

# **Reassembling Community Food Flow:** **The Making and Remaking of Community Food Distribution and Procurement in Toronto's West Central Neighbourhoods**

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Final Research Report of the Community Food Flow (CFF) project  
Led by Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre (PARC)  
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## Executive Summary

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The Community Food Flow (CFF) project explores opportunities, assets and challenges of community food distribution and food procurement in Toronto with a focus on West Central neighbourhoods. The CFF project investigates how food is accessed through donations to and purchases by drop-in centres, shelters, supportive housing, community health centres, multi-service agencies, faith groups, food-based social enterprises; these organizations constitute what is referred to as “the community food sector.”

Because of insufficient funding and resources however, community food organizations have limited access to fresh and nutritious food and as a result, struggle to meet their members’ needs. Access to healthy food is also affected by community food flow: food distribution and procurement practices situated in broader food system issues such as unequal access to affordable and healthy food. And yet, they are rarely assessed through indicators of project evaluation nor incorporated into organizational strategic planning. Therefore, the project conducts a full assessment of the food flows and access to affordable, healthy, culturally appropriate food in the community food sector.

The CFF project is built on innovative partnership development and collaboration with key players from various aspects of Toronto’s community food system. In particular, a strong research partnership with Toronto Public Health’s (TPH) Food Strategy team strengthened the project by providing a city-wide perspective and identifying a wide range of issues. The Community Food Flow project focused on community food organizations in West Central neighbourhoods, while the TPH research team encompassed community food organizations across the city.

The main research methods used are one-on-one interviews with project coordinators and managers of community food organizations, staff surveys, and focus group discussions. For one-on-one interviews, the CFF project reached 28 organizations in West Central neighbourhoods, almost half of all West Central neighbourhood organizations.

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

Furthermore, the research shows while many community food organizations are incorporating community health into their food programming and service delivery, they find it an ongoing challenge to promote and adhere to healthy food provision for their members. Program staff juggle huge administrative burden from both programming and procurement; due to pressures, it is convenience and price that many staff struggle with in making their choice, rather than the goal of healthy food provision and member engagement.

The research also encounters strong community assets, vitalities and capacities in harnessing the food procurement and preparation process to create community engagement, skills development, and employment opportunities. However, such a growing interest and potential in food-centred local economic development is not fully realized, as the current community food distribution and procurement practices consume significant staff energies and resources that could be reinvested to enhance the project effectiveness.

There is a demonstrated need for dedicated non-profit community food distributors. In fact, the community food sector possesses considerable food purchasing capacity that warrants such solutions. But at the same time, improving community food flows cannot be undertaken simply by increasing the efficiency and quantity of fresh food supply, as community food procurement is embedded in organizational culture, community engagement, skills development, and members’ efforts to rebuild their lives. Thus, improving community food flow requires the combination of organizational capacity building, neighbourhood-level collaboration, and system-level solutions, in order to build concerted efforts for a sustainable and equitable local food system.

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# **I. Introduction**

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## **1. Rationale: Why study community food flow?**

The Community Food Flow (CFF) project explores opportunities, assets and challenges of community food distribution and food procurement in Toronto's West Central neighbourhoods. A wide range of non-profit community organizations provide food-related programs and services for low-income and marginalized populations facing food insecurity<sup>1</sup>. These organizations include (but are not limited to) drop-ins, shelters, supportive housing, community health centres, multi-service agencies, food-based social enterprises, and food banks; these organizations constitute what is referred to as "the community food sector." The CFF project illuminates how these community food organizations procure food through donations and purchases with due consideration to distribution channels that they rely on.

Why is it important to talk about community food distribution and procurement when we talk about food insecurity? Food insecurity in Toronto and Canada has persisted (e.g. Tarasuk, Mitchell, & Dachner, 2013; Daily Bread Food Bank, 2013a), while social policies have failed to adapt social assistance benefits and minimum wages to the rising costs of food and housing. In the absence of strong political will and government support, the role of community food organizations has continued to expand in responding to food insecurity. Meanwhile, research documented that community meal programs generally failed to meet essential nutritious values (Tse & Tarasuk, 2008), directing more attention to nutritional considerations beyond immediate hunger relief. Due to insufficient funding and resources however, community food organizations have limited access to fresh and nutritious food, and as a result, continue to struggle to meet their members' needs.

In addition, challenges in community food organizations' access to healthy food become more complicated, when issues in the current food system are brought into the equation. Such a symptomatic issue is a two-tiered food system, one that is characterized by a growing gap between those who can access to high quality nutritious food and those who rely on cheap, processed foods or charitable food programs (Scharf, Levkoe, & Saul, 2010). Furthermore, the retail sector has considerable influence on food distribution in Canada; about 78% of the food distributed to consumers is distributed by three major grocery chains – Loblaws, Metro, and Sobeys (Carter-Whiney, 2008). These issues in the current food system affect capacities of community organizations in procuring nutritious food.

Community food procurement and distribution practices are, therefore, crucial to understand challenges of community responses to food insecurity. But, these practices are rarely assessed through indicators of project evaluation nor incorporated into organizational strategic planning. In addition, community organizations have few opportunities to talk about community food flow issues with other organizations. Neither do they have benchmarks against which to evaluate their own practices. Moreover, there has been little assessment of the impacts of current community food flow practices on the effectiveness of community food programs. For these reasons, the project conducts a full assessment of current food flows and access to affordable, healthy, culturally appropriate food in the community food sector.

## **2. What is the community food sector?**

In this project, community food organizations refer to non-profit community organizations providing programs and services that involve food provision for people facing food insecurity. This definition of the community food sector is broad and inclusive. There are certainly organizations that do not see themselves as food-focused organizations; for them, food is often positioned as secondary to their core services (Tarasuk & Dachner, 2009). In addition, the volume, frequency, and type of food programs differ from ones that run five-to-seven days a week to ones that serve snacks to a small group of members once a week. There is also a varying degree of commitments, interests, and capacities among these community organizations in providing healthy food.

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<sup>1</sup> Food insecurity refers to a situation where people lack adequate and secure access to food due to inadequate financial resources (Tarasuk, Mitchell, & Dachner, 2013)

Why, then, is it necessary to organize these different organizations under the same banner of the community food (sector) organizations? First, using community food organizations makes explicit the role of food in their programs and services, the role that is not often integrated into organizational planning. Second, more importantly, it directs attention to interdependence of diverse organizations within the community food sector. It helps illuminate diverse and complementary community practices of the different organizations that play a role in meeting various needs of people facing food insecurity. The recognition of such mutual relationship can open up possibilities to build a common ground that helps them go beyond addressing food insecurity in silos of organizations and sectors. It can facilitate coordination and collaborative solutions that complement different strengths and weaknesses of these organizations. Naming them community food organizations is an important first step to explore solutions for improving community food flow.

### **3. Research objectives**

The CFF project combines research, partnership development, and capacity building for community-based strategies, neighbourhood coordination, and system-level actions to improve community food flow. Research outcomes are used for collaborative planning and pilot project development for the year 2014. This research phase has the following five objectives:

1. To examine a range of community food procurement and food distribution practices;
2. To identify barriers and challenges facing community organizations in accessing food;
3. To assess food needs and gaps in current food supply to community food organizations;
4. To uncover community assets and good practices in community food flow;
5. To explore opportunities for community strategies and system-level actions.

This report is of particular interest to program coordinators and managers of community organizations that provide programs and services that involve food provision. The report helps stakeholders to understand better the complexity of community food distribution and procurement, and highlights some of the common challenges faced by community food organizations, as well as their unique needs. The report helps contextualize day-to-day practices of community food procurement in the broader landscape and can be used as a reference to bring staff and community partners together to begin deliberation and community planning at the organizational, neighbourhood, and sector levels. While this report focuses on analysis and findings based to a large extent on West Central neighbourhoods, the research report by Toronto Public Health's Food Strategy team (Miller, 2013b) provides citywide analysis on community food procurement in Toronto.

## II. Project Design

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In 2012, Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre (PARC) was awarded a two-year grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation. PARC took the lead in convening key stakeholders and partners in Toronto's community food system, and held a strategic planning session in January 2013. Out of the strategic planning session, the project advisory group was formed. In consultation with the Advisory Group members, the research team developed the project design as follows.

### 1. Partnership and collaboration

The Community Food Flow project builds on innovative collaboration and partnership. Three layers of partnerships informed the project development and implementation. First, the project harnessed the extensive expertise and experience of Advisory Group members who represents various aspects of Toronto's community food system from production, distribution and consumption to community social service, public policy and social enterprise. The Advisory Group consists of the following eleven organizations:

- Daily Bread Food Bank
- FoodShare
- Greenest City
- Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre (PARC)
- Second Harvest
- Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration (SSHA) at the City of Toronto
- St. Christopher House
- The Stop Community Food Centre
- Toronto Public Health's Toronto Food Strategy team
- The West End Food Co-op
- University of Toronto, Department of Nutritional Sciences

Second, the Community Food Flow project forged a core research partnership with Toronto Public Health's (TPH) Toronto Food Strategy team in fall 2013 (Community Food Procurement research). This research partnership expanded collaborative research capacity to reach as many community food organizations in Toronto as possible. While the TPH research team encompassed community food sector organizations across the city, this CFF project focused on Toronto's West Central neighbourhoods with key organizations outside of the catchment area. This research collaboration enabled the integration of neighbourhood-based approach as well as system-level analysis into community food assessment.

Third, the project evolved through core partnerships with 10 community food sector organizations in West Central neighbourhoods to cover a wide spectrum of organizations in terms of types, members<sup>2</sup>, and food procurement volumes. These 10 organizations largely reside in and nearby Parkdale as this project started with a Parkdale neighbourhood, and expanded into the West Central neighbourhoods. The 10 organizations supported the project implementation at each stage from one-on-one interviews through staff surveys to focus groups:

- Arrabon House is a Parkdale-based supportive housing program and community service for young women in need of support;
- Christie Ossington Neighbourhood Centre is a multi-service organization providing a wide range of community-based programming that includes food security and food services – Drop in and Food Bank, Men's Shelter and Transitional Housing, The Nook Children's Program, and LOFT Kitchen (LOFT Youth Centre for Social Enterprise and Innovation based Social Enterprise)
- Cota-Bailey House is a supportive housing program that serves 11 men living with mental health challenges and diabetes or pre-diabetic conditions;

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<sup>2</sup> How organizations call their service users and program participants vary such as clients, participants, users, or residents. In this report, "member" is used to include these variations.

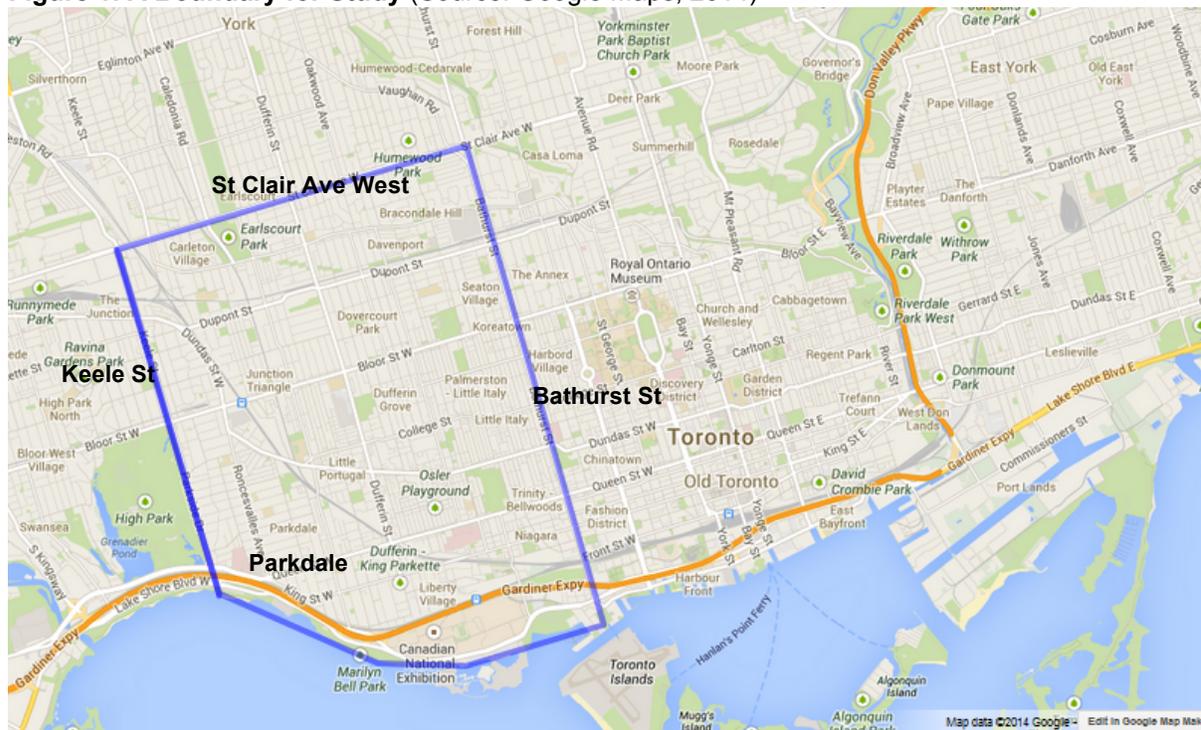
- LOFT Community Services provide supportive housing programs to people with mental health and addiction challenges. In west central neighbourhoods, LOFT has three supportive housing programs for seniors living with mental illness, dementia, and/or physical disabilities;
- Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre (PARC) is a social service agency that operates a drop-in centre for psychiatric survivors, the homeless, the disabled and those with few resources. PARC also runs Edmond Place supportive housing;
- Parkdale Community Health Centre (PCHC) provides primary health care, health promotion, counselling, advocacy, community development via a variety of community programs and services to the Parkdale community;
- St. Christopher House is a multi-service agency that applies community development principles to its service provision and programming. SCH operates two drop-ins and senior programs including a meals-on-wheels program;
- Sistering is a social service agency operating two drop-ins in Parkdale and Bloorcourt for women who are homeless, underhoused, low income or marginalized;
- The Four Villages Community Health Centre is a community health centre whose primary focus area is High Park and the Junction;
- The Redwood is an emergency shelter for women and children fleeing domestic violence.

This Community Food Flow project has capitalized on pre-existing relationships and readiness cultivated through the Parkdale Food Network.

## 2. Toronto’s West Central neighbourhoods

This Community Food Flow project focuses on West Central neighbourhoods. The study area refers to the area bounded by Bathurst Street to the east, St. Clair Avenue West to the north, Lake Ontario to the south, and Keele Street/Parkside Drive to the west (shown in Figure 1).

**Figure 1: A Boundary for Study** (Source: Google Maps, 2014)



While facing ongoing redevelopment and gentrification pressures, many of West Central neighbourhoods are low-income (see Hulchanski, 2010). For example, Parkdale is a west-end neighbourhood that is home to a large number of low-income people, recent immigrants, working poor, people facing homelessness, and marginalized populations with mental health and addiction challenges. This neighbourhood make-up has been attributed to historical and local factors such as

the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric patients, the proximity to Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), and the availability of various affordable housing options – social housing, non-profit supportive housing, rooming houses and boarding homes, and high-rise rental apartments (see Slater, 2005 for more details). Parkdale is also uniquely characterized by the concentration of various social service agencies and community organizations.

Many of Parkdale residents, particularly those on social assistance, are caught up in increasing costs of living and decreasing incomes. They have little income left to spend on food after securing housing, while some of them live in inadequate housing that does not have cooking facilities. As their capacities and resources to access (healthy) food are constrained, they rely on emergency food services and community food programs. Thus, food insecurity has been a crucial challenge to many of community organizations in the area. But many of the organizations have struggled to meet members' food needs. Parkdale Food Network has grown out of the recognition that neighbourhood-wide collaboration for service coordination, advocacy and joint solutions is necessary to address complex local food insecurity issues. It is from this neighbourhood context that this Community Food Flow emerged to explore collaborative solutions to increase access to healthy food.

### **3. Research methods**

The main research methods are one-on-one interviews with representatives of community food organizations, staff surveys, and focus groups. The main groups for research and consultation are program coordinators and managers of community food organizations who organize and/or oversee food purchasing and donation.

For one-on-one interviews, the CFF and TPH projects collaboratively conducted 95 in total. For West Central Toronto, 28 organizations were reached (31 interviews; a few organizations have multiple locations), which is almost 50% of all community food sector organizations in West Central neighbourhoods. The CFF project also conducted 12 interviews with key organizations beyond West Central neighbourhoods.

Surveys were sent to the 10 core partners outlined above and filled out by their staff members involved with food procurement. The surveys were intended to capture details that were difficult to get from one-on-one interviews such as food costs. In total, 13 staff members responded from 10 core partners.

Focus groups were designed in collaboration with a consultant from the Catalyst Centre<sup>3</sup>. The focus groups aimed to create inter-organizational discussions on opportunities and potential strategies to improve community food flow. The Toronto Food Strategy's lead research coordinator for the project presented four community food distribution scenarios, and solicited feedback and comments from participants. Four focus groups were organized: for drop-ins; for supportive housing; for community health centres; and for all others. The focus groups reached 26 participants from 20 organizations in total.

In addition, this project took a community-based research approach that engaged community members and peer perspectives in the research process and data analysis. Four community-based research assistants (CBR assistants) were hired in March 2013. They participated in a full-day research training workshop provided in partnership with Working for Change. They assisted in conducting interviews, prepared interview notes, and took part in collaborative reflection and data analysis.

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<sup>3</sup> Catalyst Centre is a collective of popular education professionals in Toronto. Catalyst Centre provides popular education programs and consulting services such as strategic planning, workshop design and facilitation. <http://www.catalystcentre.ca/>

### III. Findings: Challenges and Assets in Community Food Flow

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This research explores assets and challenges of food distribution and procurement in the community food sector with a focus on Toronto's West Central neighbourhoods. The following eight key findings emerged.

1. A current landscape of Toronto's community food distribution
2. Sectoral and geographical diversity in the community food sector
3. Food donation drives food purchasing and menu planning
4. Reliance on private, market-based food distribution services
5. Organizational food planning and prioritization
6. Food budgets mirror a lack of public policy coordination
7. Between the need for healthy food and the members' preference
8. Food as a catalyst for rebuilding local food economies

This section also introduces three Good Practices of community food organizations, ones that offer insights and approaches that other organizations can learn from to tackle similar organizational challenges.

#### 1. A current landscape of Toronto's community food distribution

A majority of community food organizations in Toronto rely on charitable food distribution systems developed by three major organizations that collect and distribute food donation. To a smaller degree, there are two community food distribution systems that deliver purchased fresh and healthy food to community food organizations across the city.

*Daily Bread Food Bank (DBFB)* collects and distributes mostly dry and canned goods to about 170 member agencies and over 200 programs across the city (except for the former city of North York). In 2012-2013 year, DBFB distributed over 10 million pounds of food, 68% of which were distributed to local food banks; 17% of which to community meal programs such as drop-in programs and housing programs (DBFB, 2013b). Member agencies can choose items and place an order in advance on a weekly basis. In response to the increasing need for healthy food from member agencies, DBFB is refocusing some of their resources to increase their distribution capacity of healthy food to member agencies. In contrast to common perception, DBFB spent nearly \$1.5 million in purchasing nutritious items such as eggs, yogurt and fresh fruits and vegetables for one fiscal year (see also Creating Health Plus program below). Furthermore, they have recently re-engaged with the Ontario Food Terminal to solicit donations of fresh produce.

*Second Harvest (SH)* is a food rescue organization that delivers over 7 million pounds of donated food to over 200 agencies in Toronto (2013). With eight large-scale refrigerated trucks, they focus on the delivery of fresh produce, dairy product and meat/protein items. Because of increasing requests for membership, close to 50 organizations are currently on the waitlist. SH also has a Harvest Kitchen program that delivers prepared meals to community organizations that do not have capacities and resources to prepare their own meals. Second Harvest initiated a pilot program called Second Harvest Outreach Program (SHOP), although it is on hiatus. The SHOP bridged food donations from the Ontario Food Terminal with food desert/high priority neighbourhoods in inner-suburbs. The program is on hiatus. Second Harvest's scope of work may be influenced by their organizational philosophy of not purchasing or offering goods for sale, but they have an extensive network and infrastructure that can be leveraged to support collaborative solutions.

*North York Harvest Food Bank (NYH)* distributes over 1.8 million pounds of food (in 2012) to about 40 agencies and 60 programs in North Toronto, bounded by Highway 27 to the west, Victoria Park Avenue to the east, Steeles Avenue to the north and St. Clair Avenue and Eglinton Avenue to the south (NYH, n.d.). In addition, NYH has recently started a wholesale food purchasing program where food items are purchased from wholesalers and supermarkets and delivered with a small mark-up to member agencies along with other donated food.

These three food distribution organizations constitute a charitable food distribution system in Toronto that delivers approximately 19 million pounds of food donation in total for one year. The following two streams of food distribution focus on distribution of purchased food items.

*Creating Health Plus program* is a joint project of nutritious food distribution incubated in response to the need expressed by drop-ins for more healthy food. In this project, Daily Bread Food Bank and the City of Toronto's Shelter, Support, and Housing Administration (SSHA) contribute joint funding to purchase and deliver dairy products including eggs, milk, and yoghurt to 27 drop-in centres across the city. Twice a year, George Brown College and Toronto Public Health with SSHA and DBFB, host culinary training workshops for healthy cooking to cooks and volunteers.

Dairy products have been the primary focus of the program, as they were identified through the pilot project in 2007 as the most popular nutritious items that are less likely to be donated. Its pilot project demonstrated the consistent access to healthy nutritious foods resulted in significant improvements in the nutritional content of community meals (DBFB, 2008). The project also showed that the increased predictability of amount and types of food items relieved stress and anxiety among program staff (ibid). The program goal is to reach all member agencies of Toronto Drop-In Network; it is exploring the way to increase financial capacities to accommodate the growing need for healthy food.

*FoodShare* is a non-profit community organization that has developed and operated a wide range of innovative community food security programs. FoodShare has decades-long track record of working with the Ontario Food Terminal (OFT). This working relationship has allowed FoodShare to develop a non-profit wholesale food distribution network. FoodShare buys wholesale fresh vegetables and fruits from the OFT as well as directly from 25 local farmers, and delivers them at an affordable rate to local communities. FoodShare has developed two major fresh produce distribution channels. The Good Food Box (GFB) program is known to many community food organizations, a program through which customers can order a box of fresh produce and receive a regular delivery. Several interviewees have used the GFB for their meal programs. A majority of them, however, find it difficult to integrate it into their meal planning because they cannot choose what kind of food items they can get.

On the other hand, the Bulk Produce program – little known to a majority of interviewees – is a wholesale food distribution program that allows customers to order fresh food items for delivery. Through this program, FoodShare currently distributes fresh fruits and vegetables to “260 schools, 20 non-profit child care centres, 75 parenting centres, and 15 non-profit agencies across Toronto” (FoodShare, n.d. a). Customers receive a list of available items with prices, and place an order to FoodShare. FoodShare then purchases food from the Ontario Food Terminal through their professional buyer, and delivers them to customers for the weekly minimum order of \$50. This program is currently at its capacity due to its warehouse and staffing limits, and is unable to take new customers.

These five distribution systems make up the current community food distribution. For example, over 1 million pounds of food in total – 667,780 pounds from DBFB, 345,622 pounds from SH, and 30,154 pounds from FoodShare – were delivered to Parkdale in 2012. While the total amount of food distributed to Parkdale may not be that significant compared to the total amount of food distributed by each non-profit community distributor, it illustrates another way of understanding the landscape of local food insecurity. While all existing community food distributors are currently operating close to their capacity, they are seeking ways to increase their capacities to meet the growing need for healthy food from community food organizations. Meanwhile, community food organizations have few options and turn to mainstream food services to purchase food.

### ***Ontario Food Terminal and FoodShare's wholesale program***

Located in South Etobicoke, the Ontario Food Terminal is the largest food distribution centre in Canada that brings together 21 warehouse vendors, 400 farmers' market tenants and 5,000 buyers (Ontario Food Terminal n.d.). It distributes close to 1 million tonnes of fresh produce annually (ibid). It is not open to the public unless individuals and organizations have a permit to access the terminal; but a permit can be obtained for \$200 for two years.

FoodShare has worked with the OFT for over 20 years to establish their current non-profit wholesale distribution system. Because of its large volume – approximately \$1 million value of fresh produce purchased from the OFT (FoodShare, n.d. b) – and complexity of procurement logistics, FoodShare has hired a professional buyer who purchases at the OFT on FoodShare’s behalf. It is this professional buyer that is critical to FoodShare’s model. The buyer has developed extensive knowledge and working relationships with various vendors at the OFT; the buyer can find high quality of food at best prices according to FoodShare’s organizational values. While FoodShare pays professional fees to the buyer, FoodShare can ensure affordability of fresh food through public/private grants and donation.

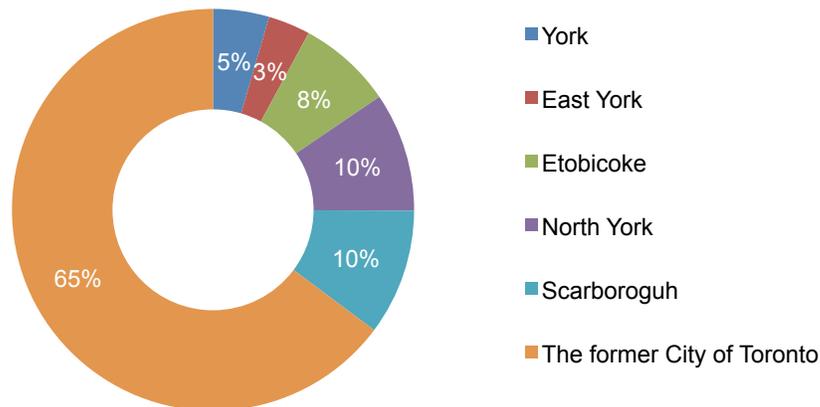
Initially, it was believed that accessing the OFT would be difficult for non-profit community organizations. And yet this research found that some non-profit organizations regularly access the OFT to purchase fresh produce on their own without a professional buyer, such as the Christie Ossington Neighbourhood Centre and Sistering. They may not need a professional buyer because their purchasing volumes per week are smaller compared to that of FoodShare that purchases food for hundreds of organizations and programs. Thus it raises a question, what is the scale of food volume that requires a professional buyer?

## 2. Sectoral and geographical diversity in the community food sector

The community food sector is complex and diverse: it consists of a wide range of organizations such as drop-ins, shelter services, supportive housing, community health centres and others. These organizations are often categorized by sub-sectors and belong to sector-based networks (e.g. Toronto Drop-In Network and GTA Community Health Centre Food Security Network). In this regard, the community food sector is cross-sectoral by nature.

Toronto Public Health’s Food Strategy team (2013b) has identified over 350 community organizations in Toronto that provide some forms of meal programs on a weekly basis. Figure 2 below provides the geographic breakdown of the community food organizations in Toronto.

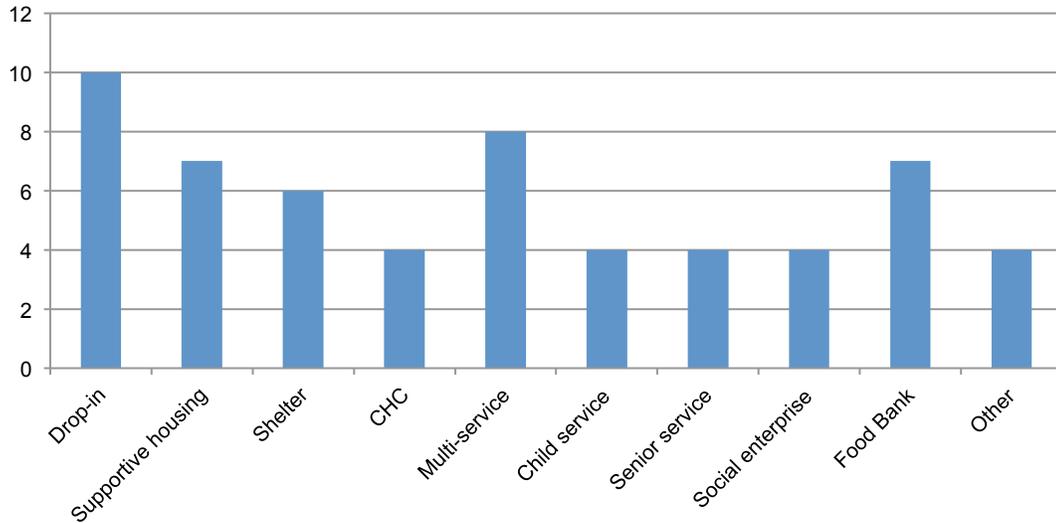
**Figure 2: Geographic breakdown of the community food sector** (Miller, 2013b)



It comes with little surprise that 230 community food organizations – 65% – concentrate in the former City of Toronto, corresponding to the overall trend of spatial mismatch between the availability of social services and their growing needs (see for example, Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force, 2005). Spatial mismatch has increased a further pressure on existing food programs in inner-suburbs, which are often described as “food deserts.” Furthermore, the latest Daily Bread Food Bank’s *Who’s Hungry* report (2013a) identifies an emerging trend that “while client visits to Toronto’s city core are now back to pre-recession levels, visits to food banks in the inner suburbs have skyrocketed since 2008 [by nearly 40 %]”. In addition, three interviewees who operate drop-in meal programs in different inner-suburban neighbourhoods feel that the lack of community meal programs in their neighbourhoods has intensified the pressure on their programs.

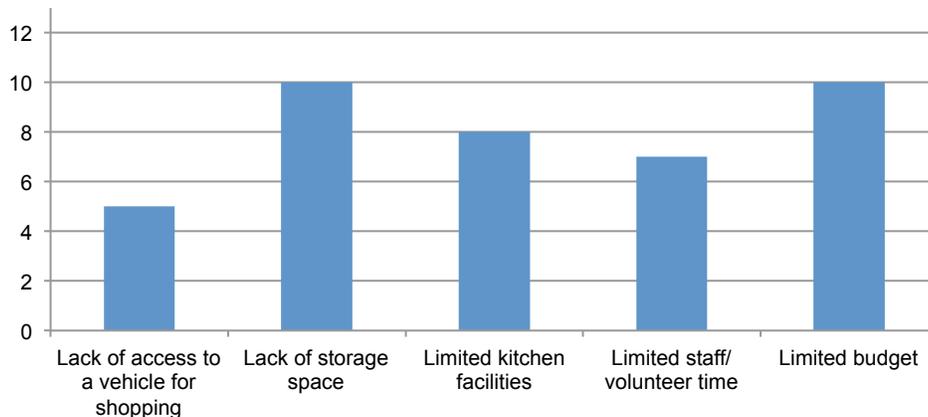
In West Central neighbourhoods, there are 58 community food organizations, some of which have multiple locations such as St. Christopher House and LOFT Community Services. About 16% of Toronto’s community food organizations are located in West Central neighbourhoods. Figure 3 below shows the makeup of diverse community food organizations in the area.

**Figure 3: The diversity of community food organizations in West Central neighbourhoods**



Regardless of different sectors and programs, two major common barriers constrain effective community food procurement: limited budgets and lack of storage space, as evidenced by staff surveys (see Figure 4 below) and interviews. While this CFF project is based on smaller sample, Toronto Public Health’s Food Strategy team (Miller, 2013b) also identifies these two challenges as major barriers in community food procurement. These two barriers cut through key themes discussed in the following sections and pose unique challenges.

**Figure 4: What barriers do you face in food purchasing? (Check all that apply)**



Several interviewees consider the diversity of community food organizations as a challenge to wider collaboration and coordination with different organizations and sectors. Differences in purchasing capacities, organizational cultures, and varying degree of commitment to healthy food stand in a way. For example, such differences emerged clearly in focus group discussions on potential opportunities and solutions for developing a dedicated community food distributor. Participants from community health centres tended to emphasize the quality of food and nutrition. Some CHCs have already developed and started to implement healthy food procurement guidelines at the organizational level. Also some participants point out there is no cohesive definition of “healthy food” across community food organizations. Therefore, they call for building a common basis of healthy food to ensure the quality of food.

Participants from supportive housing and shelters raised a potential tension between coordinated food delivery and flexibility of individual purchasing. Some of their programs use food procurement and preparation processes to promote tenant and resident engagement and skills development (see also Findings #7 and #8 for more details). Meanwhile, participants from drop-in programs were more interested in the cost effectiveness and efficiency of food procurement of healthy and fresh food within limited resources, as they serve a large number of members on a daily basis. Such different orientations in community food procurement need be taken into consideration for developing collaborative solutions.

By contrast, for other interviewees, these different emphases are not necessarily a barrier to collaboration. Rather, for them, these differences mark various roles and strengths of diverse community food organizations in meeting various needs of people facing food insecurity. In short, the diversity is a sign of community resiliency and mutually complementary relationship. A majority of interviewees also expressed their readiness and desire to build a stronger network among community food organizations. Recognizing interdependence among community food organizations can open up possibilities for deliberations on retaining and capitalizing on existing strengths in achieving a common goal of collaborative solutions.

A potential barrier to collaboration, however, may emerge from an unequal development of community food organizations – their expertise, capacities, resources, and social networks – not only in West Central neighbourhoods but also across the city. For example, when it comes to healthy food provision, research observes that there is a considerable gap in terms of capacities and knowledge in accessing nutritious food and preparing healthy meals. One focus group participant urges that making a broader impact at the system level (such as developing a new community food distributor) requires promoting capacity building, training and knowledge sharing at the organizational and community levels, so that community organizations can support system-level actions from the ground.

### **3. Food donation drives food purchasing and menu planning**

Food donation is recognized as a crucial, integral part of community food procurement. Almost all organizations in West Central neighbourhoods use some forms of food donation; over 60 % of West-Central Toronto organizations interviewed receive food donations from the Daily Bread Food Bank and/or Second Harvest. Many interviewees emphasize food donation as a lifeline for their programs.

The unpredictability of food donation in terms of quantity, quality, and nutrition however, often makes it difficult to perform advance meal planning and food procurement that reflect necessary nutritional values. Almost half of the interviewees suggest that their meal plans and purchasing are to some extent driven by what they get from food donation: this issue applies particularly to drop-in programs; six out of eight interviewees whose organizations run drop-in programs answer that they decide what they purchase based on food donation, so as to fill gaps in quantity and nutrition. The issue is further complicated by limited storage spaces. Even when food bank distributors have a large amount of fresh produce donation, some of them are not able to receive donation. Neither are they able to keep donated items for later use.

Furthermore, food donation sometimes includes food items that are spoiled and/or near expiration, requiring considerable staff and volunteer time spent on sorting out donated foods and on managing resulting waste. Occasionally, staff have to adjust their meal plans to prioritize the use of food that will expire soon. Nevertheless, the challenge in quality control of food donation stems from dynamics in the food system as a whole. Food donation distributors receive food that is too close to expiry dates or to be sold at retail stores; they have to pick up and move the food around as quickly as possible to deliver it in the least damaged condition to member agencies across the city. When a truck arrives at member agencies, quality checks do not often happen. One interviewee points out that “if you see something coming out of the truck and it’s spoiled, you can refuse it but sometimes you don’t find that out until you start picking through it.”

Meanwhile, a majority of community food organizations do not have organizational guidelines for receiving food donation. They also have a difficulty with consistently arranging staff and volunteers for receiving food donation. Limited knowledge of some staff and volunteers about food handling

sometimes results in unnecessary, excess intake of food donation. Inconsistency makes it difficult to build relationships with food donation distributors (i.e. drivers). Furthermore, a few interviewees raise an ongoing concern about the potential shortage of food, and fear of being unable to meet food needs. The situation means that they feel unable to decline undesirable items.

Food bank distributors are working to improve quality control by training staff or developing standards. As several interviewees mentioned, however, quality control of food donations also requires effective food donor education about the quality of food donation. It seems particularly difficult for individual organizations to do so because they are concerned about damaging community relations with donors. Taken together, this systemic challenge raises an important question: where in the process of community food flow should quality control of food donation take place?

### ***Good Practice 1: Strategic partnership building for food donation***

It is the integration of food donation and purchasing that characterizes community food procurement. Although this integration increases the complexity and unpredictability of food procurement, several organizations – particularly faith-based organizations – tend to be proactive towards food donation: to build strategic partnerships with farmers and local businesses and to solicit targeted food items for donation and/or discounted items.

Those organizations target items that are hard to access from regular donation streams but expensive to purchase such as fresh produce and protein products (e.g. meats). For example, one shelter organized a general fundraising campaign, through which they had a whole cow donated (later processed). The Stop Community Food Centre has built a relationship with Rowe Farms to access discounted meats. Some interviewees also express their interests in connecting with farmers to access surplus and grade B products to get fresh produce at discounted rates (see Opportunity #7).

Such strategic relationship building requires not only time and resources, but also organizational support, particularly from a resource development team. Thus, this strategy raises a question of appropriate scale for action: which scale – individual organization, neighbourhood, sector-wide – is appropriate without creating further competition for resources and gaps in access? Not every individual organization has capacity and connection to form a strategic relationship with donors; neighbourhood collaboration may open up possibilities for more equitable access to resources.

## **4. Organizational food planning and prioritization of food**

Both the interviews and focus groups revealed that the lack of organizational food planning and prioritization has resulted in inefficient food procurement practices. Food is often treated as secondary to the organization's core services (Tarasuk & Dachner, 2009). This is to some degree understandable because a majority of organizations do not necessarily see themselves as “food” organizations. The role of food – let alone food procurement – in programs is not always incorporated into strategic planning, program coordination, and organizational evaluation.

Limited organizational prioritization of food has larger ramifications for organizations that have multiple programs and services that involve food provision, such as community health centres and multi-service organizations. Except for several organizations (see Good Practice 2), food procurement takes place on an individual program basis; each program staff is responsible for both arranging food donation and purchasing food. In some cases, interviewees report that five or six different staff members go to grocery stores to purchase food every week.

One of the results of this is a cumulative impact of staff time spent on food purchasing. Many programs at community health centres and multi-service organizations tend to be small in its food volume, compared to drop-in meal programs and residential programs that run food programs five-to-seven days a week. Because program staff think that their programs alone are too small to meet minimum requirements for wholesale delivery, they often go to nearby supermarkets by foot, taxi or public transportation (also see the discussion on “minimum requirement” on pp. 18-19). Through staff surveys, this research attempted to assess cumulative impacts of staff time spent on food purchasing. But because each program and each sector has different frequency and amount of food shopping, surveys could not yield meaningful aggregated data. Yet, available survey data indicate that CHC

program staff tend to spend at least one hour per week on food procurement. In a hypothetical situation, if one CHC has six food related programs a week, then a potential total staff cost for shopping could reach from \$480 to \$600<sup>4</sup> per month (see also Miller (2013a)'s detailed analysis).

One interviewee points out the inefficiency of sporadic purchasing practices that are compounded by the lack of accountability and communication mechanisms, when each staff member only purchases food for their own program:

*“People only buy for their own programs so there isn’t a collective [practice] like, this is all the oil and vinegar that anyone can use. [Instead] every program has their own oil, every program has their own vinegar, and every program has their own salt, their own pepper. You can see that it’s not the most optimal use of resources. But if you don’t have somebody who’s in charge of it, then how horrible and annoying is that when you go in and try to cook and there’s no oil, and no salt?”*

The last sentence in the above quote also indicates the other challenge: the lack of dedicated personnel for food coordination from purchasing to inventory management. For example, two CHCs have developed healthy food procurement guidelines for staff, but the absence of a dedicated personnel means the enforcement of the guidelines is left to each staff's discretion.

The absence of a dedicated food coordinator results in the increased administrative burden on program staff; program staff often juggle double-roles as a program coordinator and food procurement coordinator. Generally for the non-profit sector, staff are overworked and overburdened with the growing need for social services and community programs; they also have to devote a large amount of time to burdensome accountability and reporting requirements from funders that further constrain staff time and resources (Eakin, 2004; 2007).

On top of these administrative and program responsibilities, many of staff resume food procurement tasks from purchasing to preparation to accounting. Thus, combined administrative burdens increase pressures on staff to provide programs *and* meals on time within limited resources. This intense pressure often results in choosing convenient, but expensive and less healthy food options. For example, one focus group participant suggests, “because of the time constraint, you are going to [a wholesale distributor] and you are getting a lot of prepared, packaged foods, not enough fresh stuff and not enough to choose from because you just do not have time to peel up all those potatoes.”

From these front-line experiences, several interviewees support creating a dedicated food coordinator position not only to achieve cost savings and improved efficiency but to also allow program staff to focus on programming and service delivery. However, interviewees suggest that food is not a priority at management and board tables so that it is hard to even direct their attention to the issue. There are also difficulties associated with creating such a food dedicated position due to funding and union policies. Meanwhile, some managers and directors share the view of creating a dedicated food position, and yet they face resistance from some frontline staff and coordinators who prefer to maintain their freedom and flexibility in food procurement. Some staff want to go food shopping and choose food items on their own; they may want to take their clients to shopping; they may find advance menu planning and coordination cumbersome.

### **Good Practice 2: A variation in organizational food procurement coordination**

This research came across several community food organizations that coordinate food procurement (and food-related resource management) across programs. These organizations factor some level of flexibility – going to a nearby supermarket for small quantities or specialty items for example – into their centralized food procurement. Furthermore, there is a variation in how food procurement is coordinated. Coordination does not always mean creating centralized food personnel who organize everything from menu planning through purchasing to cooking. This Good Practice section outlines four different examples of food procurement coordination, which allows community food organizations to choose which model fits into their organizations.

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<sup>4</sup> This calculation is based on a staff hourly rate ranging from \$20 to \$25.

The East End Community Health Centre streamlines a whole process of food provision with a centralized staff. With a dietitian's support, a centralized kitchen chef coordinates menu planning, food purchasing, and cooking for different programs (Hasdell, 2010). The chef plans menus that reflect the dietary needs of specific program clients and prepares meals during the program hour; the chef then joins the program after they finish meals and provide a quick workshop on how to make that meal (Hasdell, 2010). A benefit of this approach is that each program staff can focus their resources and times on program planning and delivery. More details can be found in "*Thinking outside of the breadbox: A 'how-to' handbook for food security programming in community health centres*".

The Stop Community Food Centre has a lead kitchen chef that coordinates all purchasing and inventory management for multiple programs provided at the Stop's Davenport site. Different program coordinators submit their order forms in advance to a lead kitchen chef. The chef coordinates all processes; puts an order in; gets invoices; checks the order when it comes in; and processes necessary paperwork. The chef also oversees and manages food inventory to reduce the overlap of food purchasing and excess spending in coordination with program coordinators. For example, the chef checks standard items such as bread, rice, milks, and beans; as they run low, the chef purchases these essential items. Centralized purchasing also results in reduction in food wastage and spoilage. Because the chef checks what's already in the storage and what's requested for purchase, the chef can suggest possible substitutions (e.g. a community kitchen program asks for spinach but when there is a lot of kale in storage, a suggestion to substitute spinach for kale can be made).

The Christie Ossington Neighbourhood Centre (CONC) builds a culture of collaboration that challenges "siloing" of programs. CONC has developed a food committee that consists of representatives from four key program areas – drop-in, housing, shelter, and social enterprise – and Executive Chef, and meets every Friday to integrate food related tasks including food procurement. This committee coordinates seasonal food purchasing, checks the quality of food donations (they meet on Fridays when DBFB and SH deliver food), distributes them in the most effective way, share other resources, and plan together for the following week. The committee has a lead person but the function is often covered by other members in their absence.

Sistering offers another model that separates key food procurement responsibilities from kitchen and frontline staff. While kitchen staff prepare menus and create a shopping list, it is an administration manager who oversees the food procurement function – placing an order, supervising inventory management for both donation and purchasing to avoid extraneous purchasing, processing financial paperwork and accounting work. The manager coordinates purchasing for two drop-in programs (for Parkdale and Bloor locations). Because of ongoing inventory check, better accounting to control spending, and streamlined recipes for two sites, Sistering is now able to use their limited food budget more effectively. This model reiterates the importance of freeing up administrative work from program staff.

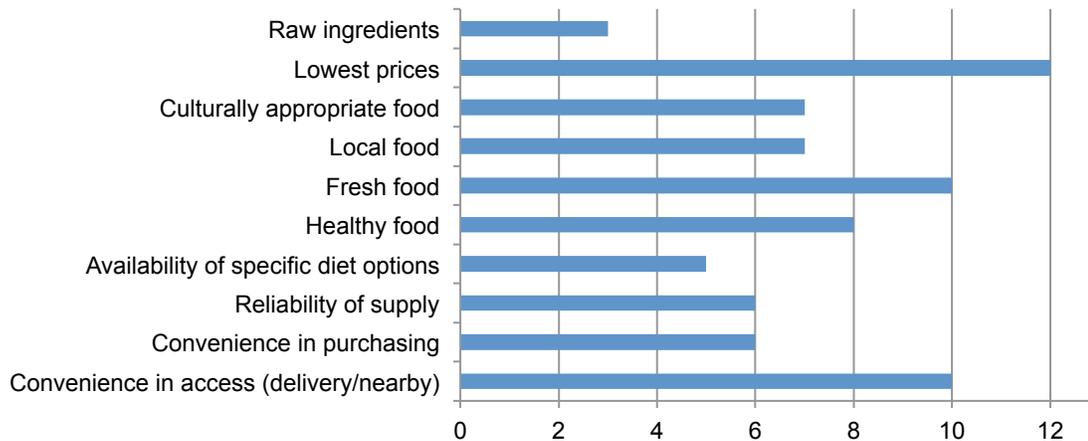
In practice, there is a spectrum of centralization and coordination of food procurement. These four different models suggest that food procurement coordination does not always require complete centralization but can maintain a certain level of program autonomy and flexibility. Further, coordination can be managed either by creating a new dedicated position or by reorganizing and allocating those tasks to existing appropriate positions, depending on existing staff capacity. Therefore, it comes down to organizational planning and prioritization about where to separate and/or coordinate responsibilities and tasks that entail food procurement.

The benefits of organizational coordination range from more effective and efficient use of both human and financial resources, to streamlined financial accounting and control, to reduction in food waste. In short, the prioritization of food is not to suggest organizations be food-oriented, but to consider issues from the point of view of organizational resource management. To make a transition from decentralized to centralized purchasing requires a progressive, capacity-building approach to solicit management and program staff support as well as to support adjustment to more organized and advance program planning.

## 5. Reliance on mainstream, market-based food distribution services

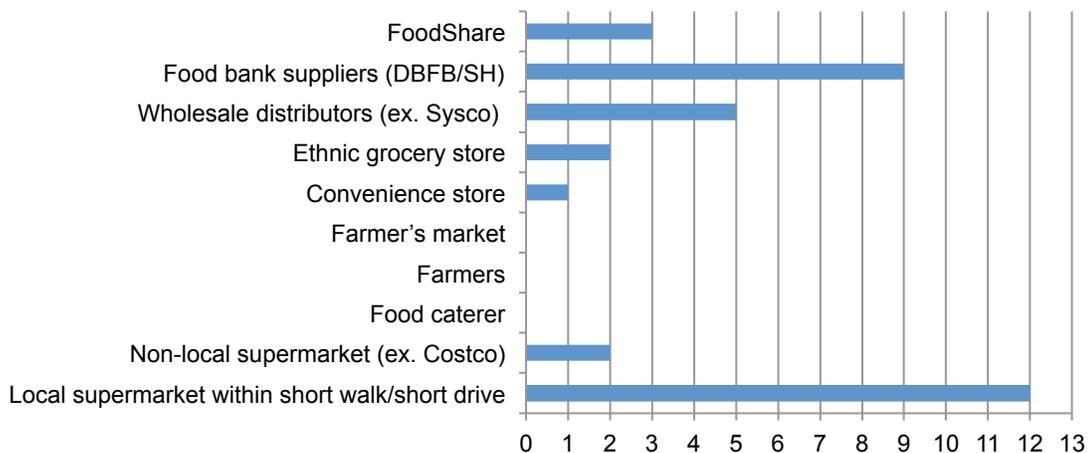
A majority of community food organizations rely on mainstream, market-based food distribution services – private wholesale distributors and supermarkets – that do not necessarily meet the unique needs of the community food sector. Asked where they purchase, almost all interviewees list nearby supermarkets and/or private wholesalers with delivery. As demonstrated above, many program staff are overburdened and their resources are overstretched; due to pressures, it is “price and convenience” that tend to influence their food procurement choices, as shown in Figure 5 below.

**Figure 5: What are your key goals in purchasing food? (Check all that apply)**



For community food procurement, however, the relation between cost and convenience is not straightforward. Almost 90% of the interviewees – and all 13 survey respondents (see Figure 6) – answer that they use nearby supermarkets such as No Frills and FreshCo. This West-central Toronto data corresponds to the citywide data from Toronto Public Health’s Food Strategy team’s research (Miller, 2013b): a majority of community food organizations in Toronto rely on chain grocery stores as a main source of food supply.

**Figure 6: Where do you get food? (Check all that apply)**



Interviewees think that the supermarkets are more affordable options than wholesale distributors. Supermarkets are also convenient when purchasing small amounts of food and specialty food. But a majority of interviewed organizations do not have their own transportation means; staff have to travel to nearby supermarkets either by foot, taxi or TTC; they can only purchase the amount that they can carry back to their organizations (some interviewees report that they have to do food shopping more frequently than they desire); and they have to unload, sort out and store purchased items. Some organizations use their vans to travel to wholesale stores that do not have delivery service such as Canadian Wholesale and Costco. While supermarkets may provide affordable products, it is

considerable staff time and related overhead costs, in addition to food costs, that community food organizations have to incur (see also #4 on staff time).

Forty-five percent of the interviewees use wholesale distributors with delivery service. Using wholesale distributors is convenient because food is delivered to their organizations while saving staff time. It also makes accounting easier as invoices are used for transaction. Some organizations are aware that using private wholesalers is expensive, but feel they have no choice but to use them because they do not have staff resource and time for shopping. Despite such convenience, many of interviewees and focus group participants find it challenging to use private wholesalers because they think that they are unable to meet minimum requirements; for example, one distributor's minimum requirement is \$500. Even if they can meet the minimum requirements, they do not have adequate storage space to keep that amount of food.

Combined with the difficulties related to organizational coordination of food procurement, one focus group participant fleshes out a complexity of community food procurement that does not appeal to private wholesale distributors:

*“There’s not a lot of coordination [among our programs] but there are so many meals in so many different locations; it’s very difficult for us to source food cost effectively because we can’t get a wholesaler to drop everything off at one location. Distribution [among programs] is difficult, [because] everything is on different days ... Large distributors don’t bother with small potatoes like us. On Fridays I serve 25 people. Who’s going to deliver food to that?... On the other hand, our main drop-in location has five meals a week so any company would deliver there. But, you know, we have both of those types of demands to manage.”*

Private wholesalers are not able to do multiple drop-offs even if the aggregated food volume is large enough to meet minimum requirements. They are unwilling to sort out and package food items according to different locations and programs. Collective ordering across different sites is cumbersome from the viewpoint of distributors.

Of course, price and convenience are not the only factors that determine choices of community food organizations. Equally important is fresh food (see Figure 5 above). Several interviewees and focus group participants raise their concern about the quality of food of private distributors, because received food is often packaged, prepared, and/or frozen (that may even include hidden ingredients). Because one shelter wanted to prioritize fresh and healthy food, they decided to shift from using a wholesaler to using their own van to access a wholesale store that sells fresh produce.

A further barrier is little transparency of private wholesalers. Most interviewees suggest that they have limited time, resources and knowledge to look for alternatives in the face of increasing programming and administrative tasks. With few exceptions, most wholesalers do not disclose their food prices online, unless customers set up an account. This makes it difficult to compare prices with other wholesalers. One interviewee speaks to a challenge that reflects an issue of information asymmetry:

*“I find it difficult to figure out how to find what the best deal is... You have to have a sales representative [to use a wholesaler]... We were going to change to [another wholesaler] but [a sales representative] wasn’t giving us quotes [to compare with other wholesalers]. She said ‘if you order this much then you will get this much discount. We give different discounts depending on the month’ and she is going to say one thing then I’ll go with her and then the prices will increase. So I’m thinking I will just stay status quo.”*

Taken together, the big picture that emerges from all these accounts is that community food procurement has to rely on a food distribution system that is largely controlled by mainstream and market-based organizations (Carter-Whiney, 2008). Market-based food options are not necessarily designed to meet the needs of community food organizations.

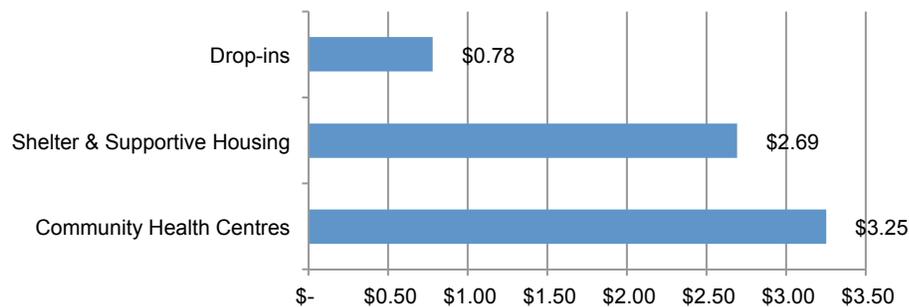
Such a symptomatic issue is “minimum requirements” that requires close attention here. Interviewees and focus group discussions reveal that many of community food organizations tend to assume that

they are unable to meet high minimum requirements for delivery. But high minimum requirements are not a standard for all food distributors. In fact, some distribution practices refute such an assumption. There is a local private distributor in Toronto who does not charge minimum requirements. In the case of FoodShare’s wholesale fresh food distribution model (see more details on p. 10-11), a minimum requirement can be as low as \$50. Furthermore, unlike some private distributors, the FoodShare model is transparent: all customers get a full list of items with prices, and they can choose the amount by a full case or half case. What these examples indicate is that it is possible to envision alternative food distribution solutions that can accommodate needs of community food organizations.

**6. Community food budgets: A potential constrained by a lack of policy coordination**

Figure 7 below shows average meal costs per a plate/person by sub-sector. It should be noted that the difference is not to suggest that less cost per meal is better, but to indicate the difference in costs is attributed to different approaches and mandates for food provision<sup>5</sup>.

**Figure 7: Average meal cost per plate per person (excluding staff and overhead costs)<sup>6</sup>**



The drop-in sector spends far less than others in order to serve a larger number of members (e.g. from 1,500 to 3,000 meals per week), conforming to a common understanding that drop-in programs have to do so much for so little. This lower cost may be due to less financial resources for food purchasing, which requires them to depend on food donations. There is a wide gap in costs per plate/person among CHC programs, as CHC interviewees suggest that some programs have more budgets for purchasing while others have next to none. The average cost per meal for community health centres is the highest, followed by residential services. This overall pattern in West Central neighbourhoods conforms to the citywide study (Miller, 2013b), though the average cost for drop-ins is almost half of the citywide average cost: \$1.43.

While limited budgets are a challenge, it should be noted that the community food sector also possess significant purchasing capacity. Toronto Public Health’s Food Strategy research team (Miller, 2013b) estimates that the total sector purchasing capacity amounts to approximately \$29 million<sup>7</sup>, a large portion of which is currently leaking from the non-profit sector to conventional private food services. In addition, the non-profit sector generally operates through advance planning with an annual budget and stable cash flows to each program, which allows for broader planning and coordination around food (Miller, 2013a). This potential, however, seems difficult to be seized because of the following funding circumstances.

One common challenge across different sub-sectors is that while food costs and needs have grown sharply, program budgets – let alone food budgets – have stayed relatively the same or been cut.

<sup>5</sup> Average meal cost is calculated based on the staff survey and interview data. First, one respondent reported zero cost (use all donated food), which was excluded from the calculation to avoid data skew. Second, the sample size is smaller than the Miller’s citywide study (2013b), there is a disparity in data between two.

<sup>6</sup> Meal costs only reflected costs of purchased foods by organizations. Depending on organizations, how to calculate meal costs vary. This raises a question what should be a “real” cost of community meals. Other costs - staff costs, overhead costs, food donations, food items distributed through Creating Health Plus (they are in fact purchased) – may need to be included.

<sup>7</sup> This figure is estimated based on food expenditure data from 17% sample of 355 community food organizations. TPH’s Food Strategy team reached approximately 27% sample (95) of 355 organizations in Toronto. In order to estimate food purchasing capacity, the study excluded some agencies charge fees for meals. This estimate does not also include large institutions (e.g. hospitals), student nutrition programs, and Meals on Wheels programs.

Statistics Canada (2013) that reports food prices in Canada increased by 19% between 2007 and 2012, in contrast with 10.7% for all others excluding food; its annualized rate of food price increase becomes 3.5%. The problem identified by the interviewees is that the food inflation rates are not necessarily factored into organizations' budgets and public grants. The continued increase in food costs without adjusted growth in food budgets also poses a challenge to make food procurement practices sustainable, as one interviewee suggests: "that's a challenge – sourcing out sustainable places that are going to be able to accommodate what I am looking for but at prices that I can sustain my budget with."

Furthermore, several interviewees identify a gap between policy and practice, when it comes to "social determinants of health" that recognize food as a key component (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). They suggest that funding often fail to reflect such recognition. Moreover, two interviewees point out a challenge that food costs cannot be claimed as "food costs" in grant reports, even if they provide food as part of health related programs; they are not always regarded as acceptable expenses. It is crucial to use food to demonstrate healthy cooking skills and health benefits of nutritious food. But because funding does not have food lines, staff have to scratch food budgets from overall project budgets.

Moreover, interviews and focus groups also indicate that accountability requirements are increasingly occupying a large portion of staff time; those requirements and evaluation indicators are not compatible with the role of food in programs (health and social benefits) but focus on outcome indicators of medical and health service delivery. These challenges related to funding may be understood as a resulting effect of the shift from the core-funding model to the project-funding model in the non-profit community sector. In the project-funding model where funders contract out service delivery work, funders tend to have a greater influence on determining what constitutes an acceptable expenditure (Scott, 2003).

Some organizations such as drop-ins and shelter services may be able to have budget lines for food. But their food costs are not covered fully by grants, and thus these organizations have to fundraise to fill the shortfall. They also rely on local food donations, but these can be terminated suddenly. One interviewee comments that the sudden loss of coffee donation from a local business added unexpected significant pressure on their food budget. Also, one interviewee describes food cost as a "soft" cost. This means that some agencies submit budgets that include food expenses; yet when budgets are pressured, the food line is often one of the first to be reduced, resulting in more reliance on food donation and less capacity for food purchasing.

As such, the issues in community food budgets outlined above can be understood as a local and organizational manifestation of lack of concerted food policy that cuts across different departments – agriculture, environment, housing, health and social policy – that concern food (MacRae, 1999 cited in Levkoe, 2011). As one interviewee argues, because food touches every aspect, no one wants to claim a responsibility.

## **7. Between the need for healthy food and the members' preference**

*"We are working with people who probably have the most chronic health issues like hypertension and diabetes, and people who are super stressed-out and living on really terrible diets. Because they don't have money, they are dependent on programs such as drop-ins and shelters. The responsibility for us to provide the most nutritious snacks and meals is critical; I think people's health depends on it. I don't think [people] make a link between food and health. It's huge. It ends up spending all that money after people get all sick when you can just do a lot of prevention... We could be doing so much more, but [our capacity] is limited [due to] funding ... storage capacity...and staffing [for food procurement and preparation]."*

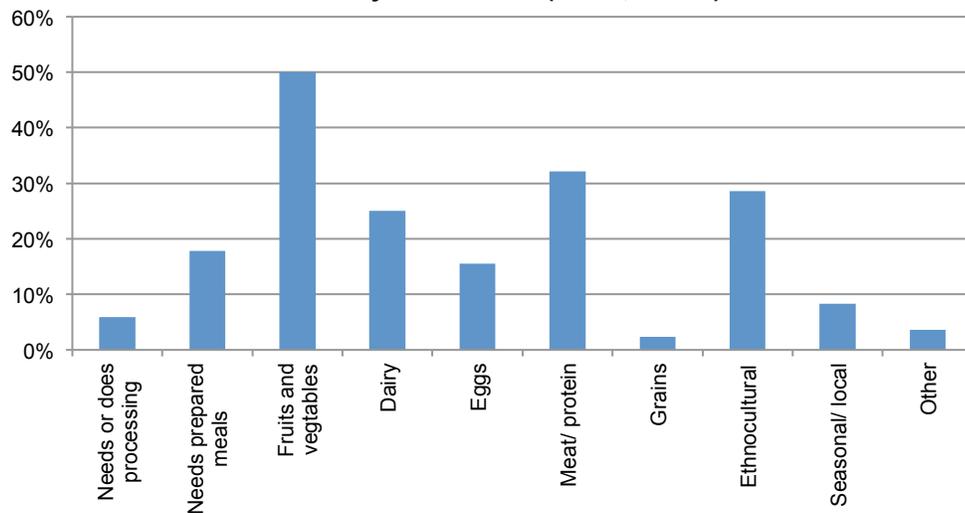
The above quote from an interview reflects the increasing recognition among a majority of interviewees about the role of food in promoting members' health. The quote also signals their day-to-day challenges to meet their members' health needs. This is a dilemma that is the central concern of this section.

Through their day-to-day frontline work, interviewees and focus group participants alike observe inter-related structural barriers that keep healthy food from flowing to low-income and marginalized populations. Many of their members are on social assistance programs that have proven to be inadequate in supporting their choices and access to healthy food (e.g. Stapleton and Cook, 2010; City of Toronto, 2013). They also point out that many of their members do not have essential cooking skills and food knowledge to prepare healthy meals on their own. This is particularly true for people who have spent a long time in emergency systems and inadequate housing that does not have sufficient kitchen facilities (e.g. stove and fridge); they get deskilled as they stop cooking for themselves. Furthermore, their individual capacities and incentives to prioritize healthy eating are highly constrained during their process of recovery from various life challenges.

It is from such an understanding of complex systemic challenges of food insecurity that community food organizations are recognizing their crucial role in contributing to providing healthy food for low-income people, marginalized groups, and vulnerable populations with mental health and addiction challenges. This emphasis stems from commitments to the idea of social determinants of health, to positive effects on people’s recovery, and to the provision of essential nutritious values for people facing economic and food insecurity on a daily basis.

Such motivation is reflected in their healthy food need demonstrated from interviews and surveys: many respondents answer that fresh produce and protein items are the top priority items that they would like to purchase more, where resources allowed. This corresponds to the findings of Toronto Public Health’s Food Strategy team (Miller, 2013b), as shown in Figure 8 below.

**Figure 8: Food needs in the community food sector (Miller, 2013b)**



Nevertheless, a majority of interviewees find it difficult to translate such recognition into capacities to adhere to healthy food provision due to inadequate funding and organizational constraints. Among many challenges, the most difficult and unique challenge faced by many community food organizations is a dilemma in providing healthy food in the community meal setting. As described above, staff would like to encourage healthy eating among members. And yet, healthy food is not always the most popular option among members. Instead, they tend to prefer comfort food and fast food meals that they are more familiar with. Difficult life circumstances – inadequate financial resources (food insecurity), limited food skills, and mental health and addiction challenges – may have prompted them to develop a propensity for eating food high in fat, sugar and salt. They seem not inclined to try various vegetables and fruits that they do not get used to eating or prioritizing, according to several interviewees.

How this dilemma is addressed reflects different organizational cultures. There is a spectrum of organizational approaches. On one side of the spectrum, organizations make it a consistent priority and commitment to provide healthy food. Organizations on this end believe that healthy food is important to support their recovery from mental and physical health issues, addiction, diabetes and

other health related issues. This emphasis thus informs their food procurement as well. On the other end of the spectrum, there are organizations that emphasize the preferences and autonomy of members. While these organizations recognize the importance of healthy food and create opportunities to introduce healthy food, they prefer not to impose their choice on them. In the middle of the spectrum, there are organizations that try to balance out member satisfaction and healthy food promotion.

Regardless of such different emphases, community food organizations work to create opportunities that encourage their members to adopt healthy eating. But *how* to engage members and clients effectively in healthy eating and support their internal change is a vexing question. There is no one-size-fit-all solution for promoting healthy food. One approach that works in one context – such as engaging members in community garden activities as experiential learning – may not be as effective in another context.

For example, one interviewee suggests one effective way to introduce healthy food: to mix nutritious ingredients with popular food items such as meat. This approach, in the interviewee's account, makes healthy meals look familiar to members, and thus remove unnecessary barriers induced by unfamiliarity. This practice also offers a lesson: "healthy" food does not need to conflict with good taste; similarly, "comfort" food can be made healthy. On the other hand, the other interviewee provides another account on this approach: when healthy meals are cooked *for* members, they eat them, but when it comes to their own decisions on what they want to eat, they tend not to choose vegetables. This analysis calls for more capacity-building approaches.

In addition, the residential setting – shelter services and supportive housing programs – is more suitable to build relationships with residents, provide ongoing education, and engage them in cooking and community gardening. Supportive housing organizations like the House of Compassion (see Good Practice below) use approaches that include menu planning, food procurement and preparation to promote healthy food. Yet these extensive engagement approaches may be difficult for a drop-in setting where program staff have to deal with a large number of people in a fast-paced environment.

### ***Good Practice 3: Member engagement for healthy eating***

The House of Compassion (HOC) is a high support housing project for 21 residents with mental health and addiction challenges. Like many community food organizations, it was not easy for them to promote meaningful resident engagement in healthy eating largely because of limited staff time and resources. In early 2013, however, HOC decided to hire a dedicated food coordinator.

What is unique about this position is that the position title reflects HOC's approach to healthy eating and resident engagement; the title is not a chef, but a kitchen facilitator whose role is not just to cook, but also, as a peer, to promote healthy eating with residents, and to make the kitchen space for residents. There was a sense that the kitchen did not belong to residents, but primarily to prepare meals. It has been less than a year since the kitchen facilitator came in, but things have started to change dramatically in the staff's eyes. Internal division of responsibilities and cooperation has allowed program staff to focus their time more on their job duties (e.g. counseling and medication support), while the kitchen facilitator can focus more on healthy meal preparation and resident engagement.

It is the integration of healthy food education and engagement into residents' everyday life that HOC believes is crucial to build relationships with residents and promote their personal changes. Thanks to the dedicated role, HOC now conducts a weekly meeting where the kitchen coordinator plans a menu with residents. Food purchasing also offers an opportunity for the kitchen facilitator to take residents shopping to nearby supermarkets and farmers' market to introduce a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables. In addition, the design of their kitchen space helps further promotion of seamless resident engagement. Because the kitchen with an island is the centre of the house as a "common space" for residents, residents naturally gravitate to the kitchen. Then, the kitchen facilitator promotes informal conversations with residents, and tries to integrate healthy food education into such day-to-day conversations. It is not a formal meeting but an informal learning opportunity that seems to be crucial.

Creating a welcoming atmosphere in the kitchen is also important, as kitchen spaces for community meal programs are sometimes so busy and complex that people do not want to come in to the kitchen.

## **8. Beyond hunger response: Food as a catalyst for rebuilding local economies**

This research unearthed innovative community practices that move past an emergency meal response. These community food practices often integrate community capacity building, skills development and employment opportunities into programs and services. There are emerging capacities in generating economic opportunities for low-income and marginalized populations.

A few interviewees report that their organizations take a holistic approach to programming and service delivery in which food plays a key role. For multi-service organizations like the Stop Community Food Centre and Yonge Street Mission, emergency food programs such as food banks and drop-in meal programs are situated as “a gateway” to other services and programs, an opportunity through which they build relationships with their members, identify their needs, and introduce them to other community programs and skills development opportunities provided at their organizations.

In addition, approximately 60% of the interviewees combine their meal provision with food education, skills development and training opportunities. For example, seven interviewees – 22% – use community garden activities to introduce their participants to healthy eating and skills development opportunities. For them, community garden activities are crucial to provide outside social activities, to promote healthy eating, and to give them control over access to healthy food.

For example, Fred Victor, a multi-service agency in East End downtown, links their drop-in program participants with other community activities involved with food. Drop-in participants are encouraged to take part in community garden activities. They grow herbs, and bring them back to drop-in snack program to serve herb tea, and encourage other drop-in participants to try it. Through the art program, drop-in participants create calendars and postcards that feature food they have grown from community gardens to express their ideas and relationships with food. These activities have nurtured peer leadership among program participants who have also taken a lead in wider member engagement in healthy eating.

For transitional programs, Eva’s Initiatives – a shelter that runs three sites across the city – sees it as crucial to help develop healthy food knowledge and cooking skills. The organization emphasizes food skill development opportunities because they are essential life skills that their youth residents need to make a smooth transition to healthy living after they move out of the emergency system. They host a weekly workshop for youth to learn cooking skills from their chef and cook for other youth as well as staff in a communal dining format. Currently they are developing a cookbook that uses food bank items only to cook healthy meals, a book that youth can take with them when they move out.

Another emerging recognition is – as one interviewee suggests – from nutrition to employment in community food programs. Inadequate income is a crucial attribute to food insecurity. Without denying the importance of social policy reforms, there is an increasing interest in harnessing community food programs to generate economic opportunities to members. In fact, six community food programs (about one fifth) within West Central Toronto – excluding two food-based social enterprises – provide some form of paid opportunities for members.

The most common approach is to create member employment opportunities in the kitchen such as cooking assistants and dishwashers. For example, Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre (PARC) has developed a drop-in meal program anchored in extensive member employment and volunteer engagement. This is an effective way to provide culinary skills development and work experience in a supportive environment. Recently, PARC is partnering with the West End Food Co-op for the Co-op Cred program<sup>8</sup> to generate more economic opportunities for members while increasing access to healthy food.

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<sup>8</sup> The Co-op Cred program is an alternative community currency program that facilitates access to the health benefits of healthy food as well as supportive work experience opportunities for low-income and marginalized groups.

In addition, a few organizations are expanding their physical and organizational capacity in food-based local economic development. The Christie Ossington Neighbourhood Centre has recently develop a food-based social enterprise cafe, LOFT Kitchen, that operates out of the LOFT Youth Centre for Social Enterprise and Innovation. Some organizations are renovating their commercial kitchen spaces to increase food production capacity and to use an enterprise incubation space by leveraging their expertise and experience in serving diverse communities. In addition, as community food programs are supported by a number of member volunteers, one interviewee suggests creating a certificate program through which their skill development and experience are recognized by local food businesses.

It should be noted that to integrate community economic development approach into community food programs is not a silver bullet. Both member employment and social enterprise models require considerable resource and organizational commitments to provide training, mentoring, and on-site supervision. Moreover, in order to address food safety and liability concerns, it is crucial to link member employees and volunteers with available training and food handling certificate programs<sup>9</sup>. A further issue is a lack of sustainable funding. One interviewee stresses that it is a lack of resources, and not a lack of ideas that impedes creative community solutions.

All of these examples demonstrate already existing strong assets and capacities around food-based community economic development within the sector. So what's community food flow got to do with these? First, these creative community food practices may not be the most "efficient" from the food procurement perspective, but they are effective in promoting community development, engagement and employment opportunities. Many factors matter to community agencies. Second, as presented so far, the current community food distribution and procurement practices tend to consume considerable staff energies and resources that could have been reinvested into program planning and capacity building. By removing such barriers, a streamlined community food flow thus can enhance the program effectiveness and enable the strategic use of resources for community change.

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<sup>9</sup> Toronto Drop-In Network provides financial support for member agencies in accessing food handling certificate program available from Toronto Public Health. Previously, TDIN also organized food certificate training programs with Daily Bread Food Bank. DBFB has a 16 week Food Services Training Program that provide a weekly 24 hour-paid training and work experience opportunities and up to 10-12 hour job readiness skills development component for people facing barrier to entering the workforce. Second Harvest also has the Harvest Kitchens program that provides food service training in partnership with local partners.

## IV. Opportunities: Organization, Neighbourhood and System Solutions

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The research project identifies the following 10 opportunities from organizational capacity building through neighbourhood-level collaboration to system-level actions.

### *Organizational Capacity Building*

1. Initiate organizational food planning
2. Develop a profile of food distributors
3. Start a community chef exchange program

### *Neighbourhood-level Planning and Collaboration*

4. Neighbourhood food networks as a coordinating mechanism
5. Establish a community food hub as a central spot for community food flow
6. Bring back a community-based food processing capacities
7. Build a strategic connection with farmers to access surplus and grade B produce

### *System and Sector-level Actions*

8. Online portal for information exchange, knowledge sharing, and streamlined orders
9. Policy advocacy for a sustainable and equitable local food system
10. Advocate for a dedicated non-profit community food distributor

## Organizational Capacity Building

### 1. Initiate organizational food planning

One key organizational challenge is limited organizational planning and coordination of food procurement. When community food organizations conduct strategic planning and organizational evaluation, the role of food in programs and services are seldom taken into consideration. Many of them do not have an organizational philosophy behind food, which often influences how food is procured at a program level. Coupled with inadequate funding, limited organizational food planning tends to result in draining staff capacity and resources. What is at stake is not only efficient access to food but also organizational resource and its management.

It is important for community food organizations to initiate organizational food planning to discuss the role of food in their service delivery and programs, and embed such recognition in organizational resource allocation, inter-program coordination, and program planning. This is not to suggest that community organizations become food-oriented organizations, but to propose that community food organizations need to recognize the potential and power of food in community building, member engagement, and local economic development, all of which constitutes comprehensive approaches to addressing complex food insecurity issues. The followings are a list of action items that community food organizations can take:

- Form a (inter-program) food committee that consists of key food-related program coordinators and managers. This committee can facilitate organizational food planning, organize regular inter-program meetings, and share resources for food procurement.
- Discuss whether coordinating organizational food procurement is ideal and possible by consulting Good Practice 2 in this report.
- Develop an organizational food philosophy and policy that can inform food procurement and programming at the program level.
- Create an organizational procurement guideline. A guideline should reflect healthy eating principles and incentivize the use of food-based social enterprise or in-house catering for staff/board meetings.
- Provide staff with training and workshop on healthy eating and food security, just as organizations provide staff-wide trainings such as an anti-oppression workshop<sup>10</sup>.
- Organizational food planning may need to address a question of what is a unique role of their organization from the neighbourhood perspective (See #4 below).

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<sup>10</sup> Currently no staff training manual or module on food security is readily available.

## **2. Develop a profile of food distributors with price comparison**

In the absence of viable non-profit community food distribution solutions, community food organizations have few options other than to rely on market-based food distribution services. Market-based food distributors are not always ideal to meet unique needs of community organizations. In addition, their practices – pricing (including percentages of marked-up costs), available items, and minimum requirement for delivery – are diverse, but information is dispersed. A further challenge is that wholesale distributors tend not to disclose their prices online, unless customers set up an account, while community food organizations have limited time and resource to compare prices and pros/cons of private solutions.

In order to break such information asymmetry, the CFF project proposes the development of a profile of existing food distributors with price comparison. The profile includes basic information of distributors and price comparison of 20-30 key items. This document will be made available as a reference document for community food organizations to help their better choices of existing distributors. The Community Food Flow research team and Toronto Public Health's Food Strategy team collaboratively will take a lead in creating the profile. The collaborative team will collect information from existing distributors while also asking for support from community food organizations to share their food-related invoices.

## **3. Start a community chef exchange program**

Cooking for community food programs requires a different set of skills and expertise; it poses unique constraints such as limited infrastructures and financial resources to procure food; it demands capacity and creativity to integrate food purchasing and food donation into meal planning; and most importantly, as several interviewees and focus group participants address, it calls for knowledge and capacities in community development and food security in addition to healthy cooking skills. Currently, however, capacity building and training for kitchen staff is largely provided on an individual organizational basis. There is also a constant need for kitchen staff training, because of high turnover rates of kitchen staff, member employees, and volunteers.

This proposed community chef exchange program is to provide training, skills development workshops, and job shadowing opportunities for community food program staff (particularly for kitchen staff and volunteers). This is an opportunity for knowledge and skill exchange such as sharing best healthy meal receipts. What differentiates this proposed program from existing training programs lies in its integrated approach. The program would be held regularly throughout the year, and hosted by community food organization partners on a rotating basis. This allows participants to not only acquire skills and knowledge situated in a similar environment and constraints, but also how other organizations' kitchens function. These dynamics are usually difficult to pass on to others in a written format. This program can be organized based on programs such as drop-ins, residential services, community kitchens and others. It would be the first step to address the uneven development of capacity and knowledge among community food organizations.

## **Neighbourhood-Level Planning and Collaboration**

### **4. Neighbourhood food networks as a coordinating mechanism**

Interviewees and focus group participants express their readiness and willingness for networking, knowledge exchange and inter-organization coordination. A neighbourhood is a strategic scale to undertake such collaborative community food planning initiatives that cut across different sectors and organizations. In Toronto, there has been a gradual growth of neighbourhood food networks in various neighbourhoods, ones that are a group of community agencies, local businesses, volunteers, and public sector actors. Various food networks already exist, such as Parkdale Food Network, Regent Park Food Partnership, Lawrence Height Inter-Organization Network's Food Justice Group and many others<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> See also Food Forward website for a list of Toronto's neighbourhood food networks: <http://pushfoodforward.com/foodforwardproject>

Neighbourhood food networks are important as a coordinating mechanism for collaborative initiatives, including some of key opportunities identified in this project. Moreover, neighbourhood food networks can lead community-based food planning and community food asset mapping initiatives. These collaborative exercises help identify and make visible unique roles, resources, and capacities of different organizations; and connect them with those seeking support of specific expertise (e.g. linking CHCs with programs that seek for dietitian's input on healthy menu planning). These neighbourhood-based concerted efforts build readiness and capacity to explore collaborative solutions. For example, this Community Food Flow project has capitalized on pre-existing relationships cultivated through the Parkdale Food Network.

There are two challenges regarding the sustainability of neighbourhood food networks, based on the experience of the Parkdale Food Network. First, neighbourhood food networks tend to rely on in-kind support from participating organizations. This may be a similar challenge to sector-based networks. It is difficult to devote staff time and resource fully to the work of neighbourhood food networks in the face of other work priorities that demand direct accountability to managers and funders alike. How to enable organizational support for network activities is important.

Second, it is difficult to secure sustainable funding for a network coordinator position. For example, PARC received a one-year funding from Metcalf Foundation to hire a coordinator for facilitating Parkdale Food Network and coordinating joint projects. But currently there is no funding secured to maintain a PFN coordinator position. Toronto can learn from the Vancouver's Neighbourhood Food Network movement. The movement has been grassroots by nature but has been supported by the City of Vancouver and other public institutions such as Vancouver Coastal Health in terms of facilitation and funding (Carr & Fodor, 2012). Another way for funding a position may be to explore a possibility of joint-funding model.

#### **Further Resources**

- Carr, P. &, Fodor, Z. (2012). Sustainability on the table: A way forward for Vancouver's neighbourhood food networks. Retrieved from <http://www.smartfund.ca/docs/sustainability.pdf>

### **5. Establish a community food hub as a central spot for community food flow**

A majority of community food organizations do not have adequate storage spaces, which limits their procurement capacity. For some organizations, this results in unnecessarily higher costs because they can only purchase small quantities. Their physical infrastructures are not necessarily designed to accommodate a large amount of food at one time.

While community food hubs in practice take different forms depending on community needs, the proposed community food hub idea emphasizes a physical community infrastructure shared by community food organizations, a space that can function as a shared storage space. It can also serve as a locally centralized drop-off and pick-up point for food donation. It may also facilitate neighbourhood-based collaborative purchasing. From the distribution point of view, a community food hub can mitigate pressures on staffing and warehouse capacity. In addition, a community food hub can house shared facilities such as a commercial kitchen and programing spaces (see #6 below on community processing that can be housed in the hub). As such, a community food hub is a key community infrastructure that promotes an integrated approach to food flows.

Developing such a physical space requires large upfront capital investment and ongoing maintenance costs. It demands extensive community consultations to identify needs and demands, as well as a financial feasibility study. Those inner-suburban neighbourhoods who have access to United Way's community hubs may be able to take advantage of existing hub spaces to create some shared storages. In Parkdale, the idea of building a community food hub has been proposed at the Parkdale Food Network table. As a pilot, there is a possibility of starting a small-scale community freezer project. PARC's building (1499 Queen St West) has a refrigerated space in the basement that can be used for a shared storage space. While developing a basic governance structure, staff/volunteer arrangement, and procedures, it is necessary to conduct site identification assessment in Parkdale (e.g. local churches and vacant storefronts). This activity can be linked to ongoing efforts of Parkdale's Neighbourhood Land Trust to secure an affordable space.

### Further Resources:

- Turnbull, R., Ferguson, M., & Lang, C. (2013). The Perth County Regional food hub feasibility study. Retrieved from [http://www.perthcounty.ca/fileBin/library/economic\\_development/pdfs/FoodHubStudy-2013.pdf](http://www.perthcounty.ca/fileBin/library/economic_development/pdfs/FoodHubStudy-2013.pdf)

## 6. Bring back community-based food processing capacities

Community food organizations face inconsistent access to nutritious and fresh produce throughout the year, depending on a growing season. They may receive a larger amount of donations of seasonal produce during the growing season; they can also access seasonal produce at more affordable rates. Is it possible to make the best use of fresh food abundance in one season? One way to tap into this opportunity is to build a community-based food processing and preserving capacities: community cannery.

There is a variation in community food processing models from producer-oriented models to community-building models to business incubation models (see Sandwell (2011) for more details). This project emphasizes one that helps stabilize community food organizations' access to nutritious food throughout the year. The community food processing capacity is essential to extend the life of vegetables and fruits and to make them available throughout the year. For example, when one drop-in program has more food produce donations than they can use, excess donated items can be preserved and used after the season. Some items can be processed into different forms (e.g. apples into an apple sauce). This keeps donated produce from going to waste and also mitigates a seasonal and week-to-week variability in food donation (Sandwell, 2011).

Community-based food processing has a potential for creating more member employment and training opportunities. In addition, community-based food processing may offer a solution to the need for fresh, healthy juice from some community food organizations. A few interviewees from drop-in programs mention that fresh juice is a popular healthy choice among members but they find it difficult to serve it every day, because it is relatively expensive. In the past, PARC, with a range of partners proposed a community juicing project idea (did not get funded). The "Fountain of Life" pilot project was to create fresh juice for drop-in members to address the lack of several key nutrients. It may be possible to start a community juicing project when capacity is ready.

Food processing skills are disappearing from local communities (e.g. Carter-Whitney & Miller, 2010). In the West Central neighbourhoods, the West End Food Co-op (WEFC) has a community-based processing capacity that can be capitalized on. Previously, the WEFC ran a successful pilot community cannery project with PARC, *The Preserving Parkdale* project. The project also included skills development opportunities for PARC kitchen members. A current challenge facing the WEFC is staffing and storage space, yet there is a potential of piloting small scale community cannery project by connecting with the PARC Co-op Cred program.

### Further Resources

- Sandwell, K. (2011). All you can: Community cannery toolkit v1.0. West End Food Co-op. Retrieved from <http://web.uvic.ca/~ccgarden/wp-content/uploads/2008/01/Community-Cannery.pdf>
- About the West End Food Co-op's cannery: <http://westendfood.coop/cannery>

## 7. Build a strategic connection with farmers to access surplus and grade B produce

While the need for fresh and healthy food from community food organizations is increasing, a large amount of food surplus and grade B produce (items that are not the format, size, etc. required by retail guidelines) are being thrown out. Some interviewees see these "wastes" as opportunities to increase access to fresh food. There is a potential of building relationships with farmers who are willing to supply their surplus and grade B produce for donation and/or at reduced costs. Some community food organizations have developed relationships with farmers who bring the donation of their food surplus, but these practices are on an individual organization basis. This model could be extended to a neighbourhood-based solution.

To explore this idea, PARC is interested in working with FarmStart. FarmStart is an organization that supports new farmers, particularly young people from non-farm backgrounds and second career farmers, to develop locally based, ecologically sound and economically viable agricultural enterprises. FarmStart provides access to farmlands to these new farmers, one of which is McVean farm in Brampton. The McVean farmers currently come once a week to Sorauren Farmers' Market in Parkdale. They have surplus when they return from markets with product unsold. Although it remains to be seen how much volume of surplus they have and what logistical procedures are necessary, some arrangement can be made to access surplus. PARC is hoping to start a pilot project to see the possibility of scaling up this solution to the neighbourhood-level.

## **System and Sector-level Actions**

### **8. Online portal for information exchange, knowledge sharing, and streamlined orders**

Some interviewees find it difficult to make it to face-to-face networking and information exchange meetings because of lack of time and resource. In addition, there is no effective communication mechanism in place that allows community food organizations to easily exchange information with other organizations. For example, several interviewees describe situations when they receive excess food donation, there is no easy way to inform other organizations about opportunities for sharing and/or barter. There is the demonstrated need for a centralized information sharing platform for community food organizations.

The idea of creating an online portal allows community food program staff to post information including excess food donation or sales information. This portal can also share best healthy food receipts that community food organizations have tried before. Such information is crucial for organizations facing similar challenges in limited access to healthy ingredients and particular member demographics. Moreover, the portal is proposed to enable them to browse food items, find best prices from various wholesalers and place an order (like Amazon). Currently, various stakeholders are exploring ways to move forward this idea.

### **9. Policy advocacy for a sustainable and equitable local food system**

As previous research demonstrate (e.g. Stapleton & Cook, 2010; Tarasuk & Dachner 2009), food insecurity lies largely in people's inability to purchase (nutritious) food: inadequate income. It is essential to advocate for social policy reforms, particularly for increasing social assistance rates to a level that ensures access to healthy food.

But food insecurity also stems from issues of the two-tier food system such as unequal access to affordable healthy food but abundance of cheap, processed food (Scharf, Levkoe, & Saul, 2010). What's needed, then, in conjunction with social policy reforms is government concerted efforts to build a sustainable and equitable food system. At the federal level, community groups are leading advocacy efforts for developing a national food policy such as Food Secure Canada's *People's Food Policy for Canada*. At the provincial level, the development of Ontario Food and Nutrition Strategy has been initiated by the Ontario Collaborative Group on Healthy Eating and Physical Activity.

A further challenge that derives from the absence of government concerted food strategies is exemplified in inadequate community food budgets for purchasing healthy food. Food is widely recognized as a component of social determinants of health (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010), but funders fail to recognize the role of healthy food in community programs that help prevent and mitigate chronic health issues among members. Funders should factor health benefits of food provision into their funding allocation from the perspective of social determinants of health. Such funding practice can be coupled with policy efforts to increase Ontario's local food consumption.

In addition, community food organizations are beginning to develop their capacities in generating economic opportunities to low-income and marginalized populations by leveraging their food programs. But a challenge is lack of sustainable funding opportunities to sustain and boost such community economic development initiatives. There are some short-term funding opportunities

available to hire people on social assistance programs. Some interviewees note that while they are vital, the short duration of funding does not match the project need and time to develop strong capacity. To respond to such growing interests and need, the City should develop a community economic development strategy that ensures sustainable funding. In the strategy, the City can include community benefit agreements (or as a part of the City's food procurement framework) to incentivize using food-based social enterprise and community economic development solutions.

#### **Further Resources**

- Food Secure Canada (2011). Resetting the table: A people's food policy for Canada. Retrieved from <http://foodsecurecanada.org/sites/foodsecurecanada.org/files/FSC-resetting2012-8half11-lowres-EN.pdf>

#### **10. Advocate for a dedicated non-profit community food distributor**

The research identifies a demonstrated need for dedicated non-profit community food distributors. In fact, the community food sector possesses a considerable food purchasing capacity that warrants such solutions. By estimates, the community food sector's total food purchasing capacity amounts to approximately \$29 million a year (Miller, 2013b). Further, the non-profit sector generally operates through advance planning with an annual budget and stable cash flows to each program, which allows for broader planning and coordination around food (Miller, 2013a). Community food organizations, therefore, should advocate for a dedicated non-profit community distributor that can meet unique needs of the community food organizations.

There are expressed interests from interviewees and focus group participants to source more healthy food options and willingness to shift their current purchasing to support non-profit based food distribution solutions. Such is reminiscent of a "plugging-the-leak-approach" to local economic development (Ward & Lewis, 2002). This approach sees leaks – outflows of money – as potential opportunities for social enterprises. While this approach is developed as a place-based framework for local economies, it prompts a question of how to capture money that is leaving the community food sector and move toward solutions for building a sustainable food (flow) system that further support mutual interdependence and cooperation.

What this community food distributor can look like is extensively discussed in the Toronto Public Health research report (Miller, 2013b). A proposed non-profit distribution solution can be designed to meet unique needs of community food organizations such as: the frequent delivery to mitigate limited storage issues; more transparency of prices; more affordable choices for fresh produce and healthy food; low minimum requirements; online ordering; and so on.

The role of community food organizations in planning, developing and implementing such a community food distributor solution is crucial. As evidenced from Parkdale Food Network's collective food procurement (bulk-buying) initiative and other organizations' experience, it is commitment and buy-in from partners and collaborators that are vital to strengthen and sustain non-profit collaborative solutions.

#### **Further Resources**

- Miller, S. (2013b). Finding food: Community food procurement in the City of Toronto. Toronto: Toronto Public Health.

## V. Conclusion

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How does food get to community organizations that provide food-related programs for people facing food insecurity? The Community Food Flow project explored this question by investigating challenges, assets, and opportunities in community food procurement and distribution in Toronto's West Central neighbourhoods.

Initially, it was expected that improving community food flow would simply require identifying bottlenecks in a movement of food from distributors to community organizations, ones that "clog" efficient flows of food. In this regard, solutions were thought to find measures that would remove such bottlenecks to increase efficiency while cultivating new and improved supply options to increase healthy food flows.

As the research project progressed, however, a far more complex landscape of community food flow emerged; a number of multi-faceted challenges complicate community organizations' access to healthy food. While a limited financial resource has been a primary barrier for many community food organizations to access healthy food, it also mirrors a lack of government's concerted efforts and funding support to address food insecurity. In addition, community food organizations currently have few choices other than to depend on market-based food distribution services that do not necessarily meet unique needs of the community food sector. These challenges are further exacerbated by rarely coordinated food procurement and limited infrastructures at the organizational level. For many organizations, food procurement practices have evolved with limited organizational planning. As a result, food procurement tasks often fall on program staff who face growing administrative burdens and funding accountability requirements.

A picture that emerges from the conjuncture of these challenges is that the current community food distribution and procurement practices tend to drain significant staff energies and organizational resources, ones that could be (re)invested to improve project effectiveness and food insecurity initiatives.

Meanwhile, the CFF project also identified assets and vitalities in the community food sector. Many community food organizations are in a transition, if at different stages, to adopt practices that promote community members' health. Some of them are exploring unique supply options on their own, such as building direct relationships with farmers and local businesses, and accessing the Ontario Food Terminal. In addition, for many of community food organizations, promoting healthy food is important but is not an easy task. And yet, they work to engage members in capacity building and learning opportunities for healthy eating. Furthermore, some of them harness food procurement processes to generate skills development and member employment opportunities by engaging them in meal planning, procurement, and cooking. These trends are not necessarily limited to West Central neighbourhoods, but also correspond to findings of the citywide study by Toronto Public Health's Food Strategy team (Miller, 2013b).

As such, community food flow is embedded in a complex web of member engagement, food-related capacity building, community economic development, and people's efforts to rebuild their lives. Improving community food flow thus cannot be undertaken simply to increasing the efficiency and quantity of (healthy) food supply. On the other hand, the community food sector also has considerable purchasing capacity and a demonstrated need that warrant a dedicated community food distributor solution. It raises a question, how can system-wide and collaborative solutions be developed to enhance access to healthy food, while retaining and strengthening existing assets and vitalities of community food organizations?

How to improve such intricate community food flow is a vexing question. But it surely requires diverse strategies and actions at different scales. The CFF project has identified opportunities from organizational capacity building to neighbourhood-level collaboration to system reforms. The community food sector can benefit from system-level solutions such as a dedicated community food distributor that can strengthen existing expertise and relationships and cultivate new supply options to

access healthy food. But as demonstrated so far, increasing food supply is one aspect of a big picture in community food flow. It is crucial to carry out organizational food planning to streamline food procurement practices, while also promoting community capacity building through knowledge exchange, skill sharing and networking. Strong community base is a critical condition that enables implementing and supporting collaborative solutions.

In addition, the CFF project recommends neighbourhood-based collaborative solutions such as a community food hub, community-based food processing, and a neighbourhood food network. These solutions do not directly increase fresh food supply. But they create community food infrastructures that mediate, complement, and reinforce overall food distribution and procurement practices. They enhance neighbourhood collaborative capacities to address food insecurity challenges at the local level. They also leverage community food flow processes to generate local economic opportunities for low-income and marginalized community members. A neighbourhood level is a scale to build active interdependence and community assets while bridging organizational and system-level actions.

Community food flow is an essential terrain in the community food sector. While reorganizing community food flow alone cannot resolve food insecurity issues, it is a strategic starting point to build solutions toward a more equitable local food system. It is a relational approach – seeing different strategies at different scales in relation to each other – that the CFF project foregrounds to address complex issues of food insecurity and community food flow.

## References

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