

Many Albertans experience difficulties accessing food. This may be due to loss or reduction of income, inadequate income, difficulties getting to a grocery store, or limited food choices in one's community.

This document was created to help facilitate discussions with community groups on how to best respond. Additional considerations that are important for Indigenous, remote, and isolated communities are not covered in this discussion guide.

Q: How do I get started?

A: Familiarize yourself with some common terms and assumptions about the topic. Terminology matters because it can help identify the issue and lead to actions that can address the issue.

Q: What are some terms to be familiar with?

- **Household food insecurity** refers to inadequate or insecure access to food because of financial constraints. Households who experience food insecurity include those who are:
 - worried about being able to afford a basic healthy diet (marginal food insecurity)
 - compromising the quality and types of food they consume (moderate food insecurity)
 - reducing the amount of food they eat (severe food insecurity)
- **Hunger** refers to a physical sensation. Hunger may or may not be a result of food insecurity. In the context of food insecurity, physical hunger is experienced as part of the most severe level of food insecurity.
- **Community food security** most frequently describes the food system and includes important issues around agriculture, fishing, hunting, gathering and food production, processing, manufacturing, distributing, and marketing.

Q: What are some common assumptions about household food insecurity?

Assumption: Negative health outcomes are only associated with severe food insecurity.

Fact: Household food insecurity at any level is associated with poorer health outcomes and a higher risk of poor mental health. Prolonged food insecurity places adults at significantly higher risk for chronic conditions (such as diabetes, heart disease, and depression).

Assumption: The youngest children in a household are most at risk.

Fact: The youngest children in a household are the least likely to experience hunger related to food insecurity. Parents (especially mothers) and older children (adolescents) are most likely to make sure younger children receive food, at their own expense.

Assumption: Households who are food insecure spend their money on items they don't need.

Fact: Households who are food insecure experience pervasive material deprivation. They prioritize spending on basic needs, spend less on everything, and struggle to make ends meet across the whole spectrum. Households who are food insecure lack more than food.

Q: Where might I start when working with groups?

A: It is important to first understand and define the issue or problem that the community group is trying to address. There may be interest in taking actions that, in fact, do not address the core issue. Share tools, resources, and evidence that can help clarify the issue and lead the group toward appropriate actions. Your local [public health dietitian](#) can be a good resource to consult with.

Once the issue has been identified, it may help to link the community group with existing organizations or groups that are already doing work or who are best positioned to take action on the area of concern. For example, if mobility problems are keeping seniors from grocery shopping and accessing the foods they need, the local senior's network may already have a program to help with this.

Q: I know that food insecurity is an income issue. What can I do when working with community groups or clients?

A: Acknowledge that healthy eating is not easy or affordable for many people. Guide conversations and actions that reflect the understanding that food insecurity is an income issue.

- Help at-risk individuals and households to seek out and apply for the federal, provincial, and local income benefits they qualify for:
 - Federal income benefit programs can be accessed at: canada.ca/en/services/benefits.html
 - Provincial benefits can be accessed at: alberta.ca/alberta-income-support.aspx
 - 211 Alberta is the best provincial site for information on financial benefits and programs
 - Options to contact 211 are: dial 211, text INFO to 211, or visit ab.211.ca/ and click “live chat”
 - Indigenous Services Canada resources and programs can be accessed at: canada.ca/en/services/benefits/audience/indigenous.html
 - Connect with local community and social service organizations to see what additional benefits are available in your community.
- Assist community groups you work with in shifting from a focus on *food-based* solutions towards *income-based* solutions. This could look like:
 - Services that help individuals and households work through benefit application processes
 - Services that help individuals file their income tax
 - Distribution of grocery cards as a proxy for income
 - Provide evidence and data to inform poverty reduction strategies in your community

Contact your local [public health dietitian](#) for more information and support.

Q: How do I address questions about transportation, food skills or community gardens?

A: These are all important issues that community groups may be interested in discussing and seeking feedback on. Outlined below are a few issues you might want to consider in your conversations.

| Issue | Possible Actions |
|------------------------------|--|
| Grocery store transportation | Link households to programs that assist with delivering groceries, free of charge, directly to their home. Explore ways to assist clients in getting to and from grocery stores (e.g. low income transit passes). |
| Food skills | Dispel the myth that financial constraints in households experiencing food insecurity are related to a lack of skills and knowledge. Research shows that people who are food insecure often have better budgeting and food procurement skills than those who are food secure. For Albertans who are interested in improving their food skills, Healthy Eating Starts Here and Canada.ca/Food Guide provide recipes and information. Your community may also have cooking classes or available. |
| Growing food | Dispel the myth that a community garden addresses household food insecurity. Evidence shows that involvement in a community garden does not protect against the financial insufficiencies of household food insecurity. These programs may contribute to health in different ways, such as providing stronger social networks, an opportunity to be physically active and opportunity to experiment with gardening. Groups interested in developing gardening skills and creating a sense of community using gardening can find information on starting a community garden in the AHS Community Garden Handbook . |

Q: I've been asked to provide a list of healthy food hamper items. What approach could I take?

A: Explore whether the community group is open to providing grocery cards instead of food items. A grocery card will allow for choice to accommodate religious, cultural, health, and personal preferences around food. Grocery gift cards allow a household to directly access food from a grocery store rather than through a community organization.

Where grocery cards are not an option, explore ways to safely provide food choices that are nutritionally dense and relatively more expensive and perishable - food items such as milk, cheese, meats, vegetables, and fruit. The hamper does not need to provide all healthy food choices that make up Canada's Food Guide. Many hampers are designed from a viewpoint that recipients have no food in their home. However, most households experiencing food insecurity

will already have some food. These foods are more likely to be lower cost, shelf-stable food items, such as pasta, rice, dried or canned beans, and canned soups.

If the group is providing food to pre-identified households, recommend they connect with each family to determine which of the available foods are preferred or not needed by the household. Explore ways to replace these with other food items or supplement with a grocery card.

Q: Are households experiencing food insecurity the intended audience for food budgeting resources?

A: No. Tips such as buying in bulk, going to multiple stores to seek out the best deals, cooking in bulk and freezing large quantities are more appropriate for households with some spending flexibility.

Households experiencing food insecurity lack enough money to buy food in large quantities. Most of these households already practice a wide variety of strategies to help them save money on food. They may also face additional barriers such as personal transportation challenges (for example, no car or limited access to transportation), precarious housing conditions (such as rentals or frequent moving) and a lack of basic appliances (including no deep freezer, no working refrigerator, or limited cooking equipment).

Q: My community group is interested in doing a food bank drive. What are things to consider?

A: There are many factors to consider to determine if a food bank drive is the best way to help. Challenges of a food bank drive include:

- Recipients of donated foods often lack choice to meet their religious, cultural, health, and personal preferences around food.
- The foods typically donated are low-cost items that a household experiencing food insecurity could likely afford (i.e. pasta, rice, peanut butter, canned soup).
- Often items donated are expired or unwanted food products.
- In times of community food shortages, food bank drives place additional challenges on grocery store food availability.
- It unintentionally gives the message that food banks are the best way to respond to household food insecurity and that all households experiencing food insecurity access food banks.

Explore if the community group is open to other options. For example:

- Money donations to the food bank. Donations usually have more buying power if money is donated directly to the food bank versus individual food donations.
- Grocery card donations. Grocery cards allow for individual choice around food purchases.
- Gift card donations that are a proxy for income (for example, transit passes, taxi chits, recreation passes, and household item gift cards).
- Activities to assist households in accessing eligible income benefits.