

**Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park**

***Stirring the Pot:
Towards a Vision for Real
Change***

***The Food for Thought:
Community Food Plan***

~ ~ ~

***A Comprehensive Report
& Recommendations
on Food Security
in the Kensington / Alexandra Park
Neighbourhood of Toronto***

Draft Copy

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On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park**

Table of Contents

Background	4
Recommended Community Food Plan Models	6
Data Collection Methods	8
The Local Community Context	10
Findings	11
1) Current Food Programming In The Neighbourhood	11
a) Emergency Food Provision.....	11
b) Alternative Food Programs.....	14
2) Impacts of Food Insecurity	
a) Psychological and Social Impacts & the Loss of Choice, Options and Control.....	15
b) Impacts on Nutrition, Diet, & Physical Health & Well Being.....	15
c) Resourcefulness of Community Members.....	17
3) Experiences, Feelings and Perceptions of Local Food Programs	17
4) Other Issues	
a) Food Costs & Access to Neighbourhood Grocery Stores.....	20
b) Access to Culturally Diverse Foods.....	20
c) Promotion of Nutrition & Health.....	21
5) A “Vision for Real Change” in the Community	22
a) Addressing Barriers to Food Security ~ Taking Action on Food & Income Issues	22
b) Active, On-going & Meaningful Involvement of Community Members in Community Food Programs.....	23

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

c) Building Community-capacity Through Partnerships Across Community Agencies.....	24
d) Alternative Approaches to Food Programming.....	24
Conclusion.....	28
References.....	30
Appendix A: Data Collection Methods	
1) <i>Survey Questionnaires</i>	32
2) <i>Focus Group Discussions and In-depth Interviews</i>	
a) Focus Groups & Individual Interviews with Homeless, Shelter and Rooming House Population	32
b) Focus Groups at Parent/Child Drop-in Centre.....	32
c) Focus Group with Food Program Participants and Workers.....	32
3) <i>Assessment of Community Food Resources</i>	33

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~ On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

Background

The Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report is the result of a 9-month community consultation and needs assessment process. Through grant money provided by the City of Toronto Food and Hunger Action Fund, Scadding Court Community Centre (SCCC), in conjunction with a number of community members and community agencies, aimed to develop a comprehensive, coordinated and integrated 3-year Community Food Plan to increase food security and access to food for individuals and families who live, work or use community programs in the Kensington/Alexandra Park area of Toronto.

The Ontario Public Health Association defines a community as having achieved food security when individuals and families, in particular those living on low incomes have:

...enough food to eat that is safe, that they like to eat and that helps them to be healthy. They must be able to get this food in ways that make them feel good about themselves and their families (SCCC, 2003).

As this report will outline, the need for a coordinated and proactive response to hunger, food insecurity and food accessibility in the local Kensington/Alexandra Park community is great. A large number of community members rely partially or almost completely on local meal programs, food banks and related food programming. Despite a great sense of resourcefulness in dealing with hunger and food insecurity, a large number of low-income community members, living on welfare rates, ODSP, or with low paying employment continued to experience hunger on a regular basis. Hunger and food insecurity has a number of destructive and damaging effects on the emotional, social, psychological and physical health and well being of individuals throughout the community. Food insecurity produces stressful and damaging effects on relationships and family life, and reduces the strength and vibrancy of the community as a whole.

In response to the high rate of hunger and food insecurity in the Kensington / Alexandra Park area, community agencies and faith-based groups have developed food programs, consisting primarily of meal programs and food banks, in an attempt to curb the intensity of need that exists. These programs, while effective in meeting some existing needs, have done little to increase food security as a whole. In fact, what has developed in many ways, instead, represents a complex web of services that perpetuate rather than alleviate dependence on charity-model food provision.

In fact, this was one of the most passionate criticisms found across the community. With a focus on short-term relief, there appeared no cohesive “vision for real change,” in relation to hunger and food security. As this report will outline many agencies and current food access programs are working at or beyond capacity, severely constrained by persistent and on-going limitations in funding, resources and staffing. The endless searching for funding, donations and volunteers simply to meet existing community member needs, amounts to a daily struggle that eliminates much possibility for expanding these food program models, let alone developing new alternative forms of food programming.

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

However, the Food for Thought: Community Food Plan has been developed with the aim of beginning the process of change. Made possible through a short-term, one-time City of Toronto Food and Hunger Action Fund Grant initiative, this report provides a means by which to move beyond such constraints, through the development of partnerships and linkages across the community. With the full support and mobilization of community members, the sharing of multiple resources, such as space, equipment, staffing, and knowledge, and most importantly, the provision of sustainable funding aimed at the coordination and implementation of programs geared to change, such a vision can become a reality.

On the basis of this community consultation process, the following six primary Community Food Plan Models of service delivery are recommended, as a means of increasing access to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate foods in ways that are positive, affirming and proactive, for low-income community members. These represent a means of moving forward as a community, in the development of an integrated, holistic and proactive framework. They provide the potential to build community capacity, and individual and community empowerment, through systems that promote local democracy, social inclusion and that greatly reduce dependence on traditional emergency food distribution programs.

Not only will implementation of this Community Food Plan Model create positive, long-term systemic change in this community, but such a model also has the potential to be transferable either in whole or in part across low-income communities throughout the City of Toronto. In line with the City of Toronto's commitment to the implementation of the Toronto Food Charter, the Food for Thought: Community Food Plan invests in food security through an investment in individual and community capacity, and the promotion of long-term community health and well-being.

Recommended Community Food Plan Models

1. Neighbourhood Food Programs Advisory Committee(s)

A neighbourhood food programming advisory committee enables a community approach to be used in the coordination of types, locations and times of programs and enables opportunities for linkages, partnerships and the sharing of resources across community food programs. A neighbourhood-wide advisory committee would be an ideal mechanism with which to develop and implement the Community Food Plan Models outlined below. Such an approach encourages the development of standards of service across the neighbourhood as a whole, and can be used to build accountability to service users, and to explore avenues for increased use of participant volunteers, paid work or Community Economic Development (CED) initiatives. Food access issues and barriers related to cultural needs and dietary restrictions can be addressed, and an increased focus can be given to diversity in programs offered. Individual community food programs can also be supported in developing Advisory Committees, in order to ensure the ongoing input of community members into individual agency programs.

A Neighbourhood Food Programs Advisory Committee must include the active and ongoing participation of a substantial number of community members, comprised of individuals, families and seniors who:

- a) Are currently using local food programs in the neighbourhood
- b) Are homeless, living in shelters or are rooming house residents
- c) Are representative of the composition and diversity of the local neighbourhood based on ethnicity, culture, language, immigration status and/or period of time living in Canada
- d) Includes staff representatives from community programs and agencies throughout the area
- e) Includes key agencies and community partners throughout the City of Toronto (eg. Food Justice Coalition, FoodShare, The Stop Community Food Centre)

2. Neighbourhood Community Kitchen Network

Currently there are, at minimum, 15 public kitchens in this community, most of which are vastly underused. Many have a number of hours each day or week where the kitchens sit empty and unused despite the community's interest in community kitchens and communal cooking as one way to promote food security. Through a coordinated strategy, program funding and funding for capital upgrades to older kitchens, this community could develop a proactive network of community kitchens utilizing a number of different program models of interest to the diverse communities that make up this neighbourhood. Community kitchens can range from staff facilitated, to peer-supported and independent collectives or cooking groups that can access support on an as-needed basis. The *Vancouver Community Kitchen Project*, at www.communitykitchens.ca provides a good prototype from which to develop such a network in this community.

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

3. *Alternative Food Programs*

In the *Findings* section of this report, the development and expansion of many new and innovative approaches to food security and food access programming are presented. Such alternative programs as community kitchens, gardens and dinners, bulk or co-op buying clubs, increased distribution of FoodShare's Good Food Box program, and workshops on nutritious and healthy eating for community members of varying ages were amongst the most popular suggestions received. With so many kitchens in the neighbourhood currently underused, and considerable feedback about the need and benefits of open kitchen facilities for those with limited access to cooking equipment and space, the development of more open kitchen facilities, with increased hours of operation is additionally recommended. Public access to refrigeration, freezing and storage for dried goods would be important aspects of such facilities.

4. *Neighbourhood Coalition on Food & Income Issues*

Working together as a community provides a forum from which to organize to fight for social, political and systemic change related to issues leading to poverty and food insecurity. As outlined in this report, advocacy and organizing on immigration issues, discrimination in employment for newcomers and immigrant populations, low welfare rates and low wage jobs, housing issues and other systemic barriers to income and food security can be best done, where community members join together with their voices heard. Such a coalition would also play a pivotal advocacy role in acquiring sustainable on-going support and funding for the innovative, community-based food programming outlined in this report. As with Recommendation #1, this coalition must be jointly made up of community members and community workers.

5. *Resource Information Materials*

It was clearly evident in this community consultation process, that those with increased access to information on emergency food programs and other resources experienced less hunger and food insecurity despite living on a low income. Community members experienced a greater sense of security if they had up-to-date resource information, on the types, times and days of programs, all of which are generally gathered and passed on currently through word-of-mouth. During the course of this research, many community members provided information on strategies they utilized to save money on food, and many more were interested in the ideas that others shared. Encapsulating these within information sheets, as well as a number of additional resource ideas of interest to the community are considered further in the *Findings* section.

6. *Skills Training & CED Initiatives*

A number of recommendations, found throughout this report and in the *Findings* section, involve the development of food and cooking skills, food skills training programs that can lead to paid employment, food handling certification and/or entrance into further educational food programming. Opportunities for paid employment and participant volunteer positions within existing meal programs need to also be considered.

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~ On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

Data Collection Methods

In total, this community consultation and needs assessment process involved the formal participation of over 220 community members and community agency workers. Food as an issue brought together community members across diverse ages, cultures, nationalities and socioeconomic situations. Considerable input has been gathered from community members living with experiences of hunger and food insecurity, as well as others concerned about the increasing hunger in their community. Focus group discussions, survey questionnaires, individual interviews with several community members, and the participation of local food program workers in an assessment of food resources available in the community, allowed participation across a broad sector.

The collection methods used here primarily focused on the generation of detailed qualitative data as an important aspect of learning about community members experiences with hunger and food insecurity, and an essential aspect of guiding the development, restructuring and implementation of future food access programming in the neighbourhood. Qualitative research puts into human terms statistical data measuring hunger and food insecurity, and brings the voices of the community together in the development of a long-term vision for change. The voices of community members that comprise this report are essential to informing and guiding the road ahead.

This community needs assessment, and community consultation process utilized a flexible, transparent and fully disclosed process, which made clear the purpose of this research, and the methodology used in the research process. A community-based approach was used that provided a number of different options for participation by community members. This was felt to be an important means by which to lessen the possibility of excluding community members from giving valuable input.

114 survey questionnaires, available in both English and Chinese, were completed between June and November 2003 at local Parent/Child Drop-In Centres, Community Kitchen, food bank, and special events involving local community members. Additionally, 7 focus groups, held with a total of 64 people, 5 in-depth individual interviews with community members made up the primary methods by which community members participated in the data collection process.

The 7 focus groups were divided into three main areas of focus. Two focus groups, held simultaneously in English and Cantonese with a total of 12 participants, were held with parents and/or grandparents of young children who predominantly live in a low-income housing complex and attend a local Parent/Child Drop-in program. 27 local food program participants and workers participated together in two focus groups, and three additional focus groups, with a total of 25 participants, were held with community members who are homeless or living in rooming houses or shelters.

A higher number of focus groups completed with those living on the streets and in shelters reflects the importance of this group in informing this community consultation process.

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~ **On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park**

It is those who are homeless that are some of the most frequent local meal program users, yet it is this group that is typically least consulted with. Those who are homeless have minimal if any power in the planning, decision-making and implementation process of the programs they must use on an almost daily basis (Brandt-Meyer & Butler, 1999). Secondly, it became apparent from this population's low response to written surveys, that gathering detailed and sensitive information on food insecurity within this population would be better achieved through a more participatory model.

In addition to these data collection methods, 24 in-depth interviews and 10 brief interviews with local food program workers from a total of 18 community agencies enabled the development of a comprehensive framework in which to view current and potential new food programming in the neighbourhood. The geographic boundaries of the agencies included in this assessment of community food resources are as follows:

- North boundary: Scott Mission (just north of College St.)
- South boundary: Harbourfront Community Centre (Lake Ontario)
- West boundary: Sistering & Fort York Food Bank (just west of Hurontario St.)
- East boundary: University Settlement House (just east of McCaul St.)

Finally, additional input was also gathered from a number of food program workers and food justice advocates throughout Toronto, who provided input informally, or as community partners and Community Food Plan Advisory Committee members.

A detailed breakdown of Data Collection Methods can be found in Appendix A of this report.

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~ On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

The Local Community Context

The Kensington/Alexandra Park area, defined for the purposes of this study as the Kensington Market/Spadina Ave. area, and the area primarily bounded by Dundas St. and Queen St., to the south, and Bathurst St., to Spadina Ave. in the east. The report looks at the food access needs of local community members who live, work or use community programs in this area.

This neighbourhood is a highly diverse community made up of a number of different cultures, ethnicities, languages, places of origin, period of time living in Canada and ages. The area has a disproportionately large number of low-income individuals, seniors and families, including a high proportion of single parent/caregiver families, and a large homeless population living in numerous shelters or rooming houses in the area or on neighbourhood streets. There are six shelters and a new transitional shelter opened in January, 2004 in the area, with the combined capacity to provide overnight shelter to 473 men, women, and homeless youth.

The City of Toronto (2002) statistics show that in Ward 20, where this area falls, 42% of families live below the Statistics Canada Low Income Cutoff Range. This measure is used as an indicator of the challenges these families often have trying to meet basic expenses such as rent, food and clothing each month. The United Way (2002) *Decade in Decline* report similarly showed the M5T postal code area of Kensington / Alexandra Park, to have a poverty rate of 38.6%, the second highest in the City of Toronto, and an almost consistently high rate of poverty as compared to 1995 statistics. Many in the neighbourhood face substantial socioeconomic barriers that impact on housing, food and health-related needs.

Many in the neighbourhood rely on government assistance or are involved in low-paying full or part-time work. Out of 96 non-senior survey respondents in this study, 61.5% relied either partially or fully on government assistance, with 38.5% receiving Ontario Works, 5.2% Employment Insurance, 14.6% ODSP, and 3.1% OSAP student loans. Of the 18 seniors who completed food plan surveys, 50% received a government pension as their main or sole form of income. 39% of the seniors and approximately 47% of the non-senior respondents worked either full-time, or part-time or both.

Within this boundary is Atkinson Housing Co-op, a large social housing complex, previously owned by Metro Toronto Housing Authority, and recently converted to co-op status. Almost 2000 residents live in the 410 unit townhouse and apartment complex. 332 families with children make up 81% of households in the area, with 84% being single parent, predominantly female-led families (MTHC Quarterly Report, 2001). 73% of the population are from visible minority groups, with the largest groups being Chinese (24%), South-East Asian (17%), Black (16%), South Asian (6%) and Hispanic (5%) (CHFT, 2002).

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~ On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

Findings

Many important findings have come as a result of this community consultation and needs assessment process. In particular, despite the existence of many food and meal programs in this area, the need for food access programming to meet food insecurity needs in the Kensington / Alexandra Park area remains high and is continuing to increase. Additionally, while the emergency provision of food is an essential element in increasing the well being of low-income community members, such programs, as currently structured are, from the point of view of participants in this research, far from ideal.

This section will begin by outlining current and alternative food programming available in the neighbourhood, followed by the key themes that emerged in this research.

1) Current Food Programming In The Neighbourhood

As Table 1 shows, a large number of community agencies in the Kensington / Alexandra Park neighbourhood are actively working to meet the food needs of local community members. A variety of food programs are offered on an on-going or occasional basis, and several projects such as a neighbourhood Bake Oven and a Bulk Buying Club are in the process of being organized and developed.

a) Emergency Food Provision

As can be seen in Table 1, in the Kensington / Alexandra Park neighbourhood, meal programs and food banks have been the largest, on-going mechanisms used to meet immediate food and hunger issues. There is, in particular, a large concentration of meal programs, in the area, and substantial reliance by community members on volunteer-driven, emergency food provision.

As Table 2 shows, there are currently 9 agencies offering meal programs ranging from 3-7 days per week. More than 535,000 emergency meals are provided on an annual basis in the neighbourhood. Many seniors and community members who are homeless, living in shelters or in rooming houses are frequent meal program users. Many community members are almost solely dependent on these programs to alleviate hunger and to meet their nutritional needs.

**Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park**

Table 1 – Food Programming in the Neighbourhood

Agency	Meal Programs (Open to Public)	Food Banks / Food Pantries	Community Kitchen / Cooking Groups	Open Kitchens	Dry Goods/Cold Food Storage Facilities	Community Gardening	Bulk Buying Clubs	Good Food Box / Staples Box Programs	Café/ Coffee Shop	Bake Oven	Meals on Wheels	Pre-Natal Programs with Food Vouchers	Special Youth Programs with Cooking and/or Meals	Food-related Workshops & Special Events	Development of Food Resource Materials
Access Alliance														✓ *	✓
Alexandra Park Community Centre		✓	✓			✓	✓						✓	✓	
Evangel Hall	✓					✓							✓		
Fort York Food Bank	✓	✓	✓ **			✓		✓						✓	
Harbourfront Community Centre			✓										✓ *	✓	
Queen West Community Health Centre												✓			
Scadding Court Community Centre			✓ **			✓		✓		✓			✓	✓	✓
Scott Mission	✓	✓							✓		✓ *				
Sistering	✓ ¹					✓								✓	
St. Felix Centre	✓					✓							✓		
St. Stephen's Corner Drop-in & Youth Arcade Senior Activities Centre Wellness Program	✓ ✓ ¹											✓ *	✓		
The Meeting Place / St. Christopher House			✓	✓	✓	✓					✓				
Treasure House Ministries	✓												✓		
University Settlement House – Out of the Cold Program	✓														
YOUTHLINK Inner City	✓														

*Program boundaries fall outside community needs assessment catchment area

**Program partnership between Fort York Food Bank, Second Harvest and Scadding Court Community Centre

¹ Open to specific populations (Sistering—women only; St. Stephen's Seniors Activity Centre—Seniors; YOUTHLINK Inner City—youth 24 years and younger)

**Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park**

Table 2 – Neighbourhood Meal Programs

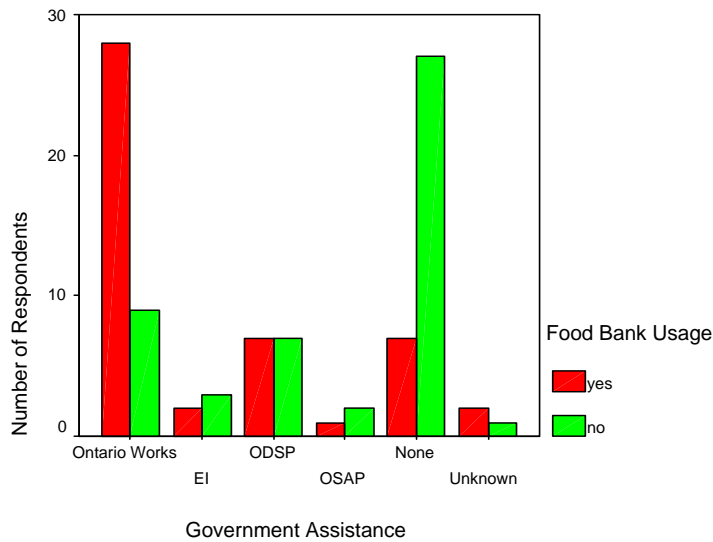
Program	Average # of Meals per Day	Average # of Meals per Week	Average # of Meals per Year
Evangel Hall	175 daily lunches 125 meals two eve/wk	875 lunches 250 evening meals	45,500 lunches 13,000 evening meals
Fort York Food Bank	41	207	10,781 (FYFB, 2003b)
Sistering	135	945	49,140
St. Felix	120	600	31,200
St. Stephen's Corner Drop-in	350	2,115	110,000
Scott Mission	725	3,625	188,500
Treasure House Ministries	150	1,050	54,600
University Settlement House	160	480	24,960
Youthlink Inner City	40	200	10,400
Total	2,021	10,347	538,081

In addition to food distribution to community members through meal programs, the Kensington / Alexandra Park area distributes a high volume of food through two local food banks and a small food pantry. At Scott Mission and through the Food Bank Program at FYFB, A Multi-Service Agency, an average 3-day supply of food can be accessed on an emergency basis, 1-2 times per month. FYFB is open to all community members based on geographic location and proof of financial need, while the food bank at Scott Mission is accessible to single fathers and women and their families only. Alexandra Park CC additionally runs a small weekly food pantry for residents of the Atkinson Co-op/Alexandra Park community, in which approximately 50 individuals and families are able to access whatever free food is available.

Despite the food bank sector's longstanding goal of "wanting to put itself out of business," the continually increasing need of individuals and families for food has led to food banks increasing rather than decreasing the amount of food they distribute. In fact, since 1989, there has been a 105.8% increase in food bank usage in Canada, (CAFB, 2003; Husbands, 1999, sect. 2, para. 4). In the local area, FYFB alone provided emergency food to 11,664 adult clients and 4,797 children in 2003, a 20 % and 34% increase respectively from last year. Included in this group are single parent families (23%), and immigrant and refugee claimants (18%). In 2003, there were 1,498 new, first-time food bank users, with the vast majority of those using the food bank (90%), were repeat users, that used the food bank an average of six times per year. Income sources for food bank users varies, with 57% receiving Ontario Works benefits, 36% having no consistent income source, 30% considered as being unemployed, underemployed or working poor, and 13% of persons with disabilities receiving ODSP benefits (FYFB, 2003a, b, c).

As can be seen in Chart 1 on the following page, within this study's survey population, food bank usage is highest within the population of respondents receiving Ontario Works, and in contrast, is lowest for survey respondents receiving no government assistance. Approximately 50% of food bank users surveyed supplement their food purchases with food from the food bank, with 40.6% needing to do so between one and four times per month.

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~ On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park



b) Alternative Food Programming

As Table 1 showed, there are a variety of alternative food access programs being offered or developed on a small-scale in the community, in addition to traditional emergency food distribution through food banks and meal programs. These programs approach food insecurity through alternative community food programming such as providing open kitchen and food storage facilities, community kitchens, community gardens, the Good Food Box program, and co-op or bulk food buying. Such programs aim to increase food security and access to nutritious and affordable food, through programming that reduces stigmatization, and offers opportunities for increased participation, choice, dignity, empowerment and control (Dowler & Caraher, 2003; Tarasuk & Reynolds, 1999).

In this study, there was considerable interest in alternative food programming amongst both community workers and community members. However, despite the enthusiasm for such programs, many barriers exist to the wide-scale development of alternative food programs in the neighbourhood. Many agency workers interviewed felt that they were already so overwhelmed with trying to meet current needs, that it was virtually impossible to imagine refocusing already scant financial resources, staffing and food supplies on new programming, particularly programming focused more on long-term sustainability, rather than immediate hunger alleviation.

In this neighbourhood, community workers consistently reported dealing with issues related to a lack of funding, staffing, and space limitations. Additionally, donor fatigue, dependence on volunteers and food donations, minimal government support and increasing need leaves food banks and meal programs, in particular, challenged in attempting to move beyond basic emergency food provision (CAFB, 2003; Husbands, 1999; Poppendieck, 1998; Riches, 1997b, 1999). As an example, Evangel Hall reported routinely finding it must cancel its Sunday evening meal with little or no notice due to inconsistency of volunteer group involvement.

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

2) *Impacts Of Food Insecurity*

a) *Psychological and Social Impacts & the Loss of Choice, Options and Control*

Food insecurity presents many challenging psychological and social implications for community members. The effects of food insecurity and reliance on emergency food provision in the lives of these individuals and families were woven through many of the comments and stories community members shared. Many community members reported feeling judged, blamed, stigmatized and discriminated against based on their situation, and felt shame and isolation as a result, not only by the general public, but, in many cases within community programs, as well. Several participants stated that they try to keep their food bank usage hidden from others, and for many their experiences with food insecurity have led to hopelessness, anger, depression and helplessness.

Loss of choice, options and control are almost inevitable for food insecure individuals and families in the neighbourhood. The lack of money in many household budgets, after paying basic costs such as rent and transportation, leaves little money to even cover the most basic food costs, let alone offering opportunities to purchase foods based on consideration of choice and variety. Though food security remained a challenge for community members living in subsidized housing, this population felt that their reduced housing costs allowed them to spend more of their money on food, allowing for choice, variety and the purchasing of more healthy, nutritious and culturally appropriate foods.

In contrast, those who are homeless or living in the shelter system have virtually no choice or control over meeting their food, shelter and other basic care needs. Stigmatization and experiences that clearly demonstrate the lack of dignity and respect afforded those who are homeless characterized the experiences and stories that *all* participants recounted. As one currently homeless participant suggested, you “Learn humility real fast out here. Giving up your control is one of the first things you learn.” Feeling as if “you’re not being heard” and believing that “no one wants to hear from us” is a daily fact of life, both in local fast food businesses and in some meal programs in the neighbourhood.

b) *Impacts on Nutrition, Diet, & Physical Health and Well Being*

Interest in nutrition and healthy eating was found across cultures, incomes and current housing situation. However, for individuals and families living on low incomes, having consistent access to healthy and nutritious foods remained more of an illusion than a reality, despite living close to Chinatown and Kensington Market, where fruits and vegetables are often sold at considerably lower prices. High rental costs leave the majority of food bank recipients spending upwards of 75% of their income each month on rent, leaving only \$2.93 per day to survive on for food, transportation and all other costs after paying rent (FYFB, 2003a; Oliphant & Slosser, 2003). This amount barely covers the cost of a one-way adult TTC fare, let alone providing the income community members require for purchasing adequate amounts of nutritious food.

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~ On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

For the parents and grandparents who participated in this research, increases in food prices, particularly fresh fruits and vegetables in the wintertime, led to decreased food security. The adults in these households reported reducing the amount of food they eat, or eliminating meals altogether, so that children in the family have more to eat. For some families, this situation results despite the presence of several working adults in the home, several of which may span two generations, working in low paying and/or part-time work. This reality impacts the physical health and emotional well being of these families as a whole.

Despite this reality, none of these focus group participants knew about the existence of food banks as a means of helping to increase access to adequate foods. These families remained isolated and alone in dealing with food insecurity. This would suggest that resource information and outreach, with translation into a number of languages common to the neighbourhood, should be developed and implemented in order to inform community members of food access programs available to them.

Community members reliant on meal programs to meet all or most of their nutritional needs almost consistently felt that their ability to maintain their physical health and a nutritious diet was severely compromised. Menu planning is generally done by community agency staff, with an aim to provide a nutritionally balanced meal to program recipients. However, most meal programs depend primarily if not completely on donations of foods. Therefore, the amount of food per meal varies depending on food availability and the numbers of recipients. While some meal programs are both willing and able to accommodate some food preferences, and medical or cultural dietary restrictions, several program workers suggested this is often difficult to control or plan for when dealing with such a large volume of need and dependence on donated food.

Despite a high reliance on meal programs and food banks, 42% of survey respondents felt they sometimes or often did not have enough food to feed themselves or their family. Similarly, many focus group participants felt that they lacked essential nutrients, vitamins and protein, and, in particular, those who are homeless or are using the shelter system, felt that their bodies had become increasingly run down with time on the street. They experienced weight loss, described their stomachs “shrinking” in size, and reported a decreased ability to eat a whole meal despite being routinely hungry. They experienced decreased immunity and increased susceptibility to illnesses easily transmitted within the shelter environment, as well as chronic stomach upset and diarrhea. One participant suggested, “Food goes through me from these programs. That never happens when I cook my own meals,” while another commented, “If you wonder why we’re getting so sick, that’s it.”

In one focus group, all but one participant made reference to their rotting teeth, and to other dental problems. All were male participants living on the streets and/or on low incomes for six months or more. Tooth decay and the loss of teeth was clearly evident in these participants, as well as participants in other focus groups. One man, homeless for 3 years stated, “My teeth were never like this before I was on the streets.” The premature loss of teeth has extensive social and psychological impacts for low-income and homeless people within our society. Individuals missing teeth experience increased discrimination and stigmatization, lowered self-esteem,

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~ On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

reduced nutritional intake due to eating problems, and substantial barriers to stabilizing their housing, employment and other critical aspects of their lives (Clark, 1999).

c) Resourcefulness of Community Members

Community members showed a remarkable sense of resourcefulness in coping with food insecurity and surviving on low incomes. Those able to connect with others to access support and information through word-of-mouth and formal or informal support networks fare better than those who are more isolated, for instance due to age, language barriers, mental health issues or disabilities. Speaking to others experiencing similar challenges enables community members to access valuable information about food program hours, days, times and locations, cheaper grocery shopping locations, and ways to save money on a limited budget. In this research, many community members also shared strategies they use to stretch food budgets, including budgeting and planning ahead, spending money wisely, cooking with raw rather than pre-packaged foods, buying bulk, discounted and low priced fruits and vegetables in season, and reducing food waste.

3) Experiences, Feelings and Perceptions of Local Food Programs

Community members who use neighbourhood food banks and/or meal programs generally felt that several key issues required addressing. Quality, quantity, choice and control in food planning, cultural appropriateness and personal desirability of foods at food bank and meal programs were considered serious issues, as was the timing and travel between programs. A number of critical concerns were also raised related to the policies, procedures, programs and staff and volunteer attitudes at meal programs, food banks and shelters. Though shelters weren't the specific focus of this research, the fact that many use shelters as a means of accessing food, as well as a location to sleep made their input into these services of relevance within this assessment.

Many participants noted that there was a lack of quality and desirability of many of the foods made available within food bank and meal programs. In particular at meal programs, decision-making and input into program and menu planning is for the most part, completely removed from the hands of program recipients, and focus group participants all laughed knowingly about their experiences eating "mystery meat." Despite the great efforts of many meal programs to develop nutritious and tasty meals, participants all generally agreed that they wouldn't eat much of the food they were presented with if they had a choice. Additionally, some reported receiving food in food banks and meal programs that was rotten, moldy, undercooked or expired. In general, participants assumed that city health, safety and cleanliness standards for shelter and meal programs must differ from those imposed on restaurants, believing that if the same standards were set, a number of programs they attended would likely be shutdown.

Additionally, participants commented on the considerable repetition of certain foods accessed from food banks, such as pasta, tomato sauce and peanut butter. The lack of variety in food choices, and the limited choices or selections available to accommodate individual food preferences, such as vegetarians, or to meet cultural or dietary food restrictions were also issues. Many complained that the lack of coordination across meal programs and reliance on

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

inconsistent food supplies means that the chance of duplication in meals throughout the day and across food programs is quite great. For instance, some participants may routinely eat a meal consisting of pasta and spaghetti sauce several times a day, including breakfast, and several days in a row. As one participant suggested, “You go to some place and their serving meatloaf for breakfast and you have no choice, so you eat it. Then you go to another program for lunch and if all they got to eat is meatloaf...well, then you’re having meatloaf again!”

In terms of program timing, there are many meal programs with overlapping hours during weekday lunch hours, and several options for meals on weekday mornings. However, there are large periods of time when few or no meal or alternative food programs are available, particularly in the evenings and on weekends. Access to food between 9:30 p.m. and 7:30 a.m. is virtually non-existent, except for food distributed through the Na-Me-Res Street Help Outreach Van. For community members living on the streets, who are unable or unwilling to access a bed in the shelter system, there is little option but to “basically starve” or panhandle money for food.

Traveling from one program to another to access food, and in many cases shelter and other support services, or from place to place just to save a few cents on groceries often consumed great amounts of participants’ time. The time and sometimes expense of travelling took away from time better focused on employment, skills training, finding affordable housing and other objectives. For participants with health problems associated with living on the streets, such as foot infections, the walking between programs increased their physical health concerns. For this reason, participants generally preferred programs where they could not only meet their food security needs, but could also use other services, such as phone, showers, computers and laundry facilities.

One such program, The Meeting Place, was spoken of very highly by community members. The Meeting Place uses an open kitchen program model, unique to this neighbourhood, and perhaps to the City of Toronto as a whole. The Meeting Place’s open kitchen provides the opportunity for community members, many of whom are currently homeless or staying in shelters, to retain choice and control over the foods they eat, by allowing free access to the public cooking facilities at anytime during open hours. The Meeting Place also offers a community kitchen program that allows community members to make a number of meals for themselves and others for only \$20 per month. Several participants felt that with the proper cooking facilities and access to affordable foods, they could make this \$20 go much further than eating in fast food restaurants. “I can choose to buy 3 meals for \$20, or I can have enough food for even 3 days (all meals) if I make my own stuff.” These community members also preferred preparing their own meals to using meal programs, believing that this increased their self-esteem, sense of empowerment and self-respect, as well as their food consumption, nutritional intake, and healthy eating habits.

Focus group members discussed the importance of having public food storage facilities, for those who are homeless, living in rooming houses, shelters or shared accommodations, where theft of food has been a problem. Again, The Meeting Place is unique in providing public food storage space to community members. With storage facilities for dry goods, and items requiring refrigeration or freezing, community members have some reassurance that their foods will be

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~ On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

safe from either spoilage or theft. However, participants saw the need for tight staff observation and control to guard against theft, and incidences of food taken from The Meeting Place's cupboards and fridges as less favourable. For those living in such poverty, theft of even one or two meals is a significant issue, often leaving no other options to replace the stolen foods. Additionally, space constraints restrict the ability of The Meeting Place to store much food, limiting this option to only a small fraction of the community members who could potentially benefit from such facilities.

A varied response was received from meal program participants related to faith-based programming offered in conjunction with direct food service delivery in the neighbourhood. Meal programs that were offered separately from religious programming were seen as more acceptable to the majority of participants, whereas situations where participants had no choice but to either attend religious programming, or to wait lined up for food until the religious services are over, were perceived as oppressive by the participants who spoke out in this study. Several people commented that the "worst thing is, you can see the food but you have to sit there and wait!" Even though "you can smell it and you're hungry," "if you don't sit down and wait, or you don't do the service, you don't get to eat!"

The lack of evening meals in the neighbourhood often gives participants little other option, despite the fact that lining-up either inside or outside, and waiting for long periods of time for food, contributes greatly to the lack of control and disempowerment these community members experienced. However, since community members are receiving a donated emergency food "hand-out," many feel that they are expected to be "happy" with whatever they get. Participants feel that they are looked at as being ungrateful, wasteful or rude if they complain about policies, practices, rules and expectations, if they don't eat the food served, or if they save a portion of the food to share with others not in attendance at the program.

In addition to this, serious concerns were raised related to policies, practices, and staff and volunteer attitudes at many food programs, particularly for those who are living in shelters or on the streets. Participants felt staff and volunteers in some programs "Treat us as dirty 'cause we're homeless," and that philosophies and policies in these programs further reinforces this. Staff are perceived as "there for the money, for the pay cheque," and many staff and volunteers were seen as lacking sensitivity and understanding of the dynamics and structural issues that cause poverty, homelessness and food insecurity.

Program policies and practices, and the reported verbal and sometimes physical actions of program staff and volunteers, were felt by participants to be reflective of the inherent power differential that exists and stands between themselves and food program staff and volunteers. "It means I'm here and you're there," with staff at the top and program recipients down at the bottom. This power differential and the lack of input and connection to programs afforded to community members has created considerable mistrust and resentment amongst many service users, and a great deal of division stands between program workers and program recipients. Community members have felt lied to about the availability of food, clothing and other resources, generally believing that staff and volunteers either stockpile resources or take the best for themselves.

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~ On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

Several focus group participants recounted experiences of being barred from food and shelter programs or being “relocated” to different shelters. Barrings can be for one or several days, weeks, months, or for a lifetime. Almost all participants held some fear of being barred, and this impacted on their willingness to voice their complaints, believing that “if you complain, you know what happens... staff start looking for things to blame on *you* and then the next thing you know, you’re out!” Almost consistently, participants also believed that “what we say doesn’t matter,” and won’t be taken seriously. Participants reported often being told, “If you don’t like it, go someplace else” despite the lack of alternative options.

When disagreements occur between staff and program users, participants were clear in stating, “It’s *always* the client’s fault.” Few felt that there was much recourse in complaining by writing letters or appealing program decisions made against them, even if policies were in place to handle such situations. “Why bother?” they asked, when it was widely believed that complaints won’t get heard, as community members they won’t really be listened to, and yet their ability to access the program may be jeopardized. Signing forms regarding food and shelter program rules, or as a way of being re-admitted to programs contributed to program users’ awareness of the power differential that stands between them and the programs they use.

4) Other Issues:

a) Food Costs & Access to Neighbourhood Grocery Stores

Most community members shop primarily in Chinatown, and Kensington Market, where there is ample access to fresh produce, meats, fish and culturally diverse foods at generally low costs. However, to access a large grocery store, community members must travel considerable distance to the No Frills at Dufferin Mall, Price Chopper at Queen St. W. near Dufferin St., and the 24-hour Dominion at College and Grace Sts., which most participants felt was too expensive for them to use. The additional time and costs of travelling, for low-income families, most often by transit or taxi was frustrating for many participants.

Increases in food prices are also an issue, particularly for many families. In the City of Toronto’s 2002 Nutritious Food Basket survey, the prices of healthy and nutritious foods in Toronto were found to have risen 13% since 1999 (Basrur, 2003). Travers (1996) found that the costs of equivalent groceries in urban inner-city stores, as compared to suburban supermarkets is also considerably higher. Rising food costs during the winter season were especially problematic for many families who participated in this community consultation.

b) Access to Culturally Diverse Foods

The majority of the families that participated in this community consultation process, all from diverse cultures felt that their diet was comparatively healthy compared to a more typical North American diet. At the same time, many of them expressed frustration that their “children don’t like our culture’s food.” They recounted experiences where their children had been teased, or had felt uncomfortable at school bringing culturally specific meals that included beans, lentils or other foods and spices. Many parents and grandparents found it a struggle to prepare

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~ On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

children's lunches, and several parents stated that they give their children Canadian (Western) foods to take to school. Older children routinely purchase fast food lunches and were believed to throw their homemade lunches away.

Access to culturally diverse foods in this neighbourhood is greatly enhanced by its being a part of the Chinatown and Kensington Market area. Approximately 50% of survey respondents, in fact, felt that the neighbourhood did have good access to culturally diverse foods. However, participants who primarily utilize food banks and meal programs to access food noted that there was little cultural diversity in food programming in the neighbourhood, and more attempts to accommodate culturally diverse diets were needed. One exception currently, is the Staples Box, available at FYFB, which provides an alternative to the Westernized foods found in a typical food bank food hamper.

However, several Muslim focus group participants, travel far distances to Thorncliffe Park to purchase Halal meats. These participants were unaware of any stores that sold Halal meat in the local neighbourhood, and if any that did could be trusted to closely follow religious and cultural practices. Halal meat tends to be somewhat more expensive than non-Halal meat, and there is only one food bank in Toronto that provides provision for the accessing of Halal meats. At the Muslim Welfare Centre, in Scarborough, any individual or family, Muslim or non-Muslim across Toronto can access the food bank. However, families in this neighbourhood must travel considerable distances to access this food bank.

For newcomers and those with limited English, reading food labels on packages was also considered to be a challenge, as was having a clear awareness of the ingredients and the nutritional value of less familiar food products. For Muslim families eating a strictly Halal diet, these food packaging issues are further complicated by the presence of alcohol and meat products, that may not be clearly labeled, in processed and pre-packaged foods. All participants found that explaining religious, cultural and nutritional or health-related diet restrictions to children is difficult.

c) Promotion of Nutrition & Health

Most parents who participated in this research, felt that their children ate a less nutritionally balanced diet, too high in meat, fast food, pop, chips, and pre-packaged foods. Children often wanted to rush through meals, and for working parents, being "in a rush" increased focus on fast foods as a quick option on the run. At the same time, many parents showed great resourcefulness and creativity in trying to increase the nutritiousness of their children's meals, and to save money and wasting of food.

The majority of focus group participants and 27% of survey respondents felt that they ate less nutritionally healthy meals, including high contents of fried foods, meat and bread, and not enough fresh fruits and vegetables. White rice and white bread, were a mainstay of most families that participated in focus groups, despite recognizing that these are "not very healthy" as compared to brown rice and whole wheat bread. Several seniors in one focus group stated knowing that they need to drink higher levels of milk, or soy milk and eat more fruits &

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~ On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

vegetables, yet felt that at times this was difficult due to increased digestive problems they have experienced as they have aged. Many participants were interested in gaining increased information on healthy eating and cooking for diverse age groups through resource materials, workshops and cooking groups.

5) A “Vision for Real Change” in the Community

As these findings clearly draw attention to, most community members and community workers are tired of the focus on temporary hunger relief, over a “vision for real change.” Participants feel that for the most part, community programs are working in isolation, apart from those most effected by the programs they offer, and questioned the willingness of community programs to work “to really change things.” Despite this frustration and anger, there was also a great deal of energy, enthusiasm and commitment amongst both community members and community agencies in the creation of a new strategy, aimed at a more inclusive, community-based response to food and hunger issues. The following section outlines these findings.

a) Addressing Barriers to Food Security ~ Taking Action on Food & Income Issues

Community members were clear in pointing out that it is the underlying structural issues leading to poverty, hunger and food insecurity that require the greatest focus for change, yet the least of which they saw happening in the neighbourhood. Significant cuts of 21.6% to welfare in 1995, a 15.8% increase in inflation during this time, increasing rental costs, a lack of affordable housing and rent control, and high rates of unemployment have created extreme hardship for many individuals and families (CAFB, 2003; Husbands, 1999; Oliphant & Slosser, 2003; Riches, 1999).

In this consultation, participants identified low wage, part-time and temporary employment, increasing education and training costs, a lack of affordable child care, and the Ontario Works claw back of the National Child Benefit Supplement as additionally increasing poverty and food insecurity. Immigration policies, language barriers and the lack of recognition of work experience obtained outside Canada poses additional on-going barriers to employment for many immigrants and newcomers. For some, experiences of ageism, illness, language barriers, and discrimination based on cultural and religious diversity, as well as the more isolating lay out of the Atkinson Co-op neighbourhood were also seen as contributing to issues of food security and poverty.

Many community members saw this community consultation as a first step in coming together to challenge systemic barriers to income and food security, and to advocate for attainable solutions. The majority of focus group participants and over 30% of survey respondents, wanted to see action taken on the issues raised, and engaging in discussion groups, community forums, "Town Hall" meetings, and coalition building were seen as opportunities for “uniting voices” and raising awareness. Such opportunities provide a forum for community members to become more politically active and proactive in relation to income and food justice issues. Such opportunities are empowering and capacity building for the community as a whole, allowing people to come together towards social and political change.

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

b) Active, On-going & Meaningful Involvement of Community Members in Community Food Programs

Despite the substantial lived experience and knowledge community members have of neighborhood food programs, in most cases community members are almost, if not completely excluded from decision-making regarding the essential services they use. There was felt to be a general lack of accountability by food and shelter providers to the community members using these programs. "Whose gonna listen to us?" was a question echoed throughout focus group discussions with homeless and shelter-using community members. The lack of ongoing opportunities to provide meaningful input into food and shelter programming, a belief that complaints won't be taken seriously, and repeat experiences of discrimination, stigmatization and powerlessness, has led to a particularly strong mistrust of programs and services within this population. Intake processes at shelters and the barring of shelter or food program participants further reinforce this mistrust and the sense of powerlessness that community members feel.

Participants felt that if program workers, volunteers and funders, that is those with the power to direct services, spent even one week in the position of service users, learning "what it really feels like to use these programs," dramatic changes would be seen. There are a number of options to immediately begin this process of change, most importantly by taking immediate steps to increase the active participation of community members in neighbourhood food programs. More than 25 percent of survey respondents and most focus group participants identified a strong interest in being involved in neighborhood food program planning. Holding community meetings, program focus groups and feedback sessions gives community members an immediate opportunity to be actively engaged in the planning, restructuring, implementation and evaluation process of local food programs. Accountability to program participants can be increased by their representation on Boards of Directors, and through the development of food program advisory committees, and a neighbourhood-wide food program advisory committee. Participant volunteer and paid positions can be created to increase opportunities for ongoing and meaningful participation.

Mechanisms additionally need to be developed that enable program users to provide feedback and to register complaints, without fear of negative consequences. Resolution of complaints should be done within an accessible, transparent process that includes the participation of community members including the individual involved if they choose. Consideration must focus not only on individual behavioural change, but also on the reevaluation of systemic agency practices, including the role of program policies, procedures and the attitudes of volunteers and program staff.

Sensitivity training and education regarding root causes and issues related to homelessness, food insecurity and poverty are also important aspects of staff and volunteer training and development. Involving program users in such professional development, and gaining on-going input from program participants related to policies and procedures, and making programs more participant-driven overall, can reduce incidents and barrings from occurring. Additionally, utilizing a more flexible, harm reduction approach, which aims to reduce the

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

negative effects of alcohol and drug use without necessarily expecting the end of such usage, can reduce power imbalances and disciplinary actions that often lead to problematic incidences and barrings in such programs.

c) Building Community-capacity Through Partnerships Across Community Agencies

Currently community organizations typically develop food programming independent of each other, using whatever resources they can find from within their respective agencies or external sources. Information and resource sharing amongst community food programs, if it occurs at all, tends to be on an informal basis and quite limited in scope, for instance focusing on partnerships aimed at special community event planning.

While on there own, current alternative food program initiatives have many limitations, partnerships and linkages across the community provide a key means of moving forward towards the development of more large-scale, proactive and sustainable food access programming. The combining and sharing of funding, staffing, space, materials and other resources, can be used to strengthen existing programs, facilitate the development of new programming and avoid unnecessary duplication of programs across the neighbourhood.

d) Alternative Approaches to Food Programming

Table 3 outlines the many programs of interest to community members and community food program workers. Food programs such as community kitchens, an open kitchen format and community gardening, which meet needs in holistic and non-stigmatizing ways were by far of the most interest to community members and workers. These empowering and self-esteem enhancing program ideas enable community members to be active contributors to their own personal welfare, as well as to the programs they are using. Such programs enhance social, psychological and physical well being, in ways that are inclusive of community members across incomes, cultures, religions and ages, and were seen as reducing the social isolation and stigmatization associated with receiving "handouts" at traditional meal programs and food banks.

Table 3 – Community Food Program Ideas

Programs	Community Feedback
Community Kitchens / Cooking Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Expanding and increasing frequency, numbers, types and focus of community kitchens and cooking groups in neighbourhood ● “Take Out” Cooking Programs – Group cooks at least 4-7 additional meals weekly to take home or for storage in public food storage facilities ● Ethno-specific Community Kitchen groups (eg. Chinese, Latin American or Caribbean Community Kitchens) ● Cooking groups focused on diverse cultural cooking ● “Cooking with Canadian foods” groups for newcomers ● Children, youth and teen cooking programs/clubs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Providing interactive, fun and healthy ways for children to learn about and try nutritious and culturally diverse foods and meals ● Family cooking groups focused on healthy eating <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gives opportunities for parents/caregivers to cook with and teach children

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young men's cooking clubs • Network of Community Kitchens and groups with need for varying levels of support, ranging from largely facilitated by program staff to participant-led and self-running groups, with program staff available only as needed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-running groups would be best began with 4-6 wks. support, to develop group structure, comfort and cohesion • Participants who are comfortable doing so can take turns leading cooking groups or supporting facilitator, and sharing foods, meals or cooking techniques from their culture or country of origin
Open Kitchen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase access to open cooking facilities with on-site food storage is much needed in this neighbourhood • Extend the number of open kitchen locations • Extend the hours of operation, especially in the evenings, of the existing open kitchen and/or any new public kitchens • Open a neighbourhood kitchen open 24 hr. per day
Dry Goods/Cold Food Storage & Freezer Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase numbers of food storage facilities in area • Increase access to stored foods without dependence on staff, in ways that controls for possible theft <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • eg. small lockers for dried goods • storage bins with locks for cold storage
Good Food Box/Staples Box Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase awareness of programs • Increased distribution of Good Food Box, through creation of a web of pick-up and drop-off locations throughout neighbourhood
Bulk or Co-op Buying Clubs / Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides alternative access to affordable, nutritious, and culturally diverse foods locally, given the lack of grocery stores in neighbourhood <p><i>Suggested Options:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Local community members travel together as a group weekly or bi-weekly to shop in grocery store, with local program support for the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizing and facilitating grocery store trips as required • Establishing group buying discounts, bulk prices and opportunities to glean perishables • Access to return trip TTC tokens or to passenger van 2. Agency-facilitated buying club: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community agency establishes relationship with co-op or wholesale distributor (eg. that delivers to existing community or government programs) • Community members submit order and money to community worker/volunteer • Pick up or delivery to community agency for distribution to community members
Community Dinners / Community Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Held monthly, related to seasons, holidays, and cultural festivals and/or as special events • Community dinners and special events can build on existing and upcoming local programs eg. Community Gardens, Tai Chi and Bake Oven at Alexandra Park • Linking with other community food programs for such events (eg. local Community Kitchen programs can help provide meals for Community Dinners)
Food, Nutrition & Healthy Eating Workshops / Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive and fun workshops for children on healthy eating, nutrition eating healthy foods • Workshops for parents on children's healthy eating and how diet, different foods and additives affect children's moods and activity levels • Nutrition and health workshops for seniors and older adults

**Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park**

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre & post-natal cooking and nutrition programs (eg. making own baby food workshops) • Workshops on healthy eating across diverse cultures • Family/child-focused workshops & discussion groups to share experience, knowledge, resources and strategies on the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues related to health and nutrition, in infancy and encouraging children’s healthy eating as they grow • Dealing with children’s lunch issues • Saving money related to food
<p>Culturally Diverse Community Food Programming</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased recognition of cultural diversity in community food programs shown by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting religious/cultural dietary restrictions • Providing nutritious alternatives that meet cultural needs • Workshops on foods and food preparation across diverse cultures • Food programs for newcomers to Canada that provide opportunities to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cook “Canadian” (Western) foods/meals • learn more about the nutritional content in unfamiliar Western foods • develop awareness and skill in reading food package labels and what is in foods (particularly pre-packaged) to ensure it meets cultural/religious practices • Providing a social atmosphere to practice and learn English skills • Promoting children’s understanding of culturally diverse foods, cultural/religious food practices
<p>Participant Volunteer / Paid Positions for Community Members in Food Programs</p>	<p><i>Participant Volunteer & Paid Positions in Meal Programs:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program model should build upon the knowledge, skills and experience community members bring to food programs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eg. Program user with cooking experience teaches cooking skills to others • Provide opportunities for learning and training (from each other as much as possible) • Provide community members with opportunities to be paid for work within programs, through honorariums, stipends or paid positions available occasional, short-term or on-going basis • Provide opportunities to receive food vouchers and to take home foods from program as a regular aspect of volunteering <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At one community agency participants reported being given opportunities for occasional paid work, such as window washing, carpentry, courier services • Enables participants to feel like they are a respected and important part of the agency • Community member ideas of how to apply to meal programs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities to be involved in cooking, cleaning, setting up, purchasing and/or stocking foods, etc. in meal programs <p><i>Working from harm reduction approach:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize a flexible harm reduction approach that allows maximum participation, in safe ways, of community members with substance use issues • Flexible scheduling provides incentives for participation by community members who experience challenges in maintaining routine work hours • May include work offered on “first come” basis, or through offering work in advance • Such flexibility was not expected to have a negative impact on programming on any given day <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “If I’m offered a job for Wed., and then on Wed., I don’t show up, then it’s too bad for me and they’ll give the opportunity to some one else. There’s always someone else who will appreciate getting the chance to do some work and make a little bit of money.” <p><i>Other Opportunities for Paid Positions / Volunteer Participants:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of resource materials • Community member involvement in community garden and community kitchen workshops and skills training programs

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

Skill Building / Training Programs & Workshops Related to Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aimed at increasing employment and Community Economic Development (CED) opportunities • Courses, workshops or programs leading to food handlers certificates, cooking / meal certification • Making linkages that prepare and facilitate the entrance of local community members into Community College food training programs
Food-related Community Economic Development (CED) Initiatives/Development of Micro-businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting and facilitating CED opportunities through provision of programs, workshops and resources • Exploring CED and micro-business opportunities related to community kitchens, community gardening, culturally diverse food programming, etc. • Building partnerships/linkages between various food programs and local restaurants & businesses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • eg. Growing herbs in Community Garden to make pesto in Community Kitchens, for sale to local businesses • Making bread in Bake Oven, for sale to local grocers and restaurants
Development of Food Resource Information & Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw upon local knowledge and experience, and provide opportunities for low-income community members to participate in paid and volunteer positions to develop these <p><i>Types of Resource Materials:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Map and calendar of local food programs showing the times and locations of food programs and other services (eg. clothing distribution) • Introduction / overview of local food programming in the neighbourhood • Ways to save money on food, including, shopping, buying and cooking tips and information on where to shop cheaply in neighbourhood • Resource booklet on culturally-appropriate, cost effective cooking adaptations to increase nutrition in diet • Resource materials on natural remedies & the curative values of various foods and herbs • Resource sheets on being proactive consumers—how to make complaints with food merchants and grocery stores
Meals and/or Distribution of Food Vouchers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide meals as an on-going part of other programs (eg. Youth programs, sewing program) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enables full participation in other programs, as immediate need for food has been met
Community Gardening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase numbers of neighbourhood community garden plots • Develop year-round greenhouse gardening programs • Providing support for home gardening • Workshops on gardening and related topics throughout year (eg. canning, preserving vegetables) • Increasing support so individuals and families can meet most of their fresh vegetable needs throughout summer months • Develop related gardening workshops, such as canning and preserving, to increase ability for low-income families to preserve vegetables for winter months • Linking community gardening to community kitchen and food-related CED activities
Bake Oven	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Kitchen cooking & baking activities geared to community use of Bake Oven • Can become site of community events and dinners • CED activities and the renting out of the Bake Oven on a low cost or sliding scale basis
Special Events/Trips Related to Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linking together across agencies as a way of sharing expenses (eg. buses) & increasing the planning of special events and trips

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

Travelling Low-cost Food Sales Truck	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combines concept behind Second Harvest/Daily Bread delivery trucks, and trucks and vans used to sell goods (eg. CD/DVD trucks, TPL Books-on-Wheels) • Food provisions organized like small market/grocery store on truck, and truck travels to different locations/organizations where those living on low-incomes can come to shop and purchase, at affordable prices, basic provisions and fresh, nutritious foods
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Participants emphasized the need to keep participation in any of these programs free or at most, at a nominal sliding scale cost. Similarly, a study by Tarasuk and Reynolds (1999), of 10 community kitchens in the Toronto area, showed that even nominal costs associated with participation in community kitchen programs, can limit the participation of low-income community members. Therefore subsidization of food program costs is a crucial aspect of enabling alternative food access programming to successfully address food security in the community.

Additionally, community food programs need to ensure that food and menu options represent the cultural diversity of the community. For community members with children, community kitchens and workshops for adults need to have child care made available. Community members travelling a distance need to also be provided with TTC tokens for participation. Food should be made available during workshops and other programs where a meal is not otherwise being cooked or served.

Conclusion

Despite the provision of large quantities of emergency food to a large number of low-income community members, food security remains a problem of significant proportion in the Kensington / Alexandra Park community. Community agencies and faith-based groups are working overtime to meet current need, yet as this study clearly points out, food security, as defined in the *Background* section by the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA), is far from being met. Food quality, quantity and variety vary from program to program, and the nutritional adequacy for many low-income community members is inconsistent at best.

Additionally, the majority of food programs currently fail to address social and psychological characteristics of food security definitions, which put forth the right of community members to access personally acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways, “that make them feel good about themselves and their families” (Riches, 1997a, b; SCCC, 2003). In such definitions, food banks and meal programs are seen as socially *unacceptable* means of acquiring food, not unlike panhandling and begging (Poppendieck, 1998; Riches, 1997a, b).

The findings outlined in this report, and the six recommended Community Food Plan Models found on pages 6-7, provide a blueprint from which to move forward in the development of sustainable and proactive community food planning. Each suggestion focuses on increasing access in the neighbourhood to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate foods, “in socially acceptable ways,” that meet the holistic psychological, social and physiological needs of community members, while also promoting social inclusion, community-building and community empowerment (Riches, 1997a).

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

The Food for Thought: Community Food Plan requires a re-visioning of food accessibility and security as a right and social imperative that affords all community members dignity, self-esteem and pride. To fully implement this vision, sustainable funding is required. Additionally, meal provision needs to be built into much of the programming community organizations do within low-income communities. Therefore, funding proposals and grants directed to programs that include low-income community members need to have a portion of funding money dedicated to food budgets.

To make this vision a reality, the Food for Thought: Community Food Plan provides a model for this community and others throughout Toronto, in approaching food security through a long-term response that provides a range of responsive food programs that meets the holistic needs of diverse community members. The active participation of community members in local food programs promotes an inclusive community context that allows individuals, families and communities to become active participants in the social fabric of the neighbourhood. The social inclusion of diverse cultures, ethnicities, ages and socioeconomic populations, increases community solidarity and community capacity, neighbourhood safety and security, and enhances the health and vibrancy of the neighbourhood as a whole.

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

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Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

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**Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park**

Appendix A

Data Collection Methods

1. Survey Questionnaires

Community members completed a total of 114 survey questionnaires, focused primarily on the gathering of qualitative data over a 5-month period between June and November 2003. Distribution of surveys occurred through a number of different child and family programs, local community kitchen and garden programs and special summer events including the Dundas Day Street Festival. Community members utilizing the services of the Food Bank Program at FYFB—A Multi-service Agency, as well as several focus group participants and local community food program participant volunteers also completed the surveys, aimed at gathering information on the following:

- How community members currently access food
- Experiences of hunger and insufficient access to food
- Experiences meeting current food needs and utilizing local food programs, including their likes, dislikes and ideas for change
- Whether local food programs meet community members' needs nutritionally and culturally

2. Focus Group Discussions and In-depth Interviews

a) Focus Groups & Individual Interviews with Homeless, Shelter and Rooming House Population

Three focus groups were held at two local community agencies providing meal programs and/or other food access programming. A total of 25 community members experiencing homelessness, staying in shelters or living in rooming houses took part in the group discussions, and an additional five participated in in-depth face-to-face interviews. Both the interviews and focus groups utilized a semi-structured approach that allowed participants maximum opportunity to direct discussion towards the issues they felt were most important, related to their experiences of poverty, homelessness, food insecurity, and local food programs.

The following provided a general framework used to guide participant responses in both the focus groups and individual interviews with these community members:

- Participant experiences with food insecurity and the usage of local food programs
- Experiences and challenges accessing food in the local neighbourhood
- Practices community members preferred related to local food programs, and concerns and changes participants would like to see in relation to these
- Experiences of meeting needs related to nutrition, culture and choice/preference in neighbourhood food programs

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~
On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park

- Recommendations for change related to community food programs and issues leading to hunger, food insecurity and poverty

b) Focus Groups at Parent/Child Drop-in Centre

The two focus groups at the Parent/Child Drop-in program were attended by a total of 12 parents or grandparents, with 8 attending the Cantonese discussion group, and 4 attending the group held simultaneously in English. All participants had immigrated to Canada, from countries with main languages other than English, and participants have lived for varying lengths of time in Canada.

Discussion group questions were developed in consultation with the Drop-In Program Coordinator and the Cantonese-speaking Interpreter. In sharing the culture, ethnicity and language of the Chinese participants, the input of the Interpreter and Program Coordinator were seen as invaluable in directing the development of questions to obtain feedback most personally and culturally relevant to focus group participants. While several questions were geared to food insecurity, several others looked at food issues as they related to culture and children. Both groups utilized the following questions as a discussion guide:

- What have been your experiences providing fresh, healthy, nutritious and affordable food for your family?
- Do you feel the foods you and your children eat are healthy & nutritious?
- Is the cost of food a problem? If so, what have you done to cope with this?
- What do you like and what would you like to change in meeting yours and your family's food needs?
- What have been your experiences with information provided on food package labels?
- What have been your experiences in cooking/preparing "Canadian" foods, utilizing pre-packaged foods, and preparing children's lunches for school?
- What possible solutions would you suggest to address the issues, problems and difficulties you've experienced?
- How can neighbourhood programs and residents work together on these issues?
- What are your recommendations for putting these ideas into action?

c) Focus Group with Food Program Participants and Workers

Two focus groups attended by 27 local food program participants and workers, provided an opportunity for small and large group discussions on food insecurity, the impacts of living on a low-income, issues that contribute to the challenges faced, strategies used to cope and potential solutions and community responses.

3. Assessment of Community Food Resources

Food for Thought: Community Food Plan Report ~ **On Food Security in Kensington / Alexandra Park**

To develop a comprehensive picture of current food programming in the neighbourhood, as well as to learn more about community agency interest in developing and expanding food programming over the next three years, an extensive assessment of community food resources was completed. This assessment involved interviews with 35 workers from 20 different food and/or programs at 18 agencies in the Kensington / Alexandra Park community.

In-depth face-to-face or telephone interviews were conducted with 24 local food and/or shelter program workers. Community workers from ten of these agencies additionally provided 1-2 subsequent brief follow-up discussions and interviews as was needed to gather additional data. Ten community agency workers also provided input through shorter face-to-face or telephone interviews. Interviews were conducted between May 2003 and January 2004, looking at the following information:

- Description of current food programs available in the community
- Amount of food/meals provided to community members (if applicable)
- Target populations served through food programs
- Opportunities and challenges experienced in meeting community food access needs
- Agency plans for expanding or offering new food security and food access programs over the next 3-years
- Possible initiatives that could be developed to increase resources and strengthen capacity to meet food needs as a community

The geographic boundaries of the agencies included in this assessment of community food resources are as follows:

- North boundary: Scott Mission (just north of College St.)
 - South boundary: Harbourfront Community Centre (Lake Ontario)
 - West boundary: Sistering & Fort York Food Bank (just west of Bathurst St.)
- East boundary: University Settlement House (just west of McCaul St.)