

# **Growing Good Health**

Better Meals for Public Schools, Hospitals  
and Our Neediest Citizens

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# Growing Good Health

## Better Meals for Public Schools, Hospitals and Our Neediest Citizens

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# Introduction

Stories about food these days are typically framed as environmental stories. How we can reduce our carbon footprint by buying local, or improve agricultural practices by choosing organic. Indeed, the universality of food has made it a highly effective vehicle for raising awareness about these important environmental issues.

But too often, this frame ignores social and economic realities. Heirloom tomatoes, farmers' markets, and rooftop gardens are out of reach for those who struggle to simply keep a roof over their heads. Too often, it seemed, the good food movement excluded those in poverty.

The goal of this series was to explore food policy, and food security, through this social justice lens.

Much of my reporting was focused on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, a neighbourhood often referred to as 'Canada's poorest postal code.'

It's a neighbourhood in which an estimated 1.2 million free or low-cost meals are served every year. What I took away from this reporting was that there is a concerted effort underway to improve the quality of this food and also to involve the people who depend on it.

A surprising example of this paradigm shift was found in the basement of [Calvary Baptist Church](#). The community there turned its typical soup kitchen into a sit-down dinner, choosing to nurture quality of experience over quantity of people served.

Indeed, the notion of 'charity food' is being turned on its head, as poverty advocates and activists fight to frame hunger as a problem for government, not charities or non-profits.

One of the most shared articles was [The Problem With Food Banks](#), a critical look at an institution which helps many people, no doubt, but which also depends heavily on high-carb, low-protein snack foods that grocery stores can't sell.

It became abundantly clear to me over the course of this series what a difference good food, served with dignity, makes in people's lives – spiritually, but also in a very practical sense. One of my favourite interview subjects was Karen Cooper, a researcher who is collecting qualitative evidence to show how good nutrition can reduce violent crime.

My hope for this series is that it demonstrates that investing in nutritious food is not just an act of compassion, and community, but also good public policy.

*Colleen Kimmett*

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*Colleen Kimmett writes about the food economy, sustainability and related environmental issues. This series was produced by Tye Solutions Society in collaboration with Tides Canada Initiatives (TCI). TCI neither influences nor endorses the particular content of TSS' reporting. Other publications wishing to publish this story or other Tye Solutions Society-produced articles please see this [website](#) for contacts and information.*

# Monthly Cost to Feed Family of Four: \$868

BY COLLEEN KIMMETT, 28 FEB 2012

*Too many people in BC can't afford to eat healthily, finds report.*

It costs \$868.42 per month on average to feed a family of four in British Columbia, according to the latest Cost of Eating [report](#) from the Dieticians of Canada.

That eats up about 15 per cent of the \$67,200 that a median-income family in the province would earn -- and much more for the one out of eight people who live below the poverty line.

The B.C. region of the Dieticians of Canada have produced the report every two years for the past decade. In 2009, the cost of a nutritious food basket for a family of four was actually slightly higher -- \$872 per month -- than it was this year, but five years ago it was significantly lower: just \$715 per month.

For a family receiving \$1,851 in social assistance each month, this cost represents 47 per cent of their monthly income.

Kristen Yarker, executive director of the B.C. region of the Dieticians of Canada, says the report is a call to address poverty and the factors that keep people in poverty.

"We as dieticians care about people being able to eat healthfully and we see how so many people can't afford to do that," says Yarker. "This is our attempt to raise awareness."

The \$868.42 figure is averaged from the monthly cost of a nutritious food basket in each of the province's health regions. In Vancouver Coastal Health region, for example, it's actually \$944 per month. In the Fraser Health region, it's slightly lower at \$851.

These figures are based on the price of about [60 items](#) in a "nutritious

food basket" determined by Health Canada that could feed two adults, a teenage boy and a four-year-old girl.

## *Not tallied: eating out, cost of getting to store*

The cost does not include pre-packaged, take-out or restaurant meals. It doesn't include spices or condiments, nor does it take into account special dietary needs or cultural food preferences.

Yarker also points out that the cost to get to a grocery store is not included in this assessment. The 2009 Cost of Food report found that in the average B.C. city, \$16.05 would get you four litres of milk, one loaf of bread, one pound of apples and 10 pounds of potatoes. In a remote community, those items would cost \$34.85, 177 per cent more.

The combination of higher food prices and fewer stores with fresh healthy options has been linked to [higher rates](#) of obesity, heart disease and diabetes seen in B.C.'s northern and remote communities that are effectively [food deserts](#).

## *Food prices jumped five per cent last year*

Canadians [spend less on food](#) than many other developed countries and remain somewhat sheltered from fluctuating global food prices, like the 2009/2010 crisis that saw global commodity prices jump 40 to 60 per cent.

Still, [according to](#) the latest Consumer Price Index from Statistics Canada, Canadians paid 4.9 per cent more for food purchased from stores and 2.8 per cent more for food purchased from restaurants in January 2012 compared to the same period last year.

Eggs, ground beef, carrots and flour were among the grocery items that have increased the most in price over the past several years, [according to](#) Statistics Canada.

From 2008 to 2012, a dozen eggs went from \$2.50 to \$3.09; a kilogram of ground beef went from \$5.84 to \$8.85; a kilogram of carrots went from \$1.22 to \$1.63; and 2.5 kilograms of flour went from \$3.91 to \$5.18.

Yarker didn't offer any money-saving tips. "This report shows how even using those creative ways [to stretch your food dollar], people can't make ends meet," she says. "We need to create a provincial poverty reduction plan. All of us who are voters can be talking to our elected officials."

# No More Free Meals:

## A Church Changes Its Approach

BY COLLEEN KIMMETT, 12 APR 2012

*Why Calvary Baptist opted to nurture quality of experience over quantity fed.*



Geordan Hankinson: Felt the 'charity model' was disempowering people the church sought to serve.  
Photo: Colleen Kimmett.

There isn't an official seating plan at Calvary Baptist Church's weekly Thursday night supper, but the seniors usually end up at the same table.

"My father was born in 1910," declares one elderly man with thick glasses and grey hair poking out from under his ballcap.

"My *mother* was born in 1900," responds his neighbour. "And my father was born in 1898."

The dinner conversation winds around to news of the day, which includes the elimination of the penny, and a bizarre story in which millions of loonies and toonies were spilled across a northern Ontario highway after a Brinks truck crashed. And, of course, the food. There is a new cook tonight, and on the menu is Indian butter chicken with turmeric rice and a robust salad of romaine, tomato, cucumber, carrot and feta cheese and a homemade oil and vinegar dressing. A serving dish of each is placed on each of the five tables, which seat about eight people each. The dining room din quiets down as everyone digs in.

The serene dinner scene in this church basement is a far cry from what it was this time last year: 150 people lined up out the door, chaos in the dining hall and, sometimes, verbal or physical fights.

This shift has taken place over the course of the past year. It was a calculated move that has been controversial, both inside and outside of the organization. And, although it may seem strange that a church would want to distance itself from the entrenched idea of charity, that's exactly what Calvary is trying to do.

## *A 'paradigm shift' away from 'free'*

I heard about Calvary from Jonathan Bird, executive director of the City Gate Leadership Forum, a non-profit focused on the role of Christian organizations and churches "in fostering vibrant, sustainable cities."

The overarching goal of the Christian Community Food Network is to get other faith-based organizations on board with what Bird describes as a "paradigm shift" away from *ad hoc* food charity towards a sustainable local food system.

Faith-based organizations are "aligned with food security idea

of sustainability," says Bird. It's important that churches support community gardening and local food, that they offer high-quality nutrition and acknowledge that organic is best, that it matters what happens to food scraps. "Our bodies are our temples," he says.

The goal of the network is also to open up a dialogue about moving away from "free" and supporting local enterprise at the same time. They want to get people involved in a different ways of providing meals, and make connections with the food being grown.

According to Bird, the meal program at Calvary started with a single dinner in 1997, organized by two women in the neighbourhood who had been helped by the church and wanted to give back.

Nine months later, it had become a weekly event modeled after the Out of the Cold program in Toronto. Guests were encouraged to take part in meal preparation and cleanup, and it quickly earned a reputation for being safe, low-key and comfortable environment where good food was served. Pretty soon, the numbers were overwhelming.

"We had no idea there was as much need as there turned out to be," says Bird. "Torpedoed" by their own success, they eventually became the very thing they said they'd wanted to be the alternative to.

### *'It was crazy'*

"A fairly typical soup kitchen," is how Geordan Hankinson describes it. Hankinson, a 24-year-old sociology student, came to Calvary in 2008 as its community meal coordinator. At that time, the church was serving 120 to 150 people every Thursday and had a roster of 200 volunteers who would rotate in and out.

"Lineups in the dining room, lineups down the hall," he says. "The only way to feed that number of people was to have them go through a food lineup. It was crazy."

Adam Smith, who has been coming regularly to Calvary Baptist for meals, and now as a volunteer, concurs. Nobody liked the lineups he says, and things could get uncomfortable. Just a few people under the influence of drugs or alcohol could show up and "suck the air out of things," says Smith. "You know, like at a school dance, when trouble shows up and ruins things for everybody?"

It became a necessity, he says, to concentrate on the quality of relationships instead of on the quantity of people.

Hankinson started reading about food security, looking at the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House and the Kitchen Tables project. He came to believe that, while the church was meeting a need, it was also, in a way, disempowering people.

He wrote up a position paper and gave it to the board of the church. "It was a bit of a difficult sell," he says. "The board was very entrenched in the charity model."

Along with Bird, and Karen Giesbrecht of City Gate's Christian Community Food Network, Hankinson got about 50 of the regular soup kitchen visitors in a room and asked them about the meal program. He says he was surprised at how honest and candid everyone was. The general consensus was, that they needed the food, but felt the lineups were humiliating.

The church gave its Thursday night dinner guests one month's notice and a list of alternative free or low-cost food sources in the city, and in April 2011, put its meal program on hiatus. Guests were given the option of taking part in a 12-week community kitchen program instead.

From July to mid-September, about 12 people met every Tuesday to "cook, sit, eat and brainstorm" says Hankinson, about what they wanted the program to be.

The group put together policies and procedures. Now, when someone

comes for a meal, they either pay \$2 or sign up to help. The jobs that were done by volunteers are now handled people who take part in the meal.

Hankinson says about eight to 10 people pay regularly for the meal, another 30 or 40 sign up for a job.

"This way, people have to work together as peers," says Hankinson. "We've gotten rid of volunteer and guest distinctions. We've flipped that power dynamic. We don't have these people from a middle class background serving these other *poor* people."

## *'I've gotten a lot of flak'*

The shift has been difficult for Calvary, and somewhat controversial within the wider charity food sector in Vancouver.

"I've gotten a lot of flak for it," admits Hankinson. When he presented what they were doing at a summer 2011 meeting of food service providers in the city, some people were quite critical of the new model, including Judy Graves, a longtime activist on the downtown eastside and the city of Vancouver's advocate for the homeless.

"I have a great deal of concern," Graves tells me over coffee at the JJ Bean in Woodward's building. "There's very little food available to people who are very poor or who have no money in the Commercial Drive area.

"I can understand what they're doing. I can see the value of building community and serving food at the same time. But I know many of the people in the streets in Commercial Drive are not capable of the level of personal organization that it takes. And if we've dropped the number of people who eat by about 100 people, where are those 100 people getting their food?"

Hankinson can't answer that for certain. He does feel that making this change at the church was an admission that, maybe they weren't really doing the greatest thing. Being stuck in a circuit, were they really helping or were they part of a band-aid solution?

"I wonder if we had created a dependency," he says, "distorted people's thinking that food is free, rather than inviting them to participate and to share in those costs that are associated with 'free food.'"

### *'A more responsible crowd'*

Calvary currently spends about \$150 on food for each meal, about half what it was when they were serving 150 people per week. Where the church has achieved savings in the amount of money spent on food, it has also committed to paying the people who cook. Four regulars have been trained in Food Safe and take turns cooking once a month, for which they are paid \$80.

I meet one of the new cooks, Rian Vita, in the kitchen a couple of hours before the meal is to be served. He's chopping onions to the sounds of ZZ Top spinning on a portable CD player.

Vita tells me he's 35, has been in Vancouver since his late twenties, but grew up in Calgary. He has been coming here regularly for meals for two years, and says the new model makes it a "much more relaxing place to be."

"Charging two dollars or having to do a chore kind of puts you in with a more responsible crowd," he says.

Vita doesn't entertain notions of becoming a career cook, but likes doing this for his community. A little bit of extra money is nice, too. "I'm not the most employable person in the world," he says. "Like, the only thing I really did for 10 years is work in music and video stores, and now there's no such thing anymore. So I have to learn how to do

something else."

I ask him what he thinks of this shift in the church's conception of charity food -- and the word charity itself. Does it offend him, I wonder?

"Not anymore," he says. "I don't think it ever did. The way they describe it is, well, just free meals. You can get a whole list of them. Vancouver's really good for that. I'm not sure about the quality of some of these meals. This is probably the best one I've seen out of the ones that I've been to."

The CCFN identified has identified and mapped 97 food assets within the Christian community -- meals, gardens or cooking programs -- between Vancouver and Langley.

In Vancouver proper, Vancouver Coastal Health has identified 112 locations where free or low-cost meals are provided, which includes both non-secular and faith-based organizations.

Still, most in this sector are quick to point out that the solution to hunger is not free meals, but rather a living wage and a route out of poverty. Smith tells me he's been homeless in the past, and during that time he says he felt he could either concentrate on his health, or finding a job. He chose his health.

"If you work," he says, "you're not able to stand in line that day for your lunch, let alone supper."

"I think trying to live on the streets and work is next to impossible."

For a map of free and low-cost meals in Vancouver, compiled by Vancouver Coastal Health as of 2011 [click here](#)

# The Problem with Food Banks

By Colleen Kimmett, 25 Apr 2012, [Theyee.ca](http://Theyee.ca)

*Hungry people must be fed. But critics say framing food as charity takes the root issues off government's plate.*

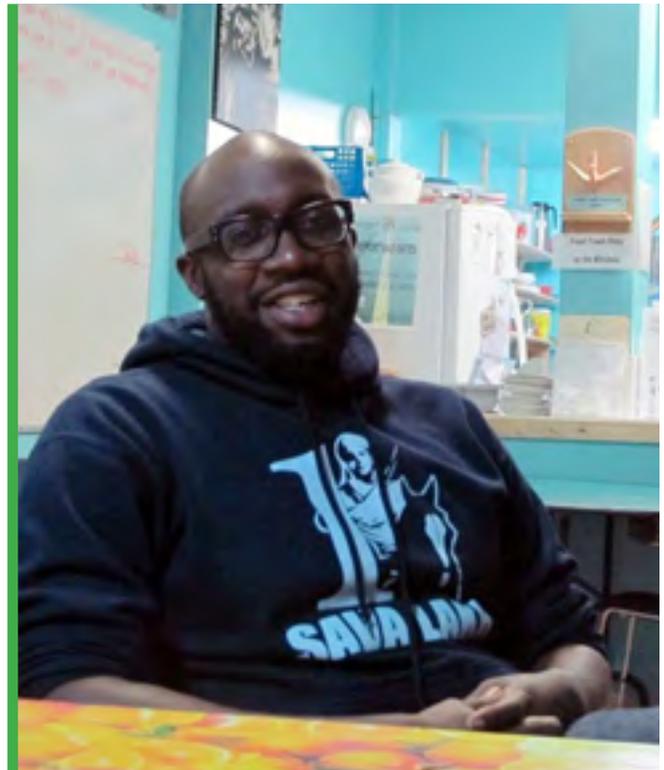
Paul Taylor grew up using food banks. He served on the board of directors for Toronto's Daily Bread food bank, one of the largest in the country. And when the CBC hosted its 25th annual funding drive for the Greater Vancouver Food Bank last December, he and some colleagues walked over to give the public broadcaster a thank-you card, along with an important message.

"We wanted to say thank you, but the CBC could better leverage their reach," he tells me over tea at the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House, where he serves as executive director. "We wanted to ask that they listen. What low-income people are really after is justice and the ability to have enough money to buy their own food."

Since taking the position nine months ago, Taylor has been vocal in his criticism of the role of food banks in our society, a role he believes allows government to shirk its responsibilities under the declaration of human rights.

Longtime advocate for the homeless Judy Graves called Taylor "one of the most exciting things to happen to Vancouver."

"Holy crow, does he get it," says Graves. "He gets it in the big picture



Paul Taylor, once reliant on food banks, says hunger cannot be solved by charity. Photo by Colleen Kimmett.

and gets in the small picture, and he's definitely the wave of the future."

Taylor is quick to acknowledge, and he respects, the moral imperative that people feel to help out in whatever way they can. But hunger is not an issue for charity, he says, and he and others at the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House are "not here to convince people of deservedness."

"Food," says Taylor, "is a fundamental human right."

## *How food became charity*

It's true that Canada signed and ratified the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1967 -- and other international agreements following -- that guarantee the right to food.

But it's not entrenched in our constitution, our domestic law. The right to food is particularly problematic in the Canadian context, because social rights, like welfare for example, are provincial responsibilities.

"It's the old problem of Canadian federalism," says Graham Riches, professor emeritus at UBC's School of Social Work. "It becomes messy in terms of whose government is really responsible for this."

Graham was one of the first academics looking at food banks from a social justice perspective. In 1986 he published *Food Banks and the Welfare Crisis*, linking the proliferation of food banks throughout the 1980s to the recession of that era, followed by the rise of neo-liberalism and the erosion of the social welfare system.

Riches agrees that there is clearly a moral imperative to feed hungry people. But food banks "enable us to sort of look the other way," he argues.

"What they've done over the last 30 years is socially constructed the issue of food as a matter of charity, and not a political question."

When I raise these points with Doug Aason, the director of community investment for the Greater Vancouver Food Bank, he tells me that he "totally, totally understands where detractors are coming from."

But for him, this argument is a philosophical one. "[Taylor] is philosophically opposed to the food bank's existence because as long as the food bank exists, the government will never be forced to look at the real reasons people come to food banks," says Aason.

He rhymes off those reasons: lack of a living wage; lack of affordable daycare; lack of affordable housing. "The single parents that come to us have to work two or three jobs to sustain themselves."

And he points out that the food bank preaches this message when it visits schools, businesses and corporations to solicit donations.

The national association that represents food banks across the country, Food Banks Canada, has an ethical [foodbanking code](#) to "strive to make the public aware of the existence of hunger, and of the factors that contribute to it," and to "recognize that food banks are not a viable long-term response to hunger, and devote part of their activities to food assistance."

But despite this, reliance on food banks continues to [rise](#).

## *Need fed by government 'inaction': Brar*

At the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House on a Monday afternoon, every demographic is represented. There are young men, moms with babies and toddlers in tow, and senior citizens.

It's busy but calm, and there's room for everyone to find a seat at

the round tables on either side of the room. I'm here to sit in on an editorial meeting of a new food-themed 'zine that house members have launched.

The inaugural issue came out last month, and among the service pieces -- recipes, and a B.C. seasonal vegetable chart -- are articles that tackle the chewy political issues that people in this neighbourhood are keenly aware of.

There was an interview with Mark Brand of Save-On-Meats, a first-person essay about free food lines in the Downtown Eastside (which regularly feature "cakes, muffins, brownies and doughnuts" and other highly-processed stuff, writes author Ludvik Skalicky) and an account of a visit that NDP MLA Jagrup Brar paid to the house in January.

That month, Brar lived on \$610 -- the amount a single person on welfare receives per month -- to draw attention to the inadequacy of B.C.'s welfare rates. After deducting \$375, the amount for a room in an SRO (which typically cost more like \$450) he had \$235, or about \$7.58 per day to cover all other necessities, including food. By the end of the month he had oatmeal, some bread and a box of Mr. Noodles left in his cupboard, and planned to volunteer in exchange for lunches and wait in food lines for his dinners.

"I respect the work Paul Taylor is doing on the right to food issue," Brar told The Tyee. Food banks are the outcome, he says, of the failure of society to deal with growing inequality in B.C.

"We have 137,000 children living in poverty in this rich province, what we call the best place on the earth to live. Over 90,000 people use a food bank every month and one-third of them are children. What we need to do as a government is the key question."

Brar is calling for a comprehensive poverty eradication plan with clear targets and timelines, and says he is working with his caucus to develop such a plan.

"Until we have that, the food banks are playing their role. Because of the gap, the inaction of the government, the community is stepping in and food banks are doing their best."

## *Serving food with philosophy*

Along with providing food, the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House also informs members about the political and policy climate in which it operates.

Its operating philosophy, which is posted on a large bulletin board alongside recipes for chickpea salad and roasted brussel sprouts, describes a place that "mirrors the entirety of our community: in its beauty and its harshness, its poetry and its frustration. We are activist, reformist and non-violent, critical of the poverty mentality and its handmaiden the charity model..."

The right-to-food philosophy also states its intention to avoid "refined sugars, processed foods, gluten, non-stick cookware, silicone, aluminum... and Eurocentric menus."

"The philosophy is really important," says Jenna Robbins, program lead for the community drop-in and right-to-food initiatives. It gives her clear parameters about what donated food they'll accept -- "it's not a personal decision," says Robbins -- but also makes things more difficult because it's harder to get the food they *want*.

While the neighbourhood house might be philosophically opposed to the existence of food banks, they do rely on the Greater Vancouver Food Bank for donations -- although they are choosy about what they'll accept.

Canned beans, toilet paper, feminine hygiene products, coffee, tea, sugar, spices, flour and brown rice are acceptable, says Robbins. Any heavily processed foods containing chemical additives, preservatives, or ingredients they can't pronounce, are not.

Other partners include Discovery Organics, which donates organic produce, and Superior Tofu, which donates soy milk.

Robbins works with a monthly food budget of \$1,000, which covers about half the volume of food served in that period. Much of it is spent at Sunrise Grocery, a bustling Chinese market on Powell Street and one of the few places to buy fresh produce in the Downtown Eastside. (Without dollars to spend, Taylor points out, people who live in the Downtown Eastside have no say in the kinds of businesses and services they want there.)

Healthy snacks like carrot sticks or bananas are available at every program the house runs -- "we don't want to assume that everyone has eaten," says Robbins -- and there are drop-in meals every Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

In February, it had the busiest drop-in meal in its history: 170 people came through the door to get something to eat. Demand for good food is clearly not going anywhere, but despite the challenges, Taylor is optimistic about what's happening in Vancouver.

He points to organizations like the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users, the Carnegie Community Action Project, the Kitchen Tables Project and the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House as examples of organizations changing the dialogue around charity.

"The charity model is more ingrained in Toronto," he says. "The fact that there are mechanisms in Vancouver to move away from that, this excites me."

# Inside the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Machine

BY COLLEEN KIMMETT, 26 APR 2012

*What to accept, what to hand out. How the city's vast distribution centre works to feed folks and keep food out of landfills.*

I feel very, very small inside the Greater Vancouver Food Bank.

Dwarfed by long rows of shelving units that reach up to the warehouse ceiling, there are so many boxes and labels and colours and signs that the eye can't seem to settle on any one thing.

My tour guides, Doug Aason, director of community investment, and Craig Edwards, director of warehouse and transportation (and acting executive director), turn my attention to the large industrial scale adjacent to the warehouse loading dock. Everything that comes in or out is weighed on that scale -- and last year, the warehouse received 4,840,971, pounds of food.

Aason tells me they used to receive a lot more product that would come and go without ever leaving the floor of the warehouse. Spoiled vegetables. Dented cans. Expired tofu. But the food bank has made a concerted effort to educate donors about what's acceptable and what's not, says Aason, and they say it's working.

"We've got a lot of support from fantastic donors," says Edwards. "Right now we're the best we've ever been."

## *The mission*

The Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society's headquarters and warehouse in East Vancouver is the distribution centre that serves 15 food bank depots in Vancouver, New Westminister, Burnaby

and North Vancouver. Along with these depots, which serve 9,000 individuals in total, the GVFB provides food to more than 100 meal-providing members agencies, like missions, drop-in centres, shelters and community kitchens.

In the inventory planning office, a large whiteboard mounted on the wall shows columns and figures that represent everything in the warehouse, and everything that isn't.

The GVFB works with a nutritionist to do menu planning, says Edwards, and they plan a month in advance. The numbers in red represent everything they need: protein, starch and fibre. Whatever has not been donated is purchased to fill gaps, which are inevitably in the protein and fibre categories.

Edwards shows me an example of an order form for New Westminster food bank, which serves 975 members total, according to the form.

This week, a single person would receive a jar of peanut butter (that's the protein), a box of Kraft Dinner (under the starch category), a tetra pack of soup, two snacks, one baked good, two miscellaneous beverages, a pound of potatoes, one vegetable (fresh or canned), one fruit (fresh or canned), and a half dozen eggs.

"We try and do a protein, starch, we try and include some fibre, we have filler items, we either do a fruit and veg, or we do a canned fruit," says Craig.

The filler items are snacks. They have a in stock 220,000 individual items under the snack category this month, by far the most of anything on the board. (Miscellaneous beverages is the second most voluminous category, with 34,578 items, then baked goods at 20,144 items and dry soup at 20,072 items.) Most of what's in the warehouse -- all those shelves stocked with all those boxes -- are snacks. They receive a *lot* of snacks, says Edwards, although over the past few years they've tried to just get healthy snacks. Granola bars or "anything with peanut butter or some protein levels," he says.

The food bank sometimes receives items with virtually no nutritional value -- "candy and crap" says Aason, which are sometimes tossed, and sometimes used as "filler items." It's not stuff that they want, but the junk food is part and parcel with reclamation.

In the grocery world, reclamation used to be an individual from a company -- whether it was Pepsi or Kellogs or Kraft -- going to grocery stores and collecting their company's unsold product so that it could be written off.

Eventually reclamation companies -- like Allied, for example, whose clients include Safeway and Sobeys -- stepped in to provide this service. These companies are contracted to pick up all unsalable goods from grocery stores at once. Then it all goes to a warehouse where it's scanned through a system that itemizes what came from where, before everything is donated to a food bank.

I ask Aason if they couldn't be more choosy about the items they receive through reclamation programs. It's something they've thought about and discussed, he tells me.

"The problem with that is then the reclamation companies will identify with other charities where they can take the food. We wouldn't want to jeopardize the good percentage of great food that we get -- canned goods."

The food bank would rather absorb the cost of disposing bad food they don't want to give out, rather than forgo the stuff they do want.

"[The] phenomenally large amount of good, great food actually, that we get far outweighs the cost of having to dispose of the other stuff," says Aason.

Go to the website of the food bank and there its mission statement is declared to be providing food to those in need. However, Edwards cites a different purpose.

"The main angle of the food bank, has been for the past five years, and will continue to be, keeping food from our landfills in one way or the other."

## *Partnering with industry players*

Whose interest is that mission really serving?, wonders Graham Riches, a professor emeritus at UBC's School of Social Work who has been following the proliferation of food banks since the early 1980s.

In the early days, food banks were largely community-, church- and even union-based operations that "were acting on a moral imperative to feed the hungry because assistance benefits weren't adequate."

Over time, says Riches, food banks have become more institutionalized, and more closely linked with the food manufacturing industry.

Food Banks Canada's annual Hunger Count\*, a snapshot of food bank usage across the country based on surveys, incorporates information from 4,188 food programs (both members and non-members of the association).

The picture it paints is daunting. Demand -- while it leveled off this year after a spike during the 2008 recession -- shows no sign of decreasing, and food banks struggle to keep up. According to the survey, 35 per cent of food banks ran out of food during the survey period and 55 per cent needed to cut back on the amount of food provided to each household.

While industry players like Kraft Canada help Food Banks Canada financially, through [fundraising campaigns](#), Food Banks Canada has put forth policy proposals to return the favour to the food manufacturing sector as well.

Like a charitable tax incentive plan (Jan. 2012), which proposes to

"allow food manufacturers, importers, distributors and retailers to deduct from taxable income the production cost of food donated to food banks, plus one-half of the unrealized appreciation (with a maximum deduction of twice the production cost)."

This would effectively create a financial incentive to donate food instead of disposing of it.

But Riches says this raises two concerns for him. The first is that it will remove from supermarkets products that would normally be marked down in price. The second is that it's unethical for corporations to be receiving market value tax breaks for donating product that is unsalable anyway.

"You've got food corporations, who you could say are partly responsible for serving a lot of food that is not very healthy, not very nutritious food, and food being wasted," says Riches. "But instead of being taken to the dump, it's recycled into the community."

## *Purchasing power*

Concerns about "the ongoing poor nutritional quality of the food being distributed" was one of the reasons why the Unitarian Church of Vancouver (UCV) decided to stop serving as a food bank depot in 2009, after 30 years of operation.

In an emailed statement to The Tyee, Reverend Steven Epperson of UCV listed the other reasons:

"Negative environmental impact of an inefficient warehousing and distribution system.

"A burgeoning number of 'clients' -- at best, our depot could serve about sixty families; the number had swelled to 120+; the site and volunteers were being overwhelmed.

"Inequitable distribution of food to clients on-site by non-UCV, long-term volunteers supplied by the Food Bank Society.

"Most important -- food is a **right**; it should not be considered or dealt with as a **charity** which, *in fact*, is the inherent nature of food banks and the nature of the relationship that obtains between those who contribute to them and dispense food on the one hand, and those who receive it on the other. Provincial and federal policy should be created in such a way that ensures that those in need of food assistance receive it in a manner consistent with food as a right, not a provisional, charitable hand out (e.g. living wage and/or food stamp legislation)."

In response, Edwards stated in an email that the GVFB has, and is, making efforts around the area of nutrition "to ensure we are able to provide clients with the healthiest food choices possible."

"In addition to the local produce we purchase, we are also working with local nutritionists to make the most of our resources while caring for our community. While we appreciate all the donations we receive, moving forward you will also see the request for healthier choices in the items being donated by the public. We are committed to helping in the realm of education by formally asking for healthier variations of the food we receive."

According to its latest financial statements, in 2011 the GVFB spent \$880,939 directly on food, up from \$703,675 the year before.

It's one of the largest purchasers of eggs in the province, buying more than 9,000 dozen every week. They also purchase between 10,000 and 16,000 pounds of potatoes per week from Heppell's farm in Surrey, and regularly receive about the same volume of organic apples from a farmer in the Okanagan.

And the food bank already sustains a host of programming that is focused on many of the same goals and priorities and other agencies focused on the right to food are prioritizing, points out Aason.

For example, from 2010 to 2011, the food bank nearly doubled its budget (from \$6, 876 to \$12,025) for Fresh Choice kitchens program, which runs instructional meal programs at community service centres around the Greater Vancouver area. It also delivers food to over 100 agencies -- places like missions, drop-in centres, soup kitchens and shelters -- which serve more than 16,000 people every week.

According to Aason, the food bank is looking to take a more active role in the community, working to build capacity within it.

The GVFB also has operational capacity -- trucks, warehouse and cold storage space -- that is beyond many of the small organizations it serves, and it has established relationships with farmers, says Aason. What if they could purchase fruits and vegetables on behalf of organizations that couldn't otherwise afford it?

"We're now in a position, financially, where we can sustain a bad year," says Aason. "We think it's a great opportunity to show some leadership.

"What I say is, let's work together."

# A Night Shift at Jen's Kitchen

BY COLLEEN KIMMETT, 11 MAY 2012

*Working odd hours, Vancouver's survival sex workers often miss the city's free meals. Enter this roaming delivery service.*



In Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, the Jen's Kitchen team totes sandwiches and snacks for delivery. Photo by Colleen Kimmett.

A woman sits in a doorway, feet apart and leaning forward with her elbows on her knees, posed like an athlete taking a break on the bench. She's had an injury.

"I had a date who bumped me on the head really hard," she tells us, rubbing her scalp with one hand. "I feel like I'm brain-dead."

A tuna sandwich is what we have to offer. It seems an inadequate response to her predicament; regardless she gratefully accepts it, along with a juice box and a piece of homemade banana bread.

For someone living in poverty in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, getting enough to eat can be a full-time job. There are numerous agencies providing free meals, but many only do so once a day or once a week. For survival sex workers who keep atypical hours, it can be even more difficult.

For the past seven years, Jennifer Allan has been trying to fill this gap with Jen's Kitchen, an advocacy, outreach and food relief service for women in Vancouver's survival sex trade.

Each Tuesday night, she and a team of volunteers -- usually three to six people -- roam the streets and alleys of the Downtown Eastside handing out sandwiches, snacks and juice boxes to any working woman who wants one.

## *'There's a lot of love in food'*

On the night I accompany Allan, we are joined by Elisa, Courtney and Brent, members of a regular bible study group at Tenth Avenue Alliance Church who volunteer with Jen's Kitchen once a month.

We meet up at the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House to prepare the sandwiches, which are typically tuna. Allan avoids peanut butter. "It's poverty food," she tells me, something the people down here get enough of already. Tuna is a bit more gourmet, she says, and certainly higher in protein.

While we chop up lettuce, smoked tofu, carrots and tomatoes to toss in with the canned fish, Courtney tells me that she stumbled across Jen's Kitchen on a blog. She and her fellow volunteers hadn't been looking to do outreach work specifically around food, she tells me.

"We were thinking love," says Courtney. "But there's a lot of love in food."

Jen's Kitchen started with a dozen tuna sandwiches that Allan

prepared in her West End apartment. That was seven and a half years ago. Allan estimates she has spent about \$30,000 of her own money -- or about \$80 per week -- on food for Jen's Kitchen during that time.

Her roster of volunteers is about 100 total, and includes individuals and groups from various organizations like churches, the Salvation Army, and even members of the Vancouver Police Department Vice Unit. They help her make the sandwiches and hand them out. Volunteers occasionally pitch in for ingredients as well; the group from 10th Avenue United bring a snack to hand out but often bread and tuna as well.

We work the corners and alleys before heading to a seedy hotel -- Allan calls it a brothel -- on Hastings. "How many girls?" she asks a large man standing at the door. Ten. She counts out the appropriate number of sandwiches, snacks and juice boxes and stacks them in the man's arms. He is buzzed in. It's a place where sex workers bring their johns, Allan explains, and a room costs \$20 an hour.

## *Feeling out of place*

When Allan first came to Vancouver 12 years ago, she was homeless. "I had five cents to my name, I was severely alcoholic and crack addicted, and the survival sex trade was my work at the time," she says matter-of-factly. "That's what I did for a living."

The money she made on street corners would allow her to buy some groceries, or pizza. Allan says she avoided church soup kitchens because she felt out of place there.

"Of course, a lot of the churches have an open door policy," she says. "But when you're a survival sex worker and you're in your high-heeled boots and your short miniskirt and a revealing top, that whole welcoming thing seems to change."

Allan says by noon she was typically starving ("breakfast is a luxury down here," she adds), and lied to get into a centre for pregnant women that served meals. When they found out she wasn't actually pregnant, she wasn't allowed back. She also tried going to a drop-in for mentally ill people -- but wasn't mentally ill enough, she says laughing.

"It's interesting how all these feeding places had all these categories you had to fit into, and if you didn't fit into it you didn't eat that day. Unless you wanted to sit on the street corner."

There are a few places that cater to all women, and exclusively women. The Downtown Eastside Women's Centre, for example, serves a hot meal in the afternoon seven days a week and has started doing breakfast on Tuesdays and Thursdays. According to fund development coordinator Fiona York, the centre serves approximately 300 women every day.

There's also Atira Women's Resource Society, which operates approximately 400 subsidized units in the city for women who are "by and large supporting themselves with survival sex work," says CEO Janice Abbott.

Abbott says there are "unique, gender related barriers" for all women trying to access food in the Downtown Eastside. When food lineups or food programs are co-ed they seem to disproportionately become male, she says, which can be intimidating for women who have experienced violence at the hands of a man. Sometimes women avoid those places altogether.

When asked if survival sex workers might have a harder time accessing food because of the hours they work, Abbott says "absolutely."

"Women who are out and about in the evening, if their main activity



Jennifer Allan, founder of Jen's Kitchen, with volunteer James Oickle. Photo by Colleen Kimmett.

occurs after a typical working day, then there are less programs period, available. Also, the risk to them increases after dark."

## *Defending DTES women*

Karen Cooper, a professor at Corpus Christi College, has spent the past two years researching the correlation between availability of food in single occupancy residences (SROs) like the ones Atira runs and the number of calls to police, fire and ambulance. As part of her research, she and her associates have interviewed hundreds of SRO residents -- including survival sex workers.

"The hardest story I heard over and over again is that even if there were meals in their residences, often they're out working during the dinner hour -- that's when a lot of people come into the Downtown Eastside to find prostitutes," says Cooper.

"They would be working over dinner, would work later into the night, realize they were too hungry to sleep and go out and turn another trick to afford some food. It took me a while to realize that what they were trying to tell me is that that's when they're more likely to get hurt."

Allan views her role as not just to feed women, but also to fight for their rights. On a typical Tuesday night, once all the sandwiches are gone, Jen's Kitchen becomes Vancouver Cop Watch.

On Hastings Street, Allan spots three officers talking to a young woman. "Get out your cameras!" Allan says. I pull out my Canon and the others hesitantly withdraw their cellphones. We stand and watch the exchange, which ends with no arrest, and then follow the officers down the street.

The role of Cop Watch, Allan explains, is to follow beat officers around and observe and take photographs of their actions, ensuring that the people's civil liberties are upheld and to intervene when they

aren't. Most of the police around here, she says, know her by now.

Allan feels the attitude from police is that everyone living in poverty in the Downtown Eastside is a criminal. She acknowledges that some of them are. There are drugs, there is robbery. If anything, she says, she wants the Downtown Eastside enforcement beat to send a message to sexual predators that "our women and girls down here are not for them to pick up and hurt."

"But that," she says, "doesn't seem to happen."

# How a Decent Meal Can Keep People from the Brink

BY COLLEEN KIMMETT, 13 JUNE 2012

*Research on people with mental illnesses in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside links better nutrition to fewer 911 calls.*

On an empty stomach it's easy to find fault with my fellow transit passengers, even the littlest ones. I'm sitting on the 99 B-line trying not to openly scowl at a toddler who is planted on his mother's lap gnawing at a cracker. His chin is shiny with saliva, and soggy crumbs stick to his fat cheeks. Gross. I look away in disgust as his mom lovingly strokes his hair.

By the time I arrive at my destination -- a café in Kitsilano -- and wolf down a croissant, I'm feeling much better about the world. It's an appropriate start to my interview with Karen Cooper, who can relate to the anecdote.

Cooper, a professor at Corpus Christi (a small Catholic college on the grounds of UBC) understands well what happens to most people's thought patterns when they are deprived of glucose. For the past five years, she has been poring over scientific literature on the relationship between nutrition and mental health and conducting her own original field research in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

Cooper is trying to quantify what most working and living in the neighbourhood already know: food, or lack thereof, has a big impact on people's moods and behaviour.

And she's found a novel way to measure this: by looking at the number of 911 calls to the neighbourhood's single-resident occupancy (SRO) buildings, before and after the introduction of meal programs.

Her research so far, she says, indicates that "Basically, anytime anyone

introduces food, you get this enormous decrease in 911 calls, police fire and ambulance."

How much of a decrease? Although Cooper says she hasn't completely finished crunching and analyzing her data, conservatively, she says, the average drop in the total number of critical incidents involving all services (police, fire and ambulance) fell between 25 and 33 per cent across the residences she looked at. That's between a period several months before the introduction of meals on site, and a period 18 months to two years later. Police calls alone saw a drop of between 40 and 50 per cent, says Cooper.

Cooper looked at seven residences in total, and warns me that she needs to collect data from more in order to make her findings statistically relevant in an academic context.

"Having said that, I feel all the time like I'm trying to prove the obvious," she says. "Which is, if you don't feed people, bad things happen. If you don't feed mentally-unwell, addicted and often physically-unwell people, even worse things happen."

## *The hot meal factor*

Cooper's foray into this type of research was accidental. The subject of her PhD was originally "nothing to do with nutrition or food," she says, but rather, empathy. Her focus was on the Sisters of Mercy, a group of nuns who did outreach on the Downtown Eastside.

As she became familiar with the Sisters' work, she realized that food was a major part of their outreach. It wasn't just the food, she adds, it was also the respect that people received there -- but it was her first inkling that food was a research topic worthy of a closer look.

Then, in 2007, at a birthday party, Cooper happened to strike up a conversation with Liz Evans, executive director of the Portland Hotel Society (PHS).

When Cooper mentioned her work with the Sisters, and her growing interest in their meal program, Evans -- who recalls the encounter -- said that PHS had been thinking about doing the same kind of research. Over the past year, the society had begun to deliver hot meals, one per resident, per day, to several of its projects.

Staff had expected to see health improvements -- they even recorded the weights of residents before and after, and noticed body mass increases of between 22 and 32 per cent in some cases -- but what they also noticed was a palpable improvement in the mood of residents, and an apparent decrease in the number of violent and disruptive incidents in the buildings.

When Evans mentioned that they were able to compare this anecdotal evidence with log records of critical incidents that staff are required to keep, "The mathematical part of my brain," exclaims Cooper, "said statistics!"

## *Brain food*

There is already plenty of clinical research on the impact that nutrition has on brain function and behaviour.

There are lab experiments, for example, that [indicate](#) people do more negative stereotyping if they are deprived of glucose. A groundbreaking 2001 clinical trial at Aylesbury jail in Britain [showed](#) that when inmates were given multivitamins, mineral and essential fatty acid supplements, the number of violent incidents decreased by 37 per cent compared to those on a placebo pill.

Other researchers in the field say the same type of quantitative analysis is important now -- at a time when the issue of food security is gaining more attention in the social service sector -- more than ever.

Christiana Miewald, an adjunct professor with SFU's Centre for



Karen Cooper of Corpus Christi College: "Anytime anyone introduces food, you get this enormous decrease in 911 calls, police fire and ambulance."

Sustainable Community Development, documented the food security needs of people in the Downtown Eastside in 2009. She found "an increasing amount of activity" in terms of food programming in that neighbourhood, but little in the way of research or policy.

"Anecdotal evidence from program and housing staff in the DTES suggests that when healthy meals are provided, there are a number of benefits," she [noted](#) in the report. For example, when the food provided at the Lifeskills Centre was improved from pastries to full meals (breakfast and lunch), staff reported that residents were more attentive and less aggressive, which reduced the amount of time they had to devote to intervening in conflicts.

Bill Briscall, communications manager for Raincity Housing, told The Tyee that one of the supportive housing projects that they manage, Princess Rooms, introduced a community kitchen program, where residents can come for a shared meal, several years ago.

When the program started, Briscall -- who says he used to manage Princess Rooms before taking his current position -- thought the idea of putting 40 residents in a room together was crazy. "When I was there, we would try to minimize interactions between residents that could escalate," says Briscall. "These are people in survival mode... they could be very angry, very protective."

Instead, he says, the meals have had the opposite effect. "Having food is making it healthier," he says. "It's actually improved the atmosphere in the building."

"We've heard that time and time again," Miewald told The Tyee in a phone interview. Miewald says she and colleague Dr. Aleck Ostry, an associate professor at the University of Victoria, have applied for a Canadian Institute of Health Research grant to try to quantify and compare the benefits of various meal programs -- like community kitchens or meal delivery services -- in supportive housing. For now, she says, aside from what Cooper is doing, "there's very little data."

"She's probably the only one doing the quantitative research," says Miewald.

## *Tallying emergency calls*

Cooper has focused on seven SROs that are home to "hard to house" populations (people with mental health and addiction issues, who often fall in and out of homelessness) with the cooperation of four supportive housing providers in Vancouver: the Portland Hotel Society, Raincity Housing, Atira and MPA (Motivation, Power and Achievement).

According to a 2008 [demographic study](#) commissioned by the City of Vancouver and BC Housing, a significant number of people in all SROs are dealing with these very problems. Of the 628 people surveyed, 32 per cent reported having a drug addiction, 20 per cent reported having an alcohol addiction, 22 per cent reported having tuberculosis, hepatitis C, HIV or AIDS, and 30 per cent said they had a mental illness.

Cooper worked directly with SRO staff who provided incident log data with names omitted to protect privacy. She analyzed the type of emergency calls that were going out -- police, fire or ambulance -- and cross-referenced these with 911 dispatcher records.

"The fire calls -- and that's not a big number -- are mostly what we would think of as negligent. Cigarettes, matches," says Cooper. "Ambulance, it's everything from drug trips to knife fights. Fights, of one kind or another would easily be the biggest chunk. Knife fights and fist fights and assaults. A fair number of mental health calls. When threats are uttered then the police get called."

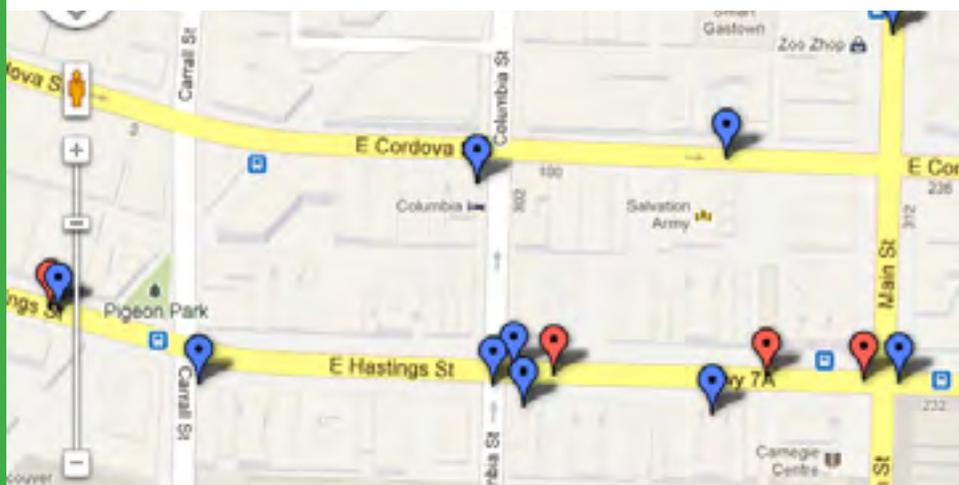
According to a 2005 [analysis](#) that looked at emergency calls to a sample of 54 SROs in the Downtown Eastside, there were 11,269 calls for police, fire and ambulance during that time period. Slightly more than half of those -- 6,947 -- were for police. Another 1,754 were fire

and rescue calls, and 2,618 were for ambulance.

There hasn't been a similar analysis since then (at least, not that this reporter could find), and it's only been in the past five or six years, roughly, that the PHS and other housing agencies have begun to introduce meal programs in a more comprehensive way.

Constable Brian Montague, a media relations officer for the Vancouver police, said in an email, "It would be difficult for us to make the connection between police response and the meal programs."

The police did provide more recent data, for VPD calls only, for six SROs that were part of the 2005 analysis. They include four PHS-run projects (Stanley, Washington, Roosevelt and New Portland hotels) as well as The Savoy and The Balmoral.



*The red markers indicate SROs for which 2005 police call data and 2011 police call data are available. The blue markers indicate SROs for which 2005 call data only is available.*

Some, like the Washington, had a significant drop in police calls. In 2005, there were 281 police calls and in 2011 there were 179 (a decrease of 36 per cent). Police calls to the Roosevelt decreased by 72 per cent, from 487 in 2005 to 135 in 2011.

The Stanley saw a modest (about three per cent) drop in police calls between 2005 and 2011.

Police calls nearly doubled at The Savoy, an MPA-run residence. In 2005, there were 53 police calls. Six years later, there were 100.

These are just a few examples; not statistically significant, and not meant to imply that food provision in these residences are the cause of any decline in police calls.

Cooper acknowledges that the research has taken her longer than she thought -- four years longer, and counting -- because there are so many variables to account for. People move around, she says, and other types of programming that might have an impact tends to come and go with funding. There have been renovations in some of the buildings as well, a provincial government response to outcry over deplorable living conditions in many of the aging SROs.

Her ultimate goal is to do a cost analysis: what's the associated dollar value of a decline in emergency calls, and how might that compare to the cost of providing meals?

So far, she has only been able to cost 911 calls to police based on the point at which the officer logs in a particular call number, to the point at which they log off a particular call number. However, there is almost always some additional action at the end of that call that she hasn't been able to account for.

Police might show up and diffuse the situation, says Cooper, but she says it appears equally likely that they show up and take someone into custody. Ambulance calls are often followed by a visit to the emergency room and about half the time, she says, a hospitalization.

"If you talk to nurses at St. Paul's (Hospital) casually, they will say 'Yes, we get people in with pneumonia, and they're basically in the hospital while we feed them for two or three weeks until their immune system is strong enough,'" says Cooper.

"We spend an enormous amount of money to feed them in the hospital -- it drives me insane!" she exclaims. "We'd be a lot better off to feed them in the SROs."

This raises another important question, from a policy perspective: who pays for this kind of programming? Even if researchers could accurately compare the cost of food provision in social housing, to the cost of not providing meals in social housing, says Cooper, "the problem is the silos where the money gets spent."

"The people in the silos who have to spend the money and the people who are going to save the money are not in the same silos," she says. "I've come more and more to see this as an administrative problem rather than a cost problem."

Next, a look at the logistics of feeding people in supportive housing, and the challenges and opportunities of expanding meal programs.

# How to Nourish Vancouver's Supportive Housing Residents

BY COLLEEN KIMMETT, 14 JUN 2012, [THEYEE.CA](http://THEYEE.CA)

*While providing meals for the 'hard to house' benefits many, it's unclear who might foot the bill. A look at the logistics.*

Boomer Bundy takes a wide, careful turn at the cobblestone intersection in Gastown where Gassy Jack's statue stands watch. Bundy is pulling about 120 pounds of hot food on a two-wheeled trailer behind his bicycle, bound for some of Vancouver's hungriest.

"I've spilled these before, and it ain't pretty," he tells me, before departing from a Hastings Street garage. That's his response to my asking if I could help out by attaching a trailer to my bike. I understand. An accident from a well-intentioned reporter is probably the last thing he wants to deal with.

Bundy is a volunteer for the Lunch Peddlers, a program run by the Portland Hotel Society. It operates out of the Smith-Yuen building, a 53-unit residence for seniors with mental illnesses. The small kitchen there has two full-time cooks and several volunteers who produce approximately 850 meals per day which are delivered -- via bicycle -- to 13 other PHS residences in the neighbourhood.

When Smith-Yuen was built in 2005, it came with funding to pay for a kitchen, cook, and one hot meal per resident each day (although meals are subsidized, tenants pay \$40 per month to take part in the program).

Getting this food funding package was a struggle, says PHS executive director Liz Evans. The society runs 16 housing projects in the Downtown Eastside that house people who struggle with homelessness, addiction and mental illness.

For a long time, the PHS was fighting for things like door locks, plumbers and more staff support at its residences, says Evans, "and food was at the very bottom of that list."

But that's changing. As the provincial, city and federal governments have teamed up to address deplorable living conditions in many of the city's SROs, they have turned their attention not just to wiring and plumbing, but also cooking amenities.

A [supportive housing project](#) on Howe Street for people with HIV/AIDS opened last year, the ninth of a 14-project housing deal between the city and the province. Run by the McLaren Housing Society, it will include supports like community meals and kitchens.

And according to BC Housing, increasing kitchen amenities is on the table as part of a recently-announced [P3 project](#) to renovate 13 SROs in the Downtown Eastside.

"We've come a long way," says Evans. "And now food is on the agenda as something that governments need to start figuring out how to fund."

## *Lunch peddlers launch*

It became clear to PHS staff that food was as important as bricks and mortar not long after it took over the Portland Hotel in 1991. They had a nutritionist come in and assess residents, says Evans, who reported back that 80 per cent were undernourished.

PHS saw an opportunity to address the problem when residents were forced to move out of the Portland for a renovation (which took nine years to complete, [officially opening](#) under its original handle, the Pennsylvania Hotel, in 2009.)

When residents were moved to a building down the street, PHS fund-raised to build a kitchen facility on the ground floor. They got all the equipment donated, says Evans, and negotiated a deal where the kitchen -- which became its own separate entity, the Potluck Café -- would provide one hot meal per day to the residents in that building.

The impetus for the Lunch Peddlers program came in 2006, says Evans, when a female relative of a young man living at the Stanley Hotel approached staff and told them how much better he did when he was eating. She arranged specifically for him to get food, with money she sent, and wanted others to have the same advantage.

Staff members drafted a proposal to expand food production at Smith-Yuen -- the only of PHS's buildings with kitchen capacity -- so that meals could be delivered to other PHS projects. The relative (whom Evans lost touch with after she moved away from Canada) came back "literally within two or three weeks," says Evans, "with a cheque for \$90,000."

That was enough to get the program going for a full year. PHS added four hours of cook time to the kitchen, and launched the Lunch Peddlers. It also paid for a small honorarium -- \$20 for a three-hour shift, says Mike Bodnar, director of food programs -- for Bundy and other volunteers.

In that first year, food service was expanded by 150 meals per day, says Evans, which were delivered first to the Stanley and the Washington hotels.

Since then, with help from grant funding, private philanthropy, and funds from BC Housing, the kitchen at Smith-Yuen has expanded to what it is today, with the goal of eventually providing one hot meal for every PHS tenant, every day.

"We're stretching absolutely everything we can to creatively meet as many food needs as we can," says Evans. "We're trying to understand

how to fill the gaps."

## *Lunch on a shoestring*

They aren't the only ones. Many front-line social service providers have cobbled together food and snacks where they can, but have done so without explicit funding. In a sector that serves people who struggle to meet basic food and housing needs, there has historically been no budget line for food.

If service providers want to help their clients with meals or snacks, they must do so with donations (which are often unreliable and of poor nutritional quality) or by drawing from already tight operational budgets, says Valerie Tarasuk, a professor in the department of nutritional sciences at the University of Toronto.

She and professor Aleck Ostry, a community health researcher at the University of Victoria, have compiled an inventory of charitable food provision in five cities across Canada: Toronto, Halifax, Victoria, Edmonton and Quebec City. In Victoria, they estimate that in a course of a month, 70,000 meals and snacks are being provided, and almost 13,000 people are receiving groceries from a broad spectrum of agencies.

"Again, practically no one with any funding, or if they did have funding, a fairly minimal amount," says Tarasuk. "You could see that as an amazing success story -- look at how they're managing to do all this feeding on a shoestring budget."

However, she questions how well this massive amount of charitable food provisioning is actually meeting the needs of the clients. "And that's a question that very few people seem to be able to ask."

Staff at PHS say their meal programs have not only improved the health of tenants, but also the atmosphere in the buildings.

"Residents have self-reported having more contact with staff," says Coco Culbertson, project director at PHS. "They know the lunch peddlers, the delivery guys, and it adds to the feeling that they're part of a community."

## *'Most wouldn't starve without it'*

People certainly seem to know Bundy. Smokers out front of the Stanley greet him when he comes in, and riding through Pigeon Park one man calls out, "What's for lunch?"

"No, for real," he adds, implying that he's not just razzing Bundy, but wondering what to expect when he returns home later.

"Lasagna!" Bundy replies over his shoulder, as he pedals by.

His first stop is The Rainier, followed by The Beacon, a low-barrier supportive housing building focused on harm reduction. That means people are allowed to use, and staff hand out needles for drug users who want them. The residents, says tenant support worker Dani Morett, are older and tend to be more stable.

She will hand out the individual portions that Bundy has brought for the tenants. After 3 p.m., the leftovers are up for grabs for those who want second and thirds. If someone shows up late and doesn't get a meal, sometimes they're angry.

"When there is food, when they're full, people are a lot calmer," says Morett.

The support workers at other buildings we visit -- the Stanley, Rainier, Onsite and Sunrise -- all say that the food PHS provides is tasty and much appreciated by tenants.

Fred McComber, who is manning the front desk at the Sunrise hotel when Bundy arrives, says "people come running" for the meals. "It's

certainly sought after," he says.

Does he think that meals play a role in reducing the number of violent or aggressive incidents, as researcher Karen Cooper has [suggested](#)? He's not sure about that. McComber says he makes about one 911 call per week, almost always for fights or assaults.

He says the people who probably depend most on the meals -- those who rarely leave their rooms, let alone the building -- aren't the ones making trouble. For those who do, there are other options.

"Everyone knows the circuits, the schedules to get free food," he says. Having meals delivered to the building makes for easy accessibility, "but most wouldn't starve without it."

## *Money on the table*

When PHS started branching out their meal program in different locations, they measured the body mass index of patients six weeks in, and then three months in. At the Beacon Hotel, says Culbertson, they saw weight increases of between 22 and 32 per cent.

Evans says PHS did share the results of their weight monitoring with BC Housing, to help make a case for a larger kitchen facility. A new project is opening at the corner of Princess and Alexander Streets in several years, says Evans, and they hope to move the kitchen there.

"Having a central facility and a budget for food in each of our project budgets would solve a lot of our problems," says Evans.

According to Seamus Gordon, senior public relations officer, BC Housing provides close to \$300,000 per year for food and meal programs in approximately 12 SROs in Vancouver. As part of the upcoming renovations to 13 provincially owned SROs, BC Housing will increase the number of communal kitchen areas, adds Gordon.

As for the City, it currently does not provide any funding specifically for food in supportive housing or shelters, says Councilor Kerry Jang. It does provide land and staff support, and some grant funding to community kitchen programs.

And when the City partnered with the province to launch the Homeless Emergency Action Team (HEAT) in 2008, it stipulated that food at emergency shelters must provide two meals a day that met Canada Food Guide standards.

"We made sure, as part of the funding envelope, that this was provided," says Jang, although the City doesn't monitor nutritional quality.

A 2010 [report](#) on HEAT found that the meals provided an incentive for people to come inside, and helped stabilize behaviour.

"After a good evening meal," the report notes, "people who had previously been considered 'hard to house' became easier for shelter staff to work with."

Tarasuk says it's "really valuable" to look at the associations that PHS and Karen Cooper are making between food, health, and safety. It's clear people who live in poverty have poor health, which becomes more expensive for the health care system, explains Tarasuk.

That's why the funding question is an important one.

"At the end of the day what we'd want is something that would enable people to eat three square meals a day, seven days a week," says Tarasuk. A big part of the problem is people not having enough money to buy their own food.

"Surely," she says, "the most efficient way would be for us to give them... a living wage, increased welfare rates."

Tarasuk also acknowledges that in some settings, like SROs and supportive housing, there's a need for people to have meals provided

for them.

"For that to be effective from a nutritional standpoint," says Tarasuk, "there needs to be money on the table and some accountability."

# Inside the Washed out Grocery Store

BY COLLEEN KIMMETT, 16 JUN 2012

*Jesse Whitehead got a taste of vulnerable northern food systems this month, after storms cut off his town's supplies.*

Heavy rains and mudslides that washed out sections of the Alaska Highway earlier this month put a spotlight on the vulnerability of northern communities dependent on food supplies from the south.

The flooding happened Wednesday, June 6, and while businesses like Tim Hortons and Superstore were flying in supplies on Hercules helicopters the following Sunday, store shelves would remain eerily empty for another week.

Jesse Whitehead, who moved to Whitehorse from Vancouver six weeks ago to find work, said the shortage didn't last long enough for people to be too concerned.

"I'm kind of stocked up on food so I'm not going hungry, that's for sure," he told The Tyee on Tuesday. "I have a cupboard full of brown rice and a bunch of yams and stuff. I'm not struggling to find food. If I were to throw a dinner party, that would be tough."

At the same time, says Whitehead, there is a big movement towards growing food. He says people are starting to think more about greenhouses, and that there are a lot of garden beds -- although with the risk of frost only recently passed, most have just been planted.

Some Yukoners turned back to the land for their greens. Local author Bev Gray [told](#) the Globe and Mail that she spent the weekend gathering spruce tips, fireweed greens and stinging nettles to eat.

"Even though we have no roads due to the washouts, we have an abundance of nutritious wild plants that we can harvest for food," said Gray.

## *'Unprecedented event'*

While relying on flown-in supplies was a novelty for those in Whitehorse, for other communities it's par for the course. And it adds to the cost, another barrier to food security in the north. Earlier this month, residents in Nunavut drew national media attention by [protesting the high cost of food](#) in their communities.

(High food costs and limited access to fresh produce has created rural food "[deserts](#)" and higher rates of obesity, heart disease and diabetes in these communities.)

While the Alaska highway is now re-opened, other key access road in the north remain closed in the wake of what the Yukon's assistant deputy minister of highways [called](#) "an unprecedented event."

Whitehead says the sudden disappearance of food hasn't made him rethink his decision to move up north, but it has made him aware of how vulnerable his new home can be.

"It's interesting, because there's a lot of kind of back-to-the-earth folks up here, and I started asking them right away when I moved up, how do you reconcile your existence with your beliefs?"

"Because this is such a ridiculous place to live in a lot of ways. Our food is shipped in from obscenely far away. That's definitely part of the conversation up here."

# How Grandview Elementary Fills up Student Plates

BY COLLEEN KIMMETT, 27 JUN 2012

*From farm and garden to desk, one Vancouver school finds success feeding vulnerable kids.*

It's Salad Bar Friday at Grandview/ḡuuqinak'uuh Elementary, but hardly any of the kids are making salads.

Instead most keep their vegetables carefully, almost obsessively, segregated on their green plastic trays and consume each item -- kale, carrot, apple and sunflower seeds -- in turn. It's a funny quirk about kids, observes Brent Mansfield, the school's garden coordinator, but as long as they're eating their veggies, he's not about to complain.

School gardens are now funneling vegetables into classrooms and cafeterias at an unprecedented rate, or at least, at a rate unseen since the Second World War.

The City of Vancouver alone has 55 school gardens, according to Kevin Millsip, the school board's sustainability coordinator. And increasingly, educators and administrators see schools playing an important role in addressing food security in the wider community. Mansfield calls schools "natural community assets," with land for growing, kitchens for cooking, and parking lots and covered play areas that could serve as CSA pickups or food-buying club depots.

"We want to go beyond just providing food," says Mansfield. "We also want to help support parents. This is going to have a greater life than saying, 'here's free food.' "



A Grandview/ḡuuqinak'uuh student gardener stops to smell the kale. Photo via [Vancouver School Board Flickr](#).

Grandview/ḡuuqinak'uuh is the fourth most vulnerable school in the city, based on the number of children enrolled who are in foster homes or homes receiving income assistance. As such, it qualifies for a hot lunch program funded by the Ministry of Education's CommunityLINK program.

The program provides catered meals five days a week, which are reheated and served by school cafeteria staff. Parents are asked to pay for meals if they are able -- via an envelope that kids take home -- but 70 per cent of those at Grandview/ḡuuqinak'uuh do not, says principal Ronnie Ross.

The school accesses a host of other food programming pieced together from private donations, charitable grants and public dollars. The result is enough food to provide each of its 170 students with breakfast, lunch and an after-school snack every day.

In addition, the school runs a food-buying club, where families and staff pool their dollars to buy wholesale vegetables once a month, and monthly potlucks open to all families.

"A lot of people," says Ross, "want to feed hungry children."

## *Upping the bounty*

Aside from the moral imperative to feed hungry kids, it's good public policy as well. Numerous studies demonstrate how important good nutrition is to learning.

Mansfield's position is funded through the Shannon Martin Community Health Fund, a trust administered by Vancouver Coastal Health. According to Mansfield, it's the only paid position of its kind in the province.

"I'm fairly well-connected to know that there's other people out there doing similar work, but not in a capacity where they're operating

out of a school and are publicly funded," says Mansfield, who also serves as co-chair of the Vancouver Food Policy Council and as a community liaison for UBC's [Think And Eat Green at School](#) project.

The position has allowed him to take things "that much further."

In the four years since he was hired, Mansfield has grown the community garden by 12 new plots, all of which are used by families whose kids go to the school. He says he does "a fair amount of grant writing" for garden projects. A recent Vancouver Foundation Generation Green grant helped expand food production at the garden. Students started a pumpkin patch and learned how to grow and harvest buckwheat.

The salad bar program has allowed the school to supplement what's coming out of its own garden and allows the school to go "above and beyond" what the provincially-funded school meal program offers.

The meal program hits the basic provincial standards, which fall under the [Guidelines for Food and Beverage Sales in BC Schools](#) created in 2007 and revamped in 2010. The guidelines apply to all food and beverages sold in B.C. schools, or at school events, and are aimed at reducing the amount of sodium, fat and sugar.

"We think we could do better than that," says Mansfield. "I think financially it's not really that viable. So to me, it's how can we supplement."

## *From farm to desk*

Grandview's salad bar is part of the [Farm to School program](#) administered by the Public Health Association of B.C. (PHABC) and funded through the Ministry of Health.

According to provincial coordinator Joanne Bays, Farm to School provides resources for teachers or administrators who want to start

a salad bar program, and over the past five years has provided more than \$500,000 in seed grants to help schools get started.

The grants, which range from \$1,500 to \$20,000 cover kitchen equipment, like a salad bar unit or a refrigerator and start-up costs (for the co-ordinator, or for promotion) for the first six months of the program.

The funds do not cover food costs or coordination over the long term, but schools have been successful in keeping them going. Farm to School first launched salad bar pilot programs in 2008, at 16 schools across the province. All but one are still going, says Bays, and six more have started up.

It's up to individual schools to find farmers to partner with. In Vancouver, Fresh Roots Urban Farm is the main grower for the program. Grandview/ḥuuqinak'uuh currently purchases produce -- typically beets, carrots, kale and other seasonal greens -- from Fresh Roots, which delivers the goods via bicycle.

Fresh Roots has been able to take school gardens to the next level. Earlier this month, it signed a partnership deal with the City of Vancouver, unique in Canada in that it allows the non-profit to establish a market garden on school property.

The quarter-acre garden will serve as a teaching space, but the produce grown there will be sold to Vancouver Tech and others schools through the Farm to School program. They intend to focus on Asian greens, salad greens, beets, carrots, garlic and other vegetables that will grow in parallel to the school year, so students can reap the benefits of a fall and winter harvest.

Fresh Roots also has a garden project at Queen Alexandra Elementary, and organizers say another market garden is being planned for David Thompson Secondary.

Rob Wynen, a school trustee with the board, called it "a wonderful

example of the VSB taking an unusable space and repurposing it into something that's aesthetically pleasing, educationally engaging and sustainable" -- especially at a time when the board is facing declining enrolment and financial challenges.

The city, school board and Fresh Roots are now working towards an agreement that would enable Fresh Roots to also sell direct on school property. Mansfield said this would further improve access to fresh organic produce, not just for students but the surrounding neighbourhood.

"Regulations, definitions and guidelines need to come together," says Mansfield. "It's not done but it's in the pipeline. It's coming."

# Big Step for Big City Farming

BY COLLEEN KIMMETT, 9 JUL 2012

*SOLEfood's new downtown Vancouver site grows food, jobs and the business case for urban agriculture.*



'This is not a token thing. This is a real amount of food.'  
SOLEfood Urban Farm's two-acre operation in the heart of Vancouver, BC.

"Most of what people refer to as urban agriculture is a step up from community gardens," says Ableman. "This is not a token thing. This is a real amount of food."

Ableman and business partner Seann Dory have been plotting the expansion since they launched their first farm on a half-acre lot beside the Astoria Hotel on East Hastings Street.

Considering that all of Vancouver's existing urban farms -- all 2.3

acres of them, according to a [2010 census](#) -- would just about fit on SOLEfood's Pacific Boulevard site, the expansion is significant for the city's local food scene. It's also a test of the financial viability of this type of social enterprise model, which has strong ties to the Downtown Eastside community where it grew up.

## *Growing jobs*

So far, Ableman says he's pleased with the progress SOLEfood has made in achieving its main goal as a not-for-profit social enterprise: to provide meaningful employment for people in the Downtown Eastside who've faced barriers finding work.

The number of staff has grown from seven to 21, says Ableman, and food production is expected to go from roughly 10,000 pounds to a projected minimum of 200,000 pounds once four of the five new sites are in production this fall.

(Pacific Boulevard is one of two that have recently come into production; the other is adjacent to the train tracks under the First Avenue bridge at Clark Street. Two more sites, on city-owned land at Main and Terminal Streets and the Olympic Village, should be in production by the end of the year, says Ableman.)

The 200,000 pounds is a projection based on financial modeling that SOLEfood was required to provide to Vancity credit union and other funders, says Ableman, but it comes with a word of caution -- this is agriculture after all, a biological system based on a lot of different variables.

This kind of agriculture requires a lot of skilled labour from employees like Ken Vallee, who greets customers at SOLEfood's stand in the Main and Terminal farmers' market on Wednesday afternoon.

Vallee tells me that he's recently had surgery on two bones in his

neck that fused together. At some point, sooner or later, he figures he likely won't be able to work and when that happens, going on disability will be an option. In the meantime he works part-time, 20 hours a week, at SOLEfood. The hourly rates starts at just over minimum wage, says Vallee, and increases depending on how often the individual works, and what their duties are.

Vallee is one of two employees who has been with the company since the beginning, and when he tells me he's become the poster boy for SOLEfood, I assume he means figuratively, until his colleague at the market stand jokes that he gets tired of seeing Ken's face every time he goes to the ATM.

Vallee, it turns out, is *literally* the poster boy for SOLEfood -- that's him on the Vancity posters you may have seen around town, promoting the kinds of initiatives the credit union funds.

Ableman emphasizes several times that employment is SOLEfood's main purpose, its *raison d'etre*. The company is designed to "support a payroll." That means selling the food at the highest return they can get (at the farmers' market, a bunch of radishes goes for \$3.50, and a small a bag of Asian greens that would make four side salads is \$5.00) and it means maintaining a certain level of consistency. They have about 30 different items, planted in succession so that harvest can happen all season. "The skill," in agriculture, says Ableman, "comes with having a continuous supply."

## *From threat to acceptance*

And success in urban agriculture, to some degree, hinges on acceptance from the community. Twenty years ago urban agriculture was considered a threat, Ableman points out (his own battle to save Fairview Gardens Farm in Santa Barbara county in the '80s is detailed in his 1998 autobiography, *On Good Land*). Now, cities are embracing it.

Vancouver's city council, its business community, financial institutions and philanthropists have all played a role in getting SOLEfood off the ground.

Concord Pacific, the developer that owns much of the land on the north side of False Creek, has leased the Pacific Boulevard site to SOLEfood for three years, at no charge, in exchange for a break on property tax from the city.

Until recently, SOLEfood has been using borrowed refrigerator space at Save on Meats for its cold storage needs. Mark Brand, the restaurant's owner, offered the space for free for the company's first two years. This spring, Seann Dory and Brand both told this reporter of their plan to expand the partnership, which would require renovating the basement at Save on Meats for additional cold storage as production ramped up. In the end, that proved very expensive for SOLEfood's budget, Ableman said. Instead, they may rent portable refrigeration units to keep at the Pacific Boulevard site, an option he says is more efficient and cost-effective. They have not decided yet.

As a not-for-profit social enterprise, SOLEfood has been able to secure an impressive amount of start-up cash in a funding climate friendly towards local food initiatives. Since 2009, the company has received at closer to \$700,000 in direct grants, and more in in-kind contributions.

In 2009, city council [approved](#) a \$100,000 grant to SOLEfood, of which \$50,000 came from a Greenest Neighbourhood Grants allocation.

In 2010, it [received](#) \$10,000 from Vancity, and was [awarded](#) \$10,000 cash and \$5,000 in technical design and production mentorship from Nature's Path Organic Foods.

In 2011 it received another Vancity community investment grant

-- this time, \$50,000 -- and an additional \$44,000 from Vancity's enviroFund. That same year, the Radcliffe Foundation, established by Vancouver philanthropist Frank Giustra, granted \$475,000.

Ableman [told](#) *The Dependent* magazine last year that its Astoria site produced \$40,000 revenue in 2010. Ableman says that with all five sites in production and major capital costs covered, they intend to be entirely self-sufficient and not reliant on grants coming in. "We do project that in three to five years, we're going to be standing on our own," says Ableman. "We want this to pay for itself by the pound."

The company is testing the economics of urban agriculture in Vancouver, says Peter Ladner, former city councilor and author of *The Urban Food Revolution*.

Ladner told *The Tyee* that he had recently toured Vancouver's first indoor, vertical farming business -- [Valcent](#), which has leased space on top of a parking garage in Gastown. It's projecting yields 20 times that of traditional outdoor growing methods -- as much as 186,000 pounds of produce per year on just 6,000 square feet.

Ladner says he doesn't know enough about SOLEfood's business model to offer an opinion on how it will sustain itself in the long term.

"If anyone can make this work," he added, "Michael Ableman can make it work."

Ableman himself is proud of what SOLEfood has accomplished so far -- the portable planters, their work on brownfields, and the employment numbers they've been able to reach. He stresses that



SOLEfood Urban Farm co-founder Michael Ableman says the goal is to break even in three to five years. Photo: Colleen Kimmett.

the company is still very much a work in progress; particularly when it comes to its particular function as a social enterprise in the Downtown Eastside.

Ableman says that SOLEfood currently donates about 10 per cent of its produce to agencies in the Downtown Eastside, including the Potluck Café and the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House, and wants to continue this trend. With production now underway at



Ten per cent of produce grown in the shadow of BC Place (recently crowned with a \$536 million dollar roof) goes to agencies in Canada's poorest neighbourhood, the Downtown Eastside.

the Pacific site, "we now have enough food to begin to really address both our marketing needs and our giveaway goals," he says.

However, Ableman also emphasizes the primary goal is employment, not giving food away "which does not always empower communities to generate food themselves."

SOLEfood is looking at other ways to get produce in the hands of low-income people. It recently launched a voucher program, funded by monetary donations from its Community Supportive Agriculture (CSA) program. Members were given the option of contributing extra when they bought their shares. A total of \$430 was collected, which will be divided into \$10 vouchers for the Downtown Eastside

Neighbourhood House to distribute amongst its members, according to Katie Pease, SOLEfood's newly-hired sales and distribution manager.

Joy de Castro, who runs the family drop-in program at the neighbourhood house, says that these will go to families who come to the drop-in. The house -- which also runs a community drop-in that serves as many as 170 meals a day -- has bought a \$500 share in SOLEfood's CSA program.

The goal is to build a larger base of shares in the Downtown Eastside, and possibly set up a distribution hub in the neighbourhood. "We don't have enough volume yet to warrant setting up a system on the Downtown Eastside, but that's the way we want to do it," says Ableman. "Otherwise, we're not going to be able to reach people."

# Officials 'Need the Pressure' to Raise Welfare Rates: Food Advocates

BY COLLEEN KIMMETT, 23 OCT 2012

*At Vancouver meeting welfare diet challengers discuss social assistance boost, and as this reporter learned, hunger's hidden cost.*



One welfare challenger's stock for the week, coming in at \$25.63. 'I averaged 1,650 calories per day -- about 1,200 fewer than what I require to maintain my body weight, given my level of physical activity. At this rate I would expect to lose at least two pounds per week,' they [wrote](#) on the Welfare Food Challenge [blog](#).

It was roughly two hours into the Vancouver food policy council's most well-attended meeting in memory -- council co-chair Trish Kelly estimated at least 70 members of the public showed up at City Hall last Wednesday night -- and the room was completely and

utterly silent, except for the voice of Fraser Stewart.

Stewart was describing what it's like to live on welfare; how he dumpster dives for organic produce on Granville Island, lives in the kinds of places where one must unplug one small appliance in order to use another, and can forget about hunger most of the day until he comes home to an empty refrigerator.

The audience hung on to his every word.

"I'm asking everyone here to do the welfare challenge," Stewart concluded. "And if you can't do it, write a bloody letter."

For Stewart, the question of how to become food secure comes down to having more money. For him, having more money comes down to higher social assistance rates in the province. And to do that, he figures, elected officials need to feel pressure to do so from the public.

Stewart is part of a local advocacy group called [Raise the Rates](#), which recently challenged citizens to try eating for a week on just \$26: the amount that organizers calculated a single person on welfare would have to spend on food.

The [campaign](#) garnered a decent amount of press and participants, and the food policy council devoted most of the meeting to presentations from those taking the challenge and discussion on the "right to food" theme (which, presumably, was behind the record attendance).

The meeting seemed to represent a coming together of two spheres of food security in Vancouver; one focused on building capacity for food production in the city, and the other focused on building capacity for equitable food consumption in the city.

What emerged was an understanding from social justice advocates and food policy advocates that the two are allies. The Vancouver food policy council committed to passing its own resolution, potentially

with a partner municipal council, supporting a raise in social assistance rates.

"We're coming up on a provincial election," said anti-poverty activist Jean Swanson, noting that neither the BC Liberals nor NDP have committed to raising social assistance rates. "They need the pressure."

One of the challengers, outspoken right-to-food advocate Paul



Ten per cent of produce grown in the shadow of BC Place (recently crowned with a \$536 million dollar roof) goes to agencies in Canada's poorest neighbourhood, the Downtown Eastside.

Taylor, pointed out that Vancouver's food policy [charter](#) presents a vision for a just and sustainable food system.

"There's a lot of emphasis on sustainable," said Taylor. "But is it just?"

During his presentation, Taylor described how his own experience growing up on welfare shaped his work now on the right to food, which has spanned several decades and provinces. He was working for food charities in Toronto in the '90s when the Ontario government introduced drastic cuts to welfare. Taylor recalled how, amid the uproar, Ontario's then-minister of social services David Taboushi [published](#) an infamous "welfare shopping list" that included bread without butter and pasta without sauce.

## *How this challenger fared*

The meeting made this reporter feel sheepish. At an editorial meeting the week before, I declared to my colleagues at The Tyee that I would take the welfare challenge and write about it.

"I think I could actually eat pretty well," I said confidently. "I eat mostly vegetarian. I'll just make a big batch of beans."

I lasted about three and a half hours.

The challenge started at midnight, on Oct. 16. At 3 a.m., after several hours of tossing and turning, I was still awake. I hadn't prepared at all, hadn't given much thought to how, exactly, I would spend my \$26 food budget and was losing sleep over the thought of having nothing for breakfast.

I rose from bed and went downstairs. I reached for my notebook and scanned the list of what I'd eaten the day before, in preparation for the challenge: a latte and breakfast cookie from a fancy Gastown coffee shop in the morning, a bowl of *pho* in Chinatown for lunch, another coffee in the afternoon, and a three-egg mushroom, cheddar and green onion omelet that I cooked at home for dinner. And over the course of the evening, the occasional spoonful of leftover shepherd's pie spooned directly from its Tupperware dish in the fridge. Yes, I am that kind of snacker.

On that sleepless night, I sought solace in the dim light of my refrigerator, breaking one of the [first rules](#) of the challenge: no eating what's already in your house. When I got to work that morning, exhausted and hungry, I saw a box of Solly's cinnamon buns someone had brought in and broke another rule of the challenge: no free food from friends or neighbours. By the end of the day, I had effectively given up. I quit.

I confessed all of this during the break at the council meeting to Karen Giesbrecht, community manager for the Christian

Community Food Network. She had considered taking the challenge too, she told me, and felt guilty for not doing so. But it was a busy week, and to have to worry about food on top of everything else was too difficult, she said. I completely understood.

Brent Mansfield, food policy council co-chair, who had undertaken the challenge along with his wife, told me he panicked earlier that day and ate his dinner -- a peanut butter sandwich -- at four o'clock.

The stress of worry is a hidden cost of food insecurity, pointed out Ted Bruce, executive director for population health at Vancouver Coastal Health, during his presentation to the council. It's not just the lack of nutrition, but stress -- "the pathway to chronic illness," as he put it -- that takes a toll on health.

"There is still a notion that poverty is absolute poverty, and that we don't have much of that here in Canada," said Bruce. "In public health, all evidence shows us that poverty is relative. Societies that are unequal, fail."

# Can Hospital Food Be Fixed?

BY COLLEEN KIMMETT, 17 OCT 2012

*A three-course inquiry. Part one: Why, yes!*



How St. Joseph's in Guelph, Ontario, is reinventing hospital food by going back to basics and sourcing locally. Graphic created by April Alayon for Tyee Solutions Society.

Guelph, Ont. -- "Hospital food" is one of those phrases that evokes an almost visceral reaction from anyone who has had the displeasure of experiencing it first-hand.

Bad hospital food stories are nothing new, but in the past few years there has been a renewed call to improve the healthcare system's approach. Not just for the sake of patients' palates and morale, but for the local food system and environment.

We expected that hospital administrators must know about their bad food problem. But we wondered: Are they doing anything to fix it? And if so, what?

The good news: it's happening. There are local food champions within hospitals and the wider healthcare system. The bad news? They're up against a system that has put food on the chopping block for the past two decades.



Leslie Carson, former food services director at St. Joseph's hospital in Guelph, Ontario. Photo courtesy of Ontario's Greenbelt Foundation.

When Leslie Carson was hired as food services director for St. Joseph's Hospital in Guelph, Ontario, in 2006, her boss had one question for her: Can you make my really bad food complaint headache go away?

"And basically, if you can, you can do no wrong," Carson said laughing, when I spoke with her earlier this year. "So I had a lot of freedom to correct things."

In the six years since then, Carson helped transform the food service at St. Joseph's by going back to the basics she learned studying nutrition and food science at the University of Alberta. In other words, going back to cooking from scratch, 'home'-made meals from fresh, whole ingredients.

Her approach turned heads and caught attention. Carson was

recognized as a local food champion by the Ontario Greenbelt Foundation last year, and received an award for leadership from the Ontario Hospital Association and the Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care.

And then, in September of this year, she and St. Joseph's parted ways.

Carson **told** the Guelph Mercury that she was fired, but was not given a reason by her employers. Barbara MacRae, the hospital's director of communications confirmed that Carson is no longer with St. Joseph's but would not comment further, citing confidentiality. When asked if food service has changed since Carson left, MacRae said "not to my knowledge."

Carson could not be contacted for comment.

## *A kitchen never meant to cook*

When Carson graduated from U of A in 1987, most Canadian hospitals still had well-equipped, well-staffed kitchens, where cooks produced almost everything from scratch.

That changed in the 1990s. Budget cuts and pressure to privatize saw many Canadian hospitals outsource food service to companies like Aramark, Sysco, Compass and Sodexo. Cooking staff were laid off, and kitchens renovated to accommodate larger freezers and "rethermalization" ovens that could quickly heat up pre-packaged meals from centralized plants. The shift from conventional cooking to heat-and-serve meals reduced labour costs by as much as 20 per cent.

A decade later, however, the "good food" movement has turned its focus from individual consumers to big public institutions like hospitals -- with some successes.

Kaiser Permanente, a private, non-profit health care provider in the

U.S., has received widespread [recognition](#) and nods from the likes of authors Eric Schlossinger and Michael Pollon, whose bestselling books (*Fast Food Nation*, and *In Defense of Food*, respectively) drew the connection between food industries and environmental and health problems.

There's plenty of appetite for a serious conversation about food's role in health care. And champions like Carson are making important inroads. But they're also facing some strong barriers.

On a tour of the St. Joseph's kitchen in January, Carson showed me a facility "built from the ground up to basically not cook." She was sort of joking, but not really. This impressively large but mostly empty kitchen at St. Joseph's hospital was built in 2002, ready-made for re-thermalization.

With no ceiling fans, no floor drains and only a small sink, the actual cooking doesn't even happen here; it's done in a cafeteria down the hall equipped with baking ovens and proper ventilation. Food is shuttled to the kitchen to be prepped, portioned and plated. "That's why we're all slim," Carson joked. "From going back and forth. It's quite inefficient."

One thing the kitchen does have is plenty of refrigerator space: a must if you're in the business of buying frozen lasagna, says Carson. And over the years she has managed to convince administrators to add appliances. "For Christmas," she said proudly, "I got a \$7,000 food processor."

Carson estimated that 60 to 70 per cent of St. Joseph's operating budget is labour. That leaves just 30 to 40 per cent for supplies, which is typical for most hospitals, she says. Of that, about one per cent is spent on food: a bare-bones budget of \$7.43 to cover three meals and two snacks per patient, per day.

"If you think about it, just personally, you could never afford to shop in the frozen aisle section every night with \$7.43," she noted. "You

would actually have to produce and make your own food."

Carson said she prepared simple meals relying on cheaper whole ingredients, buying canned tomatoes and raw onions and garlic, instead of more expensive frozen prepared pasta sauce. Local, hormone-free veal with a baked potato and side salad, for example, is one of St. Joseph's regular dinner options.

There are advantages to buying local beyond better-tasting food, said Carson. She noticed staff morale "go through the roof" when she started introducing more conventional cooking at St. Josephs. "Our cooks are feeling really proud of what they're producing and creating," she said. "That's a huge factor."

## *Not just healthier, safer too*

Working with raw ingredients also made it easier to avoid things like gluten, salt, dyes, allergens or other contaminants that could harm individual patients, said Carson.

St. Joseph's buys lettuce by the head and washes and chops it rather than buy pre-washed and pre-packaged salad, she says. "It's not coming from very far, so if there is a problem the impact is going to be very localized," Carson explained. "But, say you have all the Toronto hospitals buying their lettuce from some supplier in California and there's a problem with salmonella or something. That could be really bad."

Anyone who was working in a hospital or long-term care (LTC) facility in Canada in 2008 knows just how bad. That year a listeria outbreak infected 57 people, killing nearly every second victim. Most of the 22 fatalities were elderly people living in long-term care facilities. In fact, some contaminated deli meats had been packaged specifically *for* those long-term care facilities.

According to an outbreak [analysis](#) by the Public Health Agency of

Canada, almost 80 per cent of confirmed cases lived in a long-term care home, or were admitted to a hospital that had served deli meats taken from large packages.

"When all that was happening, I was just sitting in my office not worrying at all," said Carson. "Because we actually buy whole pieces of ham and we slice it ourselves."

## *'Naturalness' rates low*

In early 2012, the Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care produced a report on food service in Ontario hospitals and LTCs that looked specifically at the challenges and opportunities of incorporating local foods. It surveyed 137 food service managers, representing 16.7 per cent of the food service departments in all the hospitals and LTCs in Ontario.

Food services managers placed safety at the top of their priorities (100 per cent). It was closely followed by nutrition (97 per cent); sensory qualities, like texture and temperature (97 per cent); and low cost (88 per cent).

Least important to Ontario hospital food managers, according to the survey, were fairness or fair trade in product sourcing (30 per cent); food origin (24 per cent); and "naturalness" (15 per cent).

The responses also showed that long-term care facilities were already much more likely than acute-care hospitals to practice conventional cooking methods.

Eighteen per cent of acute-care hospital administrators reported using conventional cooking methods for patient meals "most" (80 to 100 per cent) of the time, while 70 per cent of long-term care administrators reported doing so.

Long-term care facilities are more likely to cook from scratch partly

because patients are living there for years, rather than weeks or months, and longer stays mean more meals.

"Food in these facilities is often considered more a part of the healthcare experience, whereas in acute care food is sometimes considered secondary to healthcare treatment," explained Brendan Wylie-Toal, Sustainable Food Manager for the Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care.

Bulk and "re-therm" food systems are more prevalent in large urban facilities also partly because it makes catering for 500 to 800 patients a day much easier. "The food quality suffers though," added Wylie-Toal.

While Carson argued that the hurdles to putting something fresh, tasty and local on every patient's plate each day are more mental than financial, in September St. Joseph's Hospital President Marianne Walker [told](#) the Guelph Mercury that the facility is facing challenging circumstances this year, in particular due to the rising cost of food and with no increase to its food budget.

She said the facility spends more on food than is allocated by the province -- a figure that is roughly \$7.30. "Our plan is to continue with the local food," Walker told the paper. "At the same time, we always have to make sure we stay within budget."

# Why Can't We Know What's in Grandma's Hospital Meal?

BY COLLEEN KIMMETT, 18 OCT 2012

*Corporate contracts prevent more than mere morsels being revealed, a reporter learns. Second in a series.*

Following on the example of [St. Joseph's hospital](#) in Guelph, a nationally-recognized model of bringing local food into big institutions, we wanted to find out how patients' meals measure up in Vancouver.

Indeed, could we do a plate-by-plate comparison of hospital meals: their ingredients, how far they'd travelled, what our health system paid for them?

Reasonable questions, we thought. Finding a satisfactory answer proved much more difficult.

Information about ingredients and food sources that other hospitals handed over readily, was refused by both [Sodexo](#) -- the \$8 billion-a-year French corporation in charge of food service at [Vancouver Coastal Health Authority](#) (VCHA) facilities -- and the public health authority itself. Both parties cited contractual confidentiality for what they couldn't share about what's being provided to the sick, injured and elderly in Vancouver's hospitals.

Which prompted us to ask another question: Shouldn't patients have a right to know what's in the food they are being served in public institutions, paid for on the public's dime?

*Food as a 'business initiative'*

"Are you a nutritionist?" asked Anna Marie D'Angelo, Vancouver Coastal Health's senior media relations officer. It came across as a facetious question, posed in a sarcastic tone. I had just finished introducing myself as a journalist, after all, doing research on hospital food and the health authority's stated intention to improve the sustainability of its patient meals.

I explained that I wanted to know as much as possible about the food at VCHA facilities. Everything from menus, ingredients, where those ingredients are sourced, how much is wasted, how much it costs, and what the nutritional content was.

After some back and forth about the focus of my story, D'Angelo directed me to Linda Renwick, regional director of food contracts for the Lower Mainland Business Initiatives and Support Services -- a unit of the VCHA.

Renwick sent a one-day regular menu, a "typical service pattern on offer to our patients," that included a nutritional analysis. She noted that all menus are approved and signed off by a clinical nutritionist. As for local food procurement, Renwick told me Sodexo's primary food supplier is the B.C. branch U.S.-based [Gordon Food Services](#), and that Sodexo purchases 29 per cent of its products from B.C. -- an increase, she claimed, from 24 per cent the year before.

That still didn't tell me much. At St. Joseph's hospital I had spoken to Leslie Carson, at the time an employee of the hospital and responsible for all the food purchased. Just recently, Carson was let go by the hospital. The hospital would not discuss why, and attempts by The Tyee to contact Carson weren't successful. But when I talked to her while she was on the job, she was happy to tell me exactly what food was bought for patients, and from where.

Those conversations with Carson contrasted with what I was learning about food purchasing for Vancouver Coastal Health facilities, which was several layers removed from the individual hospitals -- let alone the patient.

## *Degrees of separation*

Renwick's agency, the Lower Mainland Business Initiatives and Support Services (BISS), is one of those layers of removal.

Formed in 2003, the BISS took purchase decision-making away from individual hospital administrators; even, to a degree, away from regional health authorities themselves. BISS now does the purchasing for all the hospitals and facilities within four lower mainland health authorities: VCHA, Fraser Health, Providence Health Care, and the Provincial Health Services. (Nearly invisible to the public, BISS neither has an Internet presence of its own nor appears on the web sites of any of the health authorities whose purchasing it controls.)

According to a Fraser Health media [fact sheet](#), however, BISS "pioneered" large scale contracting-out of certain non-clinical services, including the food that accounted for nearly half (43 per cent) of its \$194 million spending in 2011/2012.

But that's not where the layers end. A year after it was created, the Lower Mainland BISS contracted out patient food services and house cleaning operations, both to Sodexo: a deal that health authorities said at the time would save taxpayer dollars and improve patient services.

The 10-year, \$330-million agreement gave Sodexo its largest Canadian client. That year, revenues in the Paris-based multinational's healthcare and senior care division grew by four per cent, according to one market [report](#).

The [patient services agreement](#) between Sodexo and VCHA, signed in 2004, is what you might expect from a corporate contract. At one hundred and forty pages, it's a dense tome that covers every aspect of how food will be supplied, right down to the Special K that must be stocked on wards, the options available for vegetarian or kosher patients, and the slice of birthday cake that a resident at a long-term care home should get.

It also covers details concerning the relationship between the two parties -- and the united face they are to present to the public. Among other things, it stipulates that VCHA and Sodexo would coordinate their messaging around patient food services and agree on "standardized and uniform responses to questions from the media..."

The agreement also outlines how the parties will monitor patient satisfaction and food service commitments. Sodexo is responsible for conducting audits and surveys that measure both, and VCHA is entitled to collect this information.

### *"A focus on... local."*

I went back to D'Angelo and requested the food safety audits, patient satisfaction surveys, and meal service audits for UBC Hospital -- a highly regarded VCHA facility. It had drawn my attention for several reasons. First, because UBC Hospital was similar to St. Joseph's in size and, like St. Joseph's, it has a both acute and long-term care patients.

Beside that, UBC Hospital was already linked to local food. In Aug. 2011, Sodexo had [announced](#) several initiatives at UBC Hospital, including a composting program, the introduction of reusable china and cutlery, and "a heightened focus on buying local, organic and sustainable foods."

D'Angelo did follow up, providing a copy of a UBC menu from Nov. 2011; a blank copy of the patient satisfaction survey questionnaire administered in VCHA facilities twice a year; results from the two most recent surveys done at UBC Hospital in 2011; and sample meal evaluation audits from Jan. 2011.

These painted a positive picture of the food there.

The menu itself appeared not unlike the "meat and potato" fare

offered at St. Joseph's: dinner on Dec. 3, 2011, was southern chicken, broccoli, potato wedges, wheat bread with margarine, and spice cake.

According to the two surveys conducted in 2011, patients rated meals 82 percent or higher for taste and flavour, temperature, and portion size. The lowest score was 78 per cent, for appearance.

Sample meal evaluation audits done in Jan. 2011, both scored the maximum points for temperature, presentation, texture, taste and aroma.

The glowing audits had been done by Sodexo's own kitchen staff however. Meanwhile, a 2008 independent survey of patient experiences in acute care across all VCH facilities [reported](#) a dismal 52 per cent for "overall quality of food" -- the second lowest of any area rated. (It was put into the column: "opportunities for improvement.")

Several emails requesting an interview with the director of food services at UBC Hospital and a tour of its kitchen, received no reply. And I was still drawing a blank on one of the things I was most interested in: What's *in* patient meals in Vancouver? And where do those ingredients come from?

Unfortunately, I wasn't going to get any more help from Vancouver Coastal Health.

"We believe we have been reasonable in responding to your extensive requests on this topic. We have provided you a lot of information and staff have spent a lot of time with you, going over the information," wrote D'Angelo in an email. "We don't have the resources to pursue more information for you."

Her boss, Gavin Wilson, gave me the same line.

I tried going directly to the source: Claudia Prusak, BISS's senior director of contract and operational services. Only to be sent

back to GO: "I am required to follow Vancouver Coastal Health's Communications policy, which is to refer all media requests to Public Affairs, which is Gavin or Anna Marie [D'Angelo]," Prusak told me.

## *Secret recipes, very secret*

I tried other sources who might have insight, including Margi Blaney, communications officer for the Hospital Employees' Union. Could she find someone in food services at UBC to tell me -- even off the record -- what's in the food and where it comes from?

The following week she emailed back with regrets. "This is the first time I have had no luck in finding someone who will talk," she wrote, but promised to keep trying.

She wrote again a week later. "I must admit, I have never experienced a more challenging situation than what I thought was a pretty simple ask of our members for participation/information. To date, I have had no response from members in food services at our UBC Hospital local. I'm not sure why."

Although she never did find someone willing to talk, Blaney did manage to obtain a recipe for meatloaf (see sidebar), one item that apparently is made from scratch at the UBC hospital kitchen.

I sought out a nutritionist at [Langara College's](#) nutrition and food services management program, which sends interns to VCHA facilities, including UBC Hospital.

"I can't help you much," she wrote back. "FS [food service] operations do not share their recipes. As health care is privatized in the province, getting awarded these contracts is very competitive. Providing recipes opens the door to determining food costs and therefore profits. You will not be provided this information by Sodexho [sic]."

## **How Sodexo Makes Meatloaf**

*Corporate giant hospital food provider Sodexo keeps most of its recipes under wraps, denying reporter Colleen Kimmitt lists of ingredients, how they were sourced, and methods of preparation. But via the Hospital Employees Union, a cook did provide this recipe.*

### **Sodexo Meatloaf**

*100 servings*

1.667 kg chopped onion  
883 g celery, diced  
146 ml vegetable oil  
2.083 kg bread crumbs  
500 ml parsley flakes  
250 ml low sodium beef base  
417 ml liquid egg  
10.417 kg ground beef

Indeed, Sodexo's vice president of communications, Katherine Power, confirmed it: ingredients are proprietary information, closely held secrets they will not disclose. Nor does Sodexo reveal its suppliers for specific clients.

Power did say that 21.6 per cent -- not 29 per cent, as Renwick had stated -- of the products purchased for all of Sodexo's B.C. clients are sourced from B.C. suppliers (also, that VCHA is one of its largest clients). The list includes Island Farms Dairy, Monte Cristo Bakery, Delicatessen Omnitsky Kosher and Van Houtte Coffee, among others.

Power's figure of 21.6 per cent would mean a small decline in the percentage of food locally sourced compared to the 24 per cent figure for the year before cited to me by Renwick of VCHA.

## *'Sticky, deep and dirty' contracts*

In the end, I had failed to answer what I thought were simple questions: what's in the meals being served patients at a single Vancouver hospital, and where did those ingredients come from?

I felt somewhat vindicated, however, when I spoke to Joshna Maharaj. A trained chef, Maharaj was hired in June 2011 to revamp the menu at Scarborough Hospital in Ontario to include more local and sustainable food. The funding that paid her salary -- from a provincial investment fund -- required that she establish a baseline of local purchasing so she could measure improvements.

To do that, Maharaj spent two days in the Scarborough Hospital's kitchen freezer, bundled in her winter coat in July.

The number of items she found marked "product of Ontario" was "shockingly low," recalls Maharaj: fewer than half a dozen. What was even more surprising was how few products had any label of origin at all. Only 70 to 80, she estimates, of the 400 or so product SKUs she

looked at, indicated where they were made.

"What stands out is the fact that there's zero accountability," says Maharaj, whose contract at Scarborough hospital ended in March 2012. "There's no traceability, and it's really important for people to realize this."

"Here's the thing," she said. "There's a reason why hospital food feels like it's sort of a last frontier in the good food movement. And I think it is in part due to the fact that it is the place where some of the stickiest, deepest, dirtiest corporate contracts exist."

## *'Off invoice' rebates*

To be clear, Sodexo is not the food services provider at Scarborough General Hospital. Nor am I aware of any breaches in its activities here in British Columbia.

However, in 2011, Sodexo paid \$20 million to settle an accusation of fraud levied against it by the state of New York. The charges were laid after Jay and John Carciro, brothers and former Sodexo managers turned whistle-blowers, claimed that the company had pressured its suppliers for huge "off-invoice" rebates that were never shared with its clients.

The New York State Attorney General's office investigated, and found that Sodexo had in fact failed to disclose supplier rebates it received, and to pass the savings on to state facilities, including a treatment centre for at-risk youth and a service organization for developmentally disabled children, as its contract required.

"My brother, Jay, and I were angry when we learned that Sodexo, a multi-billion dollar company, was ripping off school lunch programs and other government food services," [said](#) John Carciro when the settlement was revealed in 2011. "We went through some tough times because we chose to speak out against what Sodexo was doing. We

are grateful to the New York Attorney General's Office for vigorously investigating this matter and recouping money for the taxpayers. We hope other states will do the same."

I asked Chris Roberts, director of corporate citizenship for Sodexo about this case. He was not familiar with it, but stated: "We do not take kickbacks."

Roberts did say that Sodexo has "vendor discount agreements;" discounts on based on large-volume orders. "But there is nothing in our contracts to say that clients are entitled to that," says Roberts, who added these large orders are distributed to many different clients, or "units." Even if individual units received a discount based on their share of the order, the amount would be so marginal, it wouldn't be worth tracking, says Roberts.

## *Verification waived*

Over its nearly decade-long contract, Vancouver Coastal Health has actually reduced the reporting it requires from Sodexo. A Freedom of Information request showed that VCHA does not collect food purchase records from Sodexo, an item of information the original contract required. According to VCHA director of public affairs Gavin Wilson, VCHA does not have access to Sodexo purchasing information because it's not part of its current contract requirement.

Neither are there any records available for patient tray audits. According to Wilson: "While this documentation is indeed a requirement in our agreement with Sodexo, it is one that we ourselves have waived."

Wilson wrote in an email, "We did that because the audit scores were very stable for all sites, so it was perceived to be of little added value as an ongoing indicator. While it was considered useful at the start-up of the service to ensure accuracy, it was soon discontinued."

Nor did the same request turn up any record of meetings of the UBC Hospital's "patient food user committee." VCHA's 2004 contract with Sodexo stipulated that each of its facilities would set up such a body to provide ongoing patient input and feedback.

According to the Department of Information Access for VCHA, UBC Hospital never created the envisioned committee to seek patients' views about the food they were served.

In my last phone conversation with Wilson, I expressed my frustration with VCHA's unforthcoming communications, comparing the health authority to a "fortress" from a disclosure point of view: difficult, if not impossible, to penetrate.

Wilson emailed me the next day, noting that the health authority had provided a staff member (Linda Renwick) for an interview. He used the word "extensive" to describe what documentation VCHA had provided me.

"We take our accountability to the public very seriously and have a good reputation with local media for being responsive and forthright," Wilson wrote.

I would just have to take that and chew on it -- rather like a meal of re-thermed, anonymous hospital food from... who knows where.

# Furtive Steps to Better Hospital Dining

BY COLLEEN KIMMETT, 19 OCT 2012

*With contracts that favour supplier monopolies, finding ways to get local food on the plate can be awkward. But there's hope.*



Hospital tray heaped with local greens at Northern Health Hospital in Masset, B.C. Photo courtesy of J. Bays.

Local fish, pulled from the cold water off the north coast, is a staple on the menu at the eight-bed hospital in [Masset](#), a town of roughly 1,000 located on the largest island of Haida Gwaii.

Patient meals also regularly feature local potatoes and onions from nearby farmers; part of a farm-to-cafeteria initiative that got its start in the Masset public school two years ago under the leadership of Shelly Crack, a community nutritionist with the [Northern Health Authority](#).

The program, though well received by hospital patients and the farmers involved, has been "on again, off again," says Crack. Part of the reason, she says, is fear from some hospital staff that "maybe they're breaking the rules."

One might think that hospitals cooking fresh local food would be eager to spread the news.

But Crack acknowledges she's taking a bit of a risk even talking about it -- at least, she jokes, she's going on maternity leave soon. Even though her bosses know what's going on, she and other staff are keenly aware that they operate in a kind of legal grey zone, bound by food service contracts that have rules against purchasing food from off-contract suppliers -- including local farmers.

Other sources, on and off the record, told The Tyee the same thing: there are good food projects happening in small pockets across the province, but thanks to contract terms that favour supplier monopolies, to scale up those efforts or to speak out about them is to risk being shut down.

## *Food supplier myth-busting*

Last spring, the [Public Health Association of B.C.](#) (PHABC) hosted a "farm to cafeteria" conference, focused in part on this very issue: how do we get more fresh, more local, more wholesome food on the plates in our hospitals?

It was an opportunity for the PHABC (an arms-length organization that receives government funding to promote public health) to gauge the level of interest in the topic. As it turns out, there's a lot.

"We found out there are movers and shakers all around the province," conference organizer Joanne Bays told The Tyee. "Most are doing really great things."

An organization called [Farmers on 57th](#) runs a therapeutic garden for residents at the George Pearson Centre, a long-term care facility in Vancouver for people with disabilities. The fruits and vegetables grown there are used in smoothies for patients.

Jen Rashleigh, the program's founder, says that she was hesitant to speak publicly about what's happening at George Pearson. "We've been flying under the radar for the first four years," says Rashleigh. "We're trying to make slow and gentle inroads."

She says that making homemade smoothies for patients is politically sensitive because of the perceived risk of choking. But the nutritional benefits of fresh juice and yogurt-thickened smoothies made from fruits and vegetables that the patients help harvest themselves are tremendous.



Farmers on 57th in Vancouver runs a therapeutic garden for residents at the George Pearson Centre, a long-term care facility in Vancouver for people with disabilities. Photo courtesy of S. Wenman.

"It's all raw, which people don't get in this particular institution," Rashleigh says.

But hospital administrators who'd like to follow suit and source more local food face a double-edged sword. To do so on their own is to risk breaking tightly worded contract agreements that bind them to buying from specific suppliers or food service providers. The scope those same suppliers and food service providers have to try something new is also limited, by the risk of liability.

"Paramount to us is food safety," says Chris Roberts, director of corporate citizenship for [Sodexo](#), the company that provides patient food services for [Vancouver Coastal Health](#), B.C.'s largest health authority. "That's why we don't allow food service directors to go out and make deals with suppliers."

While Sodexo's internal regulations require that all its "vendors" -- the companies it buys from -- be federally inspected, no provincial or federal regulations prevent uninspected produce from entering a hospital, according to Greg Thibault, manager of public health protection for the Northern Health authority (which is served by Sodexo competitor [Aramark](#), based in Pennsylvania).

"What about going directly to a farmer, picking up a head of lettuce, washing and chopping it up and serving it?" he asks rhetorically. "The myth is that's not allowed. But there's no regulation on things like whole produce, fruits and vegetables."

"The way the system has been set up over the last 20 years, 30 years, it's been driving the entire system to larger and larger industry to supply at a lower and lower price," said Thibault. The trouble with that starts when something goes wrong: it happens on a very large scale, says Thibault, citing the Maple Leaf Meats listeriosis [recall](#) in 2009 as one example.

"So how do you go about reversing that trend?" he asks. "Good luck."

## *Not 'all or nothing'*

An organization called [My Sustainable Canada](#) is trying. It's been working in Ontario on various projects and is now in the process of signing a contract with the Provincial Health Services Authority to do work at a Vancouver health care facility.

The situation here is slightly different than in Ontario, explains Hayley LaPalme, the organization's sustainable food systems

coordinator. In Ontario, many hospitals are part of group purchasing organizations -- sort of like a bulk buying club -- but retain relative autonomy over food service. In B.C. it's the health authorities, not hospitals, that make decisions about food and other service contracts.

What's important about many of these, says LaPalme, is that hospitals often aren't in fact locked into "all or nothing" situations. A hospital could, for example, choose to purchase its dairy from a group purchasing organization, but not its produce.

Contracts and trade issues are major barriers to scaling up efforts to source local food, according to LaPalme, who says that facilities are cautious about staying in the margins of what they can independently source, typically about 10 per cent.

"In addition to that, they are worried about whether they are legally able to give preference to local," wrote LaPalme in an email. "That said, health care facilities are often going beyond due diligence to ensure that they are not violating the terms of their contracts or of trade agreements, and we are not encouraging them to. Instead, our strategy has been to work with the contractor to help them build their lists of approved vendors..."

Finnish Home, a 75-bed long term care facility in South Vancouver is one of the few health facilities in the Lower Mainland that's not part of Vancouver Coastal Health and its system-wide services agreement with Sodexo.

"We decided the contractor was not the way to go," says Annika Treffner, Finnish Home's director of food services.

She says part of the reason was her clientele's specific ethnic preferences. Finnish Home caters to a population that is 40 to 60 per cent Finnish; the rest is mostly German. "We're very client-oriented," says Treffner. "We're obligated to do meat and potatoes."

Treffner says two cooks -- a morning cook who comes in early and does breakfast, and a regular cook who does lunch, dinner and baked goods -- do all the food preparation in-house.

She says she doesn't feel too much pressure to meet the bottom line. She tracks food costs per month, and estimates the raw costs (of food only) are six dollars per day, per resident.

Most of the cooking is done from scratch. When Treffner does have to reduce costs, she tries to do more from scratch or buy slightly cheaper ingredients without altering the menu too much; chicken thighs instead of breasts, for example.

"Administration knows that for residents, food is so important," says Treffner. "I have a lot of latitude."

She's taken it upon herself to try to include more local food. She has volunteers pick blueberries and raspberries when they're in season, and freeze their harvest. The hospital has its own small herb garden, apple and fig trees; Treffner does the necessary climbing and picking herself.

"It's become a recent passion of mine to try and include that sort of thing," she says. "Working with tax dollars, you have to be mindful about how to use that money. But staff and residents are very enthusiastic about local food... many residents were farmers."

According to Treffner, [Island Farms](#) supplies their dairy. Coffee and juice come from Sunglo, and [Sysco](#) supplies big grocery items like flour and baking supplies. Centennial supplies meat, and Canada Bread does their bread. Most of their produce comes from Yen Brothers, which are good, she says, because they accommodate very small orders, which means they can have more variety of fresher ingredients.

ST. JOSEPH'S HOSPITAL MEAL RECIPES	
MEAL	INGREDIENTS
HOMEMADE GREEK STYLE DRESSING	OLIVE OIL, WHITE VINEGAR, CRACKED GARLIC, SALT & PEPPER, DRESSING BAG, WHITE SUGAR, LUNCH JARS
MARINATED TOMATO & CUCUMBER SALAD	CUCUMBER, TOMATO, HOMEMADE DRESSING, PARSLEY, STEAK DRESSING
MASHED POTATOES	PEELED POTATOES, DRESSING BAG, HOT WATER, SALT, POWDERED SKIM MILK, STEAK DRESSING
SAVOURY MEAT LOAF	LEAN BEEF, FROZEN BEEF STEAK, SALT & PEPPER, CRACKED GARLIC, LIQUID EGG, DRESSING, SPICE BLEND, KETCHUP, BROWN SUGAR, WING DRUMS, FILET OF FISH

Recipes for “home”-made meals in St. Joseph’s Hospital, Ontario. St. Joseph’s was featured in the first story in this series, as an example of a hospital attempting to provide more locally-sourced food for patients. Graphic created by April Alayon for Tye Solutions Society.

"Finnish Health is highly regarded," says Treffner, "and food is a part of that."

She says she's excited about the potential for more local food in hospitals. "I think this is the beginnings of something that's really going to take off."

## Room to grow

Paris-based multinational Sodexo is keenly aware of the trend towards local and sustainable food purchasing. Three years ago, when he served as Sodexo's district operations manager for Brock University, Chris Roberts worked with campus food suppliers to try and figure out where *their* produce was coming from.

The goal was to get Sodexo's suppliers to identify farms in invoices and ordering sheets. "At that time, no one was really asking those questions of suppliers," says Roberts.

It's taken some time to get these companies on board. While

[Freshstart Foods](#) (a produce supplier in Ontario that advertises "stop cutting produce and start cutting costs"), has done a "fantastic job" with their ordering system, and according to Roberts, "it's been slower with the bigger guys, GFS ([Gordon Food Services](#)) and Sysco."

Roberts says that over the past two years he has seen more requests for proposals that specifically ask for local and sustainable foods. This has mostly come from universities and colleges driven by student demands. Corporate locations and hospitals, "not so much," Roberts says, although they too are starting to change.

"We can source the local, organic, sustainable product," says Roberts. "But if a client doesn't want to purchase it, we can't force them."

Roberts says that while people like to "point the finger" at big contractors, Sodexo is leveraging the hundreds of million of dollars it spends on seafood to support sustainable fisheries. He notes that his company worked with the World Wildlife Federation to develop a sustainable seafood [purchasing policy](#), and in 2011, removed all red-listed seafood species from its menus. "We leveraged our global buying power and it will actually have an impact on fisheries," says Roberts.

Recently, Sodexo also created a set of community garden guidelines for sites where it operates. These serve more to raise awareness among staff and provide the occasional meal, says Roberts, than as a regular food source. "Not enough to supply our units," he says.

Amy Frye, acting director of the [Centre for Sustainable Food Systems](#) at UBC Farm told Tyee Solutions that UBC hospital's food service director had seemed interested in establishing an ongoing relationship with the farm. But "we never heard back about meeting to discuss," wrote Frye in an email.

"It's something we'd be open to," she added. "Though realistically we already have many established partnerships to honour and would have to determine if the hospital could work with the quantities and

seasonality of produce we could offer.

"If so, that could be exciting."

Fresh local food in B.C. hospitals may still be a movement in the bud. But it's one with plenty of enthusiasm and room to grow -- so long as no one pays it too much attention.