

Community Food Research Executive Summary

The Community Food Project is a collaboration between Toronto Food Strategy at Toronto Public Health and the Community Food Flow project based at the Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre (PARC). The project assesses the potential for aggregated purchasing for the community food sector in Toronto.

The community food sector encompasses a range of organizations that provide food to people who face challenges in food access, usually as a result of poverty. The sector includes multi-service agencies, drop-in centres, shelters, affordable housing with meal provision, community health centres, food banks, and school nutrition programs. The agencies provide millions of meals per year, as well as numerous services that can improve access to health, training, employment and other social services. The project explores food procurement practices at community agencies and recommends initiatives to expand procurement options and increase access to healthy food at these key community-centres.

The research found that agencies face a host of issues and challenges, many of which are shared across the sector. The agencies also show a resourcefulness and determination in implementing solutions individually and together. The goals of the project are to provide a community food sector assessment, recommend solutions and implement pilot initiatives. The purpose of the undertaking is to give community agencies better access to fresh, healthy food, and to provide opportunities for cost and time savings in food programs. The partners are committed to collaborative projects that combine capacity, resources and strengths to address the issues and challenges together.

Context of project

One recent report shows that 12.2% of Canadians are living with food insecurity of various levels from severe to moderate. 17% of children are food insecure (Tarasuk 2013). More than 1 in 10 Canadians live with food insecurity that can impair their health, mental abilities and social involvement.

Community agencies in the research area (the Greater Toronto Area) rely on donations and purchases from a range of sources for their meal ingredients. Overall, it is estimated that the community food sector spends about \$29 million annually on food, not including institutions such as schools or hospitals. Suppliers for the sector range widely. Discount chain grocery stores, Daily Bread Food Bank and Second Harvest are the most common sources of supply.

Agencies tend to supplement these options with donations and purchases from nearby partners such as local bakeries, independent grocery stores and restaurants. Some agencies have broader networks of donors, particularly in the case of faith-based agencies. Agencies are thus combining local neighbourhood partnerships with city-scale options. The solutions and recommendations developed as a result of the research projects likewise vary from neighbourhood-scale to city-scale. Procurement solutions to increase access to healthy food also range from agency initiatives that address supply (urban agriculture projects, farm partnerships) to initiatives that support internal coordination of food procurement across one agency and collaborative purchasing across agencies.

Research methods

The research combined one-on-one interviews for project coordinators and managers of community organizations with staff surveys and focus group discussions. The research team created a database of 355 agencies that provide meal programs. Criteria were established to identify priority candidates for interviews. Since the focus was on the possibilities of working with a distributor, the priority for in-depth interviews was given to organizations with several meal programs each week (who were therefore using enough food to warrant working with a distributor). The PARC-based research focused more closely on community-based solutions and local economic development.

27% (95) of the 355 agencies were interviewed. Although the partner organizations had separate research teams and conducted research separately, interviews, surveys and focus groups were designed to provide

comparable data, and regular meetings were held to coordinate efforts. Two project reports were issued, one with a focus on the needs and practices of west central Toronto agencies, the other focused on city-wide needs and solutions. The results from the two projects confirm and strengthen the final conclusions and recommendations of the overall project.

Research Results

The research indicates that:

- Access to fresh, healthy food, either donated or purchased, is not meeting demand.
- Opportunities for aggregated community food procurement and distribution exist.
- Opportunities exist at the agency level to reduce cost and staff-time in food procurement, and to increase access to fresh, healthy food at agencies

The research found that community food organizations currently have few choices other than to depend on mainstream, market-based food distribution services that do not necessarily meet the unique needs of the community food sector. This challenge is further compounded by the combination of limited budgets, inadequate organizational infrastructure (e.g. storage spaces), and lack of coordinated food procurement at the organizational level.

The research identified an opportunity for additional food procurement initiatives of various scales (agency, neighbourhood and city) to address the specific needs of the community food sector. Projects that address the demonstrated need may expand on existing procurement and distribution infrastructure or implement new options. The research was funded by the Province of Ontario Healthy Communities Fund, Public Health Agency of Canada, for Toronto Food Strategy/ Toronto Public Health and the Ontario Trillium Foundation (for PARC).

Research Results: Key Issues

Budget/ expenditures

Agencies report increasing demands on food programming, while budgets have been reduced or eliminated. The ability to purchase some or all of the food used in programming has important health outcomes. The budgets were found to be variable across sub-sectors; the cost of the meal did not correspond to the number of meals (that is, agencies that gave more meals were not necessarily able to spend less based on volume).

Food needs

Despite important programs like Creating Health Plus, agencies reported insufficiency in key sources of nutrients including meat (or other protein sources) and dairy. Almost 50% of agencies also report a need for more fresh fruits and vegetables.

Other findings

The research reviewed levels of participation and engagement in food programs by members or clients, and staff-time spent on food programming. The research also assessed prices based on invoices from a range of suppliers; prices were found to be highly variable. The research identified a number of issues that have an impact on the quality and capacity of food programs at agencies. These include health issues, budgets, dependence on donations, partnerships, internal coordination, participation levels, the challenges of food access for newly housed people, waste, infrastructure needs, knowledge/ training, and prioritization of other programs over food. Key issues in the sector also include the negotiation between healthy eating guidelines and the food preferences of participants, the appropriate scale of solutions, and the links between housing and food programming. The research also found a frequent lack of funding, knowledge or capacity to act on the social determinants of health and to benefit from the impacts of food programming beyond hunger alleviation.

Research recommendations

Final recommendations include both good practices that can be shared across agencies through the reports, and additional collaborative solutions that can benefit all agencies in an area or in the city itself. Solutions

range in appropriate scale from initiatives undertaken at a neighbourhood level with local partners, such as the work of the Regent Park Food Partnership and the Parkdale Food Network, to city-based solutions. The latter includes the development of a dedicated wholesale distribution infrastructure that addresses the needs identified in the reports (either based on new enterprises or an expansion of existing programs).

Organizational Capacity Building (Agency level actions)

1. Initiate organizational food planning, organizational healthy eating guidelines and coordination
2. Develop a profile of food distributors and price reviews to be shared among agencies

Neighbourhood-level Actions

3. Establish neighbourhood food networks as a coordinating mechanism for agencies
4. Establish community food hubs for community based initiatives and social enterprise development
5. Expand or establish community-based food processing and storage capacities
6. Build strategic connections with farmers to access surplus and grade B produce (also sector-level)

System and Sector-level Actions

7. Start a community chef exchange program as well as online knowledge sharing capacity
8. Engage in policy advocacy for a sustainable and equitable local food system that includes opportunities to benefit from multiple impacts of strong food programming
9. Create an online portal for better access to expanded supply options as well as information exchange
10. Explore opportunities for a dedicated non-profit community food distribution program for the GTA

The research encountered strong community assets, vitalities and capacities in harnessing the food procurement and preparation practices to achieve community engagement, skills development, and employment opportunities. Food programs were found to provide solutions to a range of issues from health to social enterprise development goals. Overall the sector shows tremendous resilience and resourcefulness but faces inadequate budgets and limited staff capacity to realize the full potential of food programs. A review of the cost per meal and a price comparison from a range of suppliers shows a great deal of variation in expenditures and cost of product. Agency-level practices were found to affect the success and impact of food programming. Recommendations for solutions address initiatives at the agency level as well as broader collaborative solutions.

There is a demonstrated need for dedicated non-profit community food distribution. In fact, the community food sector possesses considerable food purchasing capacity that warrants such solutions. But at the same time, improvements in community food flows cannot be undertaken to increase the efficiency and quantity of fresh food supply without addressing issues at the agency-level. Community food procurement is embedded in organizational culture, community engagement, skills development, and members' efforts to rebuild their lives. Thus, improving community food flow requires a combination of organizational capacity building, neighbourhood-level collaboration, and system-level solutions, in order to build concerted efforts for a sustainable and equitable local food system.

Next Steps

The partners have identified a number of next steps that are being developed both separately and together. These include the following key initiatives:

1. Online ordering portal for distribution to non-profit social service agencies
2. Community-based production kitchen to provide neighbourhood capacity for 1) storage and processing of surplus and 2) social enterprises for food production
3. Direct links between agencies and farmers to access local, fresh food and surplus product
4. Community freezer/ storage initiatives for managing surplus donations of single items

The online portal project is a systemic, sector-wide solution that would provide aggregation, procurement and distribution services to the non-profit sector. The pilot project will be led by Fresh Tech (a wholesaler and processing company located near the food terminal) with support from various partners, including

Toronto Public Health, Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre, and the Ontario Food Terminal. The project will aggregate product offers from local food producers and processors and facilitate the marketing, ordering and delivery of orders to non-profit agencies. The initial pilot will assess and customize the system for use across the city. A grant to support the development and piloting of the portal is currently pending approval.

The production kitchen, farmer links and community freezer initiatives are led by the Food Flow Project based at the Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre and involve a variety of partners, including the West End Food Co-op, FarmStart, the Parkdale Food Network and key agencies in west central Toronto. Toronto Food Strategy has provided research and other support to these initiatives as well. In general, these initiatives seek to implement social enterprise models as well as to engage the innovative Co-op Cred program that provides workplace opportunities for marginalized groups in Parkdale. The projects are in the initial phases of discussions with partners and stakeholders, identification of existing resources (available kitchens, vans, etc.), preliminary feasibility and budgeting, and identification of appropriate sources of funding for implementation.