

FRAMEWORK CHAPTER 10



VOICES of Lived Experience Dufferin is a community-based advocacy group composed of people with lived experience, and a facilitator /coordinator.

A community-based group of people with lived experience (PWLE) is a diverse and inclusive collective made up of individuals who have personally navigated a wide range of life circumstances. Members may include those who have experienced mental health challenges, substance use, homelessness, incarceration, domestic violence, poverty, trauma, chronic illness, disability, or systemic discrimination. Others may come from backgrounds of refugee or immigrant status, involvement in the child welfare system, or have lived through marginalization due to race, gender identity, or sexual orientation. This rich diversity of experience fosters a supportive environment rooted in empathy, peer connection, and shared resilience.

The VOICES Framework is a dynamic tool designed to guide organizations and communities in working more effectively with people with lived experience (PWLE). Each of the twelve chapters within the framework represents a distinct lens or tool that can be applied to shape programs, policies, and services that engage and support individuals and families.



*This document is one of 12 chapters from **The VOICES Framework**. The full framework and additional materials, as well as references and works consulted on this topic, can be found on the VOICES website.*



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TAKING A CREATIVE APPROACH TO FOOD INSECURITY

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTION PROMPTS

The VOICES process involves question prompts that guide the group discussion. These are the question prompts for this chapter's group discussion.



I think it is essential that a creative approach to food insecurity is taken in organizations that work with PWLE because...



My own experience of being food insecure taught me that...



Raising children in food insecurity feels like...



Affordable, secure housing with a garden would make a difference to me because...



A free community food culture means...



Food banks are complicated because...



We don't want to have to be thankful for food because...



When I am judged for being food insecure, I feel and experience...



It is hard for me to get real food because...



What would have kept me from food insecurity is...



INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity is a pervasive issue affecting millions of Canadians. According to recent statistics, 4.4 million people in Canada, including 1.2 million children, live in food-insecure households (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). Food insecurity is defined as the lack of access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (FAO, 2021). This issue is particularly pronounced among low-income individuals and families, highlighting the need for innovative and sustainable solutions.

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"When I experienced food insecurity, it was more than just hunger. It was the anxiety of not knowing where my next meal would come from and the shame of not being able to provide for my family. The food banks were helpful, but often the food was not suitable for my dietary needs or simply not enough. It felt like a constant struggle to maintain my dignity while asking for help."

– *VOICES Member*



PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE INSIGHTS

At VOICES, we understand that addressing food insecurity requires a multi-faceted approach. All of us have experienced the fear, stress and stigma associated with not having enough to eat, for most of us this is still ongoing, or we must balance doing without certain things we need to get enough calories. There is also the constant reality of making do and constantly worrying about meeting our dietary needs. Sometimes we also must skip meals. We know firsthand how food insecurity can affect physical health, mental well-being, and overall quality of life. Research supports our experiences, showing that food insecurity is associated with various adverse health outcomes, including chronic diseases, depression, and anxiety (Tarasuk et al., 2015) which is a reality for many of us.

"Raising children in food insecurity is heart-wrenching. You feel like you're constantly failing them, no matter how hard you try. The look of disappointment on their faces when there's not enough to eat is something that stays with you. It impacts their growth, their learning, and their happiness. We need more sustainable solutions that ensure no child goes hungry. The stress when you are afraid your family will be hungry is debilitating." – **VOICES Member**

Our experiences show that food insecurity cannot be tackled by food banks alone. It requires creative solutions that empower individuals and communities, such as community gardens, cooking programs, and local food initiatives. Studies indicate that community gardens and urban agriculture can significantly improve food security by providing fresh produce and fostering community engagement (McCormack et al., 2010). We want to see more of this in our community of Dufferin County.

"When we imagined what it would feel like to have a garden and secure housing I started to cry. For me it would change my life. If I could grow my own food, it would be a gamechanger. We had a garden before we lost our home, and it was better for our health. Now we are dealing with health issues and have no ability to grow food and fresh food is often too expensive for us to buy. It feels like we are stuck in a cycle when there is so much land in our community and ways to grow food if only we were creative and prioritized more local solutions. Instead, we are stuck in an apartment with grocery prices increasing and no ability to grow it ourselves." – **VOICES Member**



KEY POINTS OF THE FRAMEWORK

UNDERSTANDING NEEDS

Our approach addresses the specific needs of food-insecure individuals with comprehensive supports that are tailored to their dietary restrictions (Wakefield et al., 2007). For us this means having more options when it comes to accessing free food in our community.

INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORT

Tailored support including access to fresh produce, nutrition education, and mental health services if needed (Hamelin et al., 1999). We want to think about feeding the whole person – which includes calories and nourishing their spirits.

COMMUNITY-BASED SOLUTIONS

Prioritizing community gardens, farmers' markets, and local food initiatives that promote self-sufficiency and community resilience (Guitart et al., 2012).

EMPOWERMENT AND ADVOCACY

Involving food-insecure individuals in decision-making processes and advocating for their rights (Riches, 2002).

SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

Encouraging sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty initiatives that respect cultural practices and promote long-term food security (Grey & Patel, 2015).





POLICY/SYSTEM CHANGE

Good policies aspire to treat the underlying causes of food insecurity, consider racial and socio-economic disparities, as well as consider options based on ecological sustainability (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2015). Comprehensive policies should provide necessary funding, support local food systems, and facilitate collaboration among various stakeholders. In Dufferin County this could mean more access to free land to grow food, advocating for lower prices at grocery stores, more community food sharing including limiting food waste, rezoning of land that isn't being used to be used to grow food, and supporting our food banks more so that they are not stretched to meet the food needs of our most vulnerable. We also want to see more creative solutions like seed share programs, food cooperatives, affordable food box programs, or access to more creative growing solutions like container gardening. There is often a lot of red tape when these ideas are presented – for example we cannot just go to a park and start growing, we need the local government to do the work to allocate this type of space for the community to grow in. Roof tops are also another example of spaces where food can be grown and where local government and local organizations can do the preliminary work and take the lead to make it available.



"The system needs to change from just handing out food to empowering people to grow their own, learn about nutrition, and become self-sufficient. Food banks are not a long-term solution they're an emergency measure. We need policies that support community gardens, urban agriculture, and local food programs that provide real, sustainable food solutions."

– VOICES Member

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SOME EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES



COMMUNITY GARDENS

Projects that allow community members to grow their own fruits and vegetables, promoting self-sufficiency and access to fresh produce (Guitart et al., 2012).



FARMERS' MARKETS

Platforms for local farmers to sell their produce directly to consumers, fostering a strong local food economy (Brown & Miller, 2008). Often this food is more expensive but there could be subsidy program in place that create pathways that support low-income people in accessing farm produce.



FOOD HUBS

Aggregating and distributing local food products to retailers, institutions, and consumers, creating a centralized distribution network (Matson et al., 2013).



SCHOOL GARDENS AND NUTRITION PROGRAM

Teaching students about food production and nutrition while providing healthy meals (Ozer, 2007). Students can also get their school hours by engaging in community food activities and programming. Initiatives that support food in schools are essential as it allows students to access more of the nutrition, they need in ways that are for everyone and do not target any child as poor. It also helps create food knowledge and long-term food-based skills.





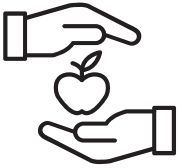
MOBILE MARKETS

Bringing fresh produce to underserved areas or food deserts, increasing access to nutritious food options (Zepeda & Reznickova, 2013). A strong example of this happening close to our community of Dufferin County is the Mobile Food Market from The Cambridge Food Bank that is working to bring fresh food to all people at a low barrier cost.



FOOD POLICY COUNCILS

Advocating for policies that support local food systems and food security initiatives (Harper et al., 2009).



FOOD SOVEREIGNTY INITIATIVES

Supporting Indigenous communities to regain control over their food systems and promoting culturally relevant and sustainable practices (Grey & Patel, 2015).



FRUIT TREES IN PUBLIC SPACE

Support planting fruit trees in public spaces.





IMPACT OF FOOD INSECURITY ON HEALTH

Food insecurity is not just about hunger; it has profound implications for health and well-being. Research shows that food-insecure individuals are more likely to suffer from chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease (Seligman et al., 2010). Additionally, food insecurity is associated with poorer mental health outcomes, including higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Weinreb et al., 2002).

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"Living with food insecurity affects my health in so many ways. I constantly feel tired and weak because I'm not getting the nutrients I need. It also takes a toll on my mental health. The stress of not knowing if I will have enough to eat is overwhelming. I developed anxiety and depression, which makes it even harder to take care of myself and my family. It feels like a never-ending cycle of struggle and despair."

– *VOICES Member*

To address these health impacts, it is crucial to adopt a holistic approach that includes access to nutritious food, health care, and mental health support. Programs like community gardens and cooking classes not only provide food but also promote healthy eating habits, mental well-being, and skill development (Armstrong, 2000).



THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY IN FOOD SECURITY

Community-based solutions are essential for addressing food insecurity. Community gardens, farmers' markets, and cooking programs to name a few can create a sense of belonging and support among participants. These initiatives help build social networks, reduce isolation, and foster a sense of empowerment (Armstrong, 2000).

"A free community food culture means everything to me. It means we can come together, share resources, and support each other. Meal programs and community gardens are not just about the food; they are about building a stronger, more resilient community. When we work together, we can create real change and ensure that everyone has access to the food they need." – **VOICES Member**

Community gardens, in particular, have been shown to improve food security by providing access to fresh produce and creating opportunities for social interaction and community building (Twiss et al., 2003). They also offer educational opportunities, teaching participants about gardening, nutrition, and sustainable agriculture (Ozer, 2007).

BARRIERS TO FOOD SECURITY

Despite the benefits of community-based solutions, there are still significant barriers to achieving food security. Food banks, while helpful in the short term, often provide food that is not nutritious or suitable for all dietary needs (Riches, 2002). Additionally, the stigma associated with using food banks can deter individuals from seeking help.

"Food banks are complicated because they don't always provide what you need. The food is often processed and unhealthy, and it doesn't address the root causes of food insecurity. We are happy that our Orangeville and Shelbourne Book Banks provides fresh food. We know this is not always the case, so we are very grateful. Even if the food is good, it's still hard to ask for help because there's a stigma attached to it. People in the world judge you for being food insecure and broke, and it makes you feel ashamed. We need better solutions that provide nutritious food and support people in becoming self-sufficient without shame." – **VOICES Member**

To overcome these barriers, it is essential to implement policies that support local food systems, reduce stigma, and promote long-term solutions to food insecurity (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2015). Addressing food insecurity requires a multi-faceted approach that includes community-based solutions, supportive policies, and empowerment of individuals. By focusing on sustainable practices, fostering community engagement, and advocating for systemic change, we can create a future where everyone has access to nutritious food. Our collective experiences and insights at VOICES highlight the need for creative, comprehensive strategies to tackle food insecurity and promote food security for all.



ORGANIZATIONAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS

These questions can help ensure that you are taking a Creative Approach to Food Insecurity at your own organization.

- 1 Understanding Needs and Tailored Support**
How can we better understand the specific dietary and cultural needs of food-insecure individuals in our community?

Are we providing food that meets diverse nutritional and cultural requirements?
- 2 Building Community Solutions**
How can we engage the community in creating and maintaining sustainable food initiatives, such as community gardens or meal-sharing programs?

What resources or partnerships are needed to launch and sustain creative food solutions?
- 3 Reducing Stigma**
What steps can we take to ensure individuals accessing food programs feel respected and not judged?

How can we shift the narrative around food banks from being charity-based to community-building initiatives?
- 4 Advocating for Policy Change**
How can we advocate for local government policies that support urban agriculture, food sovereignty, and reduced food waste?

Are there opportunities to collaborate with policymakers to increase funding for food security initiatives?
- 5 Encouraging Empowerment and Education**
What educational programs can we provide to teach gardening, cooking, and nutrition skills that empower individuals to take control of their food security?

How can we involve food-insecure individuals in the decision-making processes of food programs?

- 6 Exploring New Approaches**
Could we explore innovative solutions such as mobile food markets, rooftop gardens, or food hubs to improve access to fresh produce?
How can we integrate food initiatives with other services, like housing programs, to address systemic causes of food insecurity?
- 7 Collaborating with Schools and Organizations**
How can we partner with schools to establish nutrition programs or gardens that provide healthy meals and educational opportunities?
Are there local businesses, farms, or nonprofits that could collaborate with us to enhance our food security initiatives?
- 8 Sustainability and Long-Term Impact**
How can we incorporate sustainability into our food programs, such as promoting organic farming practices or reducing food waste?
What metrics can we use to evaluate the long-term impact of our food initiatives on the community?
- 9 Increasing Accessibility and Dignity**
How can we improve access to fresh, healthy food while ensuring anonymity and dignity, such as through gift card systems instead of coupons?
What infrastructure changes, like public fruit trees or rezoned growing spaces, could make fresh food more accessible?
- 10 Promoting a Community Food Culture**
How can we foster a sense of community through food-sharing programs and collaborative growing initiatives?
Are there cultural or historical food practices in our area that we can celebrate and integrate into our free food programs?



WALK IN OUR SHOES: PERSONAL STORIES FROM PWLE



Food banks are essential and in times of hunger they are a Godsend, but they do not go far enough. We need to go beyond the food banks in this country, not just in our community, but nationally we need more creative approaches to local food programs and initiatives like more community gardens and more healthy food programs at schools. Frankly, it is just hard to be poor and use the free food system. You are so grateful to the food bank staff and volunteers for how hard they work, but it doesn't feel nice to get free food and then there are things like coupons that target and identify us as poor. I have brought those to the cashiers so many times and they have talked loudly about it and singled me out. Once the cashier yelled out to another staff "there is a food bank coupon here how do I use this?" Everyone in the line knew. I just wanted to run. We need a gift card system that keeps us anonymous, and we need more affordable food in this country. This also means more community opportunities to grow and share food. We also hear all the time about the food waste in the world. We see it happening. It's crazy the food prices and food being wasted with hungry people! And these issues are all connected: poverty, food insecurity, food waste, environmental issues, discrimination to people - it's all connected! I think food really brings people together. Growing food together, sharing it, preserving it will bring people together and feed people too. It can't just be a shameful free food system that doesn't give you enough – there needs to be a new way of living with food as a community so that the shame is gone and no one is left hungry."

– VOICES Member

WALK WITH US...

This is one chapter from a framework of 12.
Find more resources at DCEC.CA.

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