

The Food Bank of Waterloo Region

Strategic Planning 2022

Social Development Centre Waterloo Region - community focus groups

“If you lift the hood and look under there, [these programs] as they currently exist are really out of line with the reality of people’s needs.”

Participants

5 Groups

African Women’s Alliance
Chandler Mowat Community
Small Steps Program - YWCA Cambridge
African Community Wellness Initiative
Young City Growers

6th group, a community-based food program did not succeed in submitting their notes in time. If they submit at a later date, the notes will be shared.

Participants

26 participants

- All participants are living in low income households;
- Majority of Participants 22 were female;
- Most of 16 Black African and Caribbean women over 40 years of age have varying degrees of disabilities;
- Four Black African youth ages 15-19, all in school;
- Majority of participants are first generation immigrants;
- Four women participants are Caucasian 25-45 years of age, OW/ODSP recipients.

Ongoing Marginalization & Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is a poverty issue and a consequence of persisting social and economic inequities and the lack of protections of human rights, as a legacy of colonialism, racism, and exploitation.

Using pooled Canada Community Health Survey data from 2005 to 2014, our study goes beyond reporting the prevalence of food insecurity among Black households by analyzing how race relates to factors that lead to food insecurity. It also provides the first estimate of the proportion of children living in food-insecure households by race — more than one-third (36.6 per cent) of Black children lived in food-insecure households compared to 12.4 percent of white children.

... disparities are enhanced by other challenges like inadequate access to grocery stores, community gardens, and community kitchens in neighbourhoods with higher Black populations (See maps in Appendix B), ability to secure culturally appropriate food, and excessive policing in grocery stores in low income neighbourhoods, with greater concentrations of Black residents. High food insecurity rates have also been linked to a variety of outcomes, including an increased likelihood of developing chronic diseases (e.g. diabetes, asthma, and cardiovascular disease), depression, and an increased incidence of contracting COVID-19. ([Broadbent, 2020](#))

Pandemic has highlighted the ongoing disproportionate impact of poverty on racialized and underserved communities. Visits to food banks increased up 20 percent across Canada during the pandemic ([Global News, Oct 21, 2021](#)).

The development of a Black Food Sovereignty Plan will provide a framework to advance these considerations, using a community and public health informed approach to address the issue of chronic Black food insecurity by dismantling systemic socioeconomic barriers, while increasing access, opportunity and Black community ownership over their local food systems. The implementation of this Plan will not only benefit Black residents, but will embed and accelerate an anti-racism and equity-centred approach to benefit all Torontonians and food work at the City. ([Toronto Black Food-Sovereignty Plan 2021](#))

Access to enough nutritious and culturally appropriate food is a public health issue, connected to physical, psycho-emotional, cultural and spiritual wellbeing. It is a way to increase inclusivity in communities, important for countering inequities, racism and further marginalization of groups and populations (low-income and precarious workers, persons with disabilities, social assistance recipients, immigrants and refugees, youth and seniors, LGBTQ+...)

The only interventions that have been shown to move the needle on food insecurity are those that increase low-income households' financial resources. Policies supported by evidence include higher minimum wage, increased welfare rates, lower income tax for the lowest income households and child benefits. There is also research to support a guaranteed annual income or basic income for tackling food insecurity. ([Tim Lee, PROOF, University of Toronto](#))

Toronto's Food Sovereignty Plan lists common challenges in urban centres across Canada and paints a landscape that many marginalized communities find themselves in:

1. Uneven Access to Sustainable Funding and Resources to food access where community-led organizations are chronically underfunded
2. Limited Access to Green space limiting relationships to the land, parks, community gardens, tree canopy, protection of crisis such as the epidemic or climate change.
3. Barriers to Access Infrastructure with a low distribution of food assets, community kitchens, certified or incubator kitchens, food processing, preparation and communal consumption of meals.
4. Food Apartheids and Disconnected Black Food Networks where retail and grocery stores carry poor quality produce, fresh food markets are inaccessible, people are displaced from central areas or communities where people can find culturally appropriate foods, stores or restaurants. Businesses are displaced and dispersed too so that the food supply chains become inaccessible.

Next Steps

Questions as a summary of the exploration and conversations during the engagement and consultation process

Considering the context described in current studies, the questions that were raised locally come as no surprise:

- self-determination – **what would help communities and individual households achieve food stability?**
- improvement of services & better organizing of the food bank system itself - **how would the system self-organize through bottom-up processes and ongoing hands-on contribution from the communities served?**

This report to the Food Bank of Waterloo Region can also be framed as an offer of further collaboration and dialogue with the participating groups to:

- secure consistent access to food and resources in underserved communities towards self-determination and food sovereignty
- amplify advocacy at the municipal and/or provincial level.

Community Connectors who would like to be a part of the ongoing conversation:

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Sara Hohenadel, Small Steps to Success, YWCA Cambridge
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FOCUS GROUPS - Cumulative notes

A sense-making session with the community connectors who facilitated the conversations did not happen due to scheduling conflicts, but the feedback on the draft report is planned for the first half of April 2022. The feedback and the interpretation of the cumulative notes may bring additional insight and will be shared with the Food Bank team.

1. Where do you go to get the food you need?

A number of participants did not use food banks (about 30%). Others combine purchases at general stores with food bank programs.

General stores: Freshco/No Frills, Walmart, Giant Tiger, Superstore, Food Basics, Giant Tiger, Dollar Store, corner stores

Ethno-cultural stores: specialty stores such as Halal stores, Arab stores, A to Z, African and Caribbean stores and suppliers, East and South Asian

Food Programs: Salvation Army, Cambridge Food Banks: CSHFB Mobile Food Market, Chandler Mowat Community Centre

Farmers market: too few participants reported it, one mentioned St. Jacob's

Growing food: two participant

Local business/delivery: one participant

Points raised, in order of frequency.

Rebates and discounts

Shopping at multiple stores based on sales is becoming more difficult with rising gas prices. Rebate apps on the phone can allow you to view all store flyers and base the shopping trips around it. Stores that allow price matching are preferred. The research and seeking bargains takes time and energy.

Pandemic years scarcity

Some participants note they have not used Food Assistance programs in the last two years because "there is not much given anymore". It was reported that there is less consistency in items given, less choice and packaged expired and stale

items. One participant noted she visits the food bank at the beginning of the month and bases her budget around it for what else is needed, however with the lesser amount given out, more in store purchases are required monthly than before.

Culture and Identity

Discussions around the importance of food in diverse cultures were reported. If people would take dietary customs more seriously they would be able to understand why food is so important for the sense of identity. Some foods are difficult to find in regular times, even more difficult during the pandemic, and it requires planning purchases and preserving them when they are not available.

Impact on the sense of belonging, being included and overall health of diverse communities was raised.

“Life would be frustrating; the thought of living without my cultural food would be miserable”.

“Food ties everyone together. Anyone living in Canada should feel at home. Not really fair. There's no stability around it and it is fair to the racialized communities. Gap lies in accessibility in food diversity and how that plays out. A lot of families do not feel supported. Get foods that they don't like, don't know or don't know how to cook. Don't know what it is and how to use it. When you look at the food bank and other resources, it is mainly made for White people. Don't think about health impacts on others. Immigrants' bodies are adapted to different diets and having to readjust drastically can be harmful.”

“Why not a bigger food selection... Why just one aisle? Whenever I try to find something with my mom, it is really rare to find what she's looking for. It can be hard to get food that my mom can cook”.

Points collection

Also collecting points is a great incentive to go to certain stores. Some of the financial tools associated with particular stores, such as points cards or credit cards, would require education and guidance to residents who may have an increased risk of accumulating debt.

The following topics emerged in the answers to the first question, particularly in two of the groups.

Food Security is ...

“Being able to buy, having money, an income, having a place to buy it, a place to go get it, having nutritional knowledge, [knowledge of] consumer culture...”

Besides the culturally specific foods, there are many intolerances and allergies that make food choices and food security a challenge. It is both about the access and price. And it is increasingly more about ‘health conscious’ foods access. Increasing food growing and available community garden plots would address a number of issues. Increase in wages and social assistance is needed. Many communities pointed out that households living on low income always have to compromise quality relative to quantity.

“Cost of living and cost of food per day is playing a big part in how my community is living. They are looking for affordability but this comes at a cost.”

“When I’m spending my own money, it is rare that I’m buying healthy food because of how healthy food is priced”.

Food sovereignty is...

“We need to develop the culture of growing food. Sometimes we are choosing to buy it instead of growing it. The land is not given a chance to be renewed... Overgrazing of animals due to big fast food companies. Erosion... ”

Decision-makers are not talking about food security and the people feel they have little control over the conversation, recognizing that advocacy can be stressful and emotionally draining. Still, small steps and local projects can make food production more accessible compared to what is offered today in North American stores. Farmers donating to food banks should receive government subsidies.

Grants and garden plots available to communities will make a difference, keeping in mind that ethno-cultural foods are being devalued as the seeds are not being preserved. Also, an economic boost to cultural food stores is needed, so they can

expand their reach, have more locations and increase the supply. East Asian communities have gone a long way in this regard and there are other communities with similar food preferences that benefit too. Toronto can offer models we can apply in the region.

Food sovereignty would have to be added to the curriculum in schools to counter corporate takeover, agricultural land acquisition, privatization, capitalism, global control, consumer wars... Ethnocultural communities deserve to be heard and give their input to decision-makers.

2. When does getting food feel good? bad?

Feeling Good

“Opening a present, and its food...”

“When you put all the food in the fridge and it is now stocked, because you know that now you have options”.

Youth group participants

Having Enough Money Feels Good

Most participants feel good when they go to the grocery store and **have enough money to buy what they need** and like. Buying larger quantities or groceries on sale feels good as they can secure meals for some foreseeable future. Rising food prices are causing ongoing stress.

As for the use of the food bank programs, it is recognized that supplementing monthly purchases can greatly **fill the gap in the household monthly budget**.

Access and Choice in the System

Positive experiences with food bank programs relate to instances when there are **choices offered** to them and when people’s needs are being responded to. Some would say that complaining gives results. **Physical access** is important too, so the mobile service is recognized as being able to reach more places where people otherwise receive assistance (churches, mosques, community organizations).

Kindness and assistance offered by staff and volunteers makes all the difference as people are already feeling devalued and anxious about having to use the food bank or wait in lines in front of the buildings and feel exposed.

Packaging and delivery offered as if it were a gift not a hand down from a faith based organization providing food in the community, delivered to a doorstep, and asking for immediate feedback on the contents of the hamper.

Not Feeling Good

“After the fridge is empty, it is not a good feeling.”

“GMOs, recalls, non-fair trade, local foods [you do not know], food is very complex. It is not fun”.

Youth group participants

Uncomfortable feelings arise when they have to live with a **sense of ‘emergency’ or crisis** not knowing where to get the food. Uncomfort is also there as they go to the food bank and cannot find what they need, when they cannot cook and prepare what they planned for or enjoy eating.

It is also unpleasant when the **wait times** are long to get assistance at the foodbank.

Staff and volunteers **not offering assistance or welcoming atmosphere.**

Discrimination still happens when and how people who do not speak the language or adhere to non-mainstream cultural norms.

It was brought forward that produce feels like a luxury/treat sometimes and that it does not feel good when produce goes bad quickly. Ensuring families have proper ways to **store produce, or utensils and other ingredients to prepare meals** is required.

However, during COVID, the people were given prepackaged food, the **choice was eliminated** and this way, many found it lamentable that food goes to waste when it doesn’t fulfill their dietary needs.

Expiry dates still cause discomfort and a sense of lesser value.

Set of quotes that illustrate what feels good or bad getting food

"I used to go to the House of Friendship and Sunnydale Community Center and I feel bad if I go there and they run out or I don't find what I am looking for. And it feels good when I get what I need."

"When I need food, I go to the grocery store and it feels good when I have money or have enough money, and it feels bad when I do not have enough money and I do not have enough food. In that case it feels like an emergency where I need to get food."

"When I need food I go to the grocery store, and it feels good when I already have the recipe in mind and I feel bad when I realize how much the prices of the groceries have gone up."

"Shopping at the dollar store is hard as nothing is a dollar anymore."

"Visiting grocery stores on days they restock feels good, can buy bigger quantities. Sales feel good."

"I would say for the positive experiences, in my case when I go to access the food bank on behalf of community members, the people who run the food bank take the time to ask the people about what they want, which is a good thing, if they do not have that, they provide an alternative. I think that is a very good one, they try to understand people's needs."

"It makes their monthly budget last longer to meet their needs because they are able to supplement it with food from the food bank."

"The more we complained the more things started to change, now it is much better. We started down with the staff and had meetings, the key takeaway is that if you don't speak up and ask questions then things stay the same."

"If I go there and I find that the staff are smiling then I am happy to visit them. In my experience I would say you are already anxious about going to the food bank to ask for food, but when you get there, you find that the people are smiling and happy to serve you, this gives me confidence and I feel less anxious. I feel bad when I go to the food bank and the people look like they do not want to be there, they are not friendly, that would be discouraging."

"They brought the food, they delivered it to my doorstep, they were very welcoming, they were like if you need more or if you want some other things, you can reach out to us. The food was brought like a gift, it felt like I was getting a gift instead of food assistance."

"I think we need to have more locations, especially the new immigrants who do not have transportation, the location is very hard to reach. If we have more locations, if it is in a school, or a community center so it is accessible to the people."

"The bad experience I would say is the location."

"There is a lady, a newcomer. They ask me to take them to the food bank on street. That was my worst experience. I know English and I translated to them and told them to wait in line until the door opens. When the door opened, a [person at the foodbank] started insulting them and using expletives. She said they are taking too much bread. She said who are you [defending them], why don't you go back to your country?... Since then I have never gone back, it has been about 7-8 years since I went there."

"It made it difficult for other people in the community to be served, especially people from other cultures... Still, I was shocked by the behavior of some people: it is like we are all here for the same reasons, some people might decide to say something and then get into trouble and would be told not to come back. This can be embarrassing and also not the outcome that is wanted. If there is something you don't like it is important to speak up..."

"I think the only bad experience I would say, is not a bad one per say: like people have to stay in the line or in the queue and other people see them. They feel ashamed, I wouldn't say shame but feel shy being there for a while."

"Sometimes the cultural stores have expired foods, my mom has sold expired products. And when we took it back, the response was it won't kill you and he refused to refund my mom her money."

"Feels good when I'm getting the food, when you look in the fridge and you have enough. It doesn't feel good when I'm broke and I can barely get the groceries, in addition with other costs, you almost want to starve yourself or want to go to Dollarama. When food is too expensive or when the quality of food is not good. "

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4. If you were the boss and in charge of food assistance programming and you could make one change to the services available, what would you change?

The suggestions are presented relative to the frequency.

Expiration dates oversight

Many references to a change recommended that the food banks spend more time looking over donated items to ensure safe expiration dates.

Choice of items

It was suggested that more autonomy around item choosing would be appreciated. For example, if a shelf said “take 2” and the only choice was cans of tuna, vegetarians/vegans were not offered a substitute in place of this selection.

Increasing supply of healthy and nutritional food.

Ongoing feedback collection

“I would have met regularly, every 2 weeks or every week to listen to the people and see what they need, because many reported food being wasted.”

“My house is very close to where the food is dumped. Because of fear of covid-19 nobody touches the food that has been dumped. Previously people used to come and take bags of food that had been dumped. Now nobody touches the food and it creates a lot of waste”.

“It leads to enabling the community center to meet the needs of the people. For example, if you have specific members of the community needing only halal food, if you listen to those ladies and the center would ensure they have this type of food (halal) to give out.”

“I remember there was a community center where one of the persons in charge of distributing the food was writing down exactly what members of the community wanted”.

Mitigating waste of foods

Besides asking for allowing people to choose products in hampers, there are other reasons why people would not use the food: expired products, uneven distribution, withered vegetables, etc.

“And then it is also important to beware of the expiry date on these foods, if it has expired then do not give it to the people, because if they go home and only to find out the food has expired, they put it in the garbage bin.”

“If you are standing in-line and they ask if you want halal food, then you can take meat or chicken if it is halal, if it is not halal, you do not touch it. That way this food can be given to other people who want it at the same time.”

“If the vegetable is not in good condition or showing signs of rot do not give it to the people or it will end up in garbage”.

“If the food is not required in one community it can be transferred to another community.”

“We have to come together as a community to ask what they need. We tend to give only canned foods whether they are needed or not. Sometimes, canned foods are not what people need because that is what is available but they do not use and end up throwing away. Sometimes, the baked goods such as bread are given on/ after expiry dates and they end up in the garbage because people do not want to end up sick.”

Special diets

Also to accommodate more for special diets, gluten free, vegan/vegetarian.

“Turkeys seem to be plentiful for holidays, but vegan/vegetarian items do not seem to be offered.”

Etho-cultural foods

Bridging gaps. Open a center or introduce a sector for food diversity- African, Caribbean, Arab etc. to ensure that diversity is represented. Halal food availability was mentioned most often.

Gift Cards

Gift cards were mentioned as a way to ensure people have a choice of products they need and to increase the purchasing power for households that allows for greater quality of food.

“I would listen to the people and every week I write down what they want. If the people are Indian, Chinese, Muslim, etc. I go to the food bank to collect the food, if they have it. If the foodbank does not have it, I give everybody a gift card instead”.

“I need everyone to be happy each time they come for food. Everyone would leave with something, either with a gift card or actual food. I would feel good when people give thanks from their hearts”.

“Gift-cards to buy milk, eggs etc. to increase the nutritional value of the diets of the recipients”.

Recipes for available ingredients

Having programming/staff/volunteers with knowledge around recipes and ideas on what to make with Food Bank items would be useful.

“If I was in charge of running the community center, I would teach newcomers how to cook new food. You have to realise that people in Canada are from different countries, the community centers should not only have staff from only one country, but also have staff from other countries members of the community are from, so they share how to cook their food”.

Even Distribution

Planning according to the number of participants registered. It was observed that people who do get more food usually cannot use it and it can be wasted.

“I have experience working for community food distribution and this is one of my observations: the first person that shows up he/she gets one portion and the last person that shows up gets many more portions. This I had to put a stop to by counting the number of people present. For example, if there are 50 people we then distribute the food evenly amongst the 50”.

Leniency in assessing eligibility

The processes remain intrusive. Food Banks still have stigma associated with them, and asking too many questions adds to it.

“If I were the boss, when it comes to checking documents and paperwork, I feel they should be a bit more lenient. I feel they are being a lot more intrusive with their current practices, because people would not access the food bank if they do not need it.”

Data collection

In order to assess impact, collection of data can be improved to record not only the number of families/individuals, but other data through feedback about how long the food lasted, use of products distributed, if there was waste, etc.

“[On the food bank side] we will achieve our aim; we are able to count the numbers we just distributed. The food bank can say yes, we did provide food for this number of families for a month, 15 days or 20 days and that should be the aim of the organization, like food banks and community, not just counting the numbers of families that food has been given out to.”

Representation

Staff and volunteers to represent the communities they serve.

“People that are hired are diverse.. that would help in understanding various issues”.

Utensils and containers

Access to cooking utensils or food storage containers would be helpful at the Food Banks to assist in batch cooking and storing.

Extended Hours

Extended Food Bank hours 1-2 days a week. For folks who rely on public transportation and support children at home, a 4:30 pm closing time is unattainable and is frustrating to be turned away.

Growing Food

It was suggested to Start a farm, allow for and educate young people and the underserved communities how to grow food. This would address many needs in communities: education, sustainability, children being kept busy, safe spaces, physical activity, etc.

Advocacy

Advocate for food quality and affordability. Making sure that there is food awareness, including nutrition education.

How would this change your life for the better? What need would this meet?

The answers to this prompt were similar across the groups.

“The fact that the people are happy, smiling and saying thank you goes a long way. Because when you sign up for this job (of food distribution) you are not asking for anything in return. If you see the people smiling and saying thank you, you know that they are happy with what they are getting.

“Everybody should be happy after they have collected their food. I would be happy if the people that have taken their food are happy”.

“I would feel happy when I know that food is not wasted and that would tell me I am doing a good job”.

“I feel happy when the people are happy because they are able to get what they want. The people are happy to come, happy to call and it would also reduce food waste”.

“My change would be impactful in a way that the people feel a sense of dignity, they do not have to go through a lot of headache to get food. On the part of the organization, it just speaks well for them...For me as a community member and also working for the community, it gives the people the knowledge and experience that the food bank is easily available and can be accessed freely without any judgement. I would feel good about that if the change is made.”

“For me I would feel good about it because I would be very satisfied as the head of the organization, that I am providing quality food, not just food: what you like and what you can eat.”

5. What would make you more comfortable and have more confidence in getting the food you need?

Adequate income

“If I go to the store there are several items I need, I want to have the ability to be able to get all the items I need not to get one item and having to leave the other. You are on a budget and cannot go beyond that budget. So, there are things that are on my list but which I have to wait until next week to get.”

“When I have less money, I go to the store to buy what I really need so I make a list of whatever I need and decide which is more important, because whenever there is a sale, it makes me confused. So, it is better to go shopping with a list so I can grab the most important things first before buying other items that are on sale. If you focus on the items on sale only you end up spending more money than you budgeted for.”

“What makes me more comfortable or confident is having money so that I can buy whatever I want, when I don’t have money, I have to write a budget and make a list so that I can pick the one that is more important.”

“More disposable income, not just more money, because more income usually comes with more taxes, etc. More disposable income to be able to afford better foods and better standards of living.”

“Making more money. If you want to eat healthy, it will cost. The reality is that income is a big contribution when it come to what food you are able to affordable. We need to make more money so that when we go to the grocery stores the issue about cost but quality.”

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Ensuring Dignity

“Maybe getting a free \$50 gift card”

“You want the people to feel more comfortable, the questions they are asking are a little bit too much. The paperwork, knowing their income level, knowing this and that, there should be a limit. I am not saying do not ask for paperwork, but there should be a limit. And they should ask for this information in a dignified way.”

General Education

“Better knowledge and education around import and exporting food, this may be more cost friendly. Ability to import food for myself. Avoiding strict government food regulation. Not being a blind. Support people that want.”

Lower Food Prices

“Making it more affordable. Food is really expensive. Healthy food is more expensive so affordable foods will raise health consciousness. Food affordability will have to come from somewhere, not sure where that starts from. Would have to be a solid plan.”

An additional question was asked in two groups.

Why did you agree to participate in this roundtable?

Most participants noted receiving a grocery gift card was an incentive to participate in this conversation (but not the sole reason).

Participants mentioned that they participated because they were asked by a trusted person and like to support and to help others with the systemic change.

One participant noted that groceries are increasingly pricier as well as other life costs, and that she wanted to “take in” the information.

Another participant said that food is “tricky” for her with a special diet and wanted to hear more about the availability of products to serve diverse diets.

One woman was explicit that this has been on her mind but she never had the opportunity to have an open dialogue with anyone about it. Her main source of food is the CSHFB and she is grateful for it but there is still a lot of scarcity with it. She wanted to listen to the conversation and to see if there are ways to help increase the access to food.

Summary of the Debrief

held with the community connectors held on April 14, 2022

The questions that were raised locally come as no surprise:

- self-determination/self-help – **what would help communities and individual households achieve food stability?**
- improvement of services & better organizing of the food bank system itself - **how would the system self-organize through bottom-up processes and ongoing hands-on contribution from the communities served beyond and above only collecting their feedback?**

Suggestions made:

- stigma associated with income and food insecurity is pervasive: it indicates the failure of current socio-economic systems to secure equitable distribution of resources across the population, and it remains one of the major socio-psychological barriers for food insecure households to receive assistance rooted in racism, classism, ageism, ableism, etc. The more we participate in **advocacy to improve income security and social justice**, the more we build equity into food security systems.
- big systems usually design and implement change top down after receiving feedback from the users/participants; the process can be greatly improved if the **cycle of feedback, design and action are treated as mutually reinforcing among all the stakeholders.**
- access to food and activities remains a challenge as the needs are everywhere and the services cannot reach everywhere; if we support local communities to have more control over **food security that is rooted in local cultural and nutritional practices and values**, the ripple effects would be multiple, from vibrancy of social connections to economic empowerment.

- **budgeting investments and supporting the process of allocating green/park space within densely populated and underserved neighbourhoods** to start community gardens and food security programs, will also grow better organized and self-sufficient communities.

The Seed Guelph - Do it Together Food Movement - We are building a new kind of food system in Guelph-Wellington, fueled by community and filled with dignity.

Multiple programs: growing, good food box, community kitchens, farms and markets, work experience employment programs, emergency food home delivery, and advocacy.

Fresh Future Farm - We are on a mission to restore one historically-excluded community at a time - multiple social, economic and environmental impacts.



Report completed and submitted on April 19, 2022

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