



Food First<sup>NL</sup>

# Rethinking Food Charity in Newfoundland and Labrador

## Results, Reflections, and Recommendations 2022–23



# Land Acknowledgment

This report, and the process that got us here, is rooted in the realities of Newfoundland and Labrador, home to the Mi'kmaq, Inuit of Nunatsiavut and NunatuKavut, and the Innu of Nitassinan, and the ancestral home to the Beothuk, whose culture is now lost forever.

## Where This Work Sits

In Canada, including in Newfoundland and Labrador, Indigenous people face a hugely elevated risk of food insecurity. This is a direct consequence of centuries of colonial policies that have intentionally and violently undermined Indigenous food systems and networks of community support.

We must also recognize that the very concept of charity, and of food charity in particular, is rooted in non-Indigenous ways of thinking. Indigenous communities have their own distinct traditions of mutual support, sharing, and community welfare. Thankfully, those traditions have in many cases survived colonial attempts to erase them.

As we work to envision a new model for food charity, we know that to meaningfully address food insecurity we must also work to address the disparities that Indigenous communities face in accessing food.

That said, this report is not in any way definitive of the Indigenous experience with food and food charity in Newfoundland and Labrador. We did hear from Indigenous peoples throughout this process, both within our stakeholder conversations and within the project team itself, but we cannot claim to have captured the nuances of how indigeneity and food charity relate in this province.

We urge everyone reading this work to take a deeper dive into the thinking and work on food systems created by Indigenous communities here in Newfoundland and Labrador and elsewhere in Canada.

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# Executive Summary

## About the Project

**Rethinking Food Charity: A Community Conversation** was an 8-month project to reenvision the scope and role of food charity in Newfoundland and Labrador. It had three stages:

- ▶ **Stage 1:** Online surveys for both food program providers and People with Lived and Living Experience of food insecurity.
- ▶ **Stage 2:** Focus groups with both food program providers and People with Lived and Living Experience of food insecurity.
- ▶ **Stage 3:** A large in-person gathering.

## Rethinking Food Charity: Themes

- 1. Accessibility:** Reducing physical and administrative barriers to accessing food.
- 2. Stigma and Dignity:** Building a system without shame.
- 3. Choice:** People living with food insecurity shaping the support they receive.
- 4. Collaboration:** Food programs working together and sharing resources.
- 5. Advocacy:** Food charities raising their voices for change.
- 6. Income Solutions:** Recognizing that the root cause of food insecurity is poverty.

## Recommendations for the Provincial Government

- ▶ Immediate, decisive action on structural changes that would raise incomes (such as a higher minimum wage, higher income support rates, and a basic income).
- ▶ Establish a five-year Food Charity Transformation Fund to support organizational transformation and collaboration in the food charity sector.
- ▶ Provide long-term funding to a shared delivery service and 211 service.
- ▶ Continue the Food Security Working Group.
- ▶ Participate in national dialogues around food insecurity and food charity.

# Recommendations for the Food Charity Sector

Theme	#	Recommendation	Timeline
Accessibility	1A	Stop using income testing and similar eligibility criteria.	Immediately
	1B	Consult with service users to adjust opening hours.	6 months
	1C	Make all food program spaces fully accessible.	3–5 years
	1D	Stop using MCP numbers as client identifiers.	1–3 years
	1E	Establish shared service standards.	2–3 years
Stigma and Dignity	2A	Reorganize to avoid outdoor lineups.	1 year
	2B	Universal training for food program volunteers and staff.	3–4 years
Choice	3A	Expand gift card programs.	Immediately
	3B	Move to a “grocery store” model for physical food distribution.	1–3 years
Collaboration	4A	Support the establishment of a shared delivery service.	Immediately
	4B	Establish shared staff roles responsible for wraparound support.	1–2 years
	4C	Consider merging organizations.	1–3 years
Advocacy	5A	Convene regularly around key advocacy issues.	Immediately
	5B	Lean into support from national partners.	Immediately
	5C	Collaboratively fund advocacy work on behalf of the food charity sector.	1–3 years
Income Solutions	6A	Ensure food program staff are paid a living wage.	1 year
	6B	Centre the need for income solutions in organizational communications.	1 year
	6C	Formally commit to membership in campaigns and coalitions working towards income solutions.	1–2 years



# Acknowledgements

Rethinking Food Charity stands on the shoulders of many honest and insightful conversations from People with Lived and Living Experience of food insecurity. These discussions shaped our process, report, and recommendations. A big thank you to all the individuals that participated in the survey and focus groups, and to the following groups who lent their time and community connections to host important conversations: Status of Women Central, Exploits Community Centre, Labrador Friendship Centre, Choices For Youth, Smallwood Crescent Community Centre Inc., Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation, Corner Brook Status of Women Council, SeniorsNL, Rabbittown Community Centre, and The Gathering Place.

Rethinking Food Charity would also not have been possible without the people involved in the food charity sector. With their support and participation, the project was able to create attainable recommendations and establish new relationships within the food charity sector. Through the surveys, focus groups, and Gathering we heard from people representing most of the food charity organizations in the province. We were continually struck by their openness to dialogue and to rethinking their ways of working.

This was especially true during the Rethinking Food Charity Gathering, and we thank everyone — from government staff, to community sector workers, to private citizens alike — for their insights and their willingness to have difficult conversations with each other. We would specifically like to thank the inspiring speakers from that Gathering for bringing different perspectives and ideas that strengthened this project.

They were: Jennifer Collins (Local Wellness Collective), Debbie Wiseman (Sharing the Harvest), Les Perry (Food on the Move), Jody Williams (Bridges to Hope), Roxanne Notley (NunatuKavut), Dr. Valerie Tarasuk (PROOF), Ben Earle (UBI Works & Basic Income Canada Network) and Rekha Cherian (Community Food Centres Canada).

Thanks also to the members of the Food Security Working Group. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Working Group has served as a vital sounding board for organizations working on these issues. Their input was vital in shaping this process.

Finally, thanks to the funders of this project, the Catherine Donnelly Foundation and the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, for giving us the resources to start these important conversations about Rethinking Food Charity in the province.

# About Food First NL

Established in 1998, Food First NL is a provincial, non-profit organization with more than two decades of experience collaborating with communities and organizations across Newfoundland and Labrador to advance food security in the province.

**Food First NL's mission** is to advance everyone's right to food in Newfoundland and Labrador.

**We envision** a province where everyone can eat with joy and dignity.

Our work is organized into **four strategic pathways**:



**Advocating** | We raise awareness of the systemic factors that shape our food systems and advocate for the policy solutions that would have the most positive impact.



**Organizing** | We bring together individuals and organizations across all sectors who are engaged with food issues to work collectively, share best practices, and celebrate successes.



**Taking Action** | We operate and fund on-the-ground programs that support communities in their food security priorities and provide opportunities to identify and test promising solutions.



**Valuing People** | We invest in people in all parts of our work by supporting Lived and Living Experience engagement and by continually strengthening our own team and our commitments to equity.

## Learn More

To learn more about our work visit:

**FoodFirstNL.ca** | Our main organizational website, which contains information about our programs, team, and regular updates. Sign up for our monthly newsletter to receive updates straight to your inbox.

**Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube** | Follow us @FoodFirstNL

**linktr.ee/FoodFirstNL** | Links to our most popular resources and our program pages/websites.

# Food First NL's Role In and Relationship With the Food Charity Sector

Food First NL's role in, and relationship with, the food charity sector has changed dramatically in the past three years. Food charities have always been a part of the broader community of food organizations we connect with, but it is only since 2020 that Food First NL has played a direct role in coordinating, resourcing, and operating food charity.

We first stepped into a connecting role in response to the mandatory 'Snowmageddon' storm closures. At the time, there was much uncertainty in the community about the status of food charity programs. Food First NL staff responded by gathering and sharing food program status information. During the first round of COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, Food First NL staff quickly stepped back into this role. Many people were looking for information about food and there was no single point of access.

We responded to this challenge by first creating a spreadsheet on our website listing food programs' contact information and status. Our staff continually called and emailed food programs to keep the database updated, particularly in the fast-changing early days.

The spreadsheet database soon evolved into the Community Food Helpline. Food First NL partnered with the Jimmy Pratt Foundation and SeniorsNL to create a telephone "warm line" for the database to make it more accessible. It quickly became clear that many of the clients calling this line were not calling because they didn't know what support was out there, but instead because these supports weren't adequate for them. Leveraging pandemic relief funding, the Jimmy Pratt Foundation launched a program to provide grocery gift cards to people who needed additional support. This service would later be taken on and expanded by Food First NL.

During this period, Food First NL also took a leadership role in developing a collaborative community-government response to the food security crisis. A provincial Food Security Working Group was formed, co-chaired by the Government of NL and Food First NL, to provide a table for people to come together and problem-solve.

One of the key issues identified by the Working Group was the unprecedented strain on food program resources. This led to the creation of the Community Food Program Support Fund, which was administered by Food First NL. In total, we administered more than \$1,000,000 in small grants to more than 75 organizations, funded by the Government of NL and a number of national partners.

**Now, having been both outsiders and insiders in the world of food charity, we hope to bring some new perspectives forward in the remainder of this report.**



# Food Insecurity and Food Charity in Newfoundland and Labrador



# Food Insecurity in Newfoundland and Labrador

The latest numbers from PROOF's Food Insecurity in Canada report<sup>1</sup> tell us that 17.9% of households (90,000 people) in Newfoundland and Labrador experienced some form of food insecurity in 2021. Food insecurity is measured using three categories.

## Marginal Food Insecurity:

Worry about running out of food and/or limited food selection due to a lack of money for food.

## Moderate Food Insecurity:

Compromise in quality and/or quantity of food due to a lack of money for food.

## Severe Food Insecurity:

Miss meals, reduce food intake, and at the most extreme go one or more day(s) without food due to a lack of money for food.

Specifically, 4.5% of households in the province experienced severe food insecurity, 8.6% experienced moderate food insecurity, and 4.6% of households experienced marginal food insecurity.

Nearly 7 in 10 households in the province (69%) relying on social assistance as their main source of income experienced some form of food insecurity. Almost half of all food-insecure households (45%) relied on wages, salaries, or self-employment earnings as their main source of income.

However, of the 90,000 Newfoundlanders and Labradorians who experienced food insecurity in 2021, Canada's Hunger Count<sup>2</sup> tells us that only around 10,800 of these individuals (12%) accessed a food bank that same year. Individuals experiencing food insecurity are more likely to seek financial help from family and friends, miss utility bill payments, ask for help from social

1 Tarasuk, V., Li, T., & Fafard St-Germain, A. A. (2022). *Household food insecurity in Canada, 2021*. Toronto: Research to identify policy options to reduce food insecurity (PROOF). Retrieved from [proof.utoronto.ca](http://proof.utoronto.ca)

2 *Hunger Count 2021*. (2021). Food Banks Canada. Retrieved from [foodbanksCanada.ca/hungercount-other-research-reports](http://foodbanksCanada.ca/hungercount-other-research-reports)

assistance or a community agency, or miss rent or mortgage payments rather than use a food bank.

So, why aren't people turning to food programs more often? Because households that are food insecure need more than just food. Food is an expense with some flexibility to manage in a way that other more fixed expenses do not allow (e.g., rent, utilities, child care), but the reality is that if people are struggling to afford food they are probably struggling to afford other necessities too. Food programs are limited in the support they can provide and accessing a food bank does not cause food-insecure households to become food secure, because food insecurity is largely a long-term problem of insufficient income. Also, these programs are not physically accessible for many Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, and accessing them can carry a heavy weight of stigma.

Even if food programs could provide a monthly hamper to all 90,000 Newfoundlanders and Labradorians experiencing food insecurity, the province would still have 90,000 people struggling to put enough food on their tables because of insufficient income to meet all their basic needs.

**One in four children** under the age of 18 in Newfoundland and Labrador lived in a food-insecure household in 2021.

This was the highest rate of childhood food insecurity in any province.



# Provincial Initiatives to Address Food Insecurity

Since these statistics were released, a number of important initiatives have gotten under way at the provincial level.

The [Social and Economic Well-Being Plan](#) is the province's poverty reduction and well-being plan and is currently under development. It identifies food security as one of six components that impact social and economic well-being.

[NL Health Accord](#) produced a 10-year plan and blueprint for health transformation. It recognizes that food security is one of the primary social determinants of health, and that food security is determined by income. One of the Health Accord's calls to action is to ensure that people of our province "have a predictable and livable basic income... integrated with provincial programming to improve food security."

A [Basic Income Program for Youth Receiving Residential Services](#) was announced in October 2022 to support youth aged 16 to 21. Similar to programs launched in British Columbia and Wales, this program recognizes government's special obligation to youth in care, but it is unclear whether the scale — a \$600 monthly payment — will be sufficient to help youth transition into the workforce or an educational program while also accounting for the increasing cost of living.

The [All-Party Committee on Basic Income](#) began meeting in November 2022 and recommendations are expected in June 2023. Prince Edward Island went through a similar all-party process, which resulted in recommendations to establish a basic income.

It is becoming clearer that food insecurity, and poverty more broadly, are issues that need to be addressed in a long-term, non-partisan, and collaborative way.

# Food Charity in Canada: A Very Short History

Canada's first food bank was created in Alberta in 1981 as an emergency response to the economic recession caused by an oil industry bust<sup>3</sup>. Over the next few years, food banks began popping up all across Canada to fill the gap left by high unemployment rates and insufficient social assistance programs. Since their inception, food banks and other charitable food programs have been Canada's primary response to food insecurity. Although they were intended to be a temporary solution to poverty, more and more individuals are still forced to rely on food banks over 40 years later.

Critiques of this model have been present almost since it began. Prominent advocates, such as Graham Riches, began to speak out about the issue of relying on charitable food programs to solve widespread food insecurity by 1985. They emphasized the failure of food banks to address the root cause of food insecurity: a broken social system<sup>4</sup>.

As its name suggests, the food charity model has led us to frame food as charity instead of a fundamental human right. Consequently, charitable food programs enable government officials to rely on charity instead of creating a supportive social system.

Today, there are more than 5,025 charitable food programs across Canada, and at least 97 in Newfoundland and Labrador.

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3 *Edmonton's Food Bank History*. (2023). Edmonton's Food Bank. Retrieved from [www.edmontonsfoodbank.com/about/history](http://www.edmontonsfoodbank.com/about/history)

4 *How food banks prop up a broken system*. (2020). The Tyee. Retrieved from [thetyee.ca/Opinion/2020/04/22/Food-Banks-Prop-Broken-System](http://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2020/04/22/Food-Banks-Prop-Broken-System)



# Food Charity in Newfoundland and Labrador

Today in Newfoundland and Labrador there are many organizations providing food charity.

Broadly speaking, food charity in the province breaks down into four types of programs.

**Food banks** are what usually come to mind first when talking about food charity. These are organizations that provide individuals with food to take home and prepare. In most cases these are pre-packed hampers containing two to three days of food that can be accessed once per month, although there is significant variation from organization to organization. Some food banks may also provide grocery gift cards, particularly during big holidays or following a large monetary donation.

**Meal programs** provide prepared meals, usually for consumption on-site (although take-away has become more common since the pandemic began). Meal programs can be stand-alone or integrated into multi-service agencies.

**Community freezers** distribute wild game, fish, and berries. These are most common in Labrador and provide access to traditional foods for people who may not have the means or ability to go out on the land.

**Other programs** provide food as part of their activities but food is not the primary focus. For example, a seniors' social night where a meal is always served, an after-school program with a snack, or grocery gift cards given out by community service agencies. One lesson from the pandemic is how important these programs are to their participants in terms of food access. Many programs pivoted to provide food drop-offs during the height of COVID lockdowns when their regular activities were on hold.

At this time, most food charity programs in Newfoundland and Labrador are focused on the day-to-day activities of supporting service users with their food needs. Very few have the dedicated capacity to engage in advocacy work to advance the sector beyond their program or to lower the need for food charity altogether.

# Provincial Food Program Numbers

There is very little system-level data available about food charity in Newfoundland and Labrador. We know, through the process of keeping Food First NL’s database up to date, that there were at least 97 charitable food programs operating as of January 2023 (Table 1).

Table 1. Charitable food programs (food banks, meal programs, community freezers, and other programs) known to be operating in Newfoundland and Labrador as of January 2023. Programs are listed by region.

Region	Food Banks	Meal Programs	Community Freezers	Other Programs
Avalon	24	11	0	1
Eastern	10	4	0	0
Central	13	1	1	1
Western	10	2	0	0
Labrador	6	0	13	0

## Key Food Bank Organizations

**Community Food Sharing Association:** The central agency for food distribution in the food charity sector of Newfoundland and Labrador. The organization collects and distributes food through 54 food banks to more than 10,700 individuals throughout the province. The Community Food Sharing Association is a member of Food Banks Canada’s national network. [CFSA.NF.net](http://CFSA.NF.net)

**Food Banks Canada:** The backbone organization for the national food bank network which provides support to food agencies that work at the community level. They aim to maximize collective impact, strengthen local capacity, and reduce the demand for food banks until the food charity sector is no longer needed. [FoodBanksCanada.ca](http://FoodBanksCanada.ca)

## Prior Research: 2020 COVID-19 Food Program Survey

Food First NL conducted a survey in July 2020, to collect province-wide data about food program services during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey focused on how programs were adapting and responding to the pandemic and what resources were needed moving forward. The research culminated in a survey data report.

Key findings from the 74 community food programs that completed the survey:

- ▼ 80% relied solely on volunteers and more than a third had no paid staff
- ▼ After the public health emergency struck, the number of:
  - ▷ Meal/snack programs decreased slightly
  - ▷ Food banks remained the same
  - ▷ Community freezers, gift card programs, and programs distributing food hampers more than doubled
- ▼ 81% of respondents received funding from the Community Food Program Support Fund, which was administered by Food First NL
- ▼ Over half of respondents used local fundraising to support their program, including food and monetary donations from community members.
- ▼ Areas that respondents thought required more support and improvement:
  - ▷ Funding structures (e.g., annual administration grants, multi-year funding for nonprofits, and more support to food banks)
  - ▷ Food delivery services (food transportation to service users)
- ▼ Changes that participants thought were needed in food systems work:
  - ▷ Re-evaluating the province's food system — emphasizing local food and self-sufficiency
  - ▷ Improving funding and related structures
  - ▷ Implementing a poverty reduction plan (e.g., Basic Income and living wage)
  - ▷ Enhancing communication between government, community groups, and individuals

This survey was largely a snapshot in time, capturing data about a rapidly changing sector with programs cropping up and disappearing over relatively short periods of time. That said, it is the innovations, adaptations, and lessons learned that occurred during this time that created an opening for critical reflection and, eventually, Rethinking Food Charity. The survey findings about the changes and supports that were needed also serve as a preview of themes that emerged through Rethinking Food Charity, including advocacy, income solutions, and collaboration.



# The Rethinking Food Charity Process



# Lived and Living Experience Survey

At the beginning of the Rethinking Food Charity process, we created a kickoff survey for People with Lived and Living Experience of food insecurity. The survey was open to anyone with lived/living experience in Newfoundland and Labrador including people who do and do not use food programs. In total, we received 495 responses. The survey data provided key insights from respondents and was used to identify core topics and to shape next steps for the Rethinking Food Charity process.

## Service Provider Survey

We released a survey for food program service providers at the same time that we released the survey for People with Lived and Living Experience. The survey was open to volunteers, employees, and board members with any charitable food program, including food banks, meal and snack programs, community freezers, etc. Several providers from the same food program could have completed the survey but responses were anonymous so it is unclear if this occurred. In total, we received 63 responses from people across the province.

More information about the Lived and Living Experience and Service Provider surveys is available at: [FoodFirstNL.ca/Rethink](https://FoodFirstNL.ca/Rethink)

## Service Provider Focus Groups

During the summer of 2022, we held five online regional and province-wide conversations with staff and volunteers from food programs. Each focus group was presented with area-specific data from the previous surveys, and was asked to discuss whether it reflected their program. They discussed what was working, what needed to change, and gaps in their system. In total we had 124 participants, with the conversations being held via Zoom for programs in Labrador, Western/Northern Peninsula, Central, Eastern, and Metro/Province-wide.

# Lived and Living Experience

## Focus Groups

In-depth engagement with People with Lived and Living Experience of food insecurity was a critical part of this work. It was also one where we endeavoured to take great care, knowing that the experience of living with poverty and food insecurity is one filled with invasive questions and surveillance.

The key question for us here was “who” – who would be the host of these conversations? It couldn't be food programs themselves. Regardless of the intentions and attitudes of their staff and volunteers, food programs sit in a position of significant power over service users. We didn't want to put any service user in a position of having to choose whether or not to voice a criticism to the people who provide their family with food. Additionally, we would not have been able to reach individuals who were food insecure but not accessing food charity.

We were also aware that Food First NL wouldn't be a great choice as host. At the time, we ourselves were operating a food program — the Community Food Helpline — and so the same dynamics applied. Being new to this work, we also had not had the time to build relationships of trust with people living with food insecurity.

Instead, Food First NL partnered with ten organizations that work closely with People with Lived and Living Experience of poverty and food insecurity, but are not primarily food programs themselves. We provided each organization with a grant to cover costs for promotion and facilitation, and to pay participants for their time and expertise. These partner organizations were located in Labrador as well as Western, Central, and Eastern Newfoundland.

Our partner organizations hosted 13 focus groups in total, with a maximum of 6 participants in each group. Participants included seniors, youth, Indigenous peoples, women, and other adults. Each focus group was asked nine questions, prepared by Food First NL, about their thoughts on and experiences with food charity. The facilitators had space to continue conversations or add relevant follow-up questions if necessary. Overall, participants were eager to engage and gave insight into their experiences which helped us make our final recommendations.

# Rethinking Food Charity Gathering

Held in November 2022, the in-person Rethinking Food Charity Gathering was the capstone event for the Rethinking Food Charity process. The Gathering was a free event that was open to anyone with an interest in improving food access and charitable food programming in the province. The agenda included a World Café (facilitated roundtable discussions on specific topics) along with presentations from national and provincial leaders in the food charity sector. 59 individuals representing 31 organizations gathered to discuss and reflect on what we learned throughout this process and how we can work together to shape the future of food charity in the province.

More information about the Gathering is available in the summary report at:

[FoodFirstNL.ca/Rethink](https://FoodFirstNL.ca/Rethink)

While there were People with Lived and Living Experience at the Gathering, this was primarily a gathering of organizations. The agenda centered on the themes gathered from People with Lived and Living Experience throughout the surveys and focus groups. The same power dynamics as we flagged in the focus group design applied here and this design was one way of keeping people safe.

## Valuing Lived Experiences

People with Lived and Living Experience of poverty and food insecurity have expert knowledge of their communities, the problems they face, and potential solutions. Research has shown that programs and policies are made better when People with Lived Experience help create them. However, roadblocks such as a lack of resources or discrimination often get in the way when People with Lived and Living Experience want to shape the policies and programs that most affect their lives and communities.



# What We Learned



## **We learned so much.**

Six themes repeatedly emerged over the course of Rethinking Food Charity through our conversations with People with Lived and Living Experience of food insecurity and food program service providers. Many of the challenges and opportunities for change within the food charity sector centred on six themes: accessibility, stigma and dignity, choice, collaboration, advocacy, and income solutions.

It is worth noting that these themes are not mutually exclusive. Autonomy, dignity, and the Right to Food are woven throughout each theme as well as the conversations that we've had over the past eight months more generally. At the root of these conversations are the full and complex lives of people experiencing food insecurity and of those who work or volunteer in the food charity sector. It is this humanity that has to guide and drive all advocacy work and the necessary changes within the food charity sector.

The need for change at every level is immense and immediate. The momentum required to set these changes into motion has been building for years — from service providers and people experiencing food insecurity alike. Our hope is that the information gathered and recommendations provided through Rethinking Food Charity will help turn this momentum into action.

In the rest of this section, we share what we learned on the six key themes.

# Accessibility

Throughout Rethinking Food Charity, it became clear that accessibility was one of the main areas that required major changes to create a charitable food sector that meets people's needs with dignity. One of the most common issues we heard from People with Lived and Living Experience and from Gathering attendees was the need to address both physical and administrative barriers to access.

Food charity is hard to access for many reasons. Getting to the physical location of a food program is a big hurdle for many people. On top of that, hours of operation for these programs are often limited. As a result, clients often have to navigate multiple barriers around transportation and scheduling to even get to a food program.

Once at the program, people often face physical barriers inside of the space (e.g., stairs) as well as outside of the space when they are made to wait outdoors in undesirable weather. The outdoor line-up system also forces people to navigate social barriers such as stigma and lack of privacy and confidentiality.

Beyond the space, people also face the administrative barriers of having to present identifying and often deeply personal information, such as MCP information and proof of income.

# What We Learned from People with Lived and Living Experience

People with Lived and Living Experience who participated in Rethinking Food Charity most commonly talked about food programs' physical and administrative accessibility barriers and opportunities for improvement.

Participants brought up a few overarching accessibility challenges that made food programs difficult, uncomfortable, or unsafe to access:

- ▼ Transportation to and from the food program — particularly for people in rural areas who live far away from the closest program and people without reliable transportation access.
- ▼ Physically inaccessible food program buildings — particularly for seniors and people with physical disabilities whose needs are not met.
- ▼ Limited pickup times and inconvenient/inaccessible program hours — this may lead to long wait times and exclude potential clients, such as working families.
- ▼ Eligibility requirements, including income testing and identification — using MCP numbers as identifiers, other identification requirements, and proof of income documents to prove eligibility. Participants also told us that these requirements vary between food programs and there was no standard way of operating. This barrier is also closely connected to confidentiality and stigma.

They also identified some opportunities for improvement and concrete steps that food programs could take to improve accessibility:

- ▼ Transportation to and from the food program — focus group participants strongly preferred discreet transportation and delivery options to improve anonymity and reduce clients' fear of stigma and judgment.
  - ▷ Providing discreet transportation for clients.
  - ▷ Offering discreet delivery services\* — participants said that this would be particularly helpful for clients who cannot access the food program building (e.g., people who are ill, seniors).
  - ▷ Improving public transit access to food programs.
- ▼ Ensure that all food program physical spaces meet accessibility standards\* — participants repeatedly stressed that this was critical for improving access for all.
- ▼ Increase hours of operation and available pickup times\* — participants suggested that being open longer on weekdays and adding evening and weekend hours could improve access for underserved community members, including working families and students. More generally, they felt that program hours should match with clients' schedules instead of the other way around.



- ▼ “Phone ahead” options for scheduling pick-ups and knowing what food is available — participants likened this option to picking up medical prescriptions, saying that it would provide clients with more certainty and allow them to decide when they want to make the trip.
- ▼ Establish a presence in more communities — some participants suggested this as a potential solution to the inaccessibility of some rural food programs, whose clients may have to drive long distances.
- ▼ Eliminate all eligibility and identification requirements — participants told us that eliminating the use of MCP and other identification requirements along with removing any income testing for eligibility would improve food program access for all community members.
- ▼ Create standards and certainty across all food programs\* — this was a common thread throughout our conversations with participants, who regularly noted access differences between programs that could be addressed by province-wide or national standards.

\*Identified as food program standards that could be applied province-wide.

Generally, participants told us that their ideal food program would be easy and comfortable to access and would reliably meet their needs without physical or administrative barriers. Unfortunately, this ideal was not being met for many of the people we heard from.

## Insights: Food Charity Inside and Outside the Overpass

The experience of food insecurity and the landscape of food charity look very different depending on whether you’re inside or outside Metro St. John’s. Of the 97 food programs in our database, 26 are in or around the capital city.

We heard a lot about this from participants in Rethinking Food Charity. They told us that in smaller, more rural towns, food programs provide less food and more limited varieties of food, and there is more stigmatization because there is often less privacy. It was commonly perceived that food programs in urban centers, and in St. John’s in particular, were easier to access, more likely to be accommodating and physically accessible, and would provide a better variety of food (“I feel like being in the main city is probably better”).

It is important to remember that Labrador is an even more distinct landscape with communities facing far higher food prices and greater barriers to transportation, but also housing robust local food-sharing infrastructure (e.g., community freezers) that is very rare on the Island.



## What We Learned from Food Program Service Providers

In the food program service provider survey, we specifically asked respondents about their services. With respect to accessibility, over half of the respondents indicated that they provide food hamper delivery and/or gift cards for their clients. **60% of respondents also reported having a “no questions asked” policy so clients can access their services without being asked for proof of income or other food program usage.** This is an encouraging sign that work is being done by food programs to address access barriers in every region of the province.

## What We Learned at the Gathering

Much of what we heard from attendees at the Gathering echoed what we heard from People with Lived and Living Experience.

Gathering attendees regarded the social barrier of having to present identifying and personal information, such as MCP information and proof of income, as one of the most important things that needs to change going forward. At the Gathering, Ben Earle ([Feed the Need in Durham](#), [Basic Income Canada Network](#), and [UBI Works](#)) noted that food programs often have restrictions, ask intrusive questions, and require identifying information for reasons that are “about making people answer for the supports we give them in ways that we wouldn’t necessarily want to answer ourselves.” Attendees agreed with this and remarked that individuals should not have to present identifying information each time they access a food program.

Attendees proposed a shared, standardized database where clients are entered into a system and have a unique identifier associated with their name, instead of requiring what is often perceived as personal and even medical information. This would prevent clients from being forced to continually retell their stories and “prove they are poor enough” each time they access different food programs and organizations.

Gathering attendees also identified several ways that food programs can be made more physically accessible — many of which were also identified by People with Lived and Living Experience: having transportation and/or delivery services, offering appointment and drop-in options, providing indoor waiting areas, and creating physical layouts with physical disabilities in mind. Participants also wanted to see food programs have up-to-date websites instead of just a phone number to call.

# Insights: The Ideal Food Program

We asked People with Lived and Living Experience to imagine an ideal food program in their community, the services it would provide, and how it would feel to go there.

## Their ideal food program would:

**Emphasize client autonomy and choice** by being set up like a grocery store and allowing clients to self-select items. It would also offer grocery gift cards as an alternative option and have the ability to fulfill requests for certain foods.

**Prioritize confidentiality and anonymity.** It would be similar to a doctor's office, where clients could enter a waiting room and privately go in and get the food they need. It would be located in a low-traffic area and would not require any form of identification from clients.

**Offer delivery and other solutions to accessibility barriers.** For example, it would offer the options of discreet delivery of food to clients and discreet transportation to and from the food program for clients using unmarked vehicles to reduce fears of judgment and stigma.

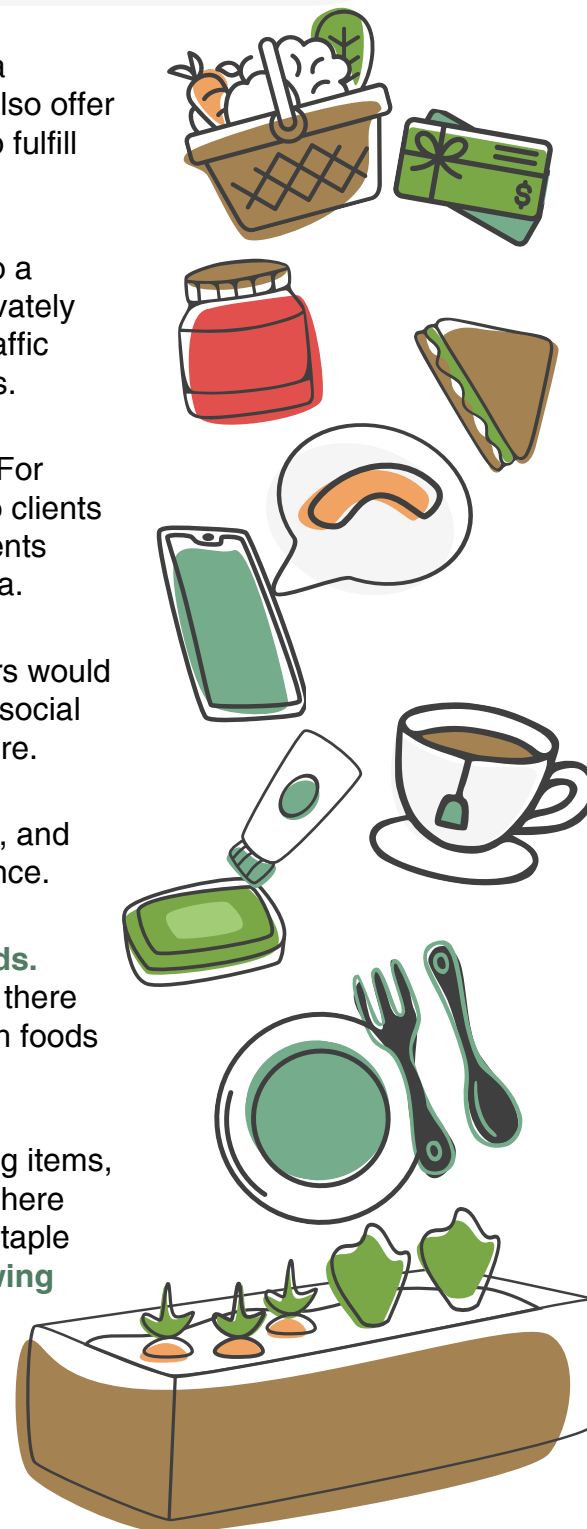
**Prioritize empathy, kindness, and respect** and staff/volunteers would undergo sensitivity training and have background knowledge in social work. It would have a welcoming and non-judgmental atmosphere.

**Offer a “phone ahead” option,** similar to getting a prescription, and the food program would communicate what is available in advance.

**Provide high quality food that is enough for their households.** Hampers would include ingredients to make multiple meals and there would be a wider variety of food options available including fresh foods such as meats, fruits, and vegetables.

**Provide non-food products,** such as hygiene products, clothing items, and recipe cards. It would also **coordinate cooking classes,** where you could learn how to make a variety of different meals using staple items, and host **community gardens** with **workshops on growing food.**

**Provide a “guaranteed meal”** to anyone who needed it.



## Stigma and Dignity

Dignity should be at the core of how people access their food and yet so much of what we heard was about people's fear and experiences of stigma and judgment because they access a food program. This fear is a major access barrier — we heard from several people who choose to not access food programs or do so as a last resort because of it. For those who do access food programs, experiences of stigma are tied up with feelings of shame and embarrassment, even when the reality is that more and more individuals are turning to food programs for support.

While People with Lived and Living Experience shared their fears and perceptions of stigma with us, many of the service providers we heard from generally felt that individuals who access their food programs do not feel stigmatized and judged. Service providers highlighted that they do what they can to ensure their clients feel welcome when accessing their services, but it is important to remember that the stigma experienced by clients often comes from the general public.

There were some common sources of stigmatization identified by the people we heard from. They include: being made to wait outdoors, especially near a busy intersection or high-traffic area; having to present identifying or confidential information, like income statements; and being treated disrespectfully by food program volunteers or staff.

## What We Learned from People with Lived and Living Experience

The People with Lived and Living Experience who we heard from identified experiences and fear of being stigmatized as a major access barrier and challenge. Some of the people we heard from — across the survey and focus groups — chose to not access food programs or used them as a last resort because of this fear of being judged. Stigma — whether experienced at the food program or in connection with food program use more generally — contributed to feelings of shame and disrespect and created a negative experience at a time when support was needed.

Participants' experiences and fear of being stigmatized are tied closely to a lack of confidentiality and anonymity at food programs. Focus group participants who access food programs told us about feeling:

- ▼ **Fear of judgment from other community members** if seen accessing a food program.
  - ▷ This fear was especially common for participants who live in a rural or remote community, when food programs are located in highly visible areas (e.g., a busy intersection), and/or when clients have to line up outside.
- ▼ Judged and disrespected by volunteers at their food program.
- ▼ Ashamed and exposed when given transportation vouchers (“More people know I’m poor”).
- ▼ Discomfort with the lack of confidentiality around presenting MCP and other identification cards for access.
- ▼ Embarrassed about having to show proof of income and income support stubs.

Experiences of stigmatization are not universal across food programs or locations. Participants from one focus group told us that they had not experienced issues around judgment or confidentiality. This difference may be due to the location (e.g., urban vs. rural; busy street vs. more secluded neighbourhood; etc.) and/or the practices at the food programs in their area.

The People with Lived and Living Experience that we heard from had many ideas about how to address these stigma-related challenges and create a food program that clients can access with dignity.

Solutions and approaches that they spoke about included:

- ▼ Prioritizing confidentiality and anonymity.
- ▼ Not requiring any form of identification from clients.
- ▼ Having an indoor waiting area that clients can enter privately\*.
- ▼ Offering appointment times that fit with clients' schedules\*.
- ▼ Being located in a low-traffic area and/or an area with a concentration of low-income households.
- ▼ Requiring staff and volunteers to undergo sensitivity training and have background knowledge in social work.
- ▼ Prioritizing empathy, kindness, and respect.
- ▼ Having a welcoming and non-judgmental atmosphere.

\*Identified as food program standards that could be applied province-wide.

Not all changes need to happen within food programs themselves. In fact, service users who responded to our survey generally agreed that they do not feel judged by the people who run the food programs and that they feel welcomed when they reach out for help. However, judgment and stigma from community members and society more generally was felt keenly by the people that we heard from. The broader community conversation needs to change, and all of us can be a part of that.

**One participant told us about their experience in a grocery store using a gift card provided by a food program. They explained how the cashiers learned to know they only came in with a gift card, and would make comments to other employees and loudly call out for a supervisor when they saw the participant heading to the checkout.**

This participant suggested that retail staff should be trained to be discreet and respectful with customers who routinely rely on food vouchers or gift cards to purchase their items.

**There is a clear need to address the judgment and stigma imparted by society more generally and to challenge society's perception of what is "normal" and "acceptable."**

## What We Learned from Food Program Service Providers

What we heard from service providers and what we heard from People with Lived and Living Experience about experiences of stigma were not perfectly aligned. In our service provider survey, nearly 90% of respondents strongly agreed that they can ensure clients do not feel stigma or shame when they access support. This is in stark contrast to what we heard from People with Lived and Living Experience, some of whom choose not to use food programs because of the perceived stigmatization that goes along with it.

To understand this contrast, it is important to recognize that the stigmatization perceived by People with Lived and Living Experience may not be intentional or originate from service providers. As one service provider in the Metro region said, “We try to avoid judging or stigmatizing clients at all costs, but that doesn’t mean that clients don’t feel judged or stigmatized.”

Feelings of stigmatization can also arise from societal norms and the notion that emergency food access is “looked down upon.” Service providers acknowledged that location and program/building design can also contribute to clients’ feelings of stigmatization. Contributing factors include:

- ▼ Being located in highly visible areas (e.g., busy intersections) or in “well-off” neighbourhoods.
- ▼ Outdoor lineups due to COVID-19 protocols or because there is not enough space for everyone to wait inside.

## What We Learned at the Gathering

Gathering attendees had lengthy discussions about the negative attitudes surrounding food charity and the people who use it, and how this contributes to experiences of stigmatization. They noted that society holds strong assumptions about the “undeserving poor” who “take advantage of systems” or “abuse services.”

We heard many opinions on why accessing emergency food services is generally looked down upon by the public. Many felt this is due to a lack of understanding, knowledge, and education around poverty in general. Others felt that generational stigma, classism, and capitalism may have something to do with it, with one attendee noting, “People think that if you’re not wealthy, then you’re not doing what you should be.”

Attendees at our Gathering largely felt that the stigma associated with accessing food programs could be reduced by educating the public and food program staff and volunteers. Centering the voices of People with Lived and Living Experience in this education could normalize asking for help and promote trust. Put plainly by one attendee, “We need to trust that when people ask for help, they need it.”

Unfortunately, the stigmatizing ideas held by society at large can be found in food charity spaces too. Several food program providers at the Gathering noted that minimizing stigma in program spaces can be a challenging task, especially for programs in small communities with minimal resources and high turnover in volunteers. They also acknowledged that this stigma prevents some community members from accessing food programs.

Gathering attendees discussed food program changes that could reduce the stigma associated with accessing food charity and experiencing food insecurity. Some of these interventions are ones already flagged around accessibility.

These changes included:

- ▼ Mandatory training for staff and volunteers that could include information on the structural causes of food insecurity, education in trauma-informed practice, and workshops on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion.
- ▼ Developing thorough protocols on client confidentiality.
- ▼ Developing shared program standards that are built on transparency and accountability.
- ▼ Using outward-facing communications to better inform the public and aim to reduce stigma in society generally.
- ▼ Create indoor waiting areas and provide appointment options.
- ▼ Provide discreet delivery services.

Gathering attendees agreed that the priority should be to “treat people as humans” and aim to promote dignity in food programs by creating a “caring and safe space — a place with respect.”



## Choice

Everyone we heard from — People with Lived and Living Experience and service providers alike — felt strongly that food programs should offer clients more autonomy and choice when it comes to the foods they receive.

Oftentimes, food programs provide support in the form of pre-packaged food hampers. While programs do their best to ensure variety in these hampers, donations and resources are regularly too limited to ensure that each hamper addresses the nutritional and cultural needs of an increasingly diverse population. Service users told us about receiving foods that were low quality, expired, or difficult to create a meal from, or which did not meet their dietary needs. Many also said that they simply did not receive enough food to get by.

Shifting to a “grocery store” model, where clients can select foods they can and will eat from the shelves, is a common vision for both service users and service providers. Providing grocery gift cards instead of pre-made hampers is also a solution that was identified by both service users and service providers that would give clients more choice.

## What We Learned from People with Lived and Living Experience

Choice and client autonomy, or lack thereof, are at the center of many of the food-related challenges that People with Lived and Living Experience spoke about. By not having enough (or any) choice in what foods they received, participants often felt their needs were not being met.

Some of the challenges they told us about, include:

- ▼ **Not receiving enough food** for them and their families to get by — particularly given that they can only access most food programs once every four to eight weeks. Nearly half of survey respondents said they did not receive enough food, though feelings about this varied. This may indicate that the amount of food provided differs between programs or that different households have different food needs. Likely, both are true.
- ▼ Receiving **food that is low quality, beyond its ‘best before’ or expiration date, or of low nutritional content.**
- ▼ Receiving hampers with **items that are difficult to create multiple (or any) meals from.**
- ▼ **Not being able to eat the food they are provided because of medical and/or dietary restrictions.** Participants talked about having limited-to-no options available that met their needs and being told “no” when asking for something that they could or preferred to eat.

Quantity and variety also varied from program to program and from area to area. These issues also seemed to be worse in rural areas where focus group participants spoke at length about not receiving enough food or having poor variety. This highlights yet another challenge: inconsistency among food programs.

Participants offered the following suggestions to increase client choice and autonomy at the program and improve the food that is available for them:

- ▼ Implement a grocery store model that allows clients to self-select items\*.
- ▼ Offer grocery gift cards as an option\*.
- ▼ Accept and fulfill clients’ requests for certain foods.
- ▼ Accommodate dietary restrictions\*.
- ▼ Offer a culturally-diverse range of foods\*.
- ▼ Provide a higher quality and greater quantity of foods.
- ▼ Allow people to access food banks more frequently.
- ▼ Provide more variety in food options, including fresh foods like meats and produce.
- ▼ Create hampers that include ingredients for multiple meals.

\*Identified as food program standards that could be applied province-wide.

## What We Learned from Food Program Service Providers

Although they shared many of the same food- and choice-related concerns as their clients, service providers told us about many of the challenges they face in improving client choice at their programs. Resource limitations were at the core of these challenges for nearly all service providers that we heard from.

In the survey, 30% of respondents wanted to provide culturally appropriate food and 21% wanted to provide wild game/gathered food at their food programs but said they did not have the resources to do so. Several survey respondents also acknowledged that they struggled to provide high quality and nutritious food to their clients and more than half felt that the food they provide should meet a nutritional standard.

Regional conversation participants talked about their difficulties accommodating people with dietary restrictions because their resources were already stretched. One service provider told us that “food programs are forced to appeal to the masses and provide food that the majority of people can and do eat, as opposed to trying to spread thin their limited resources by tackling issues of allergies and dietary restrictions.”

Many of the service providers we heard from saw the grocery store model as the way forward to improve choice and accommodate clients’ needs. 25% of survey respondents wanted to implement a grocery store model but needed more resources and another 20% already had the model in place. Service providers in our Metro regional conversation felt that a shift to a grocery store model is the most important change that could be implemented — “It is best to trust our clients and give them the autonomy they deserve.”



**It is best to trust our clients and give them the autonomy they deserve.**

*Focus Group Participant (Service Provider)*



## What We Learned at the Gathering

A major takeaway from discussions throughout the Gathering was that improving client choice is the best way to ensure that dietary restrictions can be accommodated, culturally appropriate food can be provided, and the nutritional needs of individuals can be met.

Gathering attendees discussed providing grocery store gift cards or implementing a grocery store model, instead of providing pre-packaged food hampers. This would allow participants to select the foods that meet their own dietary preferences, restrictions, and cultural needs without judgment. From our discussions, it was clear that allowing for choice was also an important way to combat stigma while promoting client dignity and autonomy.

Service providers in attendance echoed what we heard from the survey and regional conversations. They expressed a strong interest in advancing participant choice by providing gift cards or implementing a grocery store model of service but noted a lack of resources as a major barrier to follow-through on those improvements.

Lack of resources also came up in discussions about improving access for people with food restrictions. Many attendees said that the government needs to intervene because “food programs are largely too busy and too run down to address these issues properly.” Other ideas that were discussed included having an on-site dietitian at food programs once per month or implementing a policy that allows doctors to write prescriptions for restriction-appropriate food.



# Insights: What Food Insecurity Looks Like

The reflections and solutions offered by Rethinking Food Charity participants with lived experience come from a place of hard-won expertise. Each participant offered insights on the experiences of food insecurity both personally and within their communities that are invaluable when reading this report and working to address food insecurity.

During the focus groups, we invited participants to talk about what food insecurity looks like in their community and the effects that they see every day. **Here's what they said:**

- ▼ **Food insecurity damages their mental health and wellbeing.** This looks like:
  - ▷ Increased stress and rates of depression
  - ▷ Increased social isolation and feelings of hopelessness
  - ▷ Low ambition and lack of concentration
  - ▷ Reduced mental health in general
  - ▷ Inability for a person to perform at full potential because they are unable to fulfill their basic needs
- ▼ **They feel impacts on their physical health and healthcare,** including:
  - ▷ Irregular sleeping habits
  - ▷ Increased healthcare appointments, including hospitalization
  - ▷ Increased preventable health issues due to a lack of appropriate food
- ▼ **Community is weakened.** This looks like:
  - ▷ A loss of community connection and feelings of togetherness
  - ▷ Fewer opportunities to gather over shared meals and in food spaces
  - ▷ Increasing crime rates, particularly as community members have to steal food or buy/sell stolen food because they cannot afford items at the grocery store
- ▼ **Other aspects of community and peoples' lives are affected,** such as:
  - ▷ Increasing rates of substance use and addiction
  - ▷ Increasing number of people experiencing homelessness

While the effects of food insecurity are overwhelmingly negative on both individuals and communities, some participants did want to share **their appreciation for and pride in their communities and their capacity for support and care.** Although they acknowledged that food charities are not a solution to food insecurity, these participants also expressed gratitude for their community food programs — saying things like, “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

# Collaboration

The food charity sector in this province is spread thin, and demands for support are only growing. With almost 100 organizations serving a province of 530,000 people, that is no surprise. So many of the ideas that emerged from every part of the Rethinking Food Charity process involved work that would be well beyond what many of the individual programs in the province could take on. There is no way forward without close collaboration.

Some of that collaboration is already happening. There are groups of food charities that do meet regularly in their local communities, and since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a provincial Food Security Working Group, co-chaired by the Government of NL and Food First NL, that has been meeting regularly.

These groups, however, are primarily about sharing information. What has been less common thus far is deeper, more structured collaboration — things like sharing physical space or financial resources, restructuring organizations, or having staff members that serve multiple organizations. These are the kinds of collaborations that could fundamentally change the face of food charity in the province going forward.

## What We Learned from People with Lived and Living Experience

The structure of the food charity sector, unsurprisingly, wasn't a huge topic of conversation in our lived-experience conversations. People accessing food charity at the ground level don't get much of a view into what things look like behind the scenes.

That said, one conversation that did emerge clearly was around something that would likely depend on greater collaboration amongst food charities: the integration of food supports into a broader wrap-around model.

Most of the service users who responded to our survey agreed that people at food programs can connect them with help when there are other things going on in their lives. Yet those services are often not directly connected to or available at the food program site.

Focus group participants talked about the opportunity for food programs to go beyond just providing food or connecting clients with external services. People who are struggling to afford food often cannot afford other necessities. They may also not have a permanent address or a schedule that would allow them to access some services. Many participants mentioned that food programs should provide other necessities, such as hygiene products, clothing, and pet food. They also identified the opportunity for on-site dental or medical services and supportive programs for recurring clients. This would reduce the need to find and travel to additional service locations.

Participants also shared ideas about creating space for clients to build their food literacy. They suggested providing clients with recipe cards and offering cooking classes where they could learn how to make a variety of different meals using staple items. They were also interested in community gardens and workshops on food growing, hunting, and fishing to help clients become more self-sufficient.

## What We Learned from Food Program Service Providers

Throughout Rethinking Food Charity, we heard a strong agreement amongst service providers that food programs should be working collaboratively. Over 80% of survey respondents agreed that collaboration would be beneficial and we heard much the same during our regional conversations. However, limited time and resources are a big barrier. Many food program providers simply feel too busy to figure out how to make collaboration work for their program.

The majority of service providers that we heard from also agreed that food programs should provide supports to help clients meet their needs in areas unrelated to food, such as mental health, employment, and housing. In fact, roughly one-third of survey respondents worked with programs that provided these “all-encompassing” supports. Most of these programs were multi-service agencies but some were food banks.

### Context: Resources in the Food Charity Sector

Unsurprisingly, participants in both the service provider focus groups and the survey identified the lack of available funding, infrastructure, and resources as the primary gap in the current model of food programming.

As one service provider noted, “We rely on government funding — limited government funding — so it makes it even more difficult when we have to pick and choose what to do with our limited resources. Having to tell people we can’t help them is very difficult.” They also mentioned that “people and programs do not have enough funding and concrete support to allow them to meet the demand they are experiencing.”

**“ We rely on government funding — limited government funding — so it makes it even more difficult when we have to pick and choose what to do with our limited resources. Having to tell people we can’t help them is very difficult ”**

*Focus Group Participant (Service Provider)*



Throughout Rethinking Food Charity, the people who access food programs consistently recognized the resource limitations that confronted food programs. The majority of survey respondents felt that the least satisfactory part of accessing food programs was the limited resources and infrastructure that service providers are restricted to work with.

Similarly, when focus group participants were asked what they thought might be preventing food programs from improving their services, they acknowledged the lack of resources (e.g., funding, volunteers, etc.) and food donations that the food programs are working with. Some also spoke about the increasing cost of operations as a barrier (e.g., gas prices inhibiting the possibility of providing transportation or delivery services).



## What We Learned at the Gathering

Collaboration was a major topic of conversation at the Gathering. Attendees were excited about the potential unlocked by working together, even if there was a general uncertainty about how to make collaborations happen.

Many of the same ideas about wrap-around services that People with Lived and Living Experience had flagged also came up at the Gathering. Ideas included creating more community gardens and community kitchens, implementing healthy breakfast programs for all schools and for seniors, and increasing educational opportunities about meal planning, cooking, and employment skills.

The afternoon panel shared local collaboration success stories. Amongst the panelists was Debbie Wiseman (Sharing the Harvest), who spoke about building relationships with food banks and policy makers to improve regulations and distribute wild food to program clients. These local successes sparked interest and provided a taste of what is possible when organizations collaborate to address shared needs and go beyond the scope of a single program.

Many of the program providers in attendance expressed a strong desire to collaborate and share resources and knowledge but did not know where to begin. They felt that they were working in silos apart from one another and that there was a better way to leverage their resources. As one participant noted, “Right now, we are pieces of a puzzle not put together.”

During the World Café discussion, participants suggested some ways to increase and strengthen collaboration in the sector:

- ▼ A paid staff position specific to collaboration.
- ▼ The need for clear structure, trust, and leadership.
- ▼ More regional and provincial gatherings.
- ▼ Creating one main database to transfer knowledge and build capacity.
- ▼ Creating regional hubs to streamline food distribution.

Central to these ideas was communication and centralization. Attendees said they wanted to continue having conversations about the future of the food charity sector and food systems advocacy. They felt that collaboration was key for moving forward in the sector and achieving outcomes that everyone identified as important.

Attendees thought that collaboration might look like:

- ▼ **Specialized staff positions** — Shared staff could focus on areas that extend beyond daily operations and are often under-resourced in smaller organizations. This could include dedicated staff for case management and advocacy.
- ▼ **Delivery services** — Shared services could allow small organizations to reach community members who cannot access food program services.
- ▼ **Merging organizations** — Combining small organizations would create larger volunteer, staff, and donation pools.



# Advocacy

While there are many changes that can and should happen within individual food programs, there is an even greater need for advocacy to create systemic changes. Food charities have a powerful community presence that can be a huge force in these conversations. It has never been more clear that the scope of this province's food insecurity challenges are beyond the capacity of community organizations to solve.

We heard clearly from People with Lived and Living Experience that systemic change is required to reduce the need for charitable food programs in the first place.

There is a huge depth of untapped expertise from People with Lived and Living Experience and food program staff and volunteers. Both are among the most knowledgeable sources of information about the state of food insecurity in the province and the concrete actions that would make meaningful improvements for people who are experiencing food insecurity.

However, many (indeed, most) organizations find it difficult to find time to advocate for long-term solutions because of the overwhelming demands of day-to-day operations. Some are also concerned about criticizing government and potentially jeopardizing their funding. Despite these challenges, there is a clear need to move policy conversations forward and push for longer-term solutions.

## What We Learned from People with Lived and Living Experience

Advocacy was not a major theme during our conversations with People with Lived and Living Experience. However, participants did share their thoughts about the role that decision and policy makers have in improving food programs and reducing the need for charitable food programs altogether.

Focus group participants saw social policy improvements as the main way that decision and policy makers could make good food more accessible.

Specifically, they suggested:

- ▼ Implementing a Basic Income.
- ▼ Increasing the minimum wage to a living wage.
- ▼ Making housing more affordable.
- ▼ Improving public transportation.
- ▼ Dropping the sugar tax.
- ▼ Making more medical services and products available through MCP.

Participants also spoke about opportunities for legislative changes to:

- ▼ Create food program service standards that improve physical and process accessibility for service users.
- ▼ Create mandatory reductions in food waste (e.g., donating excess grocery store stock to food programs).
- ▼ Lower food prices more generally by reducing shipping and transportation costs and subsidizing staple foods.

While participants did not use the specific language of advocacy, it is abundantly clear that they see the need for systemic changes and the role that government can play in implementing them.

## What We Learned from Food Program Service Providers

Service providers saw a clear role for advocacy to create policy changes and reduce demand for their services. However, the urgency of day-to-day operations and a fear of reprisal from funding agencies (e.g., the government) create huge barriers to engaging in advocacy.

In our survey for service providers, nearly half of all respondents felt that advocacy work was not applicable to them — largely because of limited time and financial resources. Several focus group participants spoke about how they are barely able to meet the demand for food support in their area, let alone also have the time and resources to do advocacy work.

Others also mentioned the risk of reprisal resulting from advocacy work. They mentioned their fear that advocating for systemic changes that go against the current government could result in the loss of their government funding.

Most service providers agreed that a paid external position specific to advocacy was the best path forward without affecting their existing resources or jeopardizing their funding arrangements.

**“ I don't have the time to do advocacy work because I am hands-on and working on the ground. It's not that I don't think it's important, I just don't have the resources available to do it, and I'm sure it's the same for all small organizations. I always hope it will land on someone else's desk. ”**

*Focus Group Participant (Service Provider)*

## What We Learned at the Gathering

During the World Café conversations at the Gathering, attendees brainstormed some activities that food programs could undertake to reduce the need for food assistance at the local, provincial, and national levels.

Attendees also spoke about the changes needed in the food system more broadly. Participants talked about the role that food retailers and restaurants can play in donating excess and left-over food. Others spoke about improving the province's food self-sufficiency, which could start by promoting agricultural and fishing initiatives. One attendee simply said, “We need to unlink food from profit.”

Gathering attendees heard from a number of national partners that have resources available to support advocacy efforts. Representatives from Community Food Centres Canada, Basic Income Canada Network, and PROOF all took part in the Gathering. At the tables, organizations flagged other potential partners in their own provincial and national networks. For organizations who want to step into the advocacy space, there are ample supports.

At the provincial and national level, the focus was largely on advocating for increased funding, introducing a Basic Income, and other income-related solutions. Several participants noted the critical role played by People with Lived and Living Experience in this process and how their voices need to be truly heard before true change can take place. They also highlighted the need for greater collaboration between food programs and government.

## Income Solutions

Only a small fraction of people experiencing food insecurity use food charity. Of those who do, there is no evidence to suggest that food charity actually pulls people out of food insecurity.

The only evidence-based solution to food insecurity is increasing incomes. This could include improving social assistance benefits, increasing the minimum wage, and implementing a Basic Income. Income solutions — especially Basic Income — can also provide accessible and dignified assistance, unlike the charity model.

We heard loud and clear from People with Lived and Living Experience that income solutions are needed to reduce food insecurity and that food charity is not enough. Attendees at the Gathering also acknowledged the shortfalls of food charity and agreed that a turn towards income solutions that work is needed.

## What We Learned from People with Lived and Living Experience

People with Lived and Living Experience told us repeatedly that income solutions were needed to address food insecurity and reduce the use of food charity programs. Over half of the survey respondents said that they needed a higher household income before they could stop regularly using food programs. Focus group participants echoed the survey results and said that improved incomes and social policies were needed to make food more accessible for all.

Some of the income solutions that participants spoke about were:

- ▼ Implementing a Basic Income.
- ▼ Increasing the minimum wage to a living wage.
- ▼ Increasing or implementing additional government support programs and resolving issues where these programs undermine each other.

## What We Learned at the Gathering

Dr. Valerie Tarasuk from [PROOF](#) at the University of Toronto kicked off the Gathering by clearly explaining that food insecurity is primarily an issue of insufficient income, to be solved by income interventions. She noted that individuals experiencing food insecurity need more than just food. Household budgets also include fixed costs (e.g., rent, utilities) and other necessities (e.g., medication, household items). Only more money — not food charity — can address these needs so that people can buy the food that they want and need while also meeting their other needs.

Rekha Cherian from [Community Food Centres Canada](#) spoke about the need for food programs to dispel the myth that food banks can “solve hunger” and to instead promote more effective solutions. She acknowledged that charitable food programs can provide important services to people experiencing food insecurity, but that they fail to address the root causes of food insecurity itself.

Cherian and Dr. Tarasuk’s messages were well received by other Gathering attendees who largely supported income solutions and acknowledged that food charity was a response but not a solution to food insecurity. While many of the organizations that attended the Gathering expressed interest in Newfoundland and Labrador’s growing Basic Income movement, many voiced uncertainty in how to support it and how to advance other income solutions.

# Recommendations: Food Charity Sector





What would it look like to really rethink food charity in Newfoundland and Labrador? The ideas gathered throughout this process give us some very clear directions. In this final section, we present our recommendations on the path forward.

In making these recommendations, we are making **three core assumptions**:

1. That the end goal must be a world where food charity is no longer needed.
2. That that world is achievable — soon.
3. That even as we work towards that world, there is still value in making our existing system of supports more equitable, inclusive, and functional.

Judging from our conversations with both People with Lived and Living Experience of food insecurity and with food program staff and volunteers, those first two assumptions meet little resistance. Rarely did we encounter anyone who said “food charity will always be here” — and we never heard from anyone saying that it should. The existence of food charity is a symptom of a massive failure of our social safety net, one that violates a fundamental human right — the right to food. Not everyone can see their way through to how food charity could end, but everyone is keen to find that path.

The third assumption — that, in short, the system is worth fixing — is worth a bit more exploration. Since the birth of food banks in the 1980s, governments have consistently offloaded responsibility to the food charity system. We need to acknowledge the risk that investing time and effort into a system that can serve more people, and serve people better, would make it even easier for governments to avoid taking action on the social determinants of food insecurity — especially income.

Balancing this risk against the obvious potential benefit to the lives of people who interact with food charities is a difficult moral judgment, and one that no two readers of this report will likely approach in the same way.

In part, this rests on the question of advocacy. Can we empower food charities to be vocal advocates for systemic change, while also investing time and energy in changing *their* systems? Judging from the interactions we’ve had through this process, the answer to that question is “yes.” There is a will — but we all need to make the way. The remainder of this section is our attempt to distill this process and map that way out in the short and medium term (keeping the faith that, in the long term, we won’t need this system at all anymore).

Our recommendations are divided into the six themes from the previous section.

# Accessibility

## Short-Term Recommendations

### 1A: Stop using income testing and similar eligibility criteria.

Some food programs require visitors to provide proof that their income is below a particular threshold, or that they are receiving Income Support, before providing assistance. This is deeply counterproductive. It makes food aid less accessible to people whose circumstances have suddenly changed, and fails to recognize that food insecurity can occur at a wide range of income levels. It also makes the process of accessing food aid unnecessarily burdensome and results in staff and volunteers potentially being privy to unnecessary private information about service users.

- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** Immediately.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Primarily planning time. Organizations who use income testing to ration resources will need to identify an alternative method (e.g., visit limits, appointment slots, etc.).
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Advice from provincial and national organizations.

### 1B: Consult with service users to adjust opening hours.

Many food programs only have the resources to be open for very limited hours. If this is the case, it is critical to consult with the community being served to establish what range of hours would work best and how to create availability for the greatest number of people.

- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** Within 6 months.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Staff/volunteer time to develop and administer surveys/consultations; printing and/or distribution costs if applicable.
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Support with survey/consultation design available from Food First NL.



## Medium-Term Recommendations

### 1C: Make all food program spaces fully accessible.

Living with a disability is very expensive and income supports are inadequate. It is no surprise that people with disabilities make up a disproportionate share of people living with food insecurity. With that in mind, it is critical that programs aiming to support people living with food insecurity operate from physically accessible premises. In some cases, this may mean renovations to existing spaces. In other cases, food programs may find it more economical to move locations to an accessible facility.

- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** 3–5 years.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Funds for renovations to existing facilities or relocation to new ones.
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Government of NL Inclusion Grants, Government of Canada Enabling Accessibility Fund.

## 1D: Stop using MCP numbers as client identifiers.

Requiring an MCP number as a service user identifier presents a number of access barriers. Service users may understandably assume that food programs have access to their medical data (they do not). It also unnecessarily connects access to food aid to access to an MCP number, which some people may not have or may not have access to in a moment of food insecurity.

We recommend developing a system of unique identifiers that stands alone, or exploring integration with other systems of coordinated access being used elsewhere in the social service sector. Although a unique identifying number may be part of accessing food programs — which constantly operated with limited resources — this does not have to be a number issued by an unrelated government agency.

- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** 1–3 years.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Funds to cover technology transition, training, and maintenance.
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Advice from partners around the country and from other sectors (eg. housing and homelessness).

## 1E: Establish shared service standards.

People using food programs experience a wide range of service levels and expectations. This makes their experience accessing food charity more challenging and less dignified. Adopting a common set of standards (there is already one being developed for food banks by Food Banks Canada) would make the process of accessing food charity less challenging and let services users know what to expect.

- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** 2–3 years.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Staff and volunteer capacity to meet reporting requirements; time and planning to adapt standards for food programs other than food banks.
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Advice and support from national partners.

# Stigma and Dignity

## Short-Term Recommendations

### 2A: Reorganize to avoid outdoor lineups.

One specific issue we heard a lot about from people who access food charity was the stigmatizing impact of having to wait, particularly outside in a public place, to access food. Wherever possible, we recommend that food programs establish indoor waiting areas to allow people to wait with warmth, privacy, and dignity. Where food programs are sharing a building with other organizations or functions, this could be undertaken through collaboration with these other groups. This could also be accomplished through appointment systems.

- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** 1 year.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Planning time to identify indoor waiting spaces or implement appointment systems; additional volunteer or staff time to support waiting areas or appointment processes.
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Advice from similar organizations around Canada through national networks.



## Medium-Term Recommendations

### 2B: Universal training for food program volunteers and staff.

Food program volunteers and staff work with people experiencing significant traumas and marginalization. There is potential to be a great help, or to do great harm. With that in mind, adequate training is critical.

We recommend that all food program providers complete a common training curriculum that includes elements of trauma-informed practice, stigma reduction, systems navigation, and client confidentiality. Developing and implementing such a program would be a significant investment of time and resources, but would provide service users with a more consistent and supportive experience when accessing food charity.

- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** 3–4 years.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Leadership staff/volunteer time to agree on elements of a common training program; funds for curriculum development/adaptation and/or bringing in training capacity from national partners; time for all staff and volunteers to participate.
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Existing training from Community Food Centres Canada (Food Banks Transformation program), Food Banks Canada, others.

# Choice

## Short-Term Recommendations

### 3A: Expand gift card programs.

Grocery gift cards have become much more common in the food charity space since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is ample evidence that they are an effective tool, and one that makes service users feel more trusted by the programs they are accessing.

Gift cards allow people to choose the food that's right for them, something that is especially important for anyone who has dietary restrictions. Many food program providers noted in consultations that providing food hampers to meet these restrictions is very challenging. Gift cards solve this problem. They can also be mailed and often e-mailed, which addresses some of the challenges around accessibility.

Offering gift cards is, of course, dependent on a shift in donations from physical food to cash. This is already an emphasis in the messaging delivered by many food programs, but must be matched by a commitment from the public. We recommend that food programs discuss how to use the revenues from large cash donation drives to establish gift card resources.

- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** Immediately.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Cash donations.
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Advice from other food programs (including Food First NL) who have administered gift card programs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Medium-Term Recommendations

### 3B: Move to a “grocery store” model for physical food distribution.

Both People with Lived and Living Experience of food insecurity and food program providers highlighted their desire to move towards a model where service users are invited to “shop” from stocked shelves and choose the items that work for them instead of receiving a pre-packed hamper. This, again, provides both added practicality and added dignity. In practice, implementation would often require changes to both the physical layout of a food program space and to their policies and procedures. We recommend that food programs leverage existing resources and models to begin this transition.

- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** 1–3 years.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Funding for renovations or reorganization of physical facilities and volunteer/staff training; potential need for additional volunteer/staff time to support changed operating hours.
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Some government grants may be usable; organizations affiliated with larger partners (i.e., national networks, faith groups) may also seek resources through them.



# Collaboration

## Short-Term Recommendations

### 4A: Support the establishment of a shared delivery service.

One pandemic-era change to the provincial food charity model was the addition of a number of delivery services. Unfortunately, many of these services have gradually faded out since pandemic emergency funding concluded. The largest such service was provided by the Community Food Helpline, which closed at the end of March 2023. Efforts are now underway to support the delivery service owner/operator, Local Wellness Collective, a standalone service that could provide delivery for all the food programs in the Metro area, with a financial allowance to support delivery in rural communities (this would likely be an ad-hoc fund that could support a variety of different delivery arrangements at the local level).

With planning and fund development for this already underway, we recommend that both government agencies and other food programs explore how they could contribute financially to sustaining this service. We heard clearly through the Rethinking Food Charity process that the addition of delivery helped combat stigma and make existing supports more equitably accessible.

- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** Immediately.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Funding to allow continued operations.
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Food First NL is available to serve as an enabling/administrative partner where needed.

## Medium-Term Recommendations

### 4B: Establish shared staff roles responsible for wraparound support.

Few food programs can sustain a full-time support worker role themselves, but all programs would benefit from the ability to easily connect service users with wraparound supports. One potential solution is to collaborate and share the cost of such a role or roles. This person could then be a point of contact for service users from multiple programs.

- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** 1–2 years.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Funds to support salaries and operating costs; time to establish accountability structures and job parameters.
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Funds from other food programs could contribute to a common pool; some government and foundation grants may be applicable.

### 4C: Consider merging organizations.

Newfoundland and Labrador has nearly 100 food charities, many of which are very small and largely volunteer-driven. Many of the recommendations envisioned in this report will not be feasible for the smallest organizations to take on. Some of this could be solved by collaboration, but in some cases it may make more sense to go deeper and merge organizations formally. This reduces the burden on board volunteers, allows for economies of scale, and creates opportunities for wraparound supports and additional client services.

- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** 1–3 years.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Staff and volunteer time; funds for related legal and logistical costs.
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Organizations such as the Community Sector Council NL have many resources available around nonprofit governance and organization.

# Advocacy

## Short-Term Recommendations

### 5A: Convene regularly around key advocacy issues.

There are only limited opportunities for food charities to connect with each other, and these conversations tend to focus on practical operations issues. To shift focus towards advocacy work, food charities could start to convene more regularly around key priority issues.

- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** Immediately.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Staff and volunteer time to participate and organize.
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Food First NL staff can assist in convening conversations.

### 5B: Lean into support from national partners.

National organizations like Food Banks Canada and Community Food Centres Canada have materials and resources already produced that could be leveraged more often in Newfoundland and Labrador, and staff that can connect with local organizations looking to advocate.

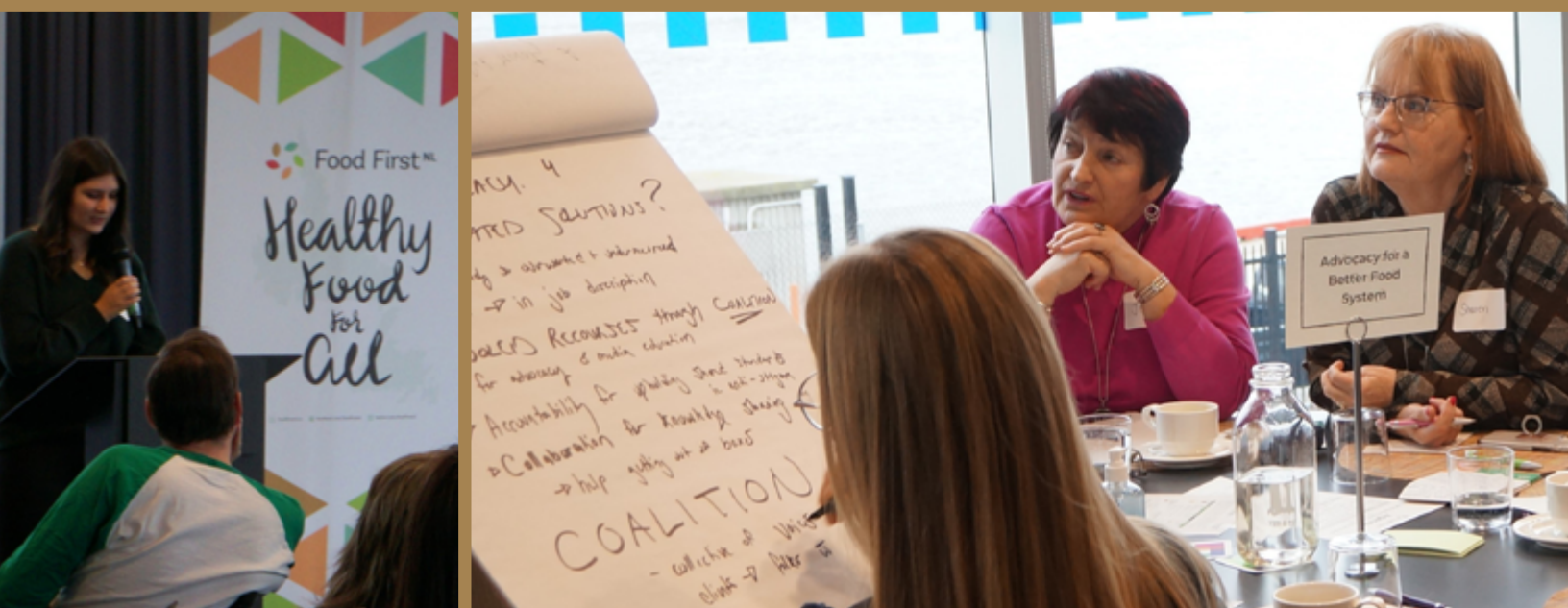
- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** Immediately.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Staff and volunteer time to participate.
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Food First NL staff can assist in making connections to national partners.

## Medium-Term Recommendations

### 5C: Collaboratively fund advocacy work on behalf of the food charity sector.

Many food charities clearly recognize the importance of advocacy around the root causes of food insecurity, but few are engaged in advocacy work. For some, this is a resource issue — time is limited and it needs to be spent running on-the-ground programs. For others, there is reluctance to criticize the government, or to alienate donors. Collaborating to fund a shared advocacy effort helps mitigate all of these barriers — reducing the perceived risks of participating in advocacy conversations and creating paid capacity to move those conversations forward.

- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** 1–3 years.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Funds to support salaries and operating costs; time to establish accountability structures and job parameters.
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Food First NL staff can assist with planning and provide resources relating to HR and communications concepts.



# Income Solutions

## Short-Term Recommendations

### 6A: Ensure food program staff are paid a living wage.

There is a significant workforce within the food charity sector in the province. Providing a living wage to these employees will help ensure that they are not also regular food charity users.

- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** 1 year.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Funds to provide additional wages; time to revisit contracts and HR plans.
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Donor funds will play a key role in this change.

### 6B: Centre the need for income solutions in organizational communications.

Food charities have a powerful voice in the community. Food program communications can avoid messaging about ending hunger through charity and take opportunities to highlight the need for income solutions. This a simple but powerful tool to advance long-term solutions.

- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** Within a year.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Staff/volunteer time from those who are responsible for communications.
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Examples of messaging from local and national partners.

## Medium-Term Recommendations

### 6C: Formally commit to membership in campaigns and coalitions working towards income solutions.

There are numerous local, provincial, and national organizations working on these issues that would appreciate food charity organizations coming on as signatories to policy submissions and other efforts.

- ▶ **Feasible Timeline:** 1–2 years.
- ▶ **Resources Required:** Staff and volunteer time to research coalition efforts; board/staff time to consider and approve endorsements.
- ▶ **External Supports Available:** Food First NL can direct organizations to applicable national campaigns.



# Recommendations: Government and System-Level Organizations



This report proposes a wide-ranging shift in how food charity is delivered in Newfoundland and Labrador. This shift will take commitment, time, and resources. Commitment is there in ample supply. Time is tight but those we've heard from have made it clear that they see the importance of this work.

Resources, though, remain a question. It is important to think out what the role of government could be and where systems-level organizations like Food First NL could or should sit.

## The Role of Government

Historically, governments of all levels have not been involved in resourcing or coordinating food charity. Most of the resources in the system come from individual and corporate donations, although some food programs that are embedded in multi-service agencies may receive some benefit from government funding.

This shifted drastically during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Faced with the impacts of pandemic lockdowns on access to food, both the Government of Canada and provincial governments (Newfoundland and Labrador included) provided resources directly to food aid for the first time. Nationally, \$330 million flowed from the Government of Canada through a number of national partner organizations. Here in Newfoundland and Labrador, the Government of NL contributed more than \$900,000 which was administered through Food First NL as the Community Food Program Support Fund. These funds flowed to both established food programs and many new programs.

These pandemic-specific funding streams have now largely dried up, and the sector is left at a turning point. Due to the food price crisis, demand is far higher than during or before the pandemic. New services (such as delivery) that were established with pandemic-era supports have become essential tools but are now largely unfunded. Operating costs are skyrocketing.

Within this context, the role of government must be considered. In doing so, it is critical to re-state that **food charity cannot end food insecurity**. Government engagement with food charity must not be used as a reason to delay action on structural changes that would raise incomes (such as a higher minimum wage, higher income support rates, and a basic income). With enough political will, these changes could happen very fast — even faster than structural changes within the food charity sector.



The existence of poverty and food insecurity is a policy choice. Government can, and should, choose differently. This is a humanitarian crisis affecting huge numbers of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians and imposing massive, long-term costs to government systems. It is a moral outrage that should offend every Newfoundlander and Labradorian, and it should be one of the most urgent issues of public policy in this province.

There is certainly reason to be hopeful that these policy shifts will happen. The Health Accord is crystal clear in making the case for investments in the social determinants of health, particularly through the creation of a Basic Income. An all-party committee is meeting to study Basic Income in more detail as we write this report, and we see our Atlantic neighbours in PEI advancing on an all-party consensus that Basic Income is the way forward. We also await the recommendations in the upcoming provincial Social and Economic Well-Being Plan, with its strong focus on poverty and food security as core components of well-being.

This all said, we must also be realistic. There is no guarantee that these changes will come, or that they will come quickly. History tells us that even with humanitarian urgency behind them, big shifts in our social safety net take years to implement. With that in mind, we do believe that there is a role for government resources in a reimagined food charity system.



## Recommendation: Food Charity Transformation Fund

Looking through the recommendations in this report, it is clear that there are many ideas that would make the sector stronger, more equitable, and more efficient, but would require up-front investments of time and resources to plan and execute. This work is where government investment could have a transformative impact without establishing expectations of permanent support for operating costs.

We recommend that the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador **establish a 5-year Food Charity Transformation Fund** to support organizational transformation and collaboration in the food charity sector.

The Food Charity Transformation Fund would ideally be flexible enough to be applied to a variety of transformation costs, including:

- ▼ Renovations to physical spaces to make them more accessible and less stigmatizing or to move towards client-choice “grocery store” models.
- ▼ Technology costs related to the establishment of more modernized data systems.
- ▼ Legal, HR, and planning costs related to organizational changes, mergers, or collaborations.
- ▼ Training curriculum and resource development costs.
- ▼ Costs related to lived-experience inclusion in planning (i.e., honoraria, child care, etc.).

We recommend that this fund include salaries as an eligible cost. One of the biggest barriers to transformation in this sector is constraints on people’s time, and accessing support for salary costs is by far the most difficult element of fund development for food programs. This transformation cannot happen without people paid appropriately to plan and execute it.

An allocation of **\$5 million over five years** would amount to approximately \$50,000 per food program in the province – enough to take on significant and meaningful projects. We would hope that many projects would be larger ones taken on by multi-agency partnerships. The fund could be designed to incentivize these kinds of collaborations.

## Recommendation: Support Shared Services

We also see a critical role for government in supporting existing shared services that make the existing food charity sector more effective and more able to reach the people facing the greatest barriers.

We recommend that the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador **provide multi-year funding to support:**

- ▼ A door-to-door **delivery service** accessible to a wide range of food programs.
- ▼ The continuance of the provincial **211 service**.

## Recommendation: Engagement and Participation

There are other ways that government can support a transformed food charity sector from a process and engagement perspective.

We recommend that Government of Newfoundland and Labrador:

- ▼ **Continue to participate in the Food Security Working Group**, which is serving as an important touchpoint between multiple government departments and community organizations supporting people living with food insecurity.
- ▼ **Participate in national meetings, conferences, and dialogue related to food-security support programming.** There are many out-of-province examples that can prove instructive.

# The Role of Systems-Level Organizations

This province has two large systems-level organizations that connect with food charities – Food First NL and the Community Food Sharing Association. Both have roles to play in systems transformation going forward.

Within its broad mission to “advance the right to food in Newfoundland and Labrador”, Food First NL’s work has four strategic pathways – advocating, organizing, valuing people, and taking action. We plan to support the transformation of food charity through three of them.

Through our **advocacy** work, we can provide a pathway into conversations around the structural factors impacting food insecurity by opening up participation in policy submissions and collective planning.

Through our **organizing** work, we aim to provide some staff time to help food charities kick off and plan collaborations, connect with resources, and engage with national partners. At time of writing we have 0.5 FTE earmarked for this work for fiscal 2023 and we will aim to keep this capacity funded longer-term.

Through our **valuing people** stream, we are launching a **Lived and Living Experience Advisory Group** made up of people from across the province who have experienced food insecurity. This advisory group can help shape transformation work going forward.

The one place we do not anticipate engaging is our **taking action** pathway. After three years of on-the-ground presence running a food aid program (the Community Food Helpline), this work became unsustainable and we do not envision returning to it in the future.

We cannot speak in as much detail to the role of the **Community Food Sharing Association** going forward, but we can certainly say with confidence that there are many roles they could play. Right now, the Association plays a vital logistical role in supplying food charities, but does not participate very actively in policy and advocacy conversations, in convening food banks, or in standard-setting for the sector. We know that their staff capacity is limited and that their team is very busy, but we have also heard from food charities about the potential for the Association to take a more active planning and policy role, as some of their equivalent organizations in other provinces do. We hope that in reviewing this report, the Association sees the same needs and can expand their team and scope of work in the future.



# Conclusion

What would it mean to really rethink food charity in Newfoundland and Labrador? We hope this report has helped make that clear.

It would mean a different, more collaborative way of working. It would mean a fundamental reimagining of the physical spaces food charities use. It would mean a deep commitment to reducing judgment and stigma and to advocating for the systemic changes that are more desperately needed than ever.

It's a tall order, that's for sure. But at the close of the Rethinking Food Charity process, we find ourselves hopeful. We saw so many examples of courageous and critical thinking through this process — both from People with Lived and Living Experience and from people involved with providing food charity. That kind of courage can carry this process far.

Courage alone, though, won't be enough. Transformation will need time and money, and we hope that all those reading this from a position of a funder — government, foundation, or private — take that to heart. We also hope that food programs themselves seriously think through how they can pool their own resources to make these changes happen.

This is not an easy time to have this conversation. Food charities across the province (and all over Canada) are staggering under the weight of unprecedented demand. This is a crisis and people get wrapped up in the day-to-day operations. That's understandable — but we hope that they can see the value of taking the longer view even now. With resources so incredibly strained, now is the time to rethink how they're used.

We also hope that this moment of crisis will further reinforce the need for food charities to advocate. The public is more aware of food insecurity now than they ever have been, and they need to be brought along in a process of relentless focus on reducing poverty.

A world where that happens does seem possible. In that world, food charities will finally be able to step back, perhaps remaining to work with people in urgent or special circumstances or perhaps finally being able to wind down entirely — the dream of any social change organization. We're not there yet, but we must not lose sight of that vision.

**Before that happens, though, there is so much we can do — together — to rethink food charity. Let's get started.**



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