

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE COMMUNITY: WIDENING THE APPROACH TO FOOD SECURITY

A Report from the
Community Knowledge Forum
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Overview of the Foundation

The Community Foundation of Mississauga is part of one of the fastest growing charitable movements in Canada. The Foundation is a registered charitable public foundation that was launched in spring 2001. Since that time, it has grown rapidly and has over \$20 million in endowed assets (at December 2013) and cumulative grants of over \$6 million. Community foundations across Canada share three fundamental roles:

One: Endowment Building/Donor Service. The Foundation builds endowed and other funds to provide lasting support for local priorities. It makes giving easy and effective, accepting a wide variety of gifts and providing donors with a number of charitable options. Donors can contribute cash, stocks, property and other assets. Donors may establish a fund in their name or in the name of a loved one. In most cases, a gift qualifies for maximum tax advantage under federal law.

Two: Local Grantmaking Expertise. The Foundation's staff and volunteers have an in-depth understanding of the issues, opportunities, and resources that shape our community. It evaluates all aspects of community well-being – including social services, education, the environment, health care, youth, seniors and the arts and makes grants to support the broadest range of community needs. It can help donors learn more about local organizations and programs that make a difference in areas they care about most.

Three: Community Leadership. Because community foundations support all kinds of charities, it is well positioned to bring people and organizations together, convening diverse voices to address local issues and opportunities. The Foundation's business is building community.

Capturing Community Knowledge

Bridging the needs of the community with philanthropy is at the heart of the Community Foundation of Mississauga. Part of that means building a base of knowledge about the issues affecting the community, bringing together the people who live and work in the city to hear what they have to say, connecting organizations serving the community, sharing information, identifying gaps and opportunities and considering innovative ideas that can be part of the solution to addressing community needs. Collaborating is one of the way a community foundation stays connected to the purpose we serve. It helps keep vital knowledge and communication flowing.

Trends and Statistics

The Foundation's focus on food security initiatives in Mississauga aligns with our peers across Canada. The national membership organization, Community Foundations of Canada launched an issue-specific report focussing on food security as part of the 2013 Vital Signs reports across Canada. Canadian communities were asked to do "3 things 4 food".

Our most recent Vital Signs report tells us that investment in food security initiatives in our community is essential. Food bank use continues to climb. In Mississauga, usage is above pre-recession levels. We recognize that food is about a lot more than what we buy and eat. Food sustains our communities and is often the place where our most pressing issues converge – poverty, health and wellbeing, environment and economy. Fighting just the symptoms of hunger isn't enough, food prices are rising at twice the rate of the consumer price index. Health issues such as obesity, heart disease and type 2 diabetes are increasing in numbers. The percent of household income spent on food is increasing. The cost of housing in Mississauga means less income is available for food. High density development has taken over lands that were exclusively in agricultural production. People are taking food matters into their own hands, learning more about food and nutrition, where their food comes from and increasing awareness around food related issues.

A University of Toronto study published in 2013, shows how Peel is transforming from a middle-class suburb to one of income extremes. The proportion of middle-income neighbourhoods in Mississauga has declined dramatically in recent decades. 45% of neighbourhoods in Peel are now considered to be low-income. In the meantime, cost of food, housing, and utilities have continued to rise.

Poverty in our area is a deep and persistent problem. 17% of Mississauga's population is living in poverty. The 2010 Low Income Measure for Mississauga indicates that the number of people struggling to meet their basic needs for food and shelter is about one in four. Housing prices continue to climb. The average price of a single-family detached home in Mississauga is over \$700,000 – well out of reach for many residents. Meanwhile, Mississauga has the longest wait-time for social housing in the province. As of mid-2012, 15,000 households were on the waitlist for social housing in the city. The number of emergency homeless shelter beds fell in Peel, down by 27%. Paying no more than 30% of household income on housing is considered affordable. Among renters in Mississauga, 42.5% pay more than 30% of their household income on shelter.

Food Bank use continues to climb – usage in Mississauga is currently above pre-recession levels, an increase of 18%. The rise in long-term usage suggests a systemic problem. The average food bank client pays out 71% of their household income on housing. The cost of housing in Mississauga means less income is available for food. The Mississauga Food Bank supports 59,000 clients each month. While food insecurity can affect anyone, particularly vulnerable groups include children, single parents, seniors and people living alone. 51% of the Mississauga Food Bank clients are children. Yet other disturbing trends are emerging; compared to five years ago, people visiting food banks are older, more likely to be born outside of Canada and have higher levels of education. The prime reason for use of food banks is low income. Whether food insecurity is caused by the significant cost of housing, rise of precarious employment (low-paying, short term jobs), living with disabilities, or being affected by layoffs and job cuts, investment in food security initiatives in our community is essential.

According to the Peel Poverty Reduction Strategy, food security is defined as “ensuring that 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.” The average weekly cost of basic healthy eating for a family of four in Peel region increased by 10.6% between 2009 and 2011, according to the annual Nutritious Food Basket Survey. Food is a right but many families living in poverty have to choose between food and other necessities such as rent. This highlights the role of food banks in addressing issues of food insecurity and poverty.

Sharing Knowledge and Expertise

The Community Foundation of Mississauga conducted interviews with members of the community from March to June in preparation for a three hour Food Security Forum held on June 10, 2014 at the SEVA Food Bank.

In examining food security in Mississauga it became clear that related issues are complex and involve much more than just food. Food itself is about much more than what we buy or eat. Food sustains us and our communities in so many ways. That is why food is the place where our most pressing issues converge - poverty, health and wellbeing, our environment and economy – they all hit home at our kitchen table.

Many people may not know that food insecurity exists in our community. Raising awareness, sharing knowledge and building community capacity were addressed in the discussion, which included the significance and meaning of food security, the role of food banks and underlying issues of poverty, food at the intersection of social cohesion, health and wellbeing, local food production and accessibility and community initiatives such as urban agriculture and community gardens.

We heard from a number of groups involved in food security issues, from Regional Poverty Reduction Strategies, a variety of food bank programs, both well established and emerging, as well as community based organizations whose programming addresses a broad approach to food security as a means to community development. Each spoke from a specific perspective related to their experiences with food security initiatives at the community level.

At the forum, presentations were made by Adaoma Patterson, Specialist, Strategic Planning for the Region of Peel, who spoke to Food Security as one of five objectives in the Peel Poverty Reduction Strategy. Meghan Nicholls, Director of Marketing and Fund Development at the Mississauga Food Bank (MFB) talked about their report ‘The Face of Hunger in Mississauga’ and the “hub and spoke” model of food distribution. Bill Crawford, Executive Director of Eden Community Food Bank outlined the Community Food Centre model and the Community Learning Kitchen as long-term, sustainable approaches to hunger. Kulvir Singh Gill, Board Chair of Sikhs Serving Canada and their program the Seva Food Bank, discussed innovative approaches to addressing community needs. Lina Zita, Community Development Coordinator at the Square One Older Adult Centre highlighted issues for seniors around food security as one demographic of the population. Carolyn Bailey, Associate Director at Eco-Source, addressed building community food security through urban agriculture and

community gardens. The Peel Food Charter was also addressed; how it is developing and its purpose in advocacy towards food security.

The Community Foundation of Mississauga is grateful for the generous contributions of all the participants who shared their perspectives at this forum. Their valuable input has helped to form the basis of this report.

Key Findings

Food Security and Poverty

It was noted that 17% of Mississauga's population live in poverty and that hunger is a hidden problem. Poverty is the driving force behind food insecurity. It is more likely for a family with children to be in poverty than a family without. The Peel Poverty Reduction Strategy (PPRS) has highlighted food security as one of five objectives in addressing issues of poverty. The other four issues to be addressed are economic opportunities, income security, affordable and accessible transportation, safe and affordable housing. Issues affecting poverty are interrelated and complex, and significantly affect families living on a low income. Food security has been highlighted as a common point of focus as it shows the linkages between housing, transit, income, health and precarious employment.

Accessibility, availability and affordability are key factors in food security. Transportation is strongly linked to food security. People need to be able to get to where food is; areas that have limited availability of nutritious foods are referred to as 'food deserts'. Public transit can be costly for people living in poverty, and may also limit the amount of 'luggage' to be carried. Stores that are only accessible by car can further limit access to food. Pockets of the city can be inaccessible for some.

Precarious employment was identified as having a negative impact on secure and stable employment in the community. Secure income is affected when people work contract to contract, without benefits, in temporary or casual positions with no job security. 40% of GTA residents now have precarious employment which has a tremendous impact on household earnings, affecting the stability and security of households.

In Mississauga, high housing costs often consume more than 30% of household income for up to 40% of the population. This means people are making choices between paying the bills and buying food, resulting in increased reliance on food banks. The proportion of income that individuals have for food impacts their ability to be food secure.

The link between nutrition and health is clear. Food insecurity has been associated with a range of poor physical and mental health outcomes. Rising obesity levels, diabetes, chronic disease and hypertension are all diet related health concerns. The number of student nutrition programs have grown in recognition of the negative behavioural and academic outcomes of food insecurity on children. This is reflected in neighbourhoods with the greatest need including both school programs and parent-led community sites.

Poverty is the driving force behind people using food banks. Families with children have a hard time making ends meet. The typical food bank client is now a two parent family with children where the parents have some post secondary education. For clients living on Ontario works or minimum wage there is not a sufficient amount of income to be food secure. Of 121,000 people in Mississauga living in poverty, only 10,000 people are using food banks. Many felt the need for food banks will continue. Indeed, participants suggested that reliance on food banks can be expected to increase over the coming years.

Role of Food Banks

Food banks were originally designed to provide emergency food relief, which was meant to be a temporary short term response to hunger. In fact, the demand for service has increased. Everything comes to a head when you don't have enough to eat. Often a food bank is the first point of contact with other social services. Food banks take care of food issues, but then must start addressing the underlying causes of what brings people in. As a result, food banks are in transition and are adapting to meet their more permanent role.

The Mississauga Food Bank model of distribution works by providing food for 67 member organizations in Mississauga. They provide food to an increasing number of member agencies placed in neighbourhoods across the city where the need is greatest. This could be a before-school breakfast club, a youth drop-in centre or a senior's hot meal program. Obtaining food donations from traditional sources is becoming more difficult and new methods are required to get the necessary amount and type of food. Sourcing and distributing more nutritious food is a priority. This "hub and spoke" model allows the member agencies to focus on the clients' needs without needing to worry about actually acquiring the food. Having a secure food source allows agencies to spend more time addressing the issues their clients are experiencing.

The Community Food Centre Model as adopted by Eden Community Food Bank, is a holistic approach to addressing the underlying issues of food insecurity. Outreach and advocacy are used to address not only the barriers to accessing food, but to making connections to other services, information and resources available in the community. Their goal is to offer more than just food relief, they aim to reach out and be a resilient part of the community, not just to serve low income families. They hope to become a place for people from all walks of life to engage with one another and make the food bank a place anyone can walk into. The development of a community learning kitchen teaches valuable skills, reduces the sense of stigma and incorporates a wider range of community engagement. It responds to the needs of the clients through cooking classes and nutritional information, developing food skills, employment training through social enterprise projects and engaging the wider community. Providing food access, developing food skills and expanding community engagement allows awareness and outreach to be more intentional and specific in programming.

Innovation and experimentation is what drives Seva Food Bank programming forward. At the core is food security but beyond that is health, employment and education as some examples of what bring people to the food bank. Navigation and advocacy are key, as is being responsive to client needs, such as providing workshops on mental health and diabetes as examples, or partnering with other agencies to get people the help they need in an effort to make services more cohesive. As root causes of food insecurity vary, services will differ. Trying a range of projects to see what works, recognizing the need for continuous change and the need to evolve over time is inherent in their approach. Ideas such as roof top gardens in low income neighbourhoods, food trucks that act like a pop up farmers markets and their own 40 acre farm demonstrate this. Many volunteers are clients, donors or employers which allows for the exchange of knowledge and skill development and creates an environment where all input is valued. The focus is on community building and is geared to moving people from dependency to self-reliance. Within this focus, their approach is to be responsive to their clients' needs and where possible, tailoring their services to be unique for everyone.

The needs of seniors were discussed to highlight some of the challenges a specific population faces in being food secure. Compounding illnesses, reduced mobility and social isolation due to reduced social networks have a significant impact. The following issues were raised; transportation to food banks due to accessibility and financial concerns, mobility as a major issue in accessing nutritious food as well as affecting food preparation, budgeting on limited funds, cooking skills and cooking nutritious meals for a single person, dietary restrictions due to health, pride in asking for help and fear of letting other

organizations into their homes, mental health issues and social isolation. At the same time that we see luxury retirement condos popping up, we see an increase in seniors' poverty. Addressing hidden barriers to accessing food banks poses a challenging question; what holds people back from using food banks? Identifying and addressing specific needs of unique populations is required to ensure food security. Partnerships with community organizations can further this process.

The consensus of participants was the need for more long term, sustainable means to respond to underlying causes of hunger and poverty, providing for the needs of today but also providing support and teaching practical skills for the future.

Food Security and Community Development

Food security is about more than food bank use. Community gardens play a role by providing opportunities to understand where our food comes from and providing accessibility to local food.

Community gardens help develop skills and relationships that promote community development. Eco-source has partnered with the City of Mississauga to open community gardens in local parks.

Residents grow their own food and also receive education and awareness with the idea that people will then get together and replicate the experience in other places. Each garden offers programming for local community groups as well as schools. Learning where food comes from, tasting the fruits of your labour and engaging socially (intergenerational mentorship) all contribute to an awareness and understanding of the pivotal role food plays in our lives. Community gardens are important for addressing food insecurity; if we don't know where food comes from we don't value it as much.

When someone participates in creating and sustaining a community garden, they often value the food they grow so much more. A big part of food waste comes at the level of the consumer. We waste approximately 40 per cent of our food, or \$27-billion worth each year. And just over half (51 per cent) of that gets tossed from households. When people have the experience of how much work and effort goes into producing food and also have the understanding that some people don't have any food, wasting it becomes unacceptable.

The Mississauga Urban Agriculture project provides opportunities to develop skills in sustainable community food production and to understand the real-world context of food security. This program is directed to those interested in learning how to grow food through field trips, community groups, internships and work placements creating hands-on opportunities. At harvest time, produce is given to

community, while teaching students and community members about sustainable food production in Mississauga.

Opportunities to learn about, grow, cook and eat food together highlights the importance of healthy nutrition and social inclusion. It's easy to get stuck on poverty issues, but growing a plant, sharing and eating is an optimistic act. This has real value beyond the actual number of pounds of food grown. This is an important element of food programs. Food plays a significant role in addressing social inclusion and it is important to explore and use models that bring people together. By taking these teachings into the broader community awareness of food security, outcomes can be improved.

Corporate partnerships like the one between the Backyard Farm & Market at Erin Mills and Daniels Corp. have focused on developing the community around food. Unused land was used to grow produce, which gets passed along to a daycare serving low income families as well as a community food bank. The community is developing along with the garden which has natural play areas for children, outdoor eco-kitchen – cooking outside showing people how to use food from the garden, engaging people in the process of growing and preparing and consuming food. People experience food in a different way. The garden began to build the community before the buildings were constructed. This project highlights an experimental way business can be involved in grass roots program development with food as the central construct. Communities need a place where people can gather and experience food and its many transformative possibilities and where conversations about local sustainable food issues can take place.

The development of a local food charter was discussed. As community awareness around food issues grows, it is important to have policies that express what is happening on the ground. Community consultations will inform the Peel Food Charter which will provide an outline of a healthy food system in our region. This will identify what can be targeted or achieved in our community. A local food charter can be used for advocacy in guiding and advancing policies in relation to food security.

Conclusions

This forum reinforced the fact that families and people of any age can experience food insecurity for a variety of reasons. Food is an essential part of life and access to food is a basic human right.

According to forum participants, a balanced, holistic approach to addressing the needs of food bank clients is the most effective means of helping them achieve food security. When people experience food security they can access social supports and services as necessary, live a healthier lifestyle,

develop skills, pursue employment and education improving quality of life. Responding to other needs around food is essential. By addressing and resolving systemic issues of poverty, there is a much greater chance of families and individuals achieving food security.

The challenge moving forward is to provide for basic food needs but to go beyond this with a focus on food which promotes community development. There needs to be recognition that food plays an important part in the diversity of our community and it is necessary to meet those needs through programming. Nurturing community through shared food experiences works and is sustainable. Demonstration projects highlighting community gardens and urban agriculture can provide solutions to multiple problems. A more food secure community means a healthier community. Innovative programming, partnerships and public education promotes food security at all levels. Adequate income to buy food, accessibility of nutritious foods, a food system that promotes healthy eating and sustainable agriculture are all necessary components of food security. The approach to food security cannot be isolated, it entails a complexity of issues and should be considered a process rather than an outcome. Food security promotes a strong, healthy and sustainable community.

Thank you to the participating organizations who have helped generate information about how the community is addressing the multi-dimensional issues around food security in Mississauga:

Adaoma Patterson – Region of Peel – Peel Poverty Reduction Strategy

Alicia Wilson – Region of Peel

Meghan Nicholl – Mississauga Food Bank

Bill Crawford – Eden Community Food Bank

Peter Costello – Eden Community Food Bank

Kulvir Singh Gill – Seva Food Bank

Daven Seebarran – Seva Food Bank

Caroline Bailey – Eco Source

Lina Zita – Square One Older Adult Centre

Craig Orrell – Dietitian – Region of Peel

Lee Overton – Erin Mills Backyard Farm and Market

Adam Molson – Daniels Corp.

Brenda Osborne – City of Mississauga Environment Division

Carlton Allen – Mississauga Fruit Tree

Manny Castellino – Lion's Club Farmers Market

Abby da Silva – Boys and Girls Club Peel

Jasmine Chong – Victim Services of Peel



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