Background Report for the
Community Emergency Food Response Plan

LEARNING FROM EMERGENCY FOOD RESPONSE DURING COVID-19

IN THUNDER BAY, ONTARIO

2020 - 2021

Thunder Bay + Area
Food Strategy
Connecting Food and Community

community safety
& well-being
THUNDER BAY

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Indigenous Food Circle

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January 2022

Thunder Bay & Area Food Strategy
Ontario, Canada

THANK YOU TO ALL INVOLVED

This research would not have been possible without a community-wide effort, beginning with the knowledge and lived experience of the many people who filled out surveys about their experience accessing emergency food supports during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ongoing participation and information sharing of numerous service-providing organizations who were on the frontlines of providing emergency food support, alongside the direction and feedback provided by the Advisory Committee, helped to make this comprehensive look at the community's emergency food response process possible (see Appendix A & B for all names).

Learning forward doesn't happen alone. May our collective work be stronger in the future!

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Cover photos compliments of Roots to Harvest, Matawa First Nations Education, Indigenous Food Circle, and the Northwestern Ontario Women's Centre.

CITATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides crucial data and support for the development of a Community Emergency Food Response Plan (CEFRP) for the City of Thunder Bay, Ontario, located on the Traditional Territory of the Anishnaabe people, today represented by Fort William First Nation, as signatories to the Robinson-Superior Treaty of 1850.

The project was led by the Thunder Bay & Area Food Strategy (TBAFS) in partnership with the Community Safety & Well-Being Council, a branch of the City of Thunder Bay. The plan aims to increase coordination, communication, and collaboration among service-providing organizations supporting food access during emergencies (i.e., unforeseen circumstances). The report presents information from the experiences of service providers and recipients of emergency food support during the early months of the COVID- 19 pandemic to set the groundwork for developing an emergency food response plan for vulnerable populations in the City of Thunder Bay, and potentially regional communities, in the face of future emergencies.

The report concludes with a set of broad lessons learned about emergency food response in the city, an analysis of opportunities that could come from future coordinated responses, and a big picture look at how a CEFRP could be structured. The report also makes a set of recommendations targeted at local organizations, First Nations Governments, Municipal, Provincial and Federal Governments, non-governmental funders, and local businesses and food producers. They focus on enhancing food access during emergencies and addressing the systemic issue of chronic food insecurity.

The next steps in the process of developing a CEFRP involve sharing this report widely with key stakeholders, developing a research-informed plan framework, and obtaining a commitment for participation from key stakeholders along with relevant information to update the network database. Ultimately, the goal of the CEFRP is to create a more resilient community and ensure that everyone has dignified access to food during times of emergency, with a specific focus on vulnerable peoples.

Photo credit: Indigenous Food Circle

1 BACKGROUND & CONTEXT OF THE CEFRP PROJECT

The Context of Thunder Bay

The city of Thunder Bay occupies the Traditional Territory of the Anishnaabe people, today represented by Fort William First Nation, as signatories to the Robinson-Superior Treaty of 1850. Perched on the northern shore of Gitchi Gumee (renamed Lake Superior) amidst the boreal forest of the Canadian Shield, Thunder Bay is a regional service hub for communities in the northwest due to its healthcare and social services and commercial activity.

The most recent census shows that the population of Thunder Bay's census metropolitan area is 121,621, with approximately 13% of people identifying as Indigenous.[1] A study conducted in 2020 by Anishnawbe Mushkiki puts the number of Indigenous people at 2-3 times higher than what was reported on the census.[2] While there are many settler towns in the region that use Thunder Bay as a hub, the northwestern region is home to over 80 First Nation reserves who, along with their political and territorial representation, play an active role in the city.

Despite the prominent role that Indigenous peoples play in the lifeblood of Thunder Bay, anti-Indigenous racism (and racism in general) make up part of the city's social fabric, connected to its unique experience with settler colonialism. As an urban centre, Thunder Bay also struggles with common challenges faced by other settler cities in Canada—addiction, homelessness, crime, inadequate affordable housing, food insecurity, etc.

Photo credit: TBnewswatch

According to data from the Lakehead Social Planning Council conducted in 2018, 15% of the population in Thunder Bay earn less than the Low-Income Measure. Data has also shown that racialized people, particularly Black and Indigenous peoples in Canada, are more likely to live a low-income lifestyle which contributes to increased risk factors for other social determinants of health, including being food insecure. These risk factors contribute to making people more vulnerable to experiencing adverse situations, especially during times of crisis.

Catalyst for the Project

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the increased need to access barrier-free food for vulnerable people was made clear. While the response by service-providing organizations was both impactful and effective, it became clear that better community-level coordination for food access during emergencies would benefit both recipients and providers.

The catalyst for this project came from an assessment of emergency food support systems with urban Indigenous organizations in Thunder Bay conducted through the Indigenous Food Circle (IFC) in May of 2020. The assessment revealed:

- That the response at the community level was fragmented, with limited collaboration between existing food access infrastructure and other community organizations.
- The need for a more integrated and effective approach to food access during times of emergency.

Sharing the findings with participating organizations led to a desire to collaboratively develop a Community Emergency Food Response Plan.

1 Statistics Canada. (2017a). Focus on Geography series, Census 2016.
2 Smylie, J. (2020). Our Health Counts Thunder Bay: An inclusive community-driven health survey for Indigenous peoples in Thunder Bay.

Purpose of the Project

The process of developing a Community Emergency Food Response Plan (CEFRP) aims to support vulnerable populations, who may face food insecurity on a regular basis, during a community-level emergency where increased pressures on food access may be experienced.

In order to support vulnerable populations with food access during an emergency, the CEFRP project aims to **increase coordination, communication, and collaboration** among organizations supporting food access of vulnerable populations to plan for **safer, more efficient, and equitable response to food security** at a community level during emergencies. The purpose of this report is to gather and share back information from the experiences of service providers and recipients of emergency food support during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to set the groundwork for developing an emergency food response plan.

In Partnerships, the Work Begins

In the summer of 2020, the Thunder Bay and Area Food Strategy (TBAFS) took on the role of coordinating the development of the CEFRP in partnership with Community Safety & Well-Being Thunder Bay (CSWB-TB), a branch of the City of Thunder Bay.

The TBAFS is a network of over 50 organizations and businesses in the Thunder Bay region that aims to build a healthy, equitable, and sustainable food system through the implementation of research, planning, policy, and program development.

The City of Thunder Bay's Community Safety & Well-Being Council is a 45-member, multi-sectoral advisory committee to the Thunder Bay City Council, that focuses on addressing risk factors for crime and victimization and promoting community safety and well-being.

After securing this key partnership and funding from the Thunder Bay Community Foundation, the TBAFS hired a project coordinator and established a 10-person Advisory Committee to guide the process. The Advisory is made up of representatives from the TBAFS, CSWB-TB, non-profit organizations and businesses (see Appendix A for a complete list of names and affiliations). With these key pieces in place, the project began in the fall of 2020.
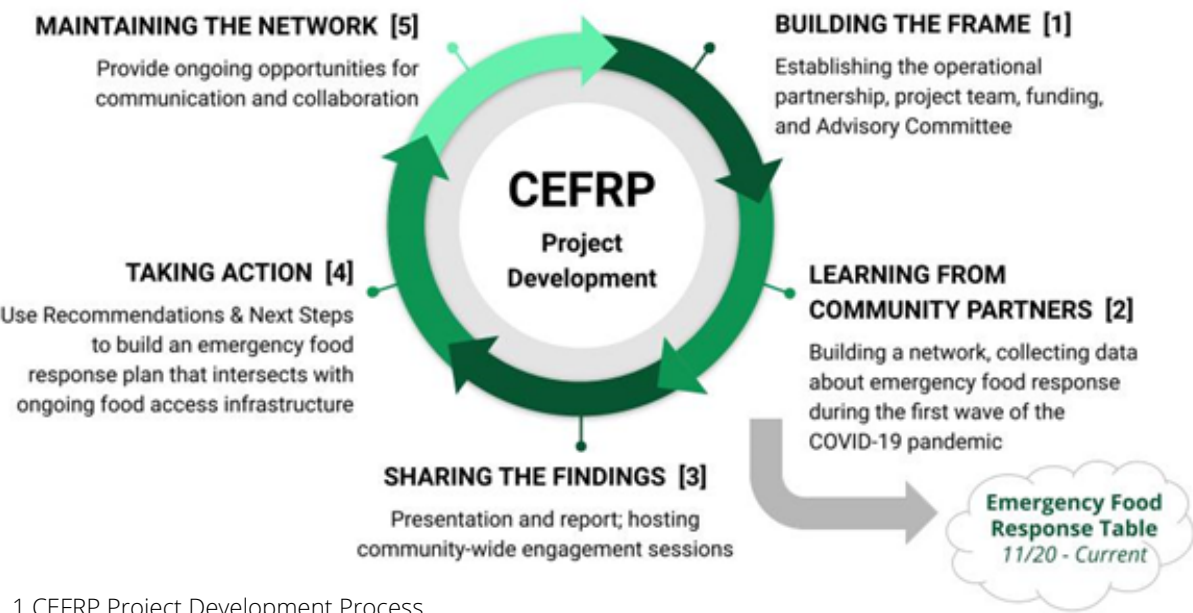
Fig. 1 CEFRP Project Development Process

Value of a Community Emergency Food Response Plan

The value of having an emergency food response plan in our community is that it:

Makes space for big picture or **systems-level thinking and approaches** that are more interdependent and can address many different levels of response

Provides greater possibilities for **collaboration, partnership and relationship building** across service providers

Fig. 2 CEFRP web of local collaboration

Builds bridges between many levels of systems involved in food response

Centres frontline organizations who are the most adept at providing food-related support and responding to crisis in directing this process, backed by evidence

Ultimately, a plan like this can contribute towards increased individual and community resilience, not only in times of emergency, but in addressing the ongoing impacts of chronic food insecurity caused by low incomes. This type of collaborative response also offers an opportunity for coalition building that can make powerful, collective statements for greater impact.

What is food insecurity?

In Canada, household food insecurity means inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints. [3]

Food insecurity can range from:
- Worrying about running out of food
- Limiting food selection or choice due to a lack of money for food
- Compromising quality and/or quantity due to a lack of money for food
- At its most severe, it can mean missing meals, reducing intake of food, or going days without food.[4]

Chronic food insecurity refers to long-term or persistent inability to meet minimum food requirements over an extended period of time. It results from extended periods of poverty, lack of assets, and/or inadequate access to financial resources.[5] Facing chronic food insecurity can have many other impacts related to one's physical and mental health.
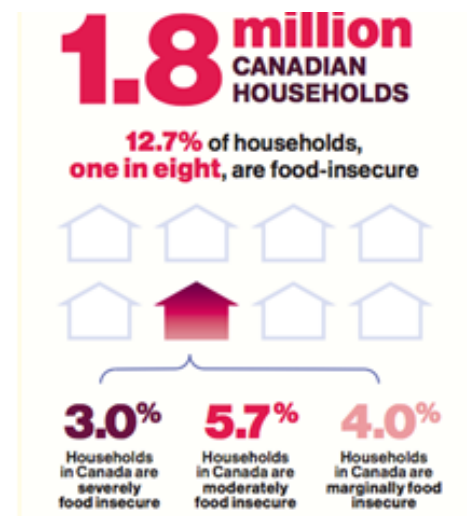

Fig. 3 Food insecurity prevalence in Canada, Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020

Who is most impacted by food insecurity in Canada?

Food insecurity in Canada has been an identified issue since the 1980s; however the problem has continued to affect more people. In 2017-18, Statistics Canada reported the highest national estimate of food insecurity than any previously reported at 12.7% of households, representing 4.4 million people.[6]

Fig. 4 Food insecure households' main source of income, Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020

Due to the presence of systemic oppression-based poverty in Canada, there are many demographic groups that disproportionally experience food insecurity: low-income households; lone-parent families; people who rent, rather than own, their homes; children; Indigenous people; racialized people; single parents; newcomers; and residents of Northern communities. Stratified across race, the 2017-18 Canadian statistics show **Black and Indigenous households** to be disproportionately affected by food insecurity, with prevalence rates of **28.9%** and **28.2%,** respectively.[7]

Despite clear evidence that food insecurity is linked to disparities in income, the predominant response by the state has been the administering of a food charity model (i.e., food banks). The persistence of the problem, however, has required continued need for emergency food access programs.

3 Tarasuk, V., & Mitchell, A. (2020). *Household Food Insecurity in Canada, 2017-2018*. University of Toronto. https://proof.utoronto.ca/
4, 7 Ibid
5 FAO. (2008). Introduction to the Basic Concepts of Food Security. https://www.fao.org/3/al936e/al936e00.pdf
6 Statistics Canada. (2017a). Focus on Geography series, Census 2016.

Distinguishing between emergency food access & chronic food insecurity

In the context of this work, it is important to clearly distinguish between an emergency at a community level and the state of chronic food insecurity.

The term "emergency" is meant to capture a scenario where unforeseen circumstances have shaped the need for immediate, short-term action. At the same time, this process acknowledges the ways that emergency work overlaps with the work of all-the-

Fig. 5 Intersections between emergency and chronic food insecurity

time systems and actions that address chronic food insecurity in the market-based food system. This plan is focused on addressing the added pressures to chronic food insecurity from unforeseen, community-wide emergencies using systems-level thinking.
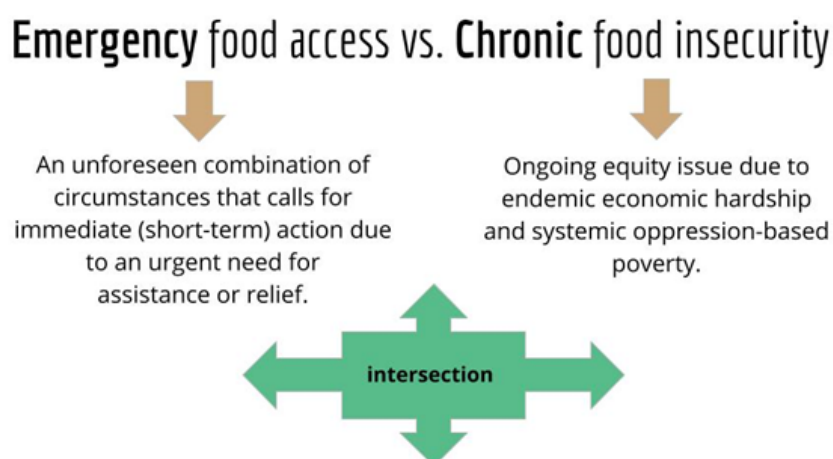
Food access & emergencies

It is known that people living in more secure economic and social situations fare better than vulnerabilized populations during emergencies.[8] A Canadian survey conducted about food access concerns during the first wave of COVID found that those with low income, those who are part of an equity-seeking group, and/or those with health risks reported increased difficulty in accessing food during the first wave of the pandemic. [9]

The COVID-19 pandemic saw an increase in Canadian food insecurity from 4.4 million to 6.2 million people, which was disproportionately felt by communities of Black, Indigenous, people of colour and those with low incomes.[10] The first few months of the pandemic also saw supply shortages due to panic buying that excluded those who did not have the means to stockpile items.
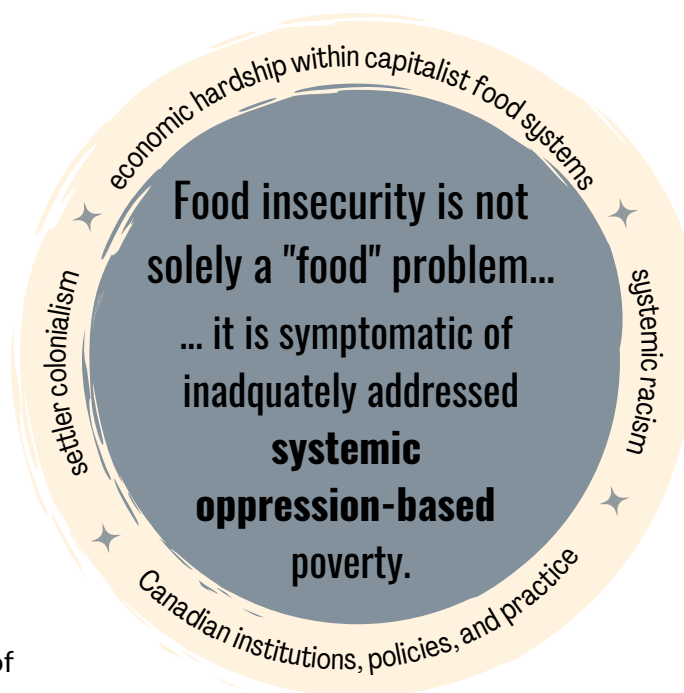
Fig. 6 Systemic oppresssion-based poverty as root cause; Martens et al., (2020) & Tarasuk & Mitchell (2020)

Beginning in March 2020, an influx of funds were given to organizations providing emergency food aid. While this response has been necessary to sustain those facing barriers to food access during the pandemic, concerns are being raised that these stopgap measures "could further entrench a system that will never sufficiently compensate for a lack of adequate incomes and social programs."[11]

Municipalities must prepare for an emergency by tuning into local levels of food insecurity. A report by the Pan American Health Organization (2011) advocates for building community resilience as an essential component in disaster planning and survival and investing time and money prior to an emergency in preparedness borne from communication, planning, and preparation.

8 Fonseca, A. (2021). Hungry for Change: A Community Where no one is Hungry. NorWest Community Health Centres.
9 Knezevic, I., Dong, B.M., & Tyson, H. (2020). Food Access, Concerns and Perceptions During COVID-19 First Wave: Ontario Survey.
10, 11 McNicholl, S., & Curtis, A. (2020). Beyond hunger: The hidden impacts of food insecurity in Canada. In Community Food Centres Canada.

3 DATA COLLECTION & METHODS

The development of a community emergency response plan began with data collection at a community level to understand the food insecurity and access landscape both before and during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic (March–June of 2020). Data collection included surveys and informal interviews with organizations offering food supports and recipients of emergency food supports, as well as the review of relevant secondary documents.

	Organizations	Recipients
Method	• Initial & follow-up surveys • Informal interviews as needed	Survey via paper copy (anonymous)
Number of Participants	46 *only 17 participants completed the follow-up survey*	155
Selection Criteria	Organizations that offered food access support during March-June 2020	Participant accessed emergency food supports during March-June 2020
Recruitment Process	List of organizations to engage was developed by the Advisory Committee and with organization participants. Informal interviews or follow-up questions were asked on an ongoing basis to participating organizations. The follow-up survey went out to all 46 organizations who participated in the original survey to gather quantitative data.	Partnered with 11 frontline organizations to distribute and collect surveys from participants connected with their services. Partner organizations were selected based on their current contact with clients, and diversity of sectors. Participants were given a $10 gift card in appreciation of them sharing their time and knowledge.
Timeline	Initial survey: October 2020-January 2021 Follow-up survey: January 2021-April 2021 Interviews: Ongoing, as needed	November 2020

Fig. 7 Data collection and methods for the CEFRP, 2020–2021

See also *Appendix B – List of Participants* and *Appendix C – Limitations of the Research.*

Presence of Chronic Food Insecurity

According to the most recent data from the Canadian Community Health Survey (2017-2018), Thunder Bay's mean food insecurity rate was 14.2%.[12] Research done by the Lakehead Social Planning Council indicates that approximately 15% of the population of Thunder Bay earns less than the Low-Income Measure, which is $22,133 for a single person and $38,335 for a family of three. This correlation between low income and prevalence of chronic food insecurity is also reflected in the CEFRP recipient survey, where 70% of participants said they accessed food support the year before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Did you access food support the year before COVID-19?

No 30.0%

Yes 70.0%
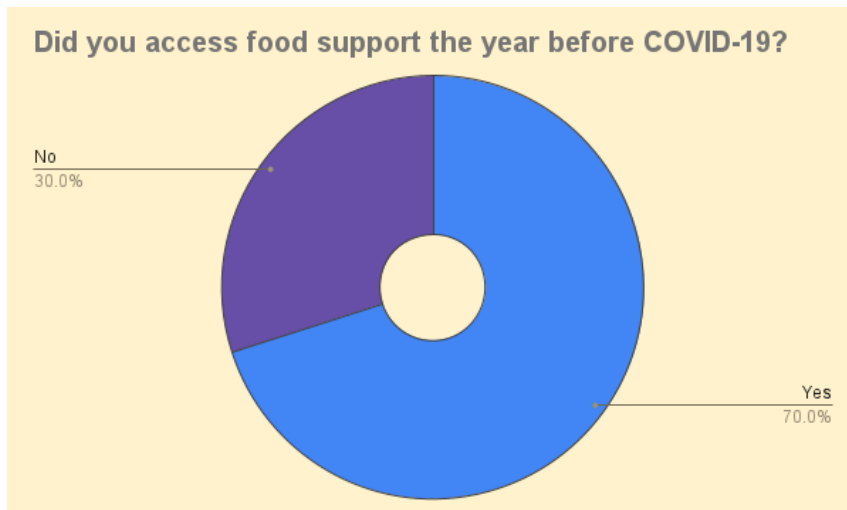
Fig. 8 CEFRP data on if people accessed food support in the year before the pandemic

"Food security is a growing problem in our community and the **impact on children and youth** can be devastating and result in poor school achievement and **long-lasting social problems** that threaten our safety and security and are costly to society."

—*Organization Participant*

Accessing Food

According to the data collected from recipients of pandemic food support, there was a patchwork of different ways that people accessed food before the onset of this emergency:

- The majority of responses indicate **self-sufficiency** in providing oneself and family with food (such as grocery stores and take-out) alongside the **use of food access programs** (such as food banks, community programs, and meal services).

- Additional sources shared under "other" showed methods used to obtain food included support from friends and family, boosting or stealing, or trading.

How did you usually get food before COVID-19?

Chain Grocery Stores
Food Supports
Local Grocery Stores
Take-out or Delivery
Other/Comments
Convenience Stores
Grew Your Own
Thunder Bay Country Market

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90%

Fig. 9 CEFRP data on how people obtained food before the pandemic

12 Thunder Bay District Health Unit. (2018). Profile of the Social Determinants of Health in Thunder Bay District, 2018.

Food Access Infrastructure

Food access infrastructure refers to the organizations and community groups that provide free food to those facing food insecurity on a regular basis, whether clients of a program or through public access food banks. Almost all participating organizations **(91%)** said they offer food as a part of their regular programming. Given that scope, local food access infrastructure in Thunder Bay is as diverse as the needs and strategies that people use to access food when they are food insecure.

This diversity can be seen across a few different indicators:

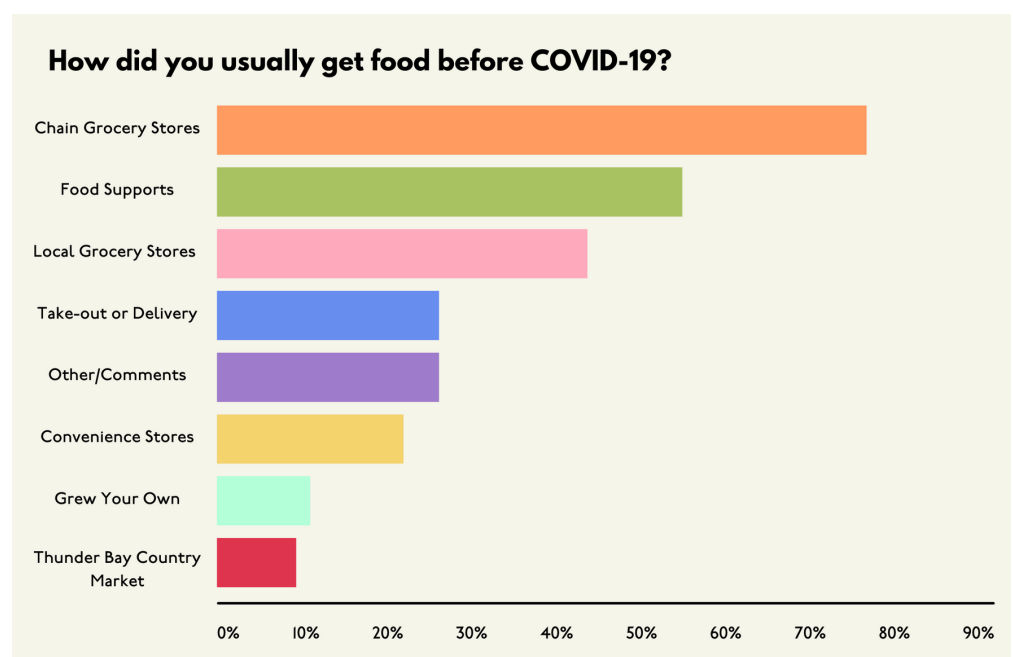- **Intersectoral:** 46 organizations represented the sectors of social services, Indigenous organizations, emergency food, health, mental health, education, emergency shelter, and political/territorial (from highest to lowest frequency).
- **Size**: Most organizations **(61%)** have small-scale operations, operating solely through volunteers or with up to 20 paid staff.
- **Demographics served**: A wide variety of demographics are served by organizations offering food support, demonstrating that vulnerable populations are being served by a variety of different organizations.
- **Services offered**: The most common ways that food is integrated into organizations or programs on a regular basis is through:
  - **Direct offerings of food (43%)** (i.e., refreshments/coffee, food bank/hampers, daily meals, school nutrition, weekly meals, intermittent food hampers)
  - **Offering programs related to food (40%)** (i.e., education and awareness, cooking programs, advocacy, community kitchen, employment-related)
  - **Purchasing and growing food (15%)** (i.e., community garden, Good Food Box, food markets)

While food access infrastructure may typically be thought of as food banks or soup kitchens, Figures 10 and 11 visually show the wide variety of regular food access supports that were offered in Thunder Bay prior to the pandemic. These include subsidized healthy foods, school nutrition programs, skill-building or learning spaces, and community gardens, alongside traditional programs supported by the Regional Food Distribution Agency (RFDA).

Fig. 10 Visual depiction of food support offered by organizations on a regular basis in Thunder Bay pre-COVID-19
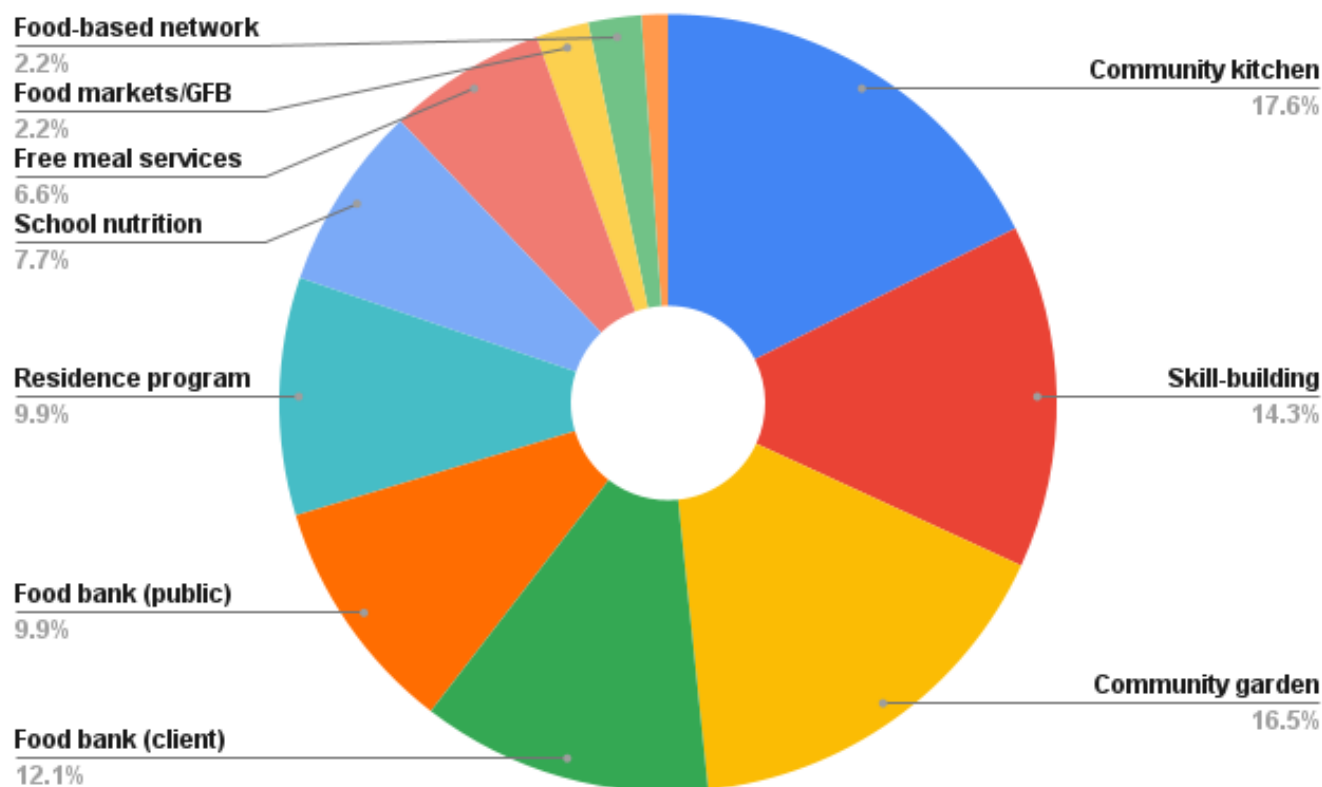
Fig. 11 Type of food support offered by organizations on a regular basis by percentage

What the data also showed that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was no centralized collaboration of food support across the wide variety of service providers. Instead, collaboration happened in a more ad hoc way such as through partnerships among individual organizations or the RFDA's centralized food distribution centre which offers collaboration amongst food banks in the city and region. The Thunder Bay & Area Food Strategy, while a city-wide network, focused predominantly on food advocacy and promotion, not on centralized coordination.

Bird's Eye View of Food Access Infrastructure

What the information tells us is that food access is supported in many ways on an ongoing basis in Thunder Bay:

- Food charity has a strong presence in the community (i.e., food banks, meal programs, school nutrition).
- There is a need for services that offer daily cooked meals.
- There is one central organization (the RFDA) that coordinates, organizes, and distributes free food with a catchment area that includes Thunder Bay, as well as the region of Northwestern Ontario.
- Offering opportunities to cook and eat together forms an important part of many organizations' models for working with people.
- School nutrition is a need in our community and there are many organizations that support this; half of those organizations are Indigenous.
- Only a few organizations are using subsidized or grow-your-own food models to support access to healthy food.

The data also tells us that **food is used by the majority of organizations as a way to connect** through learning, socializing, skill-building, and empowering people. This invokes the importance of relationships in food access models, which act as a trusted contact point in supporting individuals and families make ends meet in many circumstances.

March 2020: Setting the Stage for Food Response in Thunder Bay

On March 16, 2020, a state of emergency was declared due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was followed by widespread shutdowns. The patchwork of food access infrastructure in Thunder Bay did not escape the flood of closures meaning that many of the services and programs people relied on to meet their food and nutrition needs were deemed non-essential and suddenly stopped.

Fig. 12 Closures of food access infrastructure in March 2020

Organizations or spaces that were deemed essential, such as residential programs and daily meal services, were forced to make quick pivots knowing that people's lives depended on their ability to continue to provide food. Other organizations that did not face initial closures saw the increased need of their clients for food and were able to offer some quick initial pivots. More widespread organizational pivots to emergency food access followed this early response as the pandemic wore on.

Food Access Needs During the First Wave

The immediate instability within food access infrastructure was disruptive for people who use food supports on a regular basis because:

- There was no one clear source of information about where to get food.
- It became difficult to reach regular service providers.
- There was increased fear and anxiety about getting sick.

Moreover, there was an increased need for food due to the chronic pressures of poverty on top of sudden, wide-scale job loss with no adequate social safety net in place; **25%** of recipients cited job loss as a reason why they needed to access food support. The sudden shifts and closures in regular services made it clear that there would be an increase in immediate food insecurity; of the organizations that had data, **91%** saw an increase in the need for food access support between March—June 2020. These observations of increased need were backed up by **30%** of recipients indicating they were new to food insecurity due to the pandemic. During the first wave, almost half of recipients **(48%)** reported using food access supports between 25 times a month.

When asked why food access supports were needed during the pandemic, recipient responses fit into four broad categories (see Fig. 13). This shows that challenges accessing food came primarily from a lack of income, barriers to regular service access, or health-related constraints of the emergency.

Financial/Income	Changes to Regular Access	Ongoing Access Issues	COVID-19 Speciifc
Groceries too expensive (48%)	Usual programs closed (27%)	Transportation (38%)	Isolation (38%)
Changes to income benefits (27%)	Lack of food at store (20%)	Health issues (27%)	Other - Minimizing exposure (2%)
Job loss (25%)	Didn't know where to go (14%)		
No debit or credit card (15%)			
Other - not enough income (5%)			

Fig. 13 Recipient responses to why food access supports were needed during the pandemic.

Organizational Pivot & Response

Type of Support Offered

The supports offered by organizations during the pandemic fell across three broad categories, with direct offerings of food and assistance in acquiring food being the most significant forms of support. What this tells us is that just as important as the food itself are the wraparound supports that help get food to people, whether that is delivery, information sharing, or offering funds. Most organizations offered some form of both direct and indirect food support.

Direct Offering of Food	Assistance Getting Food	Other
47% - Food Hampers 28% - Offering Meals 28% - Weekly Food Packages 26% - Food Bank 17% - Good Food Box	63% - Referring Clients 52% - Advocating for Clients 45% - Delivering Food Hampers 36% - Providing Gift Cards 21% - Supporting Procurement 15% - Delivering Meals	23% - Other 19% - Provided Funding to Programs/Services

Fig. 14 Types of food support offered during the pandemic by frequency

Changing Landscape

To understand the broad picture of emergency food access support it is important to look at the changes from regular food access infrastructure to get a sense of the organizational pivot that took place.

- **All organizations but one** that served prepared meals continued to do so, in some form.
- **95% of organizations** that offered food banks/hampers continued to do so by the fall of 2020; 12 new organizations joined these efforts.
- **Three school nutrition programs** partnered with the mainstream school system to ensure central access points to families across the city.
- **Majority of client-based programs** reported assisting people by way of referrals and advocacy.
- **Food banks closed and operated one central food bank** from April to June 2020.

Dew Drop Inn
Responsive pivot to meeting daily food needs, fueled by direct community support

Photo credit: Dew Drop Inn

The Dew Drop Inn has been feeding the hungry in Thunder Bay for over 40 years. Prior to March 16, 2020, the Dew offered take-home lunches and sit-down hot meals from their kitchen daily. With the declaration of the pandemic, the organization switched its model overnight to offering cold take-home lunches to ensure that those who depend on these meals could continue to be served while meeting new public health safety regulations.

By September, the Dew added a hearty, hot take-home option for their patrons. Between January—December 2020, the Dew served 110,565 meals, an increase of 25,000 meals from the previous year.

Up until 2018, the Dew Drop Inn relied solely on financial and in-kind support from the community. In both 2018 and 2019, the Dew began to receive funds from the United Way Thunder Bay. This local funding relationship allowed the Dew to quickly access emergency funding at the beginning of the pandemic to ensure no interruption of service to their patrons, as well as helping to cover the increased costs of food, supplies, and staff time associated with making nutritious take-home lunches. Executive Director Michael Quibell notes that "Funding allowed the Dew to maintain a high standard of quality; without these funds, our lunches would have been minimal."

Pivot Time

A key element of emergency response is how quickly regular operations can be pivoted to meet the newly arising demands of the emergency. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **37%** of organizations took less than a week to pivot
- **34%** reported only taking 1—3 weeks to pivot

When asked what resources organizations needed to serve clients when pivoting to emergency food support, the top needs broadly relate to collaboration, being able to access the resources needed, and distribution.

What resources were needed to serve clients when pivoting to emergency food support?
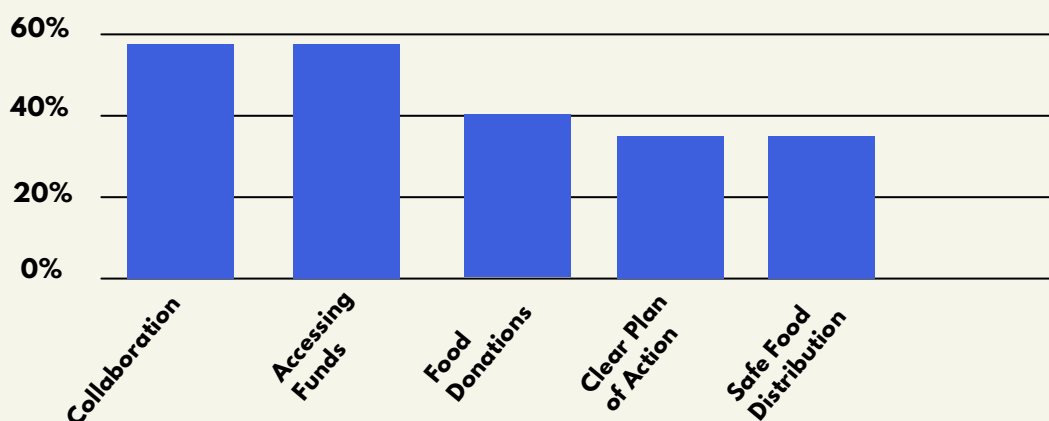
Fig. 15 Resources needed to pivot to emergency food support by percentage

Good Food Box

Resilience of a small community-based organization during a time of crisis

Photo credit: Northwestern Ontario Women's Centre

The local Thunder Bay Good Food Box program, administered by the Northwestern Ontario Women's Centre, demonstrated resilience in maintaining its ability to provide people with food during the pandemic due in large part to the organization's flexibility, nimbleness, and ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

After taking a step back in March 2020 to regroup and adhere to new public health regulations, this small community-based organization adapted its provision, packing, and distribution models while offering boxes free of charge from April – September of 2020 (made possible by quickly dispersed emergency funding).

From April – September 2020, a labour intensive process made up of a handful of volunteers packed new cardboard boxes (rather than reusable totes) on a rental truck (in place of a community hall) three times a month (compared to the previous one). In order to maintain connection with pre-existing regular volunteers and customers, the GFB worked with community partners to find creative ways to distribute more widely despite the lack of access to previous distribution points (i.e., pop-up Host Sites in parking lots).

From March—December 2020, the GFB distributed 6,417 boxes of fresh fruits and vegetables throughout the city and regional First Nation communities, an increase of more than 2,000 boxes from the previous year.

Responses that Worked Well

Top responses to the question of **what worked well** in pivoting to emergency food response were:

- *Creation of innovative solutions* to meeting needs, which required adaptability and flexibility on the part of teams and organizations.
- *Collaboration* with other organizations, which allowed for greater pivoting and adjustment.
- The *connecting role that food and food delivery can play* in supporting people with a variety of non-food-related needs at the same time (i.e., health, housing, etc.) during emergencies.
- Importance of *building and maintaining relationships* during times of crisis.

In regards to **food waste,** the majority of organizations **(82%)** who offered emergency food supports did not find that food waste was an issue in their service delivery.

- Of those who did experience food waste, barriers included inadequate or limited facilities and difficulty with client communication, which could be overcome with increased organizational collaboration.

Trends by responding organizations regarding **funds and measurable food supports** indicate that:

- The most significant increase in expenses was in the food itself, with eight times more spent on food in 2020 than what was spent in 2019.
- In 2019, no organization reported spending their food-designated dollars on transportation, whereas in 2020 four of the organizations that shared funds stated they were used for transportation-related costs.
- Four times as much was spent on packaging in 2020.

> "The breadth and reach of emergency food response work was made possible because of the ways that people came together."
>
> —*Organization participant*

Indigenous Food Circle
Advocating for & taking action to support regional Indigenous communities with food access and sovereignty

The Indigenous Food Circle (IFC) was uniquely positioned to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic with regional First Nation communities due to the relationships that have been built through ongoing network building since 2016. These relationships allowed for the IFC to support communities with immediate food access needs in the region, while advocating for Indigenous food sovereignty and longer-term sustainability with the funds made available for emergency relief.

This Indigenous-led response to the pandemic included:

Photo credit: Indigenous Food Circle

- *Immediate food support to nine road-accessible First Nations through a partnership with the Good Food Box program.*
- *Advocating for the continuation of the Northern Fruit & Vegetable Program funding while expanding the reach of the program into an additional 13 communities.*
- *Advocating for and coordinating direct emergency food funding to remote Indigenous communities across Treaty 3 and 9.*
- *Assessing emergency food response in the early months of the pandemic with urban Indigenous organizations, providing the catalyst to this plan.*

Challenges in Emergency Food Response

While quick pivots occurred for most organizations, **43%** of organizations reported facing challenges with pivoting to offer emergency food access. These fell across five categories (see Fig. 16): organizational capacity, funding, COVID-19 specific, communication-related, and procurement of food.

What challenges did your organization experience in offering emergency food access support?		
Organizational Capacity	**Funding Related**	**COVID-19 Specific**
43% - Needing to pivot 30% - Staffing 17% - Lack of volunteers 2% - Out of date client database	41% - Limited funding 23% - Limited ability to fundraise 19% - Timely access to funds	34% - Health & safety regulations 13% - Out of date pandemic plan
Communication Related	**Procuring Food**	**Other**
32% - Contacting clients 26% - Limited communication about supports at a community level	15% - Procuring large amounts of food 10% - Food donations from regular sources	17% - No challenges 15% - People accessing from multiple places

Fig. 16 Challenges experienced in offering emergency food support

The biggest challenges faced by organizations in offering emergency food access were related to organizational capacity and funding. A specific and impactful capacity issue was the lack of volunteers for food banks, causing them to close when demand was highest.

When asked what kinds of resources their organization could offer to a collaborative community effort for future emergencies, fewer than 10 organizations stated they could offer vehicles, phone lines, or funds. These challenges correlate with some of the most frequent barriers to food access that were experienced by recipients: transportation and communication.

Increased collaboration and coordination efforts with food access could help to alleviate these challenges by working together to efficiently utilize the skills and limited resources of all organizations.

NorWest Community Health Centre
Meeting people's needs through an ongoing health care provider relationship

NorWest CHC provides primary health care services. A core value of NorWest is responding to high-risk, vulnerable and marginalized people who are unable to access health care. From this care provider position, NorWest was well positioned to continue offering essential services and maintaining connection with their clients when the pandemic hit. It became clear early on that there was an increased need for food support among some of their most vulnerable clients including seniors, new mothers, and those accessing harm reduction services.

Photo credit: NorWest CHC

NorWest pivoted their operations to include emergency boxes that went out to families or individuals in need including food, baby supplies, school activities, hygiene supplies, and medical supplies (e.g. insulin, puffers, needles). They managed to secure funding on an ad hoc basis into 2021 and used their agency vehicles to deliver boxes to clients and non-clients regularly.

While the pivot to offering emergency boxes was a challenge, as it was not a part of their regular service model, the organization prioritized responding to needs voiced by the people they serve, in which food insecurity was one of the highest. NorWest's innovative response to increased need demonstrates how much of an asset pre-existing relationships are to ensuring food access during an emergency and how increased partnership with food-supplying organizations could assist in addressing gaps in service during future emergencies.

Regional Food Distribution Association
Centralized food bank model and home delivery service

The Regional Food Distribution Association (RFDA) serves as the primary hub for securing and distributing emergency food across Northwestern Ontario. In other words, they provide bulk quantities of free food to member organizations (i.e., food banks, First Nation and rural communities, organizations) who distribute food directly to those who need it. As such, the RFDA has crucial infrastructure for receiving large quantities of donated food from the food charity system including a warehouse, trucks, an industrial kitchen, and paid staff.

Photo credit: RFDA

When the pandemic hit in early March, large surpluses of food were being donated to the RFDA for distribution throughout the region. At the same time, local food banks began to close, due in large part to their reliance on older volunteers who faced an increased health risk from the virus and were no longer able to provide crucial human capacity to pack and distribute food hampers. These closures, combined with concerns that individuals were attending multiple food bank locations to stock up leaving the system short on supplies, created a significant gap in regular channels for food access. Over the course of March 2020, the RFDA saw the need for emergency food rising daily while the current food bank model struggled to keep up amidst changing public health regulations, leaving the RFDA as the main source of donated food.

Photo credit: RFDA

Working with food bank members, its Board of Directors, and the local Social Planning Council's 211 helpline, the RFDA organized a centralized food bank model to replace the previously piecemeal system of autonomous food banks. Biweekly from April 17—June 26 2020, the RFDA organized the CLE Coliseum as a central receiving and distribution location for food bank hampers with 211 handling all registrations and operational support coming from remaining food bank volunteers and the Salvation Army.

While this model allowed the RFDA to distribute large quantities of food packaged into hampers in order to reduce the handling of items at distribution points, it put a strain on the RFDA's infrastructural capacity. By mid-April, pre-packaged non-perishable hampers began arriving from Feed Ontario and Canada Food Banks that reduced some of this pressure.

Early on, the RFDA also recognized the unique transportation challenges being faced by many clients in accessing distribution points. By the end of March, the RFDA was working with 211 to register people for home deliveries of hampers for those with high-risk conditions, needing to self-isolate, or other barriers to access. When the food bank model began shifting back to independent food bank sites in July, demand was still growing, as was the capacity of the RFDA to handle more food, (especially fresh and frozen perishable items to diversify and increase the healthy food options available at food banks).

Into 2021, pre-packaged hampers, increased provisions of healthy food and deliveries for those in need, and central registration through 211 were still being coordinated and offered by the RFDA demonstrating that the pandemic was a catalyst for important change within the local food bank model.

Recipient Experiences with Food Access Support

Where and what types of support were accessed?

When asked where people accessed food during the early months of the pandemic, recipient responses fell across three broad categories: independently purchased, via community organizations, and via the central food bank. The most predominant types of food support that recipients accessed were hampers from community organizations and food banks followed by meals from programs.

These responses correspond to similar trends that people utilized before the pandemic, which indicate self-sufficiency and the shortfall being made up from a patchwork of sources with meal services, community organizations, and the standard food bank model seeing a similar frequency of use. This indicates that in an emergency, these three sources combined provide crucial food access support.

What Type of Food Access Support Did You Receive?
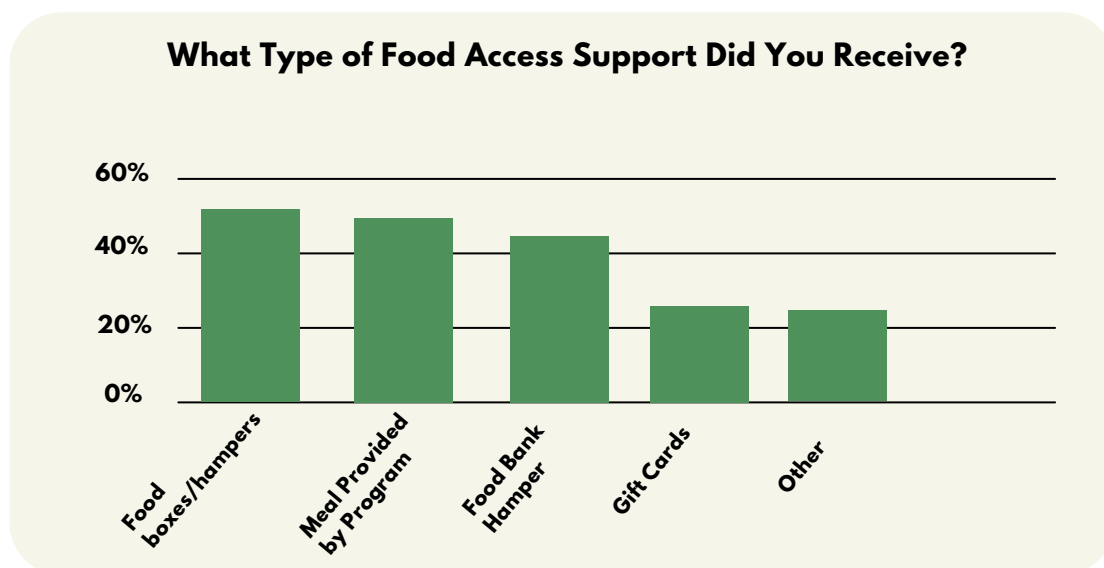
Fig. 17 Food support accessed by recipients during the early months of the pandemic

What Helped Access Food?

When asked what helped in accessing food during the pandemic, recipient responses shared insight into overall best practices, specifically those related to communication and information sharing.

Knowing where to go, having delivery options, and being able to receive help from those they had a previous relationship with were some of the most beneficial way food support was offered.

Access to emergency food was best supported when:

25%   30%   40%   41%

Legend:

Receiving CERB or other income supports

Delivery of food for those without transportation or the ability to leave the house

Receiving help from people they had a previous relationship with

People knew where to go

Fig. 18 Recipient responses to what helped you access food during the first few months of the pandemic

The data also showed that the best way to share information about food access and crisis services with people is **through relationships they already have.**

Fig. 19 shows the most frequent responses to how people heard about food supports. Locally, 211 also played a key role in sharing information.

The 211 helpline helps people navigate the complex network of human services and connects them to community resources. During the pandemic, 211 directed many individuals to daily meal programs, registered people for food banks and coordinated delivery of food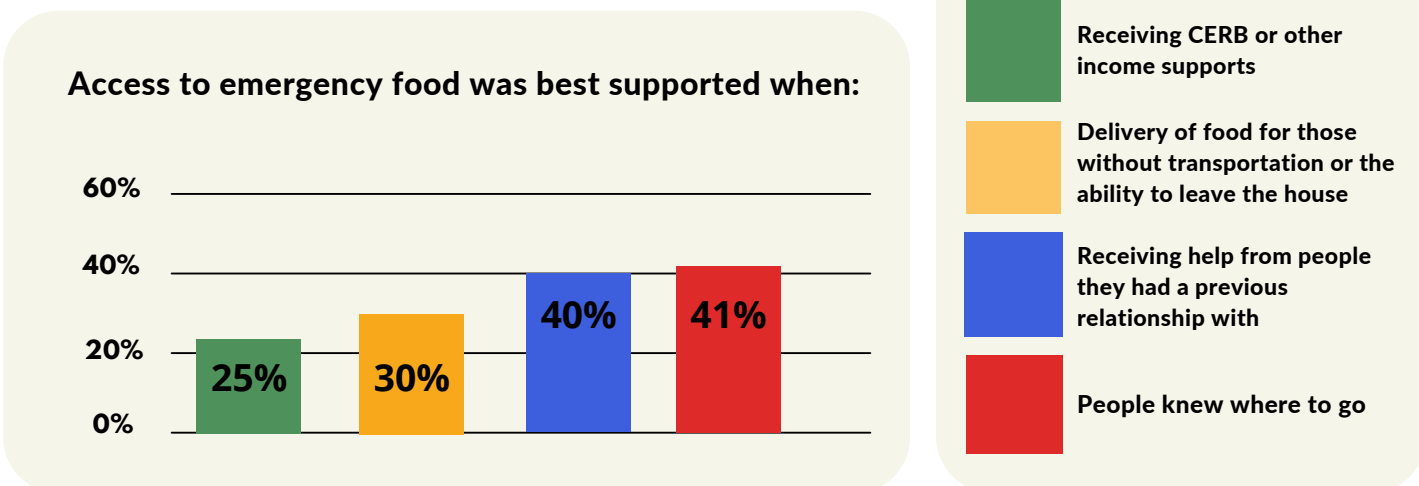 hampers to isolated seniors with mobility issues. **A quarter of recipients** who responded to the survey question of how they heard about food access supports **selected 211**.
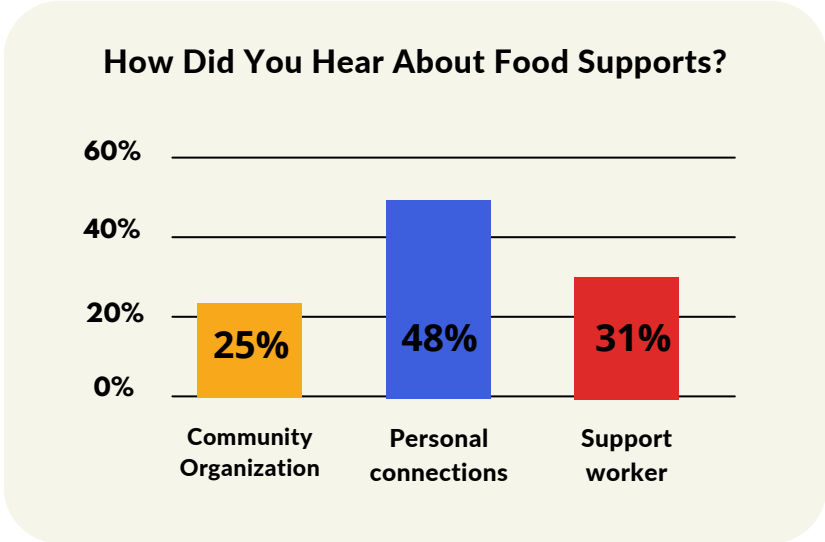
How Did You Hear About Food Supports?

Fig. 19 Recipient responses to how you heard about food supports

Information and service availability changed frequently, especially at the start of the pandemic. Further research needs to be conducted to evaluate the overall effectiveness of information sharing among agencies and the community's awareness of food access during this time. Determining what percentage of recipients had access to telephone and/or internet services, and evaluating how service providers share information about their food access supports, will help identify what strategies are most effective to create awareness of new, or changes to existing services.

> "The delivery option was fantastic. It made me feel good to not potentially be exposed to COVID."

> "Still being able to see the positive OKC staff boosts your spirit."

> "I'm so glad that the Dew Drop and other food suppliers were open at the time. Many thanks to all."

What were the barriers to accessing food?

The data tells us that the main barriers for recipients in accessing food support during the COVID-19 pandemic had less to do with the source of the crisis (a virus) and more about how food access infrastructure was working. The barriers selected fell across five main categories: organizational requirements/logistics, access-related, communication-related, COVID-19 specific, and issues with food offered.

What made it harder to get food during COVID-19?

Organizational requirements	Access related issues	Communication related
33% - Normal services closed	46% - Transportation	25% - No internet or phone
22% - Need to register	20% - Health Issues	20% - Didn't know when/where
20% - Location of pick-up	10% - No childcare	18% - Lack of info about service
18% - ID requirements	9% - Mobility challenges	
COVID-19 specific	**Issues with food offered**	**Other**
37% - Fear of contracting virus	14% - Wasn't what was needed	16% - I felt uncomfortable
	13% - Wasn't normally eaten	15% - No challenges
	12% - Not enough fresh food	10% - No set address

Fig. 20 Recipient responses about barriers to accessing food

The barriers identified provide crucial insight into the ways that service-providing organizations can take action to break down barriers to accessing food during emergencies. While some barriers are out of the hands of organizations—such as fear of contracting the virus, childcare, or people's mobility or health issues—many of these barriers organizations can actively work towards removing, especially when working together.

> "It was much easier to communicate to staff, now seems so distant. No touch, no hugs, interactions—pass the food—don't touch, breathe… ."
>
> —Recipient Participant

Role of Partnership & Coordination

Before the pandemic, there was no centralized communication or coordination among the wide network of food-providing organizations, a situation that led to the need for this research and a more coordinated food response in future emergencies. The data shows that there is an identified need for increased collaboration and communication at a community level when it came to emergency food response.

- Organizations said that in the onset and early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, **clear communication and collaboration** with other agencies **(58%)** and a **clear plan of action (36%)** were needed to serve their clients when pivoting to emergency food access.
- A quarter of respondents commented that **a lack of communication about food supports at a community level was challenging**.

Organizations were asked to share an example of a positive partnership or collaboration with others outside their organization during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and **(89%)** of organizations responded to this question, which indicated many positive partnership happened throughout the pandemic! As well, **(72%)** of organizations also explicitly named another (or multiple) local-level partnerships, implying that in times of crisis, the inclination to work together to ensure the needs of vulnerable people are being met is already strong within our community.

When asked what made these partnerships or collaborations positive, **creative problem solving** and having a **shared vision** were the most frequently cited assets in the majority of partnerships.

It was clear however there is room for improvement in partnership development, particularly in regards to communication, sustainability, and the creation of a common space in which to build and deepen relationships.
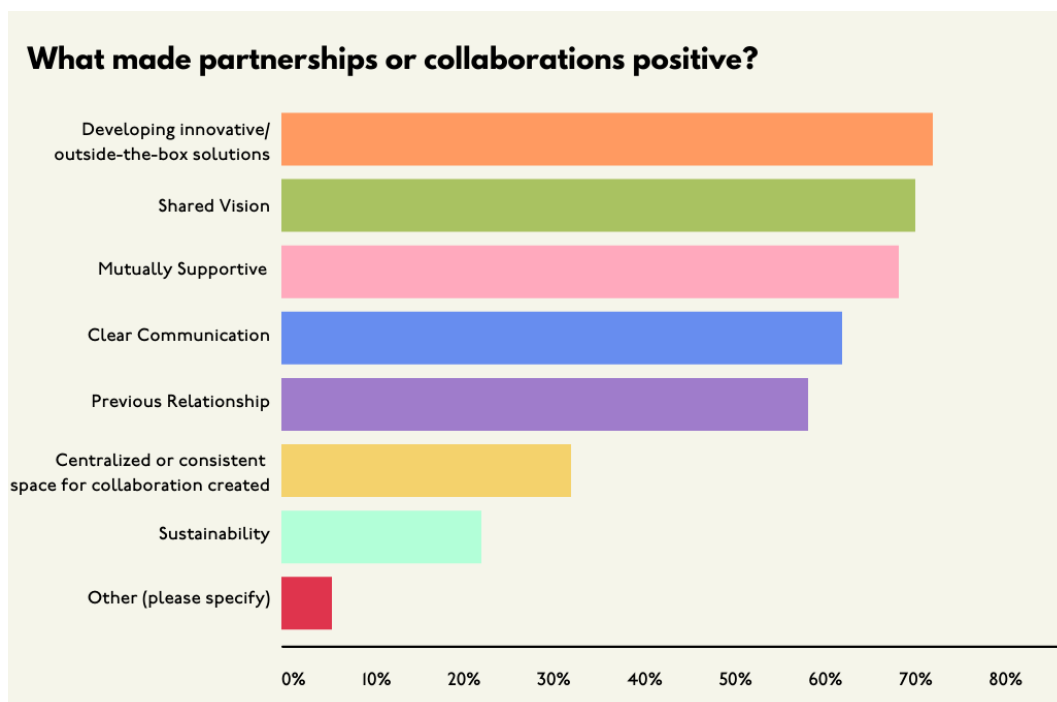

What made partnerships or collaborations positive?

Fig. 21 Organization responses to what made partnerships or collaborations positive

Roots to Harvest
A community-centred partnership approach to emergency food response

Prior to the pandemic Roots to Harvest had been using food as a tool to connect people, primarily by offering employment and experiential education opportunities to young people through urban agriculture, which created spaces for selling and sharing locally produced food with the wider community. As a core community-based food organization with crucial infrastructure—an industrial kitchen, paid staff, flexible finances, and an adaptable program model—Roots to Harvest was uniquely positioned to respond to the increased need for food that the pandemic created. Their response was to turn to community partners, longstanding and newly formed, and ask what they needed to best serve their clients.

Photo credit: Roots to Harvest

Over the course of 2020, and continuing into 2021, Roots to Harvest formed needs-based partnerships with 20 organizations to support food access during this time of crisis. Support has included cooking and packing take-away meals, purchasing and delivering healthy snacks, packing and distributing school food bags, packing and distributing hampers for specific populations, processing food when capacity was low, and launching a community food market in a priority neighbourhood. Roots to Harvest's approach to emergency food response centred relationships with organizations and of organizations to the people they serve to creatively address food access challenges during an unprecedented time.

Ad hoc Coordination & Planning Tables

While central coordination was a challenge, due in large part to the fact that it did not exist prior to the pandemic (specifically within food and at a broad cross-sectoral level) this does not mean that it was absent.

There were two collaborations relevant to emergency food response that occurred from March 2020 and into 2021:
- The **Vulnerable Populations Table** hosted by the City of Thunder Bay
- The **Community Response to Food Access Table** hosted by Roots to Harvest
  - *Which has since turned into the Emergency Food Response Table hosted by TBAFS*

Both of these spaces carved out crucial space for collaboration and coordination to occur among organizations supporting vulnerable people during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite chronic issues underpinned by systemic oppression-based poverty that existed within the community prior to the pandemic, organizations were often working in silos or small-scale partnerships. The pandemic has created an opportunity to build more relationships, aimed at finding innovative solutions to systemic problems, throughout the food sector. These spaces have provided necessary coordination and many lessons learned about collaboration and will help to form a vision for collaborative emergency food response in the future.

> "It was inspiring to see people step up, come together, pool resources, and find new ways of working together. The collaboration and tables that the pandemic was a catalyst for will see stronger networks, information sharing, and increased willingness to work together flowing from this experience."
>
> *- Organization Participant*

Funding

Due to new and increased costs associated with food support (such as gift cards, take-away packaging, delivery needs, and accessing larger quantities of food), the data showed that the work of offering emergency food would not have been possible without additional funds:

- **58%** of organizations surveyed **received additional funds** to provide emergency food support, all of whom had offered some form of food support before the pandemic.
- Of those, **89%** said they would not have been able to or might not have been able to provide emergency food supports without those funds.

According to the **58%** of organizations that accessed additional funding, the sources of additional funds were varied: *

- **65%** accessed funds only from local sources e.*g. TBCF, United Way, DSSAB, Red Cross, City of Thunder Bay, and donations*
- **34%** accessed funds only from external sources e.g. *Government and national level foundations, charities, corporations, etc.*
- **21%** accessed from both local and external sources

*See Appendix D for more details

Accessing Funds: Challenges & Successes

Along with increased costs and the need for more resources, providing emergency food support comes with a host of challenges and successes in accessing additional funds. The **most prevalent challenges** shared were the uncertainty and risk that was associated with taking on emergency response (i.e., not sure when and if the funds would come) and the time pressure to submit proposals and get started with the work, which can lead to hasty decisions. Others also spoke about the administrative burden associated with receiving additional funds and that emergency funds must be spent on specific supports and cannot be used to fill in funding gaps from lost revenue sources such as fundraisers.

The most prevalent responses when asked what made it **easier to access additional funding** were previous relationships and community support, knowing where to access funds, and the expedited processes offered by many funders. Organizational capacity to search, receive, and manage funds was also mentioned, alongside adjustments made by funders to have easy application processes and quick turnarounds releasing funds.

Thunder Bay Community Foundation & United Way of Thunder Bay
Quick creation and execution of a Joint COVID-19 Community Relief Fund

Within days of the declaration of a global pandemic, United Way of Thunder Bay recognized that COVID-19 presented a significant threat to the community and decided to create a COVID-19 community relief fund. Upon launching this initiative, the United Way received a call from the Thunder Bay Community Foundation (TBCF) asking if they could partner to combine their efforts. Thus the Joint COVID-19 Community Relief Fund was launched. By the end of March 2020, the fund had opened an easily accessible, streamlined application portal that utilized existing technology from the TBCF, with applications reviewed by a joint allocation panel.

Following soon after the launch of the joint fund was the announcement of the Emergency Community Support Fund by the federal government, which was to be allocated to Community Foundations and United Ways across the country. Once again, the United Way and TBCF decided to join forces. Thanks to this quickly formulated partnership that leveraged national and local resources, the joint funding processes of the United Way and TBCF distributed over $1.5 million in funds from March to December 2020. The COVID-19 Community Relief Fund saw the distribution of just over $300,000 to 32 local Thunder Bay grants and the Emergency Community Support Fund distributed $1.3 million to 77 individual grants, spanning across the region of Northern Ontario. Overall, the joint fund made it easier for community organizations to access funds quickly while allowing the flexibility to innovate their delivery model based on evolving needs. This partnership also supported deeper collaboration among community partners.

6 LESSONS LEARNED IN EMERGENCY FOOD RESPONSE

Sharing lessons learned from emergency food response must first reiterate that chronic food insecurity is an all-the-time issue in the community of Thunder Bay, and one that is made worse by emergency situations; during the early stages of the pandemic, 30% of recipients of food support reported being new to food insecurity. Barriers related to income inequality and health challenges pose all the time risks for vulnerable populations and addressing these risks has created an all-the-time food access infrastructure that is present in the community and has the means to mobilize during times of community-scale emergencies.

Lessons learned about emergency food response in Thunder Bay fall under six key categories, outlined below:

Changing Needs, Changing Model

- Community organizations, emergency meal services, and food banks combine to provide the essential nature of the food support system.
- During emergencies, food support infrastructure changes. Getting food directly to people through food hampers or boxes and prepared meals becomes a major priority.
- The charitable food system and access to emergency funds makes this shift possible.

Emergency Funds

- There was a significant increase in organizational funds spent on food costs, as well as transportation/delivery and packaging.
- More than half of organizations that provided food support needed additional funds to do this.
- Local sources of emergency funds made up more than half of emergency food response dollars.
- Knowing where to access funds and expedited processes made acquiring funds easier.

Barriers to Access

- The main barriers to accessing food support had less to do with the source of the crisis than how food access infrastructure was operating in an emergency situation.
  - *e.g. organizational requirements for access, lack of information, closing access points, transportation*
- Relationship-centred models were successful in connecting with hard-to-reach populations and ensuring non-food needs were also being met.
- Only offering one centralized location for public access food hampers was a barrier for many.

Coordination & Collaboration

- There was no coordination of food support across service-providing organizations in the early days of the pandemic, which lead to siloed pivots.
- Increased collaboration would have made it easier for organizations to pivot to food response.
- The pandemic created an opportunity to form ad hoc collaborative spaces, which were able to support a stronger response and set the groundwork for future coordination and planning.

Communication

- Initially, there was no one, clear source of reliable information about where to access food support.
- Not knowing where to access food support was listed as one of the main challenges facing those trying to access food support.
- Cross-sectoral communication among service-providing organizations about available food supports was lacking early on in the response.
- Support 211 in offering centralized information.

Capacity Issues

- Less than half of service-providing organizations were able to pivot their operations in under a week; the majority of those with quick pivots deal with crisis situations on a regular basis or have smaller, more nimble operations.
- Organizations that already provide daily meal services are well equipped to continue doing so, with the majority seeing no interruption to services at the onset of the pandemic.
- Organizations that rely predominantly on volunteers (i.e., food banks) are more susceptible to facing challenges in pivoting operations.

Opportunities of a Coordinated Approach

When service-providing groups and organizations have to take on all components of emergency food response by themselves—from procurement and packaging to distribution and accessing funding—the capacity of our community resources in meeting the needs of vulnerable people becomes stretched in many ways.
In recognizing that, the opportunities offered by a coordinated approach to food response can allow for:

1 Collaboration that makes for the **best use of available community resources**

- When an emergency hits, there is a finite amount of resources that become available, including food, funds, and human capacity. Developing a shared vision for how to action food response at a community level means that when an emergency strikes, key stakeholders are able to play a more targeted role in supporting a community-wide response based on their particular strengths and assets.

2 Development of a **database of service-providing organizations** and their resources

- Such a database allows a cross-sectoral group of organizations to get connected quickly while already having an understanding of which organizations may be able to provide what resources (*i.e., food, refrigerators, freezers, vehicles, phone lines, kitchens, spaces for storage and packaging, flexible funds, contact with hard to reach groups, etc.*)

3 Coordinating the **acquisition and distribution of emergency funds** at a community level

- Additional resources become available (and are required) to address food security needs during an emergency; however, there are more collaborative ways that funds can be sourced and distributed to best meet the needs of the community. A coordinated network could help to relieve the administrative burden on organizations that are already stretched thin by having a core group of people with fundraising skills and know-how work to secure funds into a central source that has the flexibility to distribute funds more quickly and responsively.

4 **Centralizing procurement and packaging** efforts

- Not all service-providing organizations can pivot quickly to procure, package, and distribute take-home food boxes during an emergency. At the same time, our community has a robust system of food access infrastructure is that is adept at procuring and packing food boxes and can pivot quickly in an emergency. Centralizing procurement and packaging efforts within these key organizations can help to relieve the burden on smaller organizations that have more limited capacity, yet tremendous reach with those who need food.

5 Prioritizing **relationship-centered models** of food distribution

- The research has demonstrated that relationships and connections to others form a crucial part of food access during emergencies. Previous relationships form an important part of the web of food access infrastructure as it makes it easier to know what supports are available and where to go. Prioritizing a relationship-centred model means recognizing that food connects—it creates opportunities to touch base with people about non-food needs that may also require support during emergencies and support autonomy in food access.

6 **Providing barrier-free access** to food support during times of emergency

- Service-providing organizations have a lot of power in deciding the parameters around who can access food and how they can do that, which the data shows can lead to some of the biggest barriers to access. Barrier-free access can mean removing the need for registration and ID; keeping regular locations open wherever possible; offering varied pick-up locations and delivery options; providing clear and consistent information; ensuring a welcoming, respectful space; and offering healthy, fresh, and culturally appropriate food as much as possible.

7 Providing **streamlined communication** among organizations and to the public

- Making decisions and taking action as a coordinated body means that all involved organizations have a representative who can share key information with their organization, as well as clear and up-to-date information to share with those needing to access emergency food.
- Streamlined communication also means that there are people who can focus explicitly on sharing information with the public through a wide range of platforms—social media, radio, news media, pamphlets, 211, etc.

8 Ensuring **First Nation and other regional communities** are considered and consulted

- As a hub for many communities in Northern Ontario, a coordinated approach to emergency food response must also consider the needs, autonomy, and unique challenges of neighbouring communities.

7 BUILDING A COMMUNITY EMERGENCY FOOD RESPONSE PLAN

The purpose of this research and report was to inform the development of a Community Emergency Food Response Plan (CEFRP), based on up-to-date information and learning from the experiences of food response during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are too many different types of emergencies to plan for the specifics of each, thus the development CEFRP can best be understood as creating the infrastructure of a parachute—made up of key resources and relationships—that can be activated in the face of any emergency.

Once activated, the response will be unique to the circumstances of that emergency, while leveraging the resources and skills of the broader network of stakeholders. From this research, TBAFS will undertake building the infrastructure for an emergency food response 'parachute'.
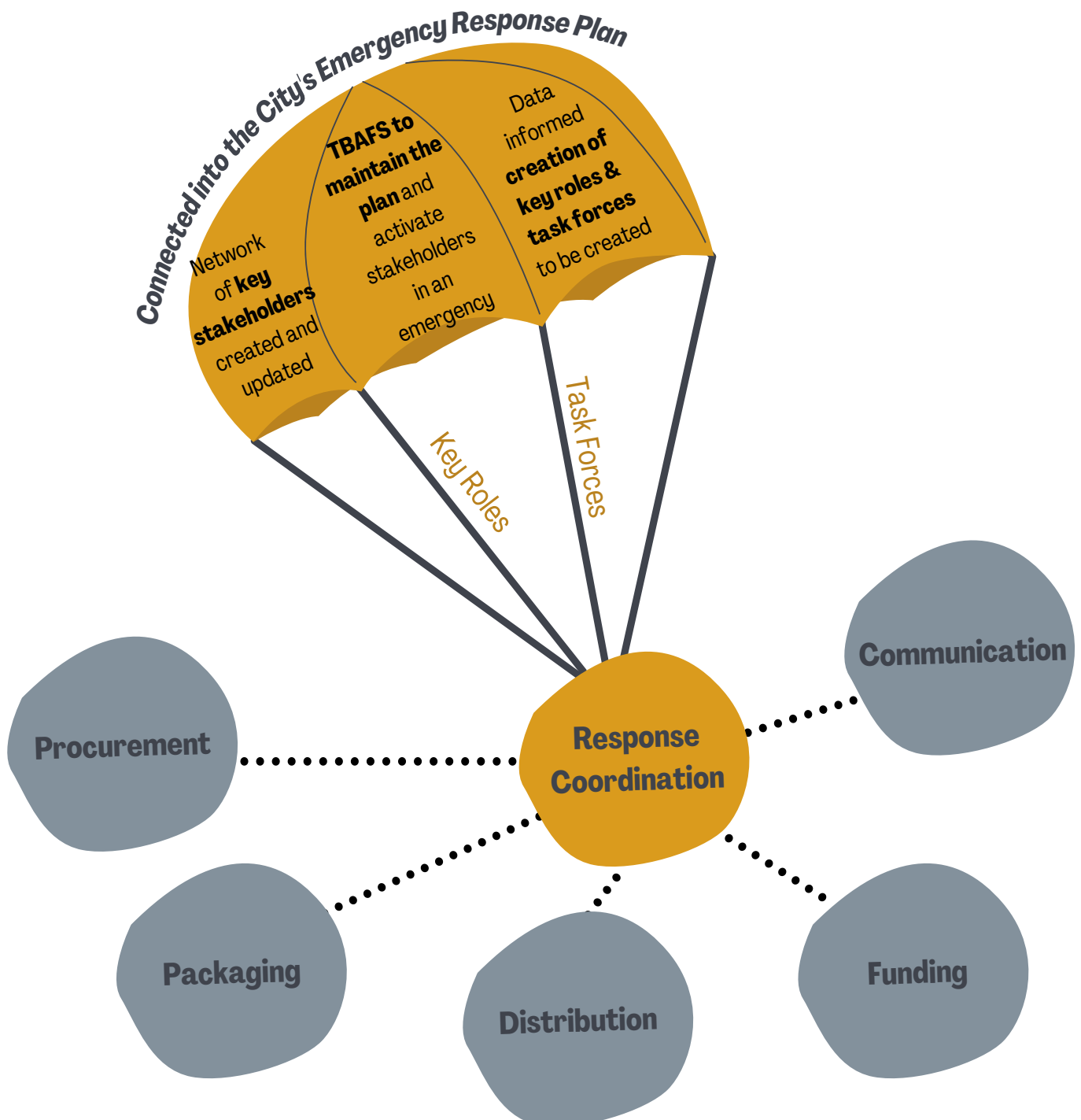
8 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS

Throughout the course of this research, many recommendations surfaced for a variety of stakeholders. These recommendations fall into two broad categories that utilize the ways in which the pandemic exposed deeper inequalities as a tool for collective action:

- *Enhancing Food Access During Emergencies*
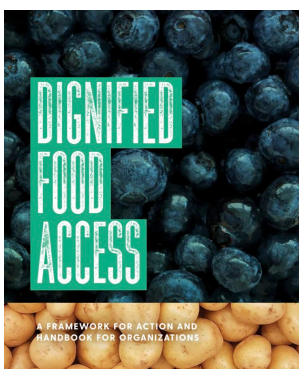- *Addressing Systemic Issues of Chronic Food Insecurity*

Within these two categories, recommendations have been made for the following stakeholder groups:

- Local Organizations
- FNMI Government(s)
- Municipal Government
- Provincial & Federal Governments
- Non-governmental Funders
- Local Businesses & Food Producers

Local Organizations

Enhancing Food Access During Emergencies	Systemic Issues of Chronic Food Insecurity
• Organizations commit to relevant roles and responsibilities for their organizations during an emergency as determined through the development of an emergency food response plan. • During an emergency, organizations enact their determined roles and responsibilities according to the collaboratively developed plan. • During an emergency, organizations communicate updates and participate in agreed upon actions at relevant shared planning tables. • Ensure that emergency food response, at all times, is respectful and centres dignified food access. • Engaging people receiving food access supports to ensure that organizations are getting timely, consistent feedback and are able to adapt to needs accordingly.	• Create organizational-level food policies that direct organization actions in a way that is equitable, dignified, and contributes to positive social and ecological health outcomes (*e.g., serving healthy food, ensuring people have kitchen staples to prepare healthy food, learn what dignified access means to the clients served, etc.*)* • Offer frontline perspectives and information about food insecurity and food access needs (including race-based data collection). • Contribute to advocacy and policy change initiatives relating to chronic food insecurity (e.g., basic income, housing, food wanted/needed from social food programs). • Committed organizations stay connected through ongoing relationship building and networking efforts to ensure an emergency food response plan remains up to date and actionable. • TBAFS: Utilize the networks of food policy councils to connect the collective knowledge of the community to national and regional level policy and advocacy conversations and initiatives. • TBAFS: Support the inclusion of all local food system actions into conversations and action around food insecurity.

"Really, people should be happy with whatever they get. have access to good food and welcoming spaces. Always."

IT'S TIME TO CHECK YOUR ASSUMPTIONS. Every person who needs food has their own reasons. Those reasons are personal and should be free from judgment by others. And it's OK if they have opinions and preferences because choice means dignity too. Let's make room for everyone at the table.

DIGNIFIED FOOD ACCESS
A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION AND HANDBOOK FOR ORGANIZATIONS

*The Dignified Food Access Handbook (2021), researched and compiled by Roots to Harvest, is a great starting place for this work.

FNMI Government(s)

Enhancing Food Access During Emergencies	Systemic Issues of Chronic Food Insecurity
- Connect with food system actors in Thunder Bay and the region to inform an emergency response grounded in an understanding of the system, up-to-date information, and streamlined coordination across support levels. - Seek support or collaboration as appropriate with community partner organizations, such as the emergency food response plan held by TBAFS.	- Maintain a focus on Indigenous food sovereignty and self-determination to ensure food systems are Indigenous-led and prepared to handle disturbance. - Advocate for and bring attention to First Nation-identified needs and assets around food insecurity and food systems. - Increase food access infrastructure in FNMI communities.

Municipal Government

Enhancing Food Access During Emergencies	Systemic Issues of Chronic Food Insecurity
- Include organizational representative(s) from the emergency food response collaborative space into City emergency response discussions. - Ensure a key member of City staff is part of the emergency food response plan, (including its development) in order to ensure that food response is utilizing and connected to city resources. - During times of emergency, provide funds for salary dollars to immediately employ an emergency food response coordinator full time, whose duties and appointment will be clearly determined in the building of the emergency food response plan. - Streamline municipal emergency money allocated for food support through the designated channels established through the EFR plan for informed collaborative spending, as opposed to individual organizations.	- Maintain collaborative multi-sectoral planning tables, such as the Vulnerable Populations Table, on an ongoing basis to ensure systemic issues are being tackled collaboratively outside of emergencies. - Incorporate the findings and determined emergency food response plan into relevant strategies and plans within the City (e.g., Emergency Planning, Community Safety & Well-Being, Poverty Reduction Strategy, etc.) - Advocate for federal and provincial government policies and programs to ensure an adequate income for all Canadians.

Provincial & Federal Governments

Enhancing Food Access During Emergencies

- Take a regional approach to determine how to administer funds to best support the needs of communities.
- Offer quick and accessible processes for organizations to access funding and other emergency food supports.
- Offer quick and accessible processes for individuals and families to receive direct income supports.
- Ensure that additional timely and accessible processes for obtaining funding and support are made specifically for Indigenous communities and organizations.

PROOF Food Insecurity Policy Research's *Household Food Insecurity in Canada (2017 - 2018)* report draws on data from Statistic Canada's Canadian Community Health Survey to report the current trends in food insecurity in Canada.

Systemic Issues of Chronic Food Insecurity

- Apply lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic response to shifting policy and funding systems, protocols, and disbursement practices to be more responsive, flexible, and adaptable to community needs.
- Commit to regularly measuring, analyzing, and reporting the prevalence and severity of food insecurity in all provinces and territories in a timely manner. This process should include ongoing analysis of disaggregated race-based food-insecurity data, including Black, Indigenous and people of colour and utilize regional-based organizations to help administer surveys to vulnerable populations.
- Ensure that the information, data, challenges, and stories of resilience that happened throughout COVID-19 are highlighted and taken into account when developing a national food policy.
- Establish targets for the reduction of household food insecurity and regularly report on progress toward their achievement as part of Opportunity for All—Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy.
- Implement policy interventions that have been shown to effectively reduce food insecurity, such as an expansion of the Canada Child Benefit, and implement a basic income guarantee for Canadians aged 18–64 years.
- Develop a new definition of "affordable housing" that is not based on a percentage of total income and considers other basic costs of living.
- Follow through on the commitment to support food security in northern and Indigenous communities as part of the Food Policy for Canada, emphasizing Indigenous food self-determination and reconciliation as guiding principles.
- Support technical and leadership training to create leaders and management skills within regional food systems.
- Continue to fund and support the building of food capacity infrastructure across Northern Ontario.
- Support communities and regions to be more prepared for emergencies by undergoing emergency food response planning processes.

Non-governmental Funders

Enhancing Food Access During Emergencies	Systemic Issues of Chronic Food Insecurity
• Ensure the application process for emergency funds is clear, easy to fill out and is followed by a timely release of funds. • Ensure that reporting requirements for emergency funds minimize the administrative burden on organizations. • Local funders continue to work together in times of emergency to pool resources and offer funds to organizations in timely and accessible ways. • Share funding opportunities with the EFR plan coordinator.	• Continue to restructure food funding/philanthropy model to be more flexible and adaptable by asking communities directly about their needs and responding accordingly (e.g., Northern Ontario Indigenous Food Sovereignty Collaborative). • Continue to lobby government funders for a shift in granting and funding systems.

Local Businesses & Food Producers

Enhancing Food Access During Emergencies	Systemic Issues of Chronic Food Insecurity
• Ensure key partners remain connected to the relationships and networks developed by the plan. • Deploy surplus food supplies (via purchase) to support vulnerable populations' food access.	• Continue to contribute to the increased formation of a resilient local food system at local and regional levels. • Participate in the development of an emergency food response plan, guided by the Thunder Bay & Area Food Strategy. • Stay connected to the TBAFS network and ongoing projects in order to collectively leverage the growth of the local food system.

APPENDICES

Appendix A - Advisory Committee

Lee-Ann Chevrette	City of Thunder Bay Community Safety & Well-Being Council Coordinator
Charles Levkoe	Canada Research Chair in Equitable & Sustainable Food Systems, Lakehead University & TBAFS Executive Member
Jessica McLaughlin	Indigenous Food Circle Coordinator & TBAFS Executive Member
Ivan Ho	Thunder Bay District Health Unit Public Health Nutritionist
Michelle Kolobutin	NorWest Community Health Centres Harm Reduction Coordinator
Michelle McGuire	Ontario Native Women's Association Community Capacity Coordinator
Michael Quibell	St. Andrew's Dew Drop Inn Executive Director
Jocelyn Kloosterhois	Our Kids Count Nutrition Manager
Jodi Belluz	Belluz Farms & Superior Seasons Farmers Market Owner
Erin Beagle*	Roots to Harvest Executive Director
Volker Kromm/* Brendan Carlin	Regional Food Distribution Association Executive Director/Community Service Manager

*Advisory members with * came on board in January 2021.*

Appendix B - List of Participants

Organization Survey Participants
*Those organizations with an * also completed the follow-up survey*

- Anishnawbe Mushkiki*
- Beendigen Anishinabe Women's Crisis Home & Family Healing Agency
- Boys & Girls Clubs of Thunder Bay
- Canadian Mental Health Association of Thunder Bay* (CMHA)
- Canadian Red Cross – Thunder Bay Branch*
- Dew Drop Inn (St. Andrew's Soup Kitchen Inc.)*
- Dilico Anishinabek Family Care
- Elevate NWO
- Elizabeth Fry Society of Northwestern Ontario
- Evergreen a United Neighbourhood*
- Faye Peterson House
- Gathering Table Food Bank
- Grace Place
- Indigenous Food Circle
- Isthmus Thunder Bay*
- John Howard Society of Thunder Bay
- Ka-Na-Chi-Hih Specialized Solvent Abuse Treatment Centre
- Kinna-aweya Legal Clinic
- Lac Des Milles Lacs First Nation
- Lakehead Social Planning Council
- LUSU Food Bank*
- Matawa First Nations Management*
- Métis Nation of Ontario
- Multicultural Association of Northwestern Ontario
- Nishnawbe Aski Nation
- Northwestern Ontario Women's Centre* (NWOWC)
- NorWest Community Health Centres*
- Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy (OAHAS)
- Ontario Native Women's Association – Thunder Bay (ONWA)
- Our Kids Count*
- People Advocating for Change through Empowerment (PACE)
- Regional Food Distribution Association* (RFDA)
- Roots to Harvest*
- Rural Cupboard Food Bank
- Shelter House*
- Shkoday Abinojiiwak Obimiwedoon*
- St. Vincent de Paul-St. Agnes Church Food Bank
- Student Union of Confederation College Inc. (SUCCI) Food Bank
- The Gathering Place
- Thunder Bay Food Bank
- Thunder Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre* (TBIFC)
- Thunder Bay Multicultural Association (TBMA)
- Underground Gym
- United Way of Thunder Bay
- Urban Abbey
- Wequedong Lodge

Recipient Survey Distribution Organizations

These organizations distributed and collected the number of surveys indicated from recipients affiliated with their programs.

- Boys & Girls Clubs(10)
- Canadian Mental Health Association (15)
- Dew Drop Inn (20)
- Elevate NWO (18)
- NorWest Community Health Centres (29)
- Northwestern Ontario Women's Centre (11)
- Our Kids Count (10)
- Salvation Army Soup Van (2)
- Shelter House (15)
- Shkoday Abinojiiwak Obimiwedoon (10)
- Thunder Bay Food Bank (15)

While data was collected from a wide range of organizations and 155 recipients of food support, overall this is a small sample size in a city with a population of over 110,000. As such, there are limitations to this data.

Organizations

- While outreach was made to over 55 organizations that met our criteria, not all of them responded, including the majority of food banks (only five food banks participated in the survey).
- Since initial engagement and distribution, a handful of other organizations have been identified that should have been included in data collection, including several organizations that are members of the RFDA (indicating a food bank/hamper program).
  - Efforts are being made to engage these organizations in the process from this point forward.
- Upon completing data analysis it became clear that some key questions were missed as well as listing some key options in multiple-choice selection questions (which may have changed the frequency of responses).
- The follow-up survey asked specific quantitative questions about the amounts of funding and distribution numbers of food supports from 2019 and 2020. Recognizing that every organization records this information differently, it is messy to capture and compare, and many organizations were not willing/able to share this information.
  - As such, the quantitative follow-up information is not as comprehensive as the information in the initial survey and was more difficult to offer comparative analysis.

Recipients

- The organizations that administered surveys to recipients represented the sectors of emergency food and shelter, education, mental health, health, and social services more broadly.
  - Three organizations each brought in more than 10% of responses, although they each represent diverse sectors.
  - Only one Indigenous-led organization and no organizations directly supporting newcomer populations ended up administering surveys, due to capacity issues at the time.
  - Only four organizations that administered surveys offer food bank services. The other organizations offer their clients food-based programming or other forms of direct food support (i.e., gift cards, supply bags, etc.). Their clients may access supports from many different places.
- Demographic information, including race-based data, was not collected in the recipient survey. This decision was made by the advisory committee due to the representative scale of the surveys, which was too small of a sample size to accurately reflect overall demographic trends.
  - It is hoped that this information will be developed at a broader level through the Thunder Bay & Area Food Strategy's ongoing Community Food Security Report Card project.
- The survey did not ask any direct questions relating to dignity in food access. If asked, this survey may have elicited more specific information about the need for dignity and what this could look like in practice.
- Through data analysis, it became clear that including family/friends/personal supports and income supports as options in relevant questions would likely have seen an increased selection of these responses (as opposed to these responses coming through in "Other" at the participant's discretion).

Businesses & Food Producers

- It is essential that there are people from within the food production and distribution systems involved in emergency food response; however the scope of this project was not able to capture those stakeholders.

Appendix D - List of Funding Sources

Twenty-seven participating organizations (58%) stated they received additional funds. Twenty-three of those organizations provided details about where those funds were accessed.

The below chart indicates those funding sources, broken down into key categories.

Local	- Thunder Bay Community Foundation - United Way - Thunder Bay District Social Services Administration Board - Red Cross - City of Thunder Bay - Private donations
Federal & Provincial Governments	- Emergency Community Support Fund - Indigenous Peoples Resilience Fund - COVID-19 Community Relief Fund - New Horizons for Seniors Program - Indigenous Affairs Canada
National	- Community Food Centres Canada - Maple Leaf Centre for Action on Food Security - Canadian Health Policy Institute - Second Harvest - Tides Canada (now MakeWay) - Breakfast Club of Canada - The Grocery Foundation - Boys & Girls Clubs of Canada - Sprott Foundation - The Chawkers Foundation
Regional	- Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres - Ontario Native Women's Association Indigenous Community Support Fund
Corporations	- Impala Canada - Unidentified corporate donations

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