

NETWORK NEWS

What's happening at York Region Food Network



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

by Kate Greavette, Executive Director

This year has been another whirlwind as we've all continued to manage the ups and downs of this pandemic. York Region Food Network has seen an unprecedented year with the scale and scope of service delivery, programs and system change.

This year has been hard. There have been a lot of sleepless nights, uncertainty and worry. What has gotten the York Region Food Network team through the highs and lows of 2021 has been **YOU**. Our community.

You have shared with us the positive impact of our services and programs on your day-to-day life. You have shared our communications and connected your networks to our incredible work. You have contributed time, energy and skills to this work, and you have confirmed with us that food security is important in our communities. It is also because of you and your feedback, messages and kindness that the team at York Region Food Network is inspired every single day to build a food secure York Region.

As we reflect on the year, we know that all of our work and accomplishments could not have been achieved without your support. In 2021, our Good Food Box program, seed library, gleaning and community breakfast

programs have grown substantially. We are serving the highest number of people ever in our food services and programs.

This is also the year that we have seen tremendous growth in our community gardens, with a record setting list of participants in our communal gardens. This has all happened in parallel with our systems work and advocacy through the York Region Food Council, Just Recovery coalition and countless presentations, articles and sessions about food insecurity.

Though we have been doing a lot of work, there is still a lot that needs to be done. We all know that the COVID19 pandemic has exposed many vulnerabilities that exist in our communities and the pandemic has disproportionately impacted many people, including those who are living in poverty, newcomers, refugees, and Black and Indigenous peoples. While we will get through the worst of the pandemic in the coming weeks and months, the ripple effects of the pandemic such as food insecurity and social isolation are going to take much longer to address.

We are asking for your support to help us continue fighting for a food secure York Region. Your one-time or monthly financial contribution can help make sure we can continue to offer fresh healthy food supports for all, while also working towards a more coordinated and secure York Region food system.

IN THE KITCHEN

Though we desperately miss cooking in-person with community residents, we are keeping busy with a wide array of takeaway and virtual food programs, suitable for all ages.

Since the start of the COVID19 pandemic, we've shifted our focus to preparing freshly-made meals for residents who need support with physical access to food and social connections. These meals are shared with the community through our takeaway breakfast on Tuesday mornings that sees upwards of 150 people weekly, and through partner organizations such as Canadian Mental Health Association and Hope House Community Hospice. Since March 2020, the York Region Food Network kitchen team has prepared and distributed over 27,000 meals in York Region!

Cooking is just a small part of what we do in the kitchen. The bulk of our work (and passion!) is in facilitating cooking workshops and classes for kids, young adults, adults and seniors. From a Halloween Spooktacular virtual class to bi-weekly classes with seniors' groups, we have been offering virtual cooking classes and engagements for the past twelve months.

Despite the virtual nature, we are seeing immense benefits from these classes. For example in our Lunch Table sessions and Global Gourmet, people are learning about each other's culinary traditions and culture, they are trying new types of foods and they are meeting new people through the process. Participants of all ages are also gaining confidence in the kitchen with new foods and skills.



IN THE GARDEN

Another food growing season has just come to a close and what a memorable garden season it has been! Demand for community gardens has been at an all-time high across York Region as residents have been dealing with rising food costs and seeking outdoor green space. Community has also been craving the physical and mental benefits that gardening offers and having autonomy over their own food production as the pandemic rages on.

York Region Food Network's Aurora and Newmarket Allotment Gardens offered 164 households the opportunity to connect with the land and grow food that is culturally and nutritionally relevant to them. Our three Community Gardens (Newmarket's London & Main, City of Vaughan City Hall and Growing to Give), thrived as gardeners of all ages flocked to the gardens weekly for fresh air, physical activity, fresh produce, social connections and the joy of experiencing the life of a plant from seed to harvest. In these gardens, participants had the chance to work together and share the harvest!

With the physical site set to open in Spring 2022, in 2021 the Compost Learning Hub ran a year of virtual workshops. These workshops have inspired hundreds of people to learn something new, develop food skills and adjust aspects of their life to positively impact the environment. These include reducing their food waste and using regenerative practices in the garden.

Beyond community gardens, our relationships with York Region farmers grew by leaps and bounds this year as we received and distributed 25,000 lbs of gleaned produce, or produce leftover in the field after harvest. This gleaned produce has been shared with over 35 community partners and distributed to thousands of individuals and households throughout York Region.



YRFN IN THE COMMUNITY

There's power in community. Power to identify problems and also power to come up with appropriate solutions.

This revelation has been at the forefront of York Region Food Network's policy development work in 2021 as the York Region Food Council, Youth Food Committee and Just Recovery Coalition have been active mobilizing the community and building a case for change.

A big piece of work that we are celebrating is the release of *Narratives from the Frontlines: providing emergency food in York Region during COVID-19*. This community-based research brought together the voices and experiences of over 45 service providers in York Region during COVID-19, providing a snapshot of the emergency food sector. Its purpose is to capture and better understand the experiences of staff, organizations and service users throughout the pandemic. This research is vital in giving us all a greater insight of the intersection of issues experienced in our community, such as affordable housing, income security and decent work.

This work helps to inspire our Just Recovery campaign, conducted in partnership with the Social Planning Council of York Region, and a series of engagements that explored new ways of thinking and doing through social procurement. This education and advocacy work will continue into 2022 through the Youth Food Committee, York Region Food Council and Just Recovery coalition.



SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR FUNDERS

