

# Rethinking Food Charity: A Community Conversation

## Gathering Summary



Food First<sup>NL</sup>



## **Rethinking Food Charity:** A Community Conversation Gathering Summary

Saturday, November 26, 2022  
The Alt Hotel  
St. John's, NL

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## About Rethinking Food Charity

Since January 2020, the province has seen a major shift in food charity and community food programs. Between “Snowmageddon,” the COVID-19 pandemic, and rapidly increasing costs of living, many Newfoundlanders and Labradorians are having a hard time reliably and securely affording the food they need. In response to all of these challenges, new community food programs have been created, existing programs transformed and adapted, and all programs saw major growth in demand. It was time to start a conversation about the future of food charity in the province.

Rethinking Food Charity: A Community Conversation was an 8-month project to scope out the future of emergency community food programs in Newfoundland and Labrador. The project evolved over three stages.



During the first stage, we surveyed [food program providers](#), [service users](#), and [potential users](#) of food programs to better understand the current landscape. The results of these surveys helped us identify the most valuable topics for the rest of the process in Rethinking Food Charity.

During the next stage, we held five regional and province-wide conversations with staff and volunteers from food programs, and nine focus groups with community members across the province with living and lived experience of food insecurity. These conversations allowed us to better understand what’s happening on the ground, what’s working, and what needs to change.

The final stage of the project was to host the [Rethinking Food Charity Gathering](#), open to anyone with an interest in improving food access and charitable food programming. On November 26, 2022, 59 individuals representing 31 organizations gathered to discuss and reflect on what we’ve learned throughout this process and how we can work together to shape the future of food charity in the province. This summary report shares the experiences and learning from that gathering.

Every stage of this process helped us to understand and learn about how the food charity system works, how it could be better, and what needs to change so it isn’t needed at all.



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To learn more about the Rethinking Food Project, and to access the reports from all stages of the process, please visit our [project page](#).



## Main Themes of the Gathering

Across the Gathering’s presentations and discussions, some main themes stood out. The ideas voiced by both presenters and participants spoke to an overwhelming desire for change, both within the food charity system and beyond it.

### Accessibility

Accessibility was a key topic of conversation throughout the day. Ben Earle noted that food programs often have restrictions, ask intrusive questions, and require identifying information for reasons that are “about making people answer for the supports we give them in ways that we wouldn’t necessarily want to answer ourselves”. Attendees very much agreed with this and highlighted that food program access needs to be improved so that individuals do not have to present identifying information, such as MCP, each time they access a food program. Instead, there should be a shared, main database where clients are entered into a system and have a unique identifier associated with their name so they are not required to continually retell their stories to different food programs and organizations each time they access one. One attendee made their opinion very clear when it comes to accessibility,



“*Food programs are in no position to dictate who deserves food or what food someone can receive.*”

The Gathering brought forward lots of ways that food programs can be made more physically accessible. One person suggested that food banks “could be more accessible to those who cannot get to the food banks - perhaps they can have transportation or a delivery service.”

### Stigma & Dignity

There are a lot of negative attitudes surrounding food charity and the people who use it. As participants discussed in the World Café, society holds strong assumptions about the “undeserving poor” who “take advantage of systems” or “abuse services”. Unfortunately, these stigmatizing ideas can be found in food charity spaces too, and this stigma is a major barrier for folks who may want to access food programs. Attendees expressed their opinions on why they

believe accessing emergency food services is generally looked down upon by society. Many felt this is due to a lack of understanding, knowledge, and education around poverty in general. Others felt that generational stigma, classism, and capitalism may have something to do with it, with one attendee noting, “People think that if you’re not wealthy, then you’re not doing what you should be.” Attendees largely felt that the stigma associated with accessing food programs could be reduced by taking action to educate the public and food program volunteers with the voices of lived experience as a way to normalize asking for help and promote trust. As one attendee put it,

“ We need to trust that when people ask for help, they need it. ”

Several food program providers noted that minimizing stigma in program spaces can be a challenging task, especially for programs in small communities with minimal resources and high turnover in volunteers. As one food program provider said, “we try to avoid judging or stigmatizing clients at all costs, but that doesn’t mean that clients don’t feel judged or stigmatized”.

Food programs can make changes to reduce the stigma associated with accessing food charity and experiencing food insecurity. These changes can be internal to the organization and its policies, but they can also inform outward-facing communications in ways that better inform the public and aim to reduce stigma in society generally. These changes start with addressing the assumptions and stigma held by staff and volunteers within our organizations. Dignifying processes for accessing food assistance are aligned with many of the suggestions noted above for improving accessibility.

## Collaboration

In our discussions with program providers, many organizations voiced the feeling that they were working in silos apart from one another. These organizations expressed a strong desire to share resources and knowledge, but didn’t know where to begin. During the World Café, participants discussed the supports they felt were needed to increase and strengthen collaboration in the sector. Some ideas included: 1) a paid staff position specific to collaboration, 2) the need for clear structure, trust, and leadership, 3) more regional and provincial gatherings, and 4) having one main database to transfer knowledge and help build capacity. The primary supports agreed upon by participants to increase collaboration was communication and centralization. Participants felt strongly that a regional hub was needed to streamline food distribution using shared provincial resources. As one participant noted:

“ Right now, we are pieces of a puzzle not put together. ”

A broad consensus emerging from the Gathering was that there is a strong need for investment in collaborative processes and infrastructure across the sector. Collaboration could be an

important avenue for building shared standards across food programs, and building transparency and accountability into these standards.

## Advocacy & Income-Related Solutions

Charitable food programs can provide important services to folks experiencing food insecurity, but they fail to address the root cause of food insecurity itself. As Rekha Cherian discussed, when food programs perpetuate the myth that food banks can “solve hunger,” they unintentionally promote false solutions.

Though we want to improve the accessibility of food programs, we ultimately know that charity is not the solution to food insecurity. As Dr. Valerie Tarasuk explained, food insecurity is an income problem and individuals experiencing food insecurity need more than just food. Thus, the solution to food insecurity is not food charity, it is money.



Organizations within the charitable food sector are among the most knowledgeable, on-the-ground sources for information on the state of food insecurity in the province. However, given the overwhelming demand of day-to-day operations, many organizations find it difficult to devote time to advocate for long-term solutions. As one staff member for one of these organizations put it,

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

Many suggestions also came out of the Gathering about how to actually do the work of advocacy. Together, food programs can be a lot more effective in our advocacy if we pool resources.



## Next Steps

The gathering summarized in this report was the final piece of public engagement for the first phase of our Rethinking Food Charity process - throughout 2022 Food First NL also gathered data through a survey of service providers, a survey of food-insecure Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, regional service provider focus groups, and focus groups with food-insecure people across the province. Taken together, this is an extraordinarily rich collection of data to work with. Here's what we're planning:

- A **final report** in February 2023 that brings together everything we've gathered and presents a final set of ideas and recommendations for the future
- Conversations with **partner organizations** and **funders** in Spring 2023 to identify how to resource the recommendations and transformations envisioned in the report
- Ongoing **opportunities to connect** for food program providers - we heard that need loud and clear
- Working with partners to solidify and resource organizations providing **shared services** to the food charity sector (such as service navigation and delivery)

## Continue the Conversation

The conversations that happened at this Gathering raise many questions and ideas that will need further thought:

- Where can we join forces, share resources, and pool finances?
- What would shared infrastructure look like across the province?
  - Delivery Service?
  - Case Management?
- Where can we come together as a sector to advocate systemic change and policy reform?
- Do we need a specific forum to continue this conversation on a regular basis?
- Who can support us to promote change both within and beyond the food charity model?

If these are conversations you'd like to stay involved in, please **sign up for the Food First NL Newsletter** on our [newsletter resource page](#). We'll be using that, as well as the attendee list from the Gathering, to let people know about where we're going from here.

# Appendix A

## The Day's Agenda

TIME	SESSION
8:30	<p><b>Registration, Coffee, and Networking</b>   Folks arrived early to register, enjoy a coffee or tea, network, and enter to win door prizes: two beautiful gift baskets from Urban Market</p>
9:00	<p><b>Land Acknowledgement</b>   In gathering to reflect on our food systems, it is important that we recognize the position we are reflecting on it from. Most of us here are settlers on this land, which is the ancestral homeland of the Beothuk people, on an island that is also a homeland of the Mi'kmaq, and their ancestors, and in a province where the the Inuit of Nunatsiavut and NunatuKavut and the Innu of Nitassinan, and their ancestors, make up the original people of Labrador.</p> <p>In Canada, Indigenous people face a hugely elevated risk of food insecurity, a direct consequence of centuries of colonial policies that have intentionally and violently undermined Indigenous food systems and networks of community support. As we gather here today to envision a new model for food charity, we look for leadership to Indigenous communities - some represented in this room - who are already doing this work very differently, and we recognize that the way we address food insecurity must address these disparities to be truly meaningful.</p>
9:10	<p><b>Welcome</b>   An introduction to the day, including special greeting from Susan Walsh, the Seniors Advocate, and Heidi Boyd of the Department of Health and Community Services</p>
9:25	<p><b>Food Insecurity and Food Charity: What We Know</b>   In this video presentation, Dr. Valerie Tarasuk, lead investigator of PROOF, a research program studying food insecurity, addressed the state of food insecurity in Newfoundland and Labrador, the systemic issues underlying the needs that food charities are working to meet, and why we need for more thoughtful policy-making in order to reduce food insecurity</p>
9:45	<p><b>Rethinking Food Charity in NL: Early Recommendations</b>   In this session, Food First NL CEO, Josh Smee, and Rethinking Food Charity Coordinator, Alison Bennett-James, outlined some of the key ideas emerging from conversations held with food programs and people with lived experience of food insecurity</p>
10:25	<p><b>BREAK</b></p>

<p><b>10:45</b></p>	<p><b>A Basic Income: What Would it Mean for Food Access?</b>   The idea of a basic income is top-of-mind in Newfoundland and Labrador right now. We heard about it in our conversations, it is a priority in the Health Accord, and an all-party committee is launching to study it. What would a basic income mean for food access? How can food programs become a part of this movement? Ben Earle, who is General Manager with the Basic Income Canada Network and UBI Works and also CEO of Feed the Need in Durham, Ontario presented.</p>
<p><b>11:15</b></p>	<p><b>World Cafe: Biting into the Tough Questions</b>   In this dialogue activity, attendees had the chance to move from table to table to discuss some key questions emerging from the Rethinking Food Charity conversations. Themes covered included: stigma in food program access, advocacy for better food systems, accessibility of emergency food programs, and collaboration across the food system.</p>
<p><b>12:15</b></p>	<p><b>LUNCH</b>   Featuring a live performance by local musician, Chris Meyers.</p>
<p><b>1:00</b></p>	<p><b>Energizer and Networking</b>   A ‘hedbanz’ style guessing game of food items often distributed by food programs.</p>
<p><b>1:15</b></p>	<p><b>Beyond the Emergency: How to Evolve your Food Bank into a Force for Change</b>   Community Food Centres Canada has developed a manual to help food banks discuss the opportunities and challenges that arise when moving from the charity model to one informed by anti-poverty, food justice, and the social determinants of health. In this session, Rekha Cherian from Community Food Centres Canada joined us to walk through some of these ideas and take questions.</p>
<p><b>2:00</b></p>	<p><b>BREAK</b></p>
<p><b>2:20</b></p>	<p><b>Panel: Reimagining Food Access in NL</b>   In this panel discussion attendees heard from inspiring people working in local food programs that are doing things differently when it comes to food access. They shared about the context of their programs, what they are working to achieve, and how they envision a different future for food charity.</p> <p><b>Panelists:</b> Jennifer Collins - Local Wellness Collective Debbie Wiseman - Sharing the Harvest Les Perry - Food on the Move (Food First NL) Jody Williams - Bridges to Hope Roxanne Notley - NunatuKavut</p>
<p><b>3:20</b></p>	<p><b>Final Reflections &amp; Meeting Close</b>   Postcard activity to reflect on actions going forward, evaluation surveys, and draw for door prizes. Thank you to all partners, staff, and attendees for a successful day!</p>



## Appendix B

### Attendance

Name	Organization	Title
Alison Bennett-James	Food First NL	Program Coordinator
Amanda Devlin	Connections for Seniors	Director of Programs and Services
Amber Fitzgerald		
Andrea Cooper	Public Health Agency of Canada	Senior Project Officer
Andrew Williams	Second Harvest	Head of Operations - NL
Bridget Clarke	St. John's Status of Women Council	Advocacy Coordinator
Carla Saunders	Food First NL	Program Coordinator
Catherine Pretty		
Celina Stoyles	Kids Eat Smart Foundation Newfoundland Labrador	Executive Director
Daphne March	First Voice	Community Advocate
Debbie Wiseman	Sharing The Harvest NL	Co-Founder
Deborah Doherty		Navigator
Denise Wilson	Holyrood Little Free Pantries Inc.	Volunteer
Emily Alexander	Food First NL	Program Assistant
Ewan Cumming	Bridges to Hope	Board Chair
Fred Marshall	St. Paul's Anglican Church	St. Paul's Anglican Church - Goulds
Gary Galway	North Avalon Eastern Foodbank	Secretary
Grace Palina		
Heather Reid	Food First NL	Communication Coordinator
Heidi Boyd	Department of Health and Community Services	Provincial Nutritionist
Jan Grace	211 Newfoundland and Labrador	Office Administrator
Jean Grant	Society of St. Vincent De Paul	Treasurer
Jennifer Collins	Local Wellness Collective	Executive Director
Jennifer Yetman	Kids Eat Smart Foundation Newfoundland Labrador	Director of Communications and Fund Development
Jody Williams	Bridges to Hope, inc	Bridges to Hope, inc
Joshua Smees	Food First NL	CEO

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Judy Peddle	Society of St. Vincent De Paul Corpus Christi	President
Katie Oldford		
Kay Matthews	Society of St. Vincent De Paul	Helper
Kimberly Orren	Fishing for Success	
Laurel Huget	Food First NL	Program Coordinator
Les Perry	Food First NL	Regional Food Animator
Lesley Burgess	Bridges to Hope	Operations Manager
Liam Collins	Local Wellness Collective	
Lisa Knee	Kids Eat Smart Foundation Newfoundland Labrador	Events and Fundraising Coordinator
Madi Gregory	Food First NL	Program Assistant
Madonna Galway	North Avalon Eastern Food Bank	President
Melissa Caravan	Eastern Health	Regional Nutritionist
Miriam Bowlby	Bridges to Hope	Vice Chair of the Board
Mohamed AbdAllah	Connections for Seniors	Executive Director
Noel	First Light	
Paula Lancaster		
Robert Piccott	Government of NL	Social and Economic Well-Being
Roxanne Notley	NunatuKavut Community Council	NunatuKavut Community Council
Rudy Singleton	Emmaus House	Chairperson
Sarah Ferber	Food First NL	Program Manager
Sarah Gagne		Volunteer
Sharon Rose	Society of St. Vincent De Paul - Corpus Christi	Executive Committee - Secretary
Sierra MacNeil	Food First NL	Program Assistant
Sonya Smith	Single Parent Association of Newfoundland	Executive Director
Stephanie Gillis	Holy Heart High School	Assistant Principal
Stephanie Power		
Susan Walsh	Office of the Seniors' Advocate, NL	Seniors' Advocate
Suzanne Laughland		
Tina Bishop	Community Food Sharing Association	
Todd Perrin	Mallard Cottage	Chef/Co-owner
Wanda Hillier	Community Food Sharing Association	Board Chair
Yahia Aly	MUN Campus Food Bank	Volunteer
Zainab Jerrett	We Care Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador Inc.	Executive Director