



## COUNTY FOOD COLLECTIVE PLAN

April 12, 2021

### I Introduction

Prince Edward County is a community in transition. Long a seasonal destination, its wider “discovery” in recent years has highlighted socioeconomic disparities. Increased tourism has created opportunities for economic development; however, most of the jobs are seasonal. Even before the current real estate boom, median housing prices had nearly doubled over ten years (2008-2018), putting home ownership out of reach for many. Meanwhile, demand for short-term accommodations has dramatically reduced the availability of long-term rentals to nearly zero.<sup>1</sup>

Hand in hand with a crisis in affordable housing is a growing problem of food insecurity. Despite a rich agricultural base and historic ties to food production, PEC is home to many residents who do not consistently access enough healthy food to meet their needs.

The County Food Collective is a group of food programs working to address the challenges of food insecurity in PEC. An additional focus is how to increase access to food programs by people who are food insecure, but not using these resources.

A three-month project supporting the food collective’s annual plan aims to:

1. increase food collective member engagement;
2. increase best practice knowledge in engaging food-insecure residents in food programming and income support programs; and
3. begin long-term planning for food programs.

The aim of the three-month project was to move the collective to the next stage of work supporting the creation of a roadmap, where food collective partners and associated actions are identified to move the collective forward, and where the three months of work supports resource development planning. The goal includes moving away from a charity model and toward poverty reduction.

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<sup>1</sup> Vital Signs 2018: The vacancy rate for registered rental units, according to a 2018 municipal survey, was just 0.8%

## Actions Taken

Food collective members engaged in meetings, research methodology development and analysis, and participated in surveys on food programs; frontline workers gave input; members shared copies of the lived experience food surveys with their clients; and members shared their data collection processes and plans.

Three surveys were conducted in March 2021 to gather more data on the needs and experiences of people who identify as sometimes being short on food, as well as frontline workers delivering a range of food programs.

- 98 people with lived experience participated in surveys giving their input to set local priorities;
- 18 frontline workers participated in surveys identifying barriers and priorities;
- 7 food programs participated in a survey gathering feedback about program planning, resource needs and capacity building.

On March 29, an expert panel of food innovators generously shared their learning, program pivots and best practices with the food collective and other attendees, hosted with the County Community Foundation and Prince Edward Learning Centre. A video of the session was uploaded to YouTube.

Reports generated:

- Key Takeaways from the Food Panel
- Food Priority in PEC Survey Results
- Research Audit

This consultation process, with a range of stakeholders, has clearly identified the need for a coordinated, sustainable plan to address food insecurity in PEC, and a communication strategy to support it.

This document sets out an evidence-based plan to continue working toward food security in PEC, informed by the lived experiences of County residents, gaps and plans identified by community food programs, and the best practices of food innovators. In addition to the working plan, we have created a resource and grant tracker, to support fund development. The food collective is striving to build an inclusive tent that welcomes all local food programs, in order to benefit from shared insights and focus our efforts in the same direction.

## **II The Problem**

In a survey of 98 PEC residents who identify as sometimes being short on food, four out of five respondents (80.6%) said they access food programs such as food banks, community dinners, Good Food Box, PEC Fresh Market, and Meals on Wheels. That leaves many who, for various reasons, are not accessing local food resources to ensure they have enough to eat.

Among those who do use food programs, only one in four (24.7%) say they meet their monthly food needs. That means ***three out of four people who are accessing food programs in PEC are still food***

***insecure***. Together with people who aren't using food programs, the rate is even higher: ***four out of five respondents experiencing food insecurity do not get enough nutritious food***, even with a range of food programs available in our community. Instead, they describe relying on processed or poor-quality food, skipping meals, borrowing money and missing bill payments. One respondent described dumpster diving to get enough to eat.

A living wage for PEC is \$17.35, as determined in 2019, through the Ontario Living Wage Network and in partnership with local agencies. The hourly rate is based on two people working full time, with two dependant children. The living wage combines annual income with government transfers. An estimated \$74,589 annual income is needed to meet a basic quality of life.

Comparing the living wage data to census data shows there is a gap in PEC. Based on 2015 data, StatsCan identifies the median household income in PEC at \$66,140. This suggests the average household is not making enough income to meet quality-of-life standards. The cost of a nutritious food basket, for a family of four, is \$855.30 per month.<sup>2</sup>

Using the low-income cut-off (LICO) as a measure, based on StatsCan data from 2017, 13.5% of the PEC population are identified as living in poverty. Individuals (29%) and households with single parents (26%) experience significantly more income insecurity, compared with the general population (13.6%).

Hastings Prince Edward Public Health defines three levels of food security:

1. *marginal*: worrying about running out of food and/or limit food selection due to lack of money for food;
2. *moderate*: compromising the quantity or quality of food consumed;
3. *severe*: reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns due to lack of food; at most extreme, may go day(s) without food.

The rate of moderate-to-severe food insecurity for Hastings-Prince Edward is estimated to be 10% of the population.<sup>3</sup> In Prince Edward County, that translates to 2,473 people.

### Knowledge and Knowledge Gaps

A research audit of current, available published research focused on PEC, as well as an inquiry into what kinds of data food programs are collecting, provides a picture of what we know, what we don't – and that we are not utilizing what is available to us. We identified 17 publications on local food insecurity, income and health, providing rich demographic data, as well as community conversations pointing out barriers and strategies to addressing food insecurity.

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<sup>2</sup> HPEPH, 2018

<sup>3</sup> HPEPH, 2018

While local data is collected, it is not synthesized across local food programs to provide us with a clear picture of what is happening in our community, and to support policy advocacy. Gaps in knowledge include:

- How many PEC residents are leaving PEC because of the cost of living?
- Are people who are using food programs also connected to other supports? (e.g. income supports, systems navigation, tax filing, legal and mental health supports)

If we are looking to “move the needle” on food insecurity and associated health outcomes at a population level, we need to coordinate local data collection and analysis, such as in a collective impact model.

### **III Engagement and Communications Plan Development**

Our community of food programs, frontline workers, and people experiencing food insecurity in PEC have made a strong, clear plea for an organized communications plan. Our panel of food innovators echoed the vital importance of communication in connecting people to the resources they need, as well as maintaining broad community support for the programs in place.

Hastings Prince Edward Public Health (HPEPH) and Prince Edward – Lennox & Addington Social Services (PELASS) are both excellent resources connecting individuals to supports available in the community. Not all people experiencing food insecurity are attached to an agency. Notwithstanding these agencies, PEC needs a broader range of resources to educate the public about food programs available locally.

Food programs in PEC currently use a range of communication tactics to reach people where they are. Generally, communications targeting people with lived experience are not tailored with audience-specific messages (i.e. different messaging for single parent households; people living alone; employed with low-wage or precarious work; youth experiencing food insecurity). Rather, they focus on core messages and use every medium they can to spread the word. A communications strategy should also consider how to evaluate the effectiveness of various tactics.

#### Communication Tactics Used by Food Programs

*Social media outreach* is a very effective (and free) tool to spread awareness. Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn can reach different, overlapping audiences. Some programs augment their online engagement with a website and e-blasts. While an online presence is essential, it's important to recognize not everyone has access to the Internet.

*Print materials* remain an essential vehicle for reaching target audiences who may not be online, including rack cards, brochures, posters and flyers. Popular areas for distribution include local businesses, social service agencies, doctors' and dentists' offices, libraries and post offices. Food programs also share their contact information with all local schools.

*Local media* are excellent communication channels available to target audiences at no charge. There are free community listings in local newspapers where events such as community suppers, or hours of

operation, can be promoted with their location. In addition to paid advertising, interviews with newspapers and radio stations can earn free publicity.

*Community visibility* is another helpful tactic to raise awareness, including roadside signs where appropriate, and a presence at community events (e.g. Seedy Saturday, Food Not Bombs meals, holiday parades).

*Referrals* (e.g. through social services agencies, medical professionals, PELC's free tax clinic) are a highly targeted form of outreach for people who may be experiencing food insecurity. Survey feedback affirms educators are often uniquely positioned to observe students affected by food insecurity; however, they are bound by strict confidentiality, so any contact with food programs must be at the family's initiative. A Community Food Centre model, where several services are co-located, can increase opportunities for cross-referral.

One of the best forms of referral is word of mouth. Survey respondents noted the people accessing food programs are their best ambassadors. If they have a positive and welcoming experience, they will share it and encourage others to feel comfortable using the services. Likewise, if they have a negative experience, word will spread quickly and widely.

### Communications Plan by Target Group

#### 1. People with lived experience

##### *a) Goal of communications:*

- help more people access food programs when they need them
- increase the involvement of people with lived experience in program delivery and policy design

##### *b) Key messages for people with lived experience:*

- access to healthy, affordable food is a right
- food programs are for everyone who needs them, whenever and as often as they need
- clear information about where programs are located, and how to access them
- their privacy will be protected
- they will not be judged
- they are not alone; everyone needs help sometimes
- their involvement is welcome and appreciated (no pressure attached)
- their input and ideas are respected and valued

##### *c) Tactics:*

- engage people with lived experience in designing and running food programs: they belong at the front of the line to join as volunteers, as staff, and as board members
- offer community leadership training
- newspaper and radio interviews
- social media
- build word of mouth by ensuring people have positive experiences when they visit County food programs; staff and volunteer training is central to supporting these positive outcomes

## 2. Food programs

### a) *Goal of communications:*

- working to create a safe and welcoming environment for people using food programs
- improving the quality of food available

### b) *Key messages for food programs:*

- food quality is important to clients: “Just because some people are low income doesn’t mean they should be given expired food like they don’t matter”
- food choice is important to clients
- investing in volunteer and staff training will create a more positive experience for clients and frontline workers alike
- people need to know their privacy is protected

### c) *Tactics:*

The best opportunity to promote these key messages is through food collective meetings held to discuss our survey results, where we can begin strategizing how to increase visitors’ feelings of welcome and safety.

## 3. Community

### a) *Goal of communications:*

The overarching goal of community communications is to foster a shared sense of unity, belonging and dignity. We live in a caring community; nobody wants their neighbour to go hungry. Building awareness of food programs helps to normalize the experience of using them, and is also an opportunity to welcome community members to get involved, or offer donor support.

### b) *Key messages:*

- anyone can experience a sudden change in circumstance
- affordable food is a right
- food insecurity is a social justice issue
- everyone needs help sometimes
- food programs are for everyone

### c) *Tactics:*

- newspaper and radio interviews
- social media
- engagement in supporting programming
- engagement in policy advocacy

## 4. Funders

### a) *Goal of communications:*

- increase stable funding to serve the community

b) *Key messages for funders:*

- investing in food programs is an investment in community, it lifts everyone up
- communicate your successes
- unrestricted funds are the most helpful way to donate; if you like what we're doing, trust us to spend the money well
- multi-year support allows stability and planning

c) *Tactics:*

- creation of a funding plan to address food collective goals and identify major donors

5. Government

a) *Goal of communications:*

- for the voice of people with lived experience to be heard
- for policy work to follow through on the experiences of community members

b) *Key messages for government:*

- food security must be a budgeting priority
- the County urgently needs more affordable housing
- supporting food programs with rent-free access to municipal buildings is a good investment
- upstream approaches that invest in our community translate to cost savings, e.g. affordable housing v. the cost of shelters and prisons

c) *Tactics:*

Our expert panel's advice on advocacy included this simple message: You always want to be invited to the table. Food collective members benefit from developing a profile within the community as leaders in the field of food security.

- give municipal deputations
- share research
- engage in policy advocacy
- suggest pilot projects
- attend community events, be visible

#### **IV Lessons Learned and Best Practices in Other Communities**

A panel discussion with food innovators was held March 29, 2021, moderated by Kathy Kennedy, Executive Director of Prince Edward Learning Centre, with presentations from:

Debra Swan, Executive Director of The Local Community Food Centre in Stratford  
Ramsay Hart, Executive Director of The Table Community Food Centre in Perth  
Katie German, Director of Advocacy and Programs for FoodShare in Toronto  
John Klein Geltink, Board of Directors for Operation Sharing in Woodstock

These organizations have embraced bold program pivots to address food insecurity in their communities. Notwithstanding regional differences, the best practices, challenges and lessons learned by these food innovators can help guide future directions in PEC.

### Key Takeaways

- Be bold: you may lose some supporters with a change in program direction, but you will gain the right supporters
- End means testing; dignity must underscore all food programming
- Engage people with lived experience of food insecurity in a multitude of ways. Their experiences should be central to program design
- Work through a social justice lens and engage in social justice education
- Integrate advocacy (both policy advocacy and systems navigation) with programming
- Research clearly shows food banks are not a solution to food insecurity; however, they can be an important emergency resource
- Create new programming through consultation. Consider what the community really needs (e.g. emergency food or a focus on wellness), and the associated costs
- Programs need a strong evaluative component, to ensure interventions are designed to address actual needs, rather than perceived needs
- BIPOC community members tend to have higher rates of food insecurity compared with the rest of the population; although PEC does not share the diversity of many communities, it is important to consider BIPOC experiences and needs when addressing food security in PEC
- Make fund development a priority and engage staff. Build excitement
- Communicate your values and celebrate your successes
- Embrace abundance: there is enough food for everyone

Please note, an audio version of the panel is available upon request. A video of the panel is available on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/HONyIW5rzyY>

## **V Community Priorities in Prince Edward County**

Several priorities for food programming in Prince Edward County were identified through the survey responses of people with lived experience and frontline workers.

1. Coordinated communications plan (see section III)
2. Programming priorities (top 3)
  - distribute grocery cards so people can buy what they actually need
  - more access to fresh produce at wholesale prices
  - community gardens: grow more food
3. Advocacy and policy development priorities
  - basic income guarantee
  - increase OW/ODSP rates
  - support a living wage in PEC



- no means testing
  - affordable housing
  - centralized food programs under one umbrella
  - funding that prioritizes food insecurity
4. Innovative program design
    - reflects the wisdom of lived experience
    - creates opportunities for people to give back
    - connects people with community resources
    - builds on best practices: what's working
  5. Components of an innovative program
    - home delivery options
    - shopping experience/grocery cards
    - group cooking sessions, gardening and canning opportunities
    - a Community Food Centre model
    - satellite food depots/fresh market truck

## VI Challenges PEC Food Programs are Facing

### 1. Barriers to program uptake

A key focus of the food collective's three-month project was to determine how to increase access to food programs by people who are experiencing food insecurity, but not using these resources. One in five food priority survey respondents who identify as sometimes being short on food do not access food programs in the community, including those which are explicitly open to everyone, such as community suppers or PEC Fresh Market.

Overwhelmingly, people who do not use food banks say it is because they feel others in the community are worse off. Other top reasons are that people feel reluctant to admit they need help, or they do not want to be seen going to a food bank. Access to food banks and other food programs is also hampered by distance from the programs, and lack of access to transportation.

Among those who do use food programs, one in four say they ***do not help meet their monthly needs***.

Reasons include:

- not enough food provided to meet their monthly food needs; visits restricted
- stigma and shame prevent people from accessing as often as needed
- lack of transportation
- lack of choice; food banks do not always provide food they can use, some have dietary restrictions
- many identified they need more access to fresh produce and meat, as well as cleaning and hygiene supplies

About half of respondents who use food programs say they *help somewhat* in meeting their monthly food needs. Another one in four respondents who use food programs find *they do help meet their monthly food needs*. Many respondents expressed gratitude to the network of supports and people working to maintain these services in PEC. They also demonstrate resilience in many ways:

- using food programs to reduce grocery costs so they can pay other bills
- stretching their monthly budget to save money and decrease stress
- using food programs to focus on healthy choices
- doing meal planning and research to make the most of affordable food selections

A number of other important themes and suggestions emerged from the survey responses:

- people who do not currently use food programs may need them soon; Covid has made it harder to get by
- calls for a government response to food insecurity, highlighting the need for policy advocacy
- food banks should use the nutrition guide and make sure people have what they need (HPEPH data on the cost of eating well can serve as a useful guide)
- some described using a food bank as humiliating, or experienced feelings of discrimination
- geography is a significant barrier for some PEC residents; satellite or outreach programs in food deserts, or more remote areas of the County, could help address this need

## 2. Challenges in program delivery

- dependency on partnerships to distribute meals
- difficulty reaching smaller towns and villages while covering a large catchment area across Hastings-Prince Edward
- physical accessibility at food banks is an ongoing challenge for members and volunteers
- some programs need new homes: there is insufficient space for their program needs, or they may lose access to their existing space
- the Food Depot requires an exit strategy

## 3. Recommendations for program delivery

- a Community Food Centre model with an accessible, multi-use space
- asset mapping in small or remote locations to determine what partnerships and connections may support program expansion into areas of need
- stable funding to ensure ongoing capacity
- rent-free access to municipal buildings for food programs
- short-term funding to continue distributing grocery cards, bridging the gap until more seasonal produce and employment opportunities become available

## VII Innovations Wanted

When asked about what innovations they would like to see put into place in PEC, overwhelmingly, food programs responded with innovative initiatives they are currently offering. Innovations are happening in

PEC. Our food programs have pivoted, and continue to pivot, to respond to community needs and wants. Innovation happening now in PEC food programs include:

- Increasing distribution of grocery cards, good food market cards
- Making deliveries to people's homes
- Providing frozen meals
- Organizing communal cooking opportunities (outside of Covid)
- No means testing at the Food Depot

#### Centralized or Decentralized?

A Community Food Centre model was strongly favoured among food program surveys and frontline workers. It was identified as a lesser priority by people with lived experience of food insecurity; however, a Community Food Centre model does help resolve many of the concerns ranked as high priorities or significant barriers for this group: concerns about stigma and privacy connected to being seen using a food bank; access to more fresh produce; a shopping experience that supports more choice; and eliminating disparities in services between different areas of the County. Cross-referrals facilitated by this model would also help people to navigate social supports, helping to relieve additional pressures the surveys identified, such as a lack of affordable housing, or difficulty accessing benefits. From a program-delivery perspective, a centralized location also offers cost-saving efficiencies; for example, kitchen facilities could be used to prepare meals for delivery, wash fresh produce, and host cooking classes and canning bees.

However, the question remains whether a centralized model best meets the needs of a diverse and geographically dispersed population. There are also advantages to a decentralized model, with rural depots (such as The Hub) or outreach initiatives that meet target groups where they already congregate (such as the ROC). To centralize or not – or perhaps some combination – remains an open question.

## VIII Planning by Program: Food Collective Members

Food Program	Current Plans	Mid-term Plans	Vision for the Future
<p><b>Prince Edward Learning Centre</b> - PEC Fresh Market</p>	<p>Exploring partnerships to expand Good Food Markets to serve more people across the County</p> <p>Grant (through March 2021) supporting a partnership with the Picton Food Bank to expand food delivery and gift cards for the Good Food Market</p>	<p>Grow Good Food Market with like-minded partners. Aim to achieve a network of markets, cooking instruction and cooking bees, to enhance cultural and intergenerational connections, and provide access to affordable food</p>	<p>Creation of a food hub with wraparound supports, housing, training and employment supports</p>
<p><b>Storehouse Foodbank</b></p>	<p>Establishing a building fund, in partnership with Wellington Rotary</p> <p>Continue partnership with Food to Share to support meals for seniors</p> <p>Resume Table Settings program providing meals for vineyard workers</p>	<p>Securing a property for the food bank</p>	<p>A location with a kitchen where we can offer cooking classes and make meals</p>
<p><b>Picton United Church Food Bank</b></p>	<p>Maintaining safety protocols and support through Covid</p> <p>Resuming custom orders for members post-Covid</p>	<p>Seeing a Community Food Centre become a reality</p>	
<p><b>Food to Share</b></p>	<p>Expanding partnerships and ways to distribute meals to people who are experiencing food insecurity</p>	<p>Begin a transition to a Community Food Centre</p>	<p>Community Food Centre</p>

	Broadening reach into to other areas of the County		
<b>Community Development Council of Quinte</b> - Good Food Box - Good Baby Box - Good Food Market - Community gardens - Community kitchens	Funding secured to continue programming through next year	Increase partnerships to reach people who are in food deserts	Increase community development and social planning work, which will provide the data and evidence we need to best direct our focus
<b>Food Depot</b>	Secure funds to continue services through June 2021  Need an exit strategy and handover to other services  There is an ongoing need for grocery cards		

**IX Advocacy**

Advocacy was identified by food innovators and survey respondents as an important focus for moving from a charitable model to an empowerment model. We know food security is, foremost, a social justice issue; therefore, advocacy and social justice work are central to addressing food insecurity in PEC. Fostering advocacy as a component of food programs helps nurture a sense of belonging and engagement among clients and the broader community. Advocacy gives people a collective, rational voice, and helps ensure the wisdom and ideas of people with lived experience are being heard.

In PEC, advocacy efforts can be channeled toward multiple goals promoting food security.

1. Municipal government
  - promote a living wage in PEC
  - develop a municipal food strategy and charter
  - make food programs a funding priority
  - advocate for rent-free space in municipal buildings for food programs
  - seek municipal support for local producers/local produce in grocery stores
  - seek support for an advocacy group/training for people with lived experience of food insecurity
  - prioritize affordable housing

2. Provincial
  - increase social assistance rates
3. Federal
  - promote a basic income guarantee
4. Organizational
  - develop an exit strategy for the Food Depot
  - further develop and promote food collective communication plan
  - advocate for coordination and staff support for food collective
5. Resource development
  - seek support for a capital campaign: Storehouse Foodbank and/or Community Food Centre
  - recommend assessment and cost-benefit analysis (Community Food Center v. food banks v. grocery cards)
  - identify major donors
  - evaluate social enterprise development opportunities
  - create pilot programs
  - secure multi-year funding

## **X Conclusion**

Covid has presented both a challenge and an opportunity for County food programs. Layoffs and repeated cycles of lockdown have expanded awareness of how quickly individual circumstances can change, resulting in broader acceptance of government support to address the underlying causes of food insecurity, including initiatives such as a guaranteed basic income.

These conditions create an opportunity to attract municipal and donor support with a strong vision for universal, sustainable programming to improve food security in PEC.

The research and recommendations presented in this report are derived from wide stakeholder consultation; however, there are other community partners, such as PEC schools and the Food for Learning program, whose perspectives have not been captured by the research. Ongoing consultation with community stakeholders will help to inform future directions.

This is a working plan. The food collective is an inclusive group welcoming the participation of all local food programs, in order to benefit from our shared insights, and focus our efforts in the same direction.