty and alter our food system. We need to ensure that we support immediate needs while also addressing the root cause of food insecurity. .

Policy Recommendations to Reduce Food Insecurity

Throughout this research, it was evident that many of the concerns highlighted by organizations were policy issues, such as livable incomes, decent work, and affordable housing. We need to work towards improving public policy, strengthening our social safety net so we can reduce and prevent food insecurity and poverty.

It is recommended that:

- All levels of government:
  - Formally acknowledge that food insecurity is an urgent public health crisis that impedes human rights and social justice, and addressing food insecurity requires immediate action.
  - In partnership with researchers, food security organizations and community, develop a comprehensive policy framework to seriously and adequately address food insecurity and reduce poverty.
- The Federal government needs to commit to regularly measuring, analysing and reporting the prevalence and severity of food insecurity in all provinces and territories in a timely manner. This process needs to include ongoing analysis of disaggregated race-based food insecurity data, including Indigenous and Black Canadians.[27]
- Federal and Provincial governments establish targets for the reduction of food insecurity and poverty and be required to report on their progress towards reaching those targets regularly. Good public policy can have a significant impact on reducing food insecurity if it addresses the root cause of the problem – poverty.
- The Federal and Provincial governments need to work together to ensure all workers, including migrant workers, have decent work. This means raising minimum wages, legislating paid sick days for all workers, ensuring workplace health and safety and eliminating perverse incentives that increase part-time work, such as exemptions from paying benefits.
- The Federal and Provincial government collaborate to create Income Security so no one living in Canada lives below the poverty. This could be done through policies such as tax credits, improved Employment Insurance and ensuring Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program rates are liveable.
- Governments invest in affordable housing and rent controls in York Region so that individuals and families living on low incomes can afford to live in the Region without compromising their food security. The cost of living, especially housing, is high in York Region. Expenses such as rent and utilities are fixed, while spending on food can be cut and modified by reducing the quality or amount of food purchased to accommodate for other expenses to the point of food insecurity.
- Municipal and regional governments have dedicated staff who can be members of Food Councils and food networking groups.
- Municipal and regional governments need to also play a role in creating an enabling environment for the creation of community gardens, community farms and other grassroots food initiatives that build food sovereignty.
- Dedicated governmental resources are available to build a coordinated regional food system. Many stakeholders operate within York Region's food system. Resources need to be dedicated to conducting a York Region Community Food Assessment, mapping food security initiatives and research. It is imperative that the regional food system is in regular communication and works collaboratively to address the immediate food needs of the community.

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Appendix

Organization	Service Area (Location)
105 Gibson Centre	Markham
360° Kids Support Services	Richmond Hill & Markham
Aurora Food Pantry	Aurora
Canadian Mental Health Association	York Region (Newmarket)
CAYR Community Connections	York Region (Newmarket)
Chasdei Kaduri Jewish Food Bank	Vaughan
CHATS (Community and Home Assistance to Seniors)	York Region
Concerned Citizens for the Homeless in Newmarket	Newmarket
Cornerstone Christian Community Church	Markham
Crosslands Church	Newmarket
DANI: Developing and Nurturing Independence	Thornhill/Vaughan
Family Services of York Region	York Region (Richmond Hill)
Food Bank of York Region	York Region (Vaughan)
Gathering Place	Georgina
Georgina Community Food Pantry	Georgina
Georgina Pop Up Breakfast Club	Georgina
Girls Inc. of York Region	York Region (Newmarket)
Helping Hands Food Pantry - Maple Hill Baptist Church	Georgina
Holland Landing Food Pantry	East Gwillimbury
Hope for Today Fellowship Church Food Pantry	Georgina
Hope House	Aurora, Richmond Hill, King
Humanity First	Vaughan
Hummingbird Community Hub	Whitchurch-Stouffville
Inn from the Cold	Newmarket
Jericho Youth Services	Georgina
John Howard Society of York Region	York Region (Markham)
JRCC (Jewish Russian Community Centre)	York Region (Vaughan & Richmond Hill & Thornhill)
Krasman Centre	Richmond Hill & Newmarket
MACCA (Markham African Caribbean Canadian Association)	Markham
NACCA (Newmarket African Caribbean Canadian Association)	Newmarket
Neighbourhood Network	Northern 6 (Aurora)
Newmarket Food Pantry	Newmarket
Newmarket Housing Coop	Newmarket
Parya Trillium Foundation	Richmond Hill, Thornhill and Markham (Markham)
Rose of Sharon	York Region (Newmarket)
Routes Connecting Communities	Georgina
Salvation Army - Northridge Family Services	York Region (Aurora)
SEPYR/CCSYR (Settlement and Education Partnership in York Region/Catholic Community Services of York Region)	York Region
Shine Through the Rain Foundation	Newmarket
St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church Sutton- Community Meal	Georgina
Valleyview Alliance Church	Newmarket
Welcoming Arms	Aurora
Women's Support Network of York Region	York Region (Newmarket)
YMCA	York Region
York Region District School Board	York Region
York Region Food Network	York Region (Aurora)

i According to the Ontario Nonprofit Network's document on Decent Work (2019), "Decent work is a holistic approach to achieve fair, stable and productive workplaces. Decent work practices improve the quality of life for employees, while also supporting more effective and impactful outcomes for organizations."
ii The organizations who participated in this research were focused on food security projects that provided access to food. It is important to note that these programs do not reduce food insecurity because they do not address the financial constraints households face when purchasing food.

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