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Highlighting the Vital Work of VCH CFAI-funded Food Security Organizations during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Co-authored by:

Lauren McGuire-Wood, VCH Community Investments

Dr. Chris Hergesheimer, One Straw Society

Abstract

Food security has been an ongoing challenge in British Columbia and has been exacerbated by the still unfolding COVID-19 pandemic. Community organizations and food security advocates continue to call for evidence-based policy interventions to help address the growing concerns, especially as they relate to service providers in the region. Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) oversees the Community Food Action Initiative (CFAI) funding, which is provided by the Ministry of Health. Operating since 2005, CFAI is designed to build the collective capacity of communities to improve their food security. While each health authority in BC uses their CFAI funding differently, VCH CFAI grants provide long-term core funding for nine organizations and programs across the region; these organizations and programs operate a host of structural, upstream health promotion activities. Using a qualitative methodology, this report examines the firsthand experiences of these community groups as they responded to the programming challenges brought on by the pandemic. Results show that alongside the formation of new partnerships, innovative models of service provisioning, and the opening up of more direct avenues for discussing larger scale policy change, challenges persist. Noted challenges include: struggling to maintain and find new sources of funding for emergency services; staff overworking; loss of social connection between program recipients and with the community-based groups; and the exacerbation of structural inequalities. The report ends with a series of recommendations which are targeted at particular organizational levels.

Key words:

Food Security, British Columbia, Non-profits, Community-based Food Systems, Vancouver Coastal Health

Introduction and Purpose*Food Insecurity in BC: Pre-pandemic and beyond*

Food insecurity has long been an issue for individuals and families in BC and across Canada, and has especially been a concern to community members, governments, and organizations as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds. Based on Statistics Canada's Canadian Community Health Survey from 2017-18, 12.4% of British Columbians experience food insecurity, which involves not being able to afford to eat balanced meals and feeling worried that food would run out before they had enough money to buy more (Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A., 2020). Studies done about food-insecure households suggest "much more pervasive material deprivation" than just a lack of adequate nutrient-dense food; food-insecure households are often unable to afford other necessities too, including housing and prescription medication (Tarasuk, V., Mitchell, A., 2020). Community organizations and food security advocates continue to call for evidence-based policy interventions, especially around financial resources for low-income households.

In May 2020, BC residents were invited to complete a population health survey, developed by the provincial government and the BC Centre for Disease Control, regarding the changes to their health and lifestyles due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Results indicated that 31% of BC residents reported increased difficulty meeting financial needs as a result of job loss and financial hardships during the pandemic; 14.6% of British Columbians felt an increase in food insecurity since the pandemic started (BCCDC COVID SPEAK Dashboard, 2020). Evidence from this survey and the on-the-ground lived experiences of people and service providers suggest that the pandemic brings additional complexity to a problem that has affected British Columbians for decades.

Further Strain on Already Under-resourced Non-Profits

Non-profit organizations currently offer many food services to individuals and families in BC to meet the needs of food insecure populations. In general, non-profits have been particularly affected by the pandemic, especially since, as a sector, many are already under-resourced in terms of funding and people power. In a 2014 report on the current state of the BC charitable sector, research firm Ference Weicker & Company found that working conditions were more precarious for non-profit staff than those in other industries. Salaries for non-profit workers are

lower on average, despite many positions requiring higher education, “with racialized workers and those in traditional ‘caring roles’ ... typically earning the lowest wages” (FERENCE Weicker & Co., 2014). Non-profits often have funding coming from a variety of different channels, many of which are not guaranteed every year; staff may need to re-apply each year, or funding may only span the project’s first year. As such, the industry relies heavily on volunteers and contract workers (FERENCE Weicker & Co., 2014). When the pandemic began, many non-profit staff found themselves on the front-lines of COVID-19 response.

Shortly after the pandemic public health measures had been introduced, non-profit capacity building organization Vantage Point worked with Vancouver Foundation, Victoria Foundation, and the City of Vancouver to survey non-profits around BC on their needs. Their final report, titled No Immunity, showed that 74% of the non-profits surveyed experienced a reduction in revenue from fundraising, while at the same time, 52% experienced an increased demand for services/supports from clients and communities. Though demand for social services increased, not all non-profit organizations were able to maintain funding and deliver the newly identified programs. For example, only 37% of non-profits reported that they were able to introduce new programs or services to meet that demand. Vantage Point developed recommendations for various stakeholders to support non-profits during this time, including financial assistance from governments, funders, and businesses, and assistance in moving to remote programming (including clients not having access to or not being able to afford equipment). The report calls on governments to increase regional emergency coordination with non-profits providing essential services. It also highlights the role of capacity building organizations to ensure non-profit staff and participants’ concerns are understood and heard by key decision makers. These findings are particularly relevant in examining deeper the work of VCH’s Community Food Action Initiative (CFAI) organizations during early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community Food Action Initiative Grants in the VCH Region

The CFAI grants originated through a 2005 Ministry of Health initiative to build the collective capacity of communities to improve their food security. Each year, the VCH CFAI invests approximately \$200,000 across their recipient communities. While each health authority in BC uses their CFAI funding differently, VCH CFAI grants provide long-term core funding for nine organizations and programs across the region (see Table 1). These grants are administered by the VCH Community Investments team, which provides other capacity building support in addition to the funding. As part of the VCH CFAI model, these organizations are connected to other staff members at VCH too, including the Population Health team, Public Health dietitians, and Aboriginal Health staff.

Table 1: CFAI non-profit organization names and locations

Community Organization	Location
Richmond Food Security Society	Richmond
Cedar Cottage Food Network	Vancouver - Kensington-Cedar Cottage neighbourhood
Grandview Woodlands Food Connection	Vancouver - Grandview Woodlands neighbourhood
North Shore Table Matters	North Vancouver
Squamish CAN	Squamish
One Straw Society	Sunshine Coast region
Lift Community Services Society	Powell River
Bella Coola Valley Sustainable Agricultural Society	Bella Coola
Qqs Projects Society	Bella Bella (Heiltsuk territory)

Like other Community Investments grantees, (i.e., SMART fund recipients), all CFAI-funded organizations and programs deliver health promotion activities meant to build capacity within entire communities, rather than intervene at the individual level. CFAI programs, built over years of embedded community development work and based on the shifting needs of their unique communities, aim to address food systems-level change and not emergency food response.

Since these grants originated over 15 years ago, VCH's CFAI model has been the subject of two evaluation reports; the most recent evaluation was completed at the beginning of 2019. This 2019 report spoke to the contributions that CFAI programs have made to their communities in terms of increasing social connection and improving mental and physical wellbeing, and the potential for CFAI coordinators, as well as other staff and volunteers, to play a greater role in policy work and systems change at the regional and provincial levels. The evaluation report also identified barriers to the work done by the CFAI coordinators, two of which stood out especially. The first is the funding amounts received, which have remained fairly static since 2005 despite increasing demands on these organizations and the increased cost of living. The second main barrier is the subsequent burnout and turn-over of staff in the

coordinator roles, due in part to funding challenges. In order to strategize around the recommendations in the evaluation report, VCH staff and the CFAI coordinators came together for an in-person gathering in Vancouver in January 2020. At this gathering, attendees discussed the supports that are needed for CFAI-funded organizations from VCH and other funders, and identified some areas of opportunity regarding food security policy. They also participated in the early stages of creation of a set of common indicators to be used to evaluate the work by all CFAI organizations funded through VCH.

Purpose and Guiding Questions

Though the CFAI organizations are funded primarily for upstream health promotion work within their respective communities, each reported that the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic from March to June 2020 changed the way that they delivered services. For the most part, that meant a move towards at least some emergency food service provisioning. Such a shift in tactics inspired a number of questions that required deeper exploration. In order to better understand the dynamics of these shifts, VCH Community Investments staff undertook a data gathering exercise with CFAI coordinators.

The purpose of Community Investments' check-in interviews with CFAI coordinators was to: 1) understand the role of small non-profits in addressing the increase in food insecurity during the first wave of the pandemic; 2) understand the impact of moving to emergency food services on small food security non-profits that receive CFAI funding; and 3) identify ways to further build the capacity of the CFAI-funded non-profits and communities in the VCH region.

This report explores those questions. It also provides a much-needed opportunity for CFAI coordinators to learn about each other's activities during the early stages of the pandemic, and a means for coordinators to work more closely with VCH staff on CFAI objectives that have been discussed in the previous evaluation reports and at the January 2020 in-person gathering. Finally, this cross-sectional report offers CFAI coordinators an evidence-informed tool they can deploy during conversations with elected officials and community partners, and during additional funding exploration. VCH staff will also be able to use this report to help demonstrate the regional impact of CFAI funding during the pandemic and beyond.

Methodology

This data was collected through phone interviews with the staff, contractors, and volunteers from these organizations (CFAI coordinators and Board members) between May and July 2020. 10 interview subjects were interviewed, representing a total of 9 organizations. This primary data is meant to complement other data collected through municipal and provincial surveys, research institutions, food banks, other public health research, and non-profit capacity-building organizations such as Vantage Point. Each coordinator was asked the same set of questions about how their service delivery has changed during the pandemic and what they have learned since March 2020 when public health measures to slow the spread of COVID-19 were introduced in BC. The coordinators' answers were coded thematically and organized into this report. CFAI coordinators verified the content of the report and the authors' summarization.

CFAI-Funded Organizations Stepping Up to Fill Gaps in Emergency Food Services

In March 2020, VCH Community Investments informed all SMART and CFAI grantees that they should respond to the needs of their communities during the pandemic in the best way they knew how, and if needed, that they could be flexible with their funding from VCH during this time. Throughout the pandemic, CFAI grantees have scaled up their existing programs or developed new activities to meet the emergency needs of their communities. These activities include, but are not limited to the following: acting on immediate and strong increases in demand for community gardening (e.g., the development of the Granny Gardens program in Bella Bella, which encourages Heiltsuk community members to channel the spirits of ancestors to guide them through the pandemic); organizing or assisting with food hamper delivery programs in partnerships with schools and other agencies; assisting with grocery gift card distribution; moving service delivery to online platforms as appropriate; meeting increased demand from municipal and retail partners for food rescue and recovery programs; and providing increased involvement in multi-stakeholder Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) meetings or other emergency food response tables. While these new or scaled up initiatives may represent significant changes in past programming and/or service delivery, how far and to what extent the CFAI-funded organizations and programs have shifted away from upstream health promotion activities varied depending on the needs and interests in their community. However, data strongly suggests that each one of the organizations has moved to an emergency food response of some kind.

As stated in the beginning of this report, evidence has continually shown that the root cause of food insecurity is lack of income (PROOF, 2020; BCCDC Cost of Eating Report, 2018).

However, food banks and other charitable food provision models continue to dominate both the short- and long-term responses to food insecurity; this was reinforced during the pandemic. The federal government, which distributed \$100 million through the Emergency Food Security Fund in April 2020, half of which went to Food Banks Canada; the other \$50 million was distributed between 5 other national charitable emergency food organizations (Agriculture Canada, 2020). While it is true that food banks saw higher demand for their services across the VCH region during the pandemic, as shown in a report completed by UBC dietetics students during their placements at VCH in summer 2020 (Ramanaden, S. et al), they remain a band-aid solution to a larger structural issue (Riches, 1986, 1997, 1999, 2002). In April 2020, the Greater Vancouver Food Bank, which serves Vancouver and North Vancouver, closed many of its community locations in Vancouver citing safety issues. This led to other organizations such as neighbourhood houses doing much of that food distribution work themselves, as well as running their other essential programming. CFAI-funded organizations both worked alongside and provided programs in addition to food banks during the pandemic, though they were not able to access the same funding opportunities. For example, Grandview Woodlands Food Connection noted a strong need for home food delivery as an alternative to standing in line at the food bank, and they helped people stay safely at home by initiating a food delivery program. As a result of their strong partnerships and their involvement at EOCs and other emergency food response tables, CFAI coordinators were able to identify challenges as they arose in their communities and help frame possible solutions for this emergency situation and at the food systems-level, based on past experiences with their health promotion activities and drawing on their networked approach. This provided essential knowledge translation and showcased the integral role that the CFAI organizations can play as a bridge between larger structural community food security activities and assisting with emergency provisioning.

CFAI-Funded Organizations Uniquely Positioned to Understand Evolving Community Needs during Emergencies

One key strength among all of these CFAI-funded programs and organizations is the deep and networked connections that staff and volunteers have with community members. CFAI coordinators are well-positioned to connect people to other organizations and resources, are knowledgeable about all things food-related in their geographic region, and understand the unique needs of the communities they serve.

Many of the CFAI coordinators noted that they reached out directly to their community partners and/or program participants shortly after the public health measures were put into place to better understand how they could best support their communities in a short-term, responsive way. For most of these organizations, that meant shifting to hamper pick-up or food delivery models. Especially in more rural communities in the VCH region, CFAI coordinators reported that there was a sudden surge of interest in gardening from community members, and in food security more generally. For example, the staff and Board of Directors at One Straw Society on the Sunshine Coast noted that the pandemic contributed to a “cultural and societal shift around the value of the work we’re doing.” The CFAI coordinator at Qqs Projects Society on Heiltsuk territory (Bella Bella) found that the pandemic allowed Qqs to work with “a whole new cohort of people that wouldn’t necessarily have engaged before.”

This engagement with partners and participants, due in large part to pre-existing relationships and having built a sense of trust in the community, helped the CFAI coordinators quickly determine where the gaps were in terms of service delivery for their participants. Seniors and Elders, families (especially those with single parents and refugee families), people with low incomes, and disabled and/or immunocompromised people were some of the populations that CFAI coordinators reported were most impacted by the pandemic in terms of food insecurity. Lack of access to technology was a barrier for some participants trying to locate food resources. In addition, limits on various food items at grocery stores in rural communities presented a challenge for larger families trying to buy enough food to feed everyone in their household. These small but nimble non-profit organizations were able to identify these needs shortly after the onset of the pandemic through their consistent and familiar presence in VCH communities, and by collaborating with key partners to deliver emergency or other additional services.

Food Security Partnerships Strengthened and Working Better Together

Over the last five years, there has been an increase in the number and types of collaborations led by food systems coordinators (CFAI evaluation report, 2019). Building on this collaborative spirit, data from this report shows that the pandemic has also facilitated and inspired further networking, referrals, and cooperation. Several of the CFAI coordinators reported that the pandemic quickly facilitated “breaking down silos” among food security organizations and institutions as they organized to best serve marginalized populations. These partnerships allowed food to be distributed to more people, leveraged the strengths of each organization to help their community, and offered opportunities to collaborate on funding proposals. Relationships were built or strengthened with varying levels of government (municipal, regional, and even to some extent federal), other non-profit organizations and agencies, funders, food banks, grocery stores, and farmers. Three of the CFAI organizations stated that they were able to work more closely with Indigenous nations during the pandemic than they had in the past. As the CFAI coordinator in Bella Coola stated, from the work they have done so far over the pandemic, “it will be easier to bring together these partners again in the future.” In other areas, already established networks such as the Vancouver Neighbourhood Food Networks continued to be useful in an emergency situation, such as helping make connections with local farmers to supply produce for programming. According to a report on the VCH approach to food security during the pandemic produced by practicum student Sigbrit Sochting (2020), existing relationships between CFAI-funded organizations and VCH staff, especially public health dietitians, facilitated a more robust understanding of the immediate needs of communities. The success of these collaborations so far through the pandemic has shown the importance of strong partnerships in crisis response and recovery. The extent to which these partnerships and collaborations have been sustained and led to successes into the future should be a topic of future investigation.

New Opportunities for Potential Policy and Systemic Change in Collaboration with Local and Regional Governments

Many of the CFAI-funded organizations are involved in food systems change through working with municipal and regional governments on food charters and other policy efforts. In many cases, the pandemic accelerated those partnerships with governments and assisted with important policy work that was already underway. In response to the pandemic, the majority of the CFAI coordinators became integral parts of their local Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) and/or other committees and working groups at the municipal or regional levels. These collaborations once again suggest that CFAI coordinators are critical actors in the food security response during an emergency. Governmental recognition of this fact is a valuable asset to communities and to the CFAI work in general. The following list showcases some examples of the work these agencies have been doing with governments:

- In Powell River, the Food Action Network was re-invigorated during the pandemic, with a push from the city's Social Planner. Lift Community Services' staff members were part of this network.
- Squamish CAN has been working with their Food Policy Council and developed working relationships with the District of Squamish and Squamish Lillooet Regional District. They are working on the regional Squamish Valley Agriculture Plan.
- The CFAI Coordinator with North Shore Table Matters (out of the North Shore Neighbourhood House) noted that the three municipalities in the North Shore area have shown a greater interest in food waste and recovery since COVID measures were introduced.
- The Board Chair for Bella Coola Valley Sustainable Agricultural Society (BCVSAS) has been contracted to work with Nuxalk Nation on a food security plan.

VCH Community Investments encourages the involvement of staff from the CFAI-funded organizations in collaborating with local and regional governments to contribute to food policy and food systems change work. However, with limited staff capacity in these small organizations, an increase in their work in delivering emergency food services during a situation like the pandemic does impact the amount of time they are able to contribute their knowledge and expertise to larger strategic conversations around emergency prevention and recovery. As such, while new conversations with governmental agencies may have been opened up and policy work may have found a greater evidence base of support, the action items of larger upstream policy work may have been delayed due to a needed redirection of resources to meet emergency provisioning gaps.

Significant Challenges for Non-Profits Doing Food Security Work

Though the CFAI coordinators all mobilized immediately to work with community members and their partners, the pandemic has not been without significant challenges for these organizations. Many of these challenges are structural in nature and outside of the hands of these small organizations to tackle on their own. The following four points represent challenges worthy of extended discussion.

Struggling to Maintain and Find New Sources of Funding for Emergency Services

Funding is always a primary concern for non-profit organizations. For most of the coordinators, they struggled with finding and applying for enough funding to cover their new needs. Emergency funding was plentiful at the start of the pandemic, including the \$100 million Emergency Food Security Fund from the federal government mentioned above, but that funding could be restrictive. As many of the CFAI-funded programs and organizations are non-

profit societies and not registered charities, certain emergency funding streams were unavailable to them without charitable status. For example, Lift Community Services in Powell River identified the need for infrastructure upgrades but is having a difficult time finding funding for capital costs during the pandemic; this is also an issue for Grandview Woodlands Food Connection in Vancouver and Qqs in Bella Bella. In addition, funding to meet additional staffing costs or increases in coordinator hours is not always possible within the emergency funding parameters. Emergency funding can be specific, directive and oftentimes not eligible to cover staffing costs. Furthermore, not being able to hold in-person events has left several of these organizations without their primary means of fundraising; this aligns with a challenge identified for non-profit organizations across BC (Vantage Point, 2020). As was raised through the CFAI evaluation reports and the in-person gathering in January 2020, funding has been a concern for these organizations for quite some time; CFAI grant amounts have remained nearly the same for the 15 years the funding has been administered. Funding is especially important now when they are faced with overwhelming need in their communities and multiple, overlapping public health emergencies.

Staff Overworking and Unable to Rely on Volunteers

With the surge of emergency food needs, CFAI coordinators found themselves putting much more time and energy into reactive ‘pandemic programming’, at times even working 7 days per week. Some coordinators expressed that with physical distancing and general uncertainty, it was difficult to rely on volunteers as much as they once did, and volunteers had to be temporarily let go for safety reasons. Staffing limitations were already a concern for CFAI coordinators before the pandemic, and this became heightened with the increased demand brought forth by the pandemic. This sentiment supports the findings in Vantage Point’s No Immunity Report (2020), which found that 68% of organizations reported facing challenges related to staff and volunteers needing to work remotely during the pandemic, while 35% of organizations reported reduced hours for staff because of budgetary constraints. Community Investments staff heard similar issues during phone interviews with SMART grant recipients.

Loss of Social Connection for Participants

In addition to building capacity for participants around food knowledge, skills, and access, these CFAI programs focus on building social connections and combating isolation in their communities. With the pandemic changes to service delivery, there have been some losses in terms of social connection for participants who previously attended health promotion programs offered by these organizations. Though participants are engaging online where possible, several CFAI coordinators said that participants were missing the in-person aspects

of their programs, especially those who could not get online. An important part of food security work is the social infrastructure that comes with food programming; the ability to maintain social connection through these programs has changed throughout the pandemic. “We are seeing volunteers going through health disparities without the program,” said one CFAI Coordinator. While the prevailing sentiment was a loss of social connection through the limitations on in-person gathering, it should be noted that the move to online has also opened up some new opportunities. One Straw Society’s twice monthly Presentation and Speaker series is an example of new programming that has embraced the virtual space to share conversations and presentations about food systems topics that matter. Overall, the shared experience of living through a global pandemic did unite community members as they supported one another during this difficult time, and this showed through their interest in and support for CFAI programs. Though public health measures limited in-person interactions, the CFAI coordinators have found creative ways to engage community members who were already aware of their programs, as well as introduce new people to their programming.

Structural Inequities Exacerbated

While emergency food programs can be commended for coming together quickly during the pandemic, the reality is that they are not getting to the root of the structural inequities highlighted and exacerbated by COVID-19 public health measures. The CFAI Coordinator in Powell River, for instance, spoke about recognizing large gaps in food systems during the pandemic but being unable to fill those gaps on their own. The CFAI Coordinator in Richmond reported that they have had to move away from their health promotion model, and have “[moved] backwards into the old way of doing things [emergency response].”

Over the last few years, food security discourse has evolved to acknowledge that increasing income is one of the most promising strategies to combat food insecurity (Klein & Goudriaan, 2019). Several coordinators discussed income-based solutions to the problem of food insecurity in their interviews with VCH Community Investments staff. Many organizations began to issue grocery gift cards rather than food hampers to clients, giving those clients the ability to choose and purchase their own food based on cultural and personal preferences. The CFAI Coordinator for Grandview-Woodlands Food Connection brought up the intersections of food security with income supports, and suggested a guaranteed minimum income as a possible solution to food insecurity. This aligns with the conclusion in the BC Centre for Disease Control’s Food Costing in BC 2017 report, which found that “the strongest predictor of household food insecurity is not food price itself, but household income.” Without a level of income that supports them to access enough food, food insecure populations will continue to rely on charitable emergency food programs that only mask the underlying structural inequity

issues. The lack of strategic responses to address these issues now will continue to leave food insecure populations in the lurch in future emergency scenarios.

Discussion

Food (in)security has emerged as one of the defining conditions highlighted by COVID-19 in BC, and urgently requires efforts to build more resilient, equitable, and sustainable food systems. The two overarching issues detailed in this report do not exist solely because of the pandemic. First, the lack of adequate income supports contributed to an increase in community members needing help accessing food during this emergency situation. Second, the dire need for more resources to support the food systems-level work of CFAL-funded organizations became increasingly clear during the pandemic. If income inequality and its ripple effects for food security were addressed, and funding for staffing costs and capital investments were increased, evidence suggests that these organizations would be able to double down on their activities related to social connection, strategic partnerships, and policy and systems change, which have a crucial role to play generally, but especially in emergency preparedness and prevention, the delivery of timely and coordinated responses, and sustainable recovery. Working toward food security is an ongoing public health issue, pandemic or not, and these organizations are essential to the communities they serve. In order to continue to provide strategic, upstream, community-based programming that addresses both the chronic causes of food insecurity and the systemic issues that prevent communities from reaching food sovereignty, additional supports are needed. The final section of this report outlines a set of core recommendations for actors and participants at various levels.

Recommendations

The following recommendations begin with efforts and advocacy at the local level, to regional bodies, and then into provincial circles of influence.

Vancouver Coastal Health

It is recommended that the Community Investments and Population Health teams at VCH continue to pursue a range of opportunities for Healthy Public Policy efforts with new impetus for systemic and policy change around food security at local and regional levels. In addition, it is recommended that VCH staff involve non-profit organizations more deeply in decision-making and strategic work to better understand the perspectives of the populations they serve. Such an endeavor allows the lived experiences of non-profit staff and volunteers, and community members to become valuable sources of decision-making data and enhances pathways for regional and interorganizational collaborations. VCH also has a key role to play

in the sharing of regional data across funded organizations, and to work with other health authorities to help make a case for increased CFAI funding. Finally, it is strongly advised that VCH Population Health explore available evidence around income solutions to food insecurity, including initiatives such as permanently increasing OAS, disability, and social assistance rates; enacting living wages policies; increasing the minimum wage; and providing a universal basic income. After exploration of a wide range of solutions, VCH should present findings to various stakeholders responsible for policy change.

Governments: Local, Regional, and Provincial

The final set of recommendations involves those being made to governmental bodies at the local, regional, and provincial levels. Government involvement in food security work, whether that is upstream health promotion strategies via policy or emergency provisioning, is integral to meeting both short- and long-term goals. Evidence from this report indicates that governments at all levels should increase the provision of supports, resources and/or coordinated services to maintain expanded food security services in order to meet increased needs that may or may not dissipate as the recovery process begins. Given the crucial role of funding in sustaining and expanding organizational capacity, it is also recommended that the Ministry of Health increase CFAI funding across all health authorities to continue the vital food security work this fund makes possible. Finally, it is recommended that government bodies enact at least one, if not more, of the following income-based solutions to food insecurity: permanent increases to social, disability and OAS assistance rates; living wages policies; increasing the minimum wage; universal basic income for specific marginalized groups. Poverty reduction/elimination plans in each municipality and province-wide should directly involve food and income supports. It should be understood that food security is a key determinant of health, to be included in all healthy living-related policies.

Conclusion

This report has highlighted the fact that despite increased coordination with existing emergency food agencies, retail and other private sector partners, and government, VCH's CFAI-funded organizations had to shift, almost completely in some cases, to emergency food services from their health promotion activities. This report has showcased the fact that the knowledge held by CFAI coordinators, their connections to their communities and key partners, and their flexibility has been vital to VCH staff, municipalities, and other agencies throughout the pandemic in understanding what is happening on the ground for marginalized populations. The partnerships that were either created or strengthened during the pandemic so far have been the biggest success, and these partnerships have led to stronger working relationships with all partners, especially Indigenous nations and different levels of government. However, from what the CFAI coordinators have shared, the decrease in attention to the social connection side of food security work could have a detrimental effect on participants and volunteers. With small non-profits filling gaps in emergency food service delivery, it leaves their staff little time to focus on other important health needs heightened by the pandemic. The recommendations outlined in this report should be considered crucial steps to efficient and effective service delivery.

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