

***The Provision of Charitable Food Assistance in Canada:
Forging a More Adequate Response***

Key Findings from the Halifax Regional Municipality

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Sincerely,

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1. Brief Introduction to Study

In the 1980s, when concerns about local problems of hunger first surfaced, communities responded by establishing food banks and a host of charitable meal and snack programs. At the outset, these initiatives were regarded as temporary, ‘emergency’ responses to needs arising from the economic recession of that period. However, demands for charitable food assistance did not go away as the economy improved. Through the 1990s, there were major changes to our social safety net, and ad hoc, extra-governmental, food charity continued to grow. Charitable food assistance programs are now deeply entrenched, and they remain the primary response to hunger for those too poor to access food through mainstream market channels.

Although food banks continue to be the public face of food charity in Canada, our recent studies in Toronto and Victoria indicate that there is a lot of charitable food provisioning occurring outside the food bank system in some cities, as countless other voluntary organizations, social service agencies, health centres, and education/training programs mobilize resources in an effort to respond to unmet food needs. Yet there are grave questions about the adequacy of the food assistance provided and the proportion of those ‘in need’ that are even reached by these programs. Studies in Canada repeatedly show that most food-insecure people do not seek food charity, and those who do are not protected from food deprivation. The failure to meet the food needs of those who are too poor to access food through normal channels has serious implications for their health and contributes to their marginalization and social isolation.

Although the root causes of income-related problems of food insecurity do not lie at the community level, communities continue to be charged with the task of defining and resourcing initiatives to help people meet basic food needs. Yet much of this work is invisible, or it has been around for so long now that we have begun to take it for granted. We began this study to chart the full scope of charitable food provisioning activities in Halifax, Quebec City, Toronto, Edmonton and Victoria and to assess each community's capacity to recognize and respond to local problems of unmet food need. We hope our findings will spark debate and discussion in the participating cities about what is needed to build a more effective system of ‘front-line’ response to problems of hunger.

2. Compiling an Inventory of Charitable Food Assistance

A comprehensive list of agencies and organizations running charitable food assistance programs in Halifax Regional Municipality’s urban core – Halifax, Dartmouth and Bedford – was compiled by collating and cross-checking several locally available records. These included: the membership list of FEED Nova Scotia, Haligonian.ca, the Halifax Regional Municipality website, ‘Halifax Homeless Resources’, HealthLink811 (public health resource line), Capital Health (for a list of family resource centres), Mobile Outreach Street Health programs, 411, general Google searches and word of mouth (asking interviewees if they know of any other food programs in the area). We also contacted the central offices of the Archdiocese of Halifax, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Centre of Islamic Development, the Maritime Muslim Academy, Atlantic Jewish Council, and the Chabad Lubavitch of the Maritimes to determine their involvement in charitable food assistance.

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Agencies were eligible to participate in the study if they provided free food (or food for a nominal fee, like \$1-\$2) in the form of groceries or prepared meals and snacks. Agencies that only offered food to people who were enrolled in a particular program (e.g., a training program) or living in a particular place (e.g. shelters, group homes) were omitted from this study. Programs targeted to children (e.g., school food programs, children's breakfast clubs) were also omitted.

A total of 60 agencies were identified from our search. Two of these agencies were no longer providing food assistance, six agencies could not be contacted, and one agency declined participation. The final sample size was 51, representing an 88% participation rate.

3. The Scope, Origins and Importance of Charitable Food Assistance

The wide variety of the agencies and organizations captured in this study reflects the extent of community involvement in charitable food assistance. As expected, traditional soup kitchens, drop-in centres and food banks associated with churches and social service agencies are providing food to those in need, but so are health centres, and educational agencies (see Table 1). Most agencies surveyed provided either a charitable meal/snack program *or* grocery program, but 41% of the agencies were providing both types of charitable food assistance.

Agency type	Number of agencies (%)	Number of meals served/month (%)	Number of individuals given groceries/month ¹ (%)
Multi-service agencies (e.g., family resource centres, drop-ins, social service agencies)	18 (35)	6 812 (27)	1 225 (17)
Churches, mosques, synagogues, and other faith centres	11 (22)	3 548 (14)	925 (13)
Ministries and other faith-based service agencies for the poor	9 (18)	3 712 (15)	3 838 (55)
Organizations focused solely on food assistance	6 (12)	8 730 (35)	660 (9)
Colleges, universities	4 (8)	480 (2)	365 (5)
Health centres	3 (6)	1 872 (7)	0
TOTAL	51	25 154	7 013

Given the potpourri of agencies providing charitable food, the number of people an agency served varied greatly, with anywhere from 2 to 175 people being served a meal or snack on a given day and 17 to 2,100 individuals getting groceries in a month. But the totality of the efforts is remarkable: In one month, an average of over 25,000 meals or snacks is served to people in

¹ Three of the 38 agencies who reported giving groceries were missing data on numbers served; one agency was missing data on number of individuals so this number was estimated based on the number of households served.

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need, and over 7,000 people receive food hampers (see Table 3). These figures represent a maximum monthly activity because they assume that all programs are operating that month; however, not all programs surveyed operated each month.

Although not everyone was able to provide statistics for both years, the data we could get indicates a net increase in charitable food provisioning in Halifax between 2009 and 2010.

- Among agencies operating hamper programs, 52% said they were serving more households per month in 2010 than 2009. Only one agency said they were providing fewer hampers. Adding up all of the differences, there were almost 400 more households receiving hampers in 2010.
- Among agencies operating meal programs, 38% reported serving more meals in 2010. Only three agencies said they were serving fewer meals. Overall, there were 120 more meals being provided per day of operation in 2010 than 2009.

Agencies reported a number of reasons for starting their food assistance programs, but most commonly (39%), programs were initiated to feed the hungry people agency workers encountered in their community. Some were started to serve newly identified pockets of need, but others just reflect new groups deciding to get involved in food charity work. In some cases, food was offered because it was seen as essential to enable the participation of vulnerable clients in a particular program (e.g. harm reduction program).

Some agencies have a long history of charitable food assistance, but the system seems to have proliferated in the 1980s, and then again, in the 1990s (see Figure 1). Interestingly, the growth in the 1980s was mostly among agencies providing one type of charitable food assistance (i.e. either meal/snack programs *or* grocery programs), while the largest proportion of growth in the 1990s was among agencies that provide both types of assistance. Community-based food provisioning is now a well-entrenched response to hunger in Canada's urban centres. Most (75%) agencies surveyed have been running food assistance program for at least 10 years.

Figure 1. History of charitable food provisioning by agencies currently running meal programs, grocery programs, or a combination of these:

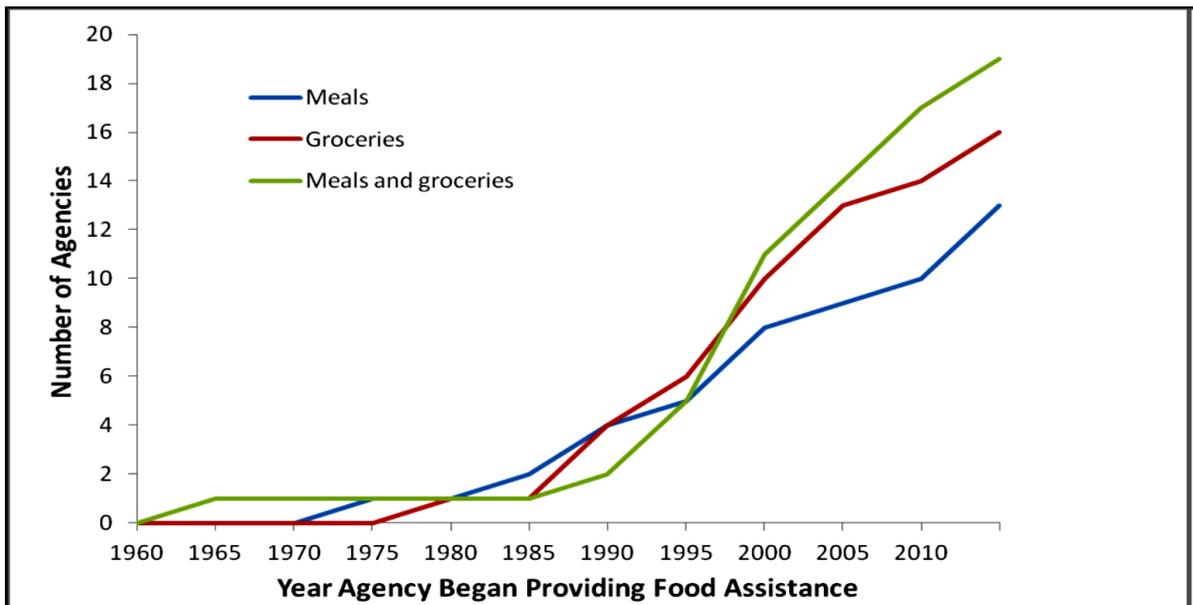
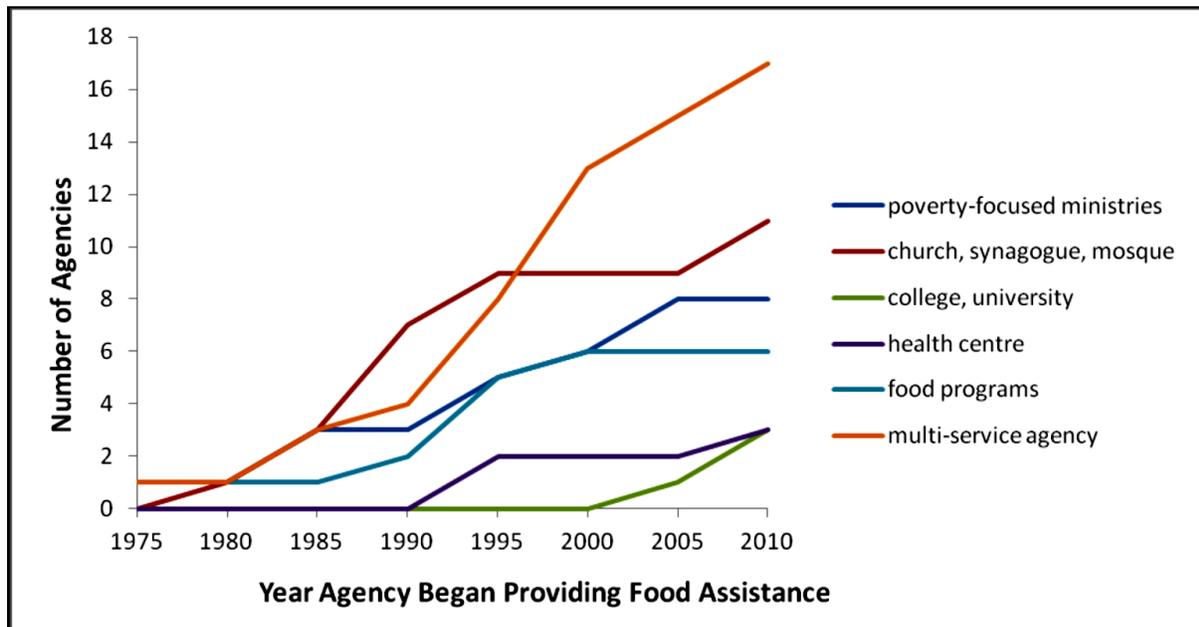


Figure 2. History of charitable food provisioning by agency type:



While Figure 1 depicts food assistance program initiation, it provides an incomplete picture of this. There were at least 12 additional programs initiated during this period that are no longer in operation. Six of these were on our recruitment list but were not surveyed because their contact information was no longer valid and there was no forwarding information.

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In addition, 11 agencies added new food programs over the past three years, and six of the agencies in the study reported stopping a food program in the last three years. Most times program cancellations were related to insufficient resources, but agencies also reported stopping food services because of changes in programming, moving to a location that lacked kitchen facilities, and in one case a community garden was terminated due to lack of participation. These results highlight the dynamic nature of food programming within agencies.

Very few agencies focused exclusively on the provision of food. In many agencies, not just those categorized as multi-service, charitable food assistance occurred in conjunction with other services intended to help clients meet other basic needs. For example, 76% helped with accessing other services such as housing, employment, social assistance, legal aid; 63% offered counseling and personal support; and 55% did advocacy related to poverty reduction and policy change. The broad spectrum of services and supports offered in most agencies providing charitable food assistance highlights their recognition of the multiple unmet needs confronting their clients.

Some agencies made provisions to provide program users with more food if they requested it. For meal/snack programs, this usually meant providing seconds if food was still available after everyone had been served, and for grocery programs, this meant giving additional items when available. However, 13% of meal/snack programs and 20% of grocery programs reported being unable to handle requests for more food. Similarly, the ability of agencies to offer program participants opportunities to exercise choice in receiving charitable assistance was constrained. About 40% of meal/snack programs offered a self-service buffet style, and 74% of grocery programs reported offering clients some choice of items that went into their food hampers. However, programs' abilities to offer choice were limited by constraints in their food supplies.

One indication of this was the fact that 48% of meal programs reported sometimes serving a more limited meal and 54% of grocery programs provided a more limited selection of food in hampers because of a lack of food. In addition, over one-third (38%) of meal/snack programs and over half (56%) of grocery programs reported that in the course of a month, they had to reduce the amount of food they were giving people as a way to stretch the supply of food.

The importance of the food being provided by food banks and charitable meal/snack programs to their recipients cannot be overstated. Seventy-three percent of the 2,573 households receiving groceries in a month came to the food banks as often as permitted. Further, 16 446 (65%) of the meals/snacks were served to people who were considered regular attendees, with 37% of meals being served to homeless² individuals. The reliance on charitable food by impoverished groups speaks to the predominant role of the charitable food sector vis a vis current social policy in Canada.

At the same time, the vast majority (88%) of agencies reported that the individuals using their programs needed more assistance in meeting their food needs than they were able to provide, and a majority (64%) reported that if they had the resources, they would expand their food assistance programs. Many of those who reported that they would not expand even if they had the resources, would not do so because charitable food assistance was not the agencies' main

² Homeless was defined in this study as the situation of sleeping in a temporary shelter, indoor or outdoor private or public space, or at someone else's place, because the person has no place of their own.

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mandate; several others pointed to the need for systemic change rather than more charitable services to address problems of hunger. These findings call into question the appropriateness of the charitable sector to compensate for gaps in social policy.

a. *Meals and snacks*³

Of the 51 agencies surveyed, 34 agencies (67%) reported providing meals and/or snacks. But, four of these just offered snacks for people while they were waiting for other services (e.g. food bank and family resources).

To better understand food access opportunities for a person in need, we looked at how the food assistance programs surveyed functioned as a ‘system’. Assuming there was a week when all programs were in full operation, a total of 6013 meals or snacks would have been provided, ranging from 306 on Sundays to 1,119 on Tuesdays (see Table 2). All but one agency operated on a weekly basis, and eighty percent were opened year round. However, most (64%) agencies served food once on a given day; 28% provided something to eat twice a day, and only 8% provided meals or snacks three times on a given day. About one-third (31%) of agencies reported that in the course of a typical month they often or sometimes had to turn away clients because they didn’t have enough food and 10% reported often or sometimes having to shorten or even *cancel* serving times due to a lack of food. Based on these findings, food intake among many people relying on food assistance would be seriously compromised, particularly on the weekends.

Table 2. Provision of meals and snacks by day of the week (n =28⁴)

Number of meals and snacks served ⁵							
	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
‘Breakfast’ (before 1100)	143	456	418	422	358	400	136
‘Lunch’ (1100 to 1700)	100	256	287	264	272	243	100
‘Dinner’ (after 1700)	23	298	318	324	286	183	226
‘All day’ Snacks	40	66	96	96	96	66	40
TOTAL	306	1 076	1 119	1 106	1 012	892	502

³ Food that was offered at scheduled times was considered a ‘meal’; food that was provided throughout the day was considered a ‘snack’. The distinction between meals and snacks is based on the duration of time food is available and general knowledge about how the program operates, not on any nutritional criteria.

⁴ Two of the 30 agencies serving meals and/or snacks are not included in this table because their meal service is informal and the times meals are offered vary throughout the week.

⁵ The numbers represent the maximum number of meals and snacks available, assuming every program is operating in a given month and given week.

b. Groceries

Of the 51 agencies providing charitable food assistance, 38 agencies (67%) provided groceries. Most places providing groceries operated on weekdays. Only two agencies were open after 5 p.m. on weekdays, and in both cases, this was a Thursday evening. Five agencies provided groceries on an 'ad hoc' basis. About half of the agencies providing groceries (52%) allowed people to come once a month. The other half offered greater access – most often, twice a month. Three agencies reported there was no consistent frequency with which people could access the food; instead, they had a supply of 'emergency' food on hand that could be given out as the need arose, and as long as the supply lasted. However, one-quarter of agencies providing groceries reported that in the course of a typical month they often or sometimes had to turn away people because they didn't have enough food, and 11% reported often or sometimes having to shorten or even *cancel* hours of operation due to lack of food.

4. How do charitable food assistance programs operate?

Agencies surveyed were using a variety of means to access food for their food assistance programs. Over half (55%) fundraised to get money and/or food to support their food assistance programs. Almost all (92%) agencies solicited food donations; 73% received food from FEED Nova Scotia, the major collector and distributor of donated food in the Province; 32% from local businesses (e.g. Sobey's, Superstore, Tim Horton's); and 79% from other community sources (e.g. churches, schools). In addition, agencies were purchasing food. In a typical month, a total of \$39,270 was spent on food.

The food supplies in most agencies were a mix of donation and food purchased specifically for their programs. Only 7% of the agencies providing meals said they did not use donated food in their meals, and only 11% said that they purchased no food for their meal programs. All of the agencies operating grocery programs distributed donated food, and only 10% said that they did not purchase any additional food for distribution.

When the reported proportions of donated and purchased food are applied to the total volume of meal services and food bank operations in a month, food purchases account for an estimated 31% of meals and 27% of the groceries given to individuals in a month. Donations account for 42% of meals and 65% of the groceries given to individuals in a month⁶.

The majority (73%) of agencies were members of FEED Nova Scotia. Almost all (94%) of the 7,013 individuals who received groceries each month did so at grocery programs that were member agencies of FEED Nova Scotia (only 395 individuals received groceries from non-member agencies). The presence of FEED Nova Scotia was also significant among meal programs where member agencies of FEED Nova Scotia accounted for 66% of the meals/snacks served (or 16 588 meals).

⁶ These percentages do not add to 100% because we are missing data on donations and purchases for 7% of food bank activity and 26% of meal services.

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Fifty-seven percent of meal/snack programs and 42% of grocery programs reporting using nutrition standards (e.g. Canada's Food Guide) to plan their meals and hampers, but many told us that it was often impossible to follow these guidelines because what they provided depended on what combination of food donations they received and what could be purchased on a tight budget. Some said that the end of the month was particularly difficult because of dwindled supplies (food and money). Further, special requests (e.g. vegetarian options) could be difficult to accommodate as were efforts to buy healthier but more costly items such as trans fat-free margarine.

The quality of what was provided was also said to be influenced by the particular cook or volunteer working at the time. In the absence of standards, some agencies reported that they tried to provide healthy food with a focus on including fruit or vegetables in meals or hampers. Some agencies reported making specific requests to FEED Nova Scotia for these items and others asked not to receive items that they considered to be 'junk food' (e.g. potato chips). A couple of agencies reported having food service workers who were nutritionists, and these staff helped to facilitate healthy meals/snacks/hampers in the absence of nutrition standards. Several agencies operating without nutrition standards, reported serving whatever they had on hand.

Agencies relied heavily on donated labor. On a typical day, 80% had a least one volunteer working with them, but the number of volunteers working ranged from 1 to 28. Four agencies reported having people working in their program to fulfill volunteer or work requirements for welfare benefits. Almost two-thirds (61%) of the agencies had at least one paid staff person working in their food program(s). In total, on a day when all programs surveyed were operating, there would be 75 paid staff, 301 volunteers, and 10 work-for-welfare people engaged in charitable food provisioning in Halifax.

In addition, 51% of agencies were operating in rent-free (or donated) spaces (e.g. church basements). These venues were not always adequate for program delivery; among agencies providing charitable meals, nearly half (47%) reported that they had difficulty seating everyone who came to eat.

Scheduling of food assistance programs is disconnected from the needs of program users. Seventy-one percent of agencies reported not intentionally timing their food assistance programs to be offered when clients are most in need of food. Rather, programs were scheduled around the availability of volunteers and space, other programming, and longstanding practice (i.e. "this is the way it's always been").

Further diminishing the probability that food assistance reaches all those who could benefit from it was the fact that agencies did little to advertise their charitable food programs. Forty-one percent posted signs at their location with information about their food program, 57% reporting using web-based advertising or directories to make people aware of their services, and 35% did active outreach such as distributing posters or leaflets in the community. Over one-third of agencies reported doing none of those activities.