

MOBILE FOOD MARKET Collaboratively Addressing Food Access: Halifax's Mobile Food Market

In 2012, Halifax Municipality experienced the highest level of household food insecurity of 33 Census Metropolitan Areas across Canada¹. Food security occurs when all people have the opportunity to obtain the foods they require to be healthy². Individuals experiencing food insecurity report poorer physical and mental health and have increased risk of chronic health conditions³. While low income is often the greatest barrier to accessing healthy food, living in neighborhoods with few affordable healthy food retail options can also compound food insecurity.

In early 2015, Halifax Municipality and Nova Scotia Health Authority, along with partners from communities, government departments, private businesses, and the not-for-profit sector, began collaborating to address food access issues among priority populations. The concept of a mobile food market (MFM), a travelling community food market that sells fresh produce at an affordable price to communities experiencing food insecurity, was one innovative approach explored.

A team of partners dedicated several months to co-create a collaborative governance structure and a project plan, which included securing funds to pilot a MFM for five in-need communities in the Halifax region. Extensive engagement with community organizations and residents confirmed that food access was a serious, growing issue and demonstrated support for a MFM as part of the solution.

The Halifax MFM is a partnership supported by an advisory team, which includes representatives from the Halifax Mayor's Office, Nova Scotia Health Authority's Public Health team, Ecology Action Centre and Partners for Care. Daily market operations are supported by a market coordinator, an assistant coordinator, and community volunteers.

The key objectives of the MFM include:

- Improving the accessibility of fresh, high-quality, culturally appropriate fruits and vegetables for residents in the market communities.
- Increasing engagement and collaboration among and between existing and new partners.
- Building capacity among community volunteers and local hosts to play an active role in shaping food systems in their communities.
- Enhancing the sense of neighbourhood pride and community engagement among residents and MFM visitors and customers.
- Assessing the market potential for alternative methods of food distribution for underserved communities within the Halifax region.

¹ Tarasuk V., Mitchell A., Dachner N. (2012). Household Food Insecurity in Canada 2012. Retrieved from: http://nutritionalsciences.lamp.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Household_Food_Insecurity_in_Canada-2012_ENG.pdf

² Voices for Food Security in Nova Scotia. (2017). Can Nova Scotians afford to eat healthy? Report on 2015 participatory food costing. Halifax, NS: Food Action Research Centre (FoodARC), Mount Saint Vincent University.

³ Tarasuk V., Mitchell A., Dachner N. (2012). Household Food Insecurity in Canada 2012. Retrieved from: http://nutritionalsciences.lamp.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Household_Food_Insecurity_in_Canada-2012_ENG.pdf

In May 2016, the MFM launched, using a Halifax Transit bus to deliver fresh, affordable, culturally-appropriate fruits and vegetables to five communities in the Halifax region. While all community members are welcome to shop at the MFM, the aim is to improve food access among low income residents, seniors, new Canadians, people with disabilities and lone-parent families. Following the initial pilot, the MFM launched a winter/spring service with two delivery models - one model transported food to residents in North Halifax and Fairview via indoor markets, while pre-purchased \$10 produce packages similar to a food box program were delivered to residents in Spryfield/Harrietsfield, North Preston and East Preston.

The MFM provides a wonderful example of an initiative supported by multi-sectoral partners aimed at creating a healthy, more just and sustainable food system in Nova Scotia. According to a recent MFM survey, 94% of customers reported the market has made it easier for them to purchase fresh produce while 97% customers agreed market produce is affordable. The MFM has built capacity within communities, fostering connections among volunteers, customers and residents and has also highlighted food access issues within Halifax and the value of working together toward collective impact. One MFM customer shared their experience: *“It makes a huge difference not only to myself but also to the seniors in this area, low income people, and people with disabilities like myself. You don’t have really far to walk to get to it and that makes a huge difference to me and my family.”* The MFM has also provided opportunities to engage with new Canadians. For example, in one market community, many new Canadian families have become market volunteers, which has provided them with the opportunity to learn and practice English.

The MFM has partnered with various organizations to create vibrant, animated community hubs, providing residents with a space to socialize, celebrate, and engage in other onsite activities including music, arts and crafts, and recreation activities. As well, the market has created opportunities for intergenerational interaction between youth and senior volunteers, while also garnering job skills among youth. According to evaluation results, 95% of customers feel the market is a fun and welcoming place.

By meaningfully engaging residents, the MFM has supported and fostered community leadership around food. From the outset, the MFM Advisory Team demonstrated leadership while applying adaptive project management through continuous, ongoing evaluation. This involved listening to the needs of market communities and empowering residents to shape the market to meet the needs within their neighborhood. For example, in one community, members identified the opportunity to strengthen their focus on food work and formed a local Food Action Network. Another community partnered with a local organization to provide employment opportunities for at risk youth through supporting food projects within their community such as the MFM.

Continued leadership at various levels has contributed to the success of the MFM. The Advisory Team has successfully inspired funders to continue supporting the market. The MFM leadership model provides a wonderful example of how multiple and diverse partners including government, not-for-profit, private businesses and community organizations can collectively pool their resources to achieve broad outcomes that could have not have otherwise been accomplished alone.

Although it began with a focus on food access, the market has expanded to include health promotion, recreation, skills development, economic development, social inclusion, and food literacy. The MFM is continuing to strengthen partnerships while exploring opportunities to expand services to other communities in Nova Scotia.