USING INFORMATION TO MOBILIZE A COMMUNITY

Food Security in Prince Edward County

DECEMBER 2019

**A Community Demonstration Project
funded through Rural Ontario Institute's
"Measuring Rural Community Vitality" initiative**

Context

Prince Edward County (PEC) is a single-tier municipality in Eastern Ontario with a mostly rural population of about 25, 000 spread over a geographic area of approximately 1,000 square kms. Historically an agricultural region, today Prince Edward County is home to a variety of farms large and small, dozens of wineries and breweries, a wide range of entrepreneurial businesses and a burgeoning tourist economy.

Motivated by census data indicating that Prince Edward County experiences one of the highest rates of food insecurity in Ontario, The County Foundation convened a food security working group in 2014.

Food insecurity is a serious social and public health problem that negatively impacts the physical, mental, and social health of individuals and families as well as the overall health of the community. The most recent Ontario data (2013-14 Canadian Community Health Survey) indicates that approximately 10% of households in Hastings and Prince Edward Counties report moderate ("compromising quantity or quality of food consumed") to severe ("reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns due to lack of food, at most extreme may go days") food insecurity. **Given the population, this suggests that as many as 2,500 people in Prince Edward County (PEC) may be food insecure.**

The root causes of food insecurity are complex and interrelated, many being associated with poverty. Unemployment, precarious employment, high housing costs, lack of affordable transportation, rising food and utilities costs as well as gaps in access and distribution that lead to food deserts are all part of the picture.

The latest PROOF report (Food Insecurity Policy Research, U of Toronto) states that nation-wide "over 60% of food-insecure households are relying on wages and salaries as their main source of income. Simply having a job is not enough; low-waged jobs and precarious work means people in the workforce often don't have enough income to be food-secure."

The County Foundation produced *Vital Signs* reports in 2013 and 2018 promoting awareness of successes and challenges in Prince Edward County. The 2013 *Vital Signs* Advisory Committee, comprising leaders from a broad range of local organizations, prioritized three issue areas from the report: Food Security, Learning and Transportation. Working groups were formed to define priorities and projects in these three areas.
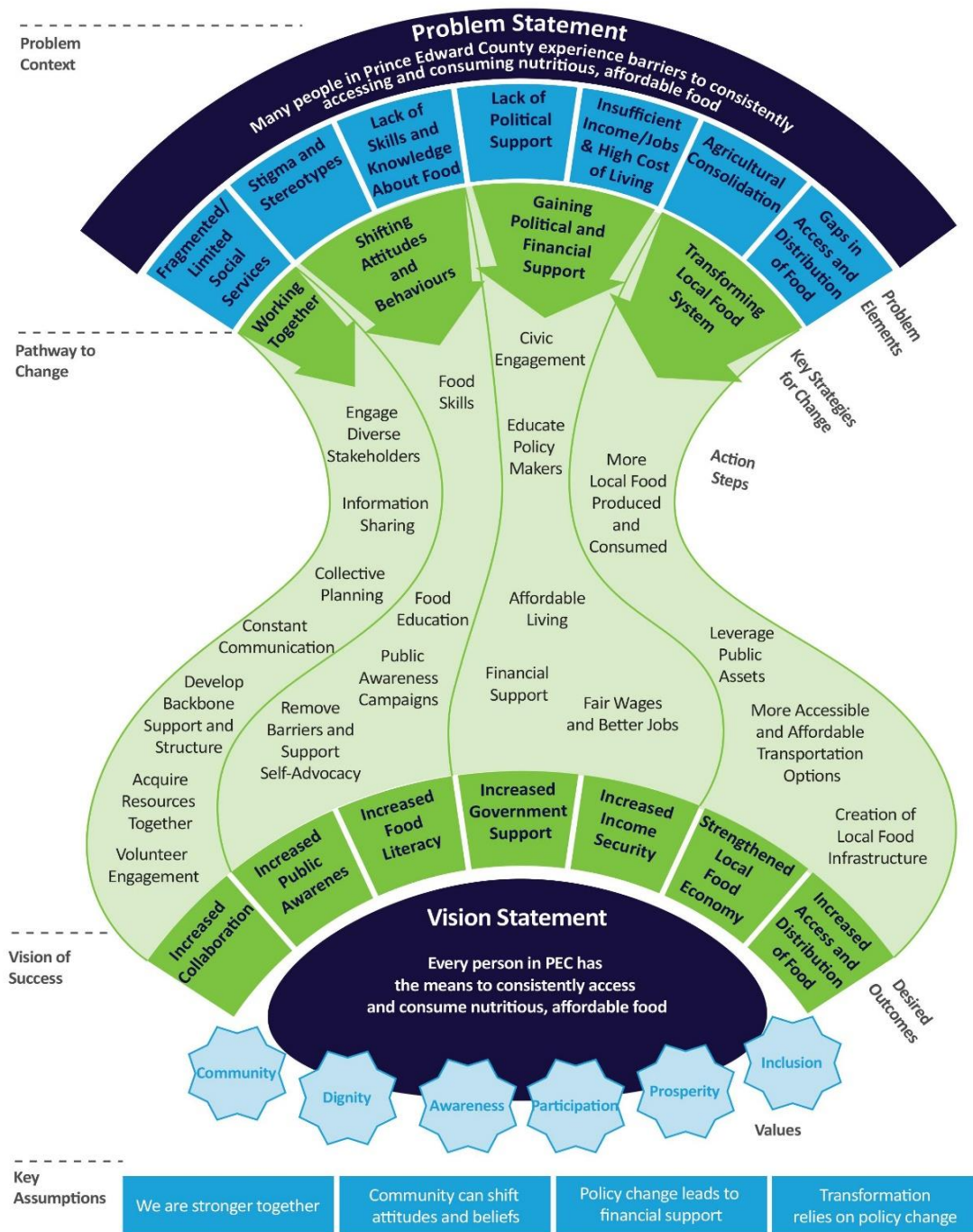

The *Vital Signs* Food Security working group has met on a regular basis, and in early days focused on relationship-building, gaining awareness of food programs and services already available in the community, and launching new projects such as community gardens and Fresh for All, a grow-a-row initiative.

Conscious of the complex, long-standing nature of this issue, the working group came to embrace a Collective Impact approach for reaching a goal of significantly reducing food insecurity in Prince Edward County. With support from The Ontario Trillium Foundation and guidance from Eco-Ethonomics, specialists in sustainable food system research and planning, the group completed a 7-month Collective Impact project in 2017 gathering data on the local food system and engaging a diverse cross-section of the community to develop innovative and collaborative strategies that address the root causes of food insecurity.

A significant outcome of this phase was articulation of a Theory of Change in narrative and graphic formats. Informed by input from across the community, the Theory of Change provides a framework for the initiative going forward.

THEORY OF CHANGE FOR FOOD SECURITY IN PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY

The County FOUNDATION

Problem Context

Problem Statement
Many people in Prince Edward County experience barriers to consistently accessing and consuming nutritious, affordable food

Stigma and Stereotypes
Lack of Skills and Knowledge About Food
Lack of Political Support
Insufficient Income/Jobs & High Cost of Living
Agricultural Consolidation
Gaps in Access and Distribution of Food

Fragmented/ Limited Social Services

Problem Elements

Shifting Attitudes and Behaviours
Gaining Political and Financial Support
Transforming Local Food System

Working Together

Key Strategies for Change

Pathway to Change

Civic Engagement

Engage Diverse Stakeholders
Food Skills
Educate Policy Makers
More Local Food Produced and Consumed

Action Steps

Information Sharing

Collective Planning
Food Education
Affordable Living
Leverage Public Assets

Constant Communication
Public Awareness Campaigns
Financial Support
More Accessible and Affordable Transportation Options

Develop Backbone Support and Structure
Remove Barriers and Support Self-Advocacy
Fair Wages and Better Jobs

Acquire Resources Together

Increased Food Literacy
Increased Government Support
Increased Income Security
Strengthened Local Food Economy
Creation of Local Food Infrastructure

Volunteer Engagement

Increased Public Awarenes
Increased Access and Distribution of Food

Increased Collaboration

Desired Outcomes

Vision of Success

Vision Statement
Every person in PEC has the means to consistently access and consume nutritious, affordable food

Community
Dignity
Awareness
Participation
Prosperity
Inclusion

Values

Key Assumptions

| We are stronger together | Community can shift attitudes and beliefs | Policy change leads to financial support | Transformation relies on policy change |

The *Vital Signs 2018 Report* indicated that despite valiant efforts by individual organizations, many people in the community continue to go hungry. Soon after its October 2018 publication the report's Advisory Committee, comprised of leaders of 17 community organizations, chose Food Security as first among the 8 issues covered in the report and urged The County Foundation (TCF) to continue providing leadership for collaborative action on this complex community issue by building on the research and engagement work completed to date.

TCF convened a meeting of key Food Security working group members to determine next steps.   In a timely coincidence ROI had just released a call for proposals for its *Measuring Rural Community Vitality: Community Demonstration Projects.* These key group members agreed to form a Steering Committee and develop a project proposal based on mobilizing the community around three desired outcomes in the Theory of Change:

Increased Public Awareness	Increased Food Literacy	Increased Access and Distribution of Food

The Prince Edward County proposal, with The County Foundation and the County of Prince Edward as lead agencies, was chosen as one of three ROI-funded Community Development Projects.   Starting in January the Steering Committee met monthly, with early meetings devoted to developing the work plan, project budget and governance structure.

The $15,000 in funding received from the Rural Ontario Institute was augmented by cash and in-kind contributions from project partners which brought the overall budget to $46,000 and allowed for development of a comprehensive work plan for the 9-month project.

	Cash Contribution	In-Kind Contribution	Costs Covered by In-Kind Contributions
Rural Ontario Institute	15,000		
The County Foundation	10,000	4891	Backbone wages
Food to Share	2905	3700	Cooled storage construction; cooking with Council and businesses; graphic design
HPE Public Health		1218	Meal or No Meal event; printing Food Access Guides
Community Development Council of Quinte		550	Meal or No Meal; building supplies for Community Garden
Prince Edward Learning Centre		5750	Tuition; wages; transportation; food for students; incentives
Storehouse Foodbank		975	Gift cards for incentives; food for cooking sessions
Picton United Church Food Bank		500	Gift cards for incentives; food for cooking sessions
Farrell Insights		450	Gift cards for incentives
Total:	27,905	18,034	

The project was launched at a meeting of the full working group in February 2019 where Action Teams for the three strategy areas were formed and governance structure was ratified.

Steering Committee

Backbone Team

Public Awareness Team

Food Literacy Team

Access to Food Team
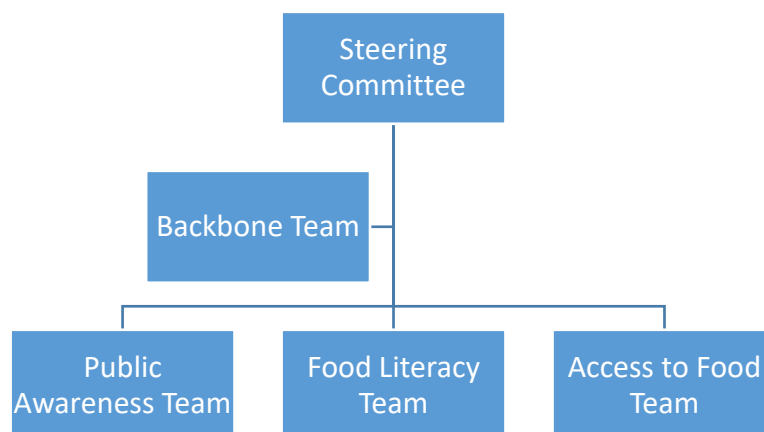
- Steering Committee guided the direction of the initiative by developing strategies to support the work of Action Teams and addressing accountability by asking "What are our measures going to be? How will we know that we're making progress?"
- Action Teams drove the implementation of the strategies. They were responsible for the activities aimed at achieving the project outcomes.
- Backbone team provided support for the Steering Committee and Action Teams through ongoing facilitation, communications support, and handling logistical and administrative details needed for the initiative to function smoothly.

The team approach to the work plan brought a dynamic aspect to the strategies. Each team had its own structure and characteristics based on the perspectives of the team leaders and the resources shared by team members and other partners. To ensure continuity and good communication each team had a representative on the Steering Committee.

Public Awareness Team

Led by The County Foundation's Tony Walton, this team undertook several activities to increase public awareness of the issue of food insecurity in PEC and resources currently available in the community. This team included members with lived experience of poverty and food insecurity; their input and insights were invaluable to the work of the team.

Strategies and activities undertaken:

- Branding – Aided by the in-kind contribution of a team member with graphic design expertise, the team engaged the working group in renaming the initiative and choosing a logo. The unwieldy moniker Vital Signs Food Security Working Group made way for **The Food Collective.** This strategy has already led to greater recognition of the initiative and its activities throughout the community.

- Pilot project to distribute 200 hardcopies of HPE Public Health's Food Access Guide. With the intention of gauging the need for hardcopies of this online resource, the guides were placed in PEC libraries, the fitness centre and Family Health Team offices. All 200 were picked up within a month. In addition, the direct weblink to

[the Food Access Guide](#) was posted on TCF website and Facebook page, reaching more than 1500 people. These positive results led to a plan to print copies of the updated 2019 guide when available and to increase efforts to make the link to the online guide widely available.

- Meal or No Meal workshop – Facilitated by CDC Quinte and HPE Public Health, this interactive session highlighted the difficult choices faced by those living on low incomes. Participants were guided to a deeper understanding of the real cost of eating well in Prince Edward County. 30 community members participated in the session including the Mayor and four municipal Councillors, the President of the Chamber of Commerce and service club representatives. Most participants completed exit surveys. Among the variety of comments was:

> *"Great program. Shows the difficult decisions too many people are forced to make daily. An eye opener for sure. We as a community must continue to raise awareness of all the life issues faced by many people in our community who live on the margins."*

- Public outreach through radio interviews, Facebook postings, newspaper coverage of issues and activities. One posting on TCF's Facebook page highlighting the availability of the Good Food Box reached over 11,000 people.
- Created a database of regional food services and programs to provide baseline numbers for tracking activities going forward.

Food Literacy Team

Led by Jonah Schein, Program Facilitator for Prince Edward Learning Centre, the team's project was built into the curriculum of this adult learning centre and guided students as they explored the local food system and developed a draft food policy for use by the community.   Through a series of guest speakers, field trips, hands on learning including cooking demos, discussions and writing exercises students addressed four areas of food literacy:

a) How the food we eat impacts our health
b) How our food system impacts our environment
c) How our food choices impact our economy
d) How many people in PEC are struggling to access healthy food

The work of this team addressed the policy change areas of the Collective's Theory of Change. Students and other team members explored and reflected on various aspects of collective and systemic change compared to change on an individual level. They highlighted the importance of starting with change in their own system, PE Learning Center, and began to institute changes in line with their learnings such as healthier food available for snacks at the Centre and making coffee as opposed to buying it at fast food restaurant. An outcome of the project is a draft food policy that the team will present in a deputation to municipal Council early in the new year.

Access to Food Team

Led by Glen Wallis, founder of Food to Share, this team undertook a wide variety of activities aimed at increasing access to nutritious food including:

- Hired and trained community members with lived experience of food insecurity to deliver programming such as cooking classes.
- Held cooking classes in partnership with the Food Banks.
- Gathered feedback from food program users via focus groups led by Mike Farrell.
- Purchased a mobile billboard for promotional messages about food programs.
- Built relationships with farmers as resources for fresh, local produce for Food to Share, the Food Banks and other food programs.
- Established self-serve produce shelves at Food Banks.
- Posted weekly recipe blog on the Food to Share website featuring foods currently on sale at local stores and farm stands.
- Explored the potential for establishing Good Food Markets in PEC. CDC Quinte is piloting several markets in Hastings County that can serve as models.
- Established cooled drop off point for Fresh for All donations.
- Established new Community Meals.
- Held cooking sessions for municipal Council and local businesses to give them insight into the work of Food to Share.

In addition to the immediate impact of providing needed access to food, these activities were undertaken to test strategies that can be built upon as the local food system begins to shift from an emergency/charity model to a food centre model as described in Community Food Centres Canada's Good Food Principles

Learnings/Impacts

- Support from the Rural Ontario Institute for The Food Collective's project had the significant impact of engaging the municipality in the initiative at a deeper level than had been previously possible.

- The preliminary work of creating a governance structure, essential to development of a solid foundation on which to build the project, was not without challenges. It can be difficult for grassroots organizations accustomed to working independently and within their own sphere of volunteers and supporters to begin making the shift toward collective action. Established regional agencies, often competing for limited resources, may also be reluctant to make this shift. Allowing ample time for trusting relationships to form, taking the risk to openly address conflicts and roadblocks, and being intentional about reinforcing the value of collective action are necessary to keep the project moving toward systems change.

- While a collective works toward a shared agenda, the importance of strong and consistent leadership can't be overestimated. In this project the partnership between The County Foundation and the County of Prince Edward as lead agencies provided a firm foundation and project oversight while a dedicated Steering Committee served in the primary decision-making role, meeting monthly to share updates and strategize next steps. Team leaders made use of available resources to accomplish the project's goals.

- It's paramount to engage community members with lived experience of poverty and food insecurity in efforts to make systems change around food insecurity. This requires creating inclusive spaces to work in and taking time for trust and comfort to develop as well as taking steps to provide ongoing support and guidance to all participants, including training programs for volunteers who work with people in need.

- Using food as a community-building tool is an effective strategy for reducing the stigma that exists around food insecurity. Taking food programs and services to where people are – schools, youth centres, childcare centres, or just on their turf – greatly increases the reach of programs and reduces stigma.

- Issues of sustainability need to be considered throughout the project to ensure that adequate financial, human and capital resources are available to move strategies forward.

Conclusions/Going Forward

Community engagement around food insecurity in Prince Edward County began at the reporting stage and continues to evolve and expand as the initiative develops. Starting in 2013, Community Conversations facilitated by The County Foundation as a lead-in to the *Vital Signs* Reports created opportunities for community members to give feedback about issues and to engage in potential solutions. Publication of the reports generated conversations, even debates, about issues and raised the level of community engagement. The Collective Impact work began the process of organizing stakeholders around a shared agenda with clear pathways to change.

The Food Collective's vision,   "Every person in PEC has the means to consistently access and consume nutritious affordable food"

is being pursued through partnerships and collaborative action that address the root causes of food insecurity while seeking to authentically engage those most affected by poverty and food insecurity.   Lessons learned through the ROI project moves the community another step closer to this vision.

ROI Project Steering Committee