



Food Literacy Pilot

Final Report, October 2017

A joint initiative between Lifecycles Project Society and the Victoria Cool Aid Society's Downtown Community Centre

Acknowledgment of the Territories

This work was done on unceded Coast Salish and Straits Salish First Nations territory including the traditional territories of the Esquimalt, Songhees, Malahat, Pacheedaht, Scia'new, T'Souke, WSANEC, (Pauquachin, Tsartlip, Tsawout, and Tseycum) and Nuuchah-Nulth First Nations (Pacheedaht). We know that settler societies have, and continue to, benefit through the processes of displacement and colonization that are ongoing realities for Indigenous people and their communities across Turtle Island. We would like to acknowledge that this work is implicated in colonial systems of being and knowing.

Thank-you for hosting many of us as uninvited guests.

Contents

Summary	4
What We Did.....	5
Findings	7
<i>Food Service Operation Details and Accessibility</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Quality and Choice</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Equity and Inclusive Food Environments</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Information Sharing and Educational Programs</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Food Access</i>	<i>9</i>
Pilot Project Reflections	11
Strengths	11
Challenges	12
Next Steps	14

Summary

During the summer of 2017, Victoria Cool Aid's Downtown Community Centre (DCC) and LifeCycles Project Society collaborated on a Food Literacy Pilot Project.

The pilot's primary goal was to *explore how community food service agencies can better support those living in food insecure environments in advising, influencing and leading food literacy and food access programming in the Capital Region*. We aimed to:

- Understand how we might ladder participant engagement to support marginalized communities in having increasingly more meaningful and involved participation in community food programming;
- Develop a project (pilot) based on community collaborations rooted in existing community programs;
- Connect community members to existing food-based programming and local food access points and create opportunities to connect with community knowledge sharing;
- Foster community leadership that meets leaders where they are at;
- Nurture community connections through food.

This project was guided by eight Food Literacy Ambassadors who co-facilitated the program alongside coordinators Zinnia and Shereen. The Food Literacy Ambassadors were community members who were recruited for their lived experience with the emergency food system and their expertise and awareness of community food security.

Our team facilitated community dialogues and reflected upon food literacy and food access programs in the Capital Region. Conversation and reflection tended to focus around the following key issue areas: food service operations and accessibility, quality and choice, equity and inclusive food environments, information sharing and educational programs, and food access. Our findings in these areas are described below.

In delivering this pilot project, we also learned important lessons about coordinating projects of this nature. These lessons will be important to consider in developing future food engagement initiatives with diverse community members. Our lessons learned in coordinating this pilot are also described below, as successes and challenges.

Both the DCC and LifeCycles are excited to continue to deepen our efforts in supporting this project's goals. Some preliminary next steps and future goals are listed at the end of this document.

What We Did

During August of 2017, the project convened diverse communities and organizations to share experiences with and perspectives on food access and food literacy. The Pilot involved 55 people in total, including:

- 8 Food Literacy Ambassadors,
- 30 dialogue participants,
- 11 outing participants, and
- 6 staff.

Our program was structured to engage folks directly in our local food systems through:

Food Literacy Ambassador Orientations

Leading up to the dialogues and out trips, Ambassador orientation and planning sessions were organized, with participants choosing how much and in what way they wished to be involved.



Community Food Dialogues

Two dialogues were hosted: one at Yates Street Community Garden and the second at Mustard Seed Street Church. The Ambassadors, along with Shereen and Zinnia, designed and lead discussions and gathered input about local food security and food literacy.

On August 19th, the group co-facilitated a community dialogue at the Yates Street Community Garden with folks who were there for a garden planned community

gathering. A fulsome conversation took place over an hour with 13 people. The dialogue was then used to create the interview questions asked at Mustard Seed.

On August 25th, the group co-facilitated more in-depth one-on-one interviews with folks who were there over lunch. Each interviewee's time was acknowledged with a \$10.00 grocery card. Despite the fact that the room was abuzz with conversation ambassadors conducted ten to fifteen minute interviews with fourteen folks to learn about their experiences and knowledge of the emergency food system.



Community Food Out Trips

Two trips, visiting the Welland Community Orchard and Springridge Commons, provided experiential opportunities for community members involved in the dialogues to connect with their local food systems and continue informal dialogue and discussion about local food security and food literacy issues.



Findings

Experiences and knowledges expressed throughout the program are described below. Our project coordinators compiled these reflections with support from the Food Ambassadors.

Food Service Operation Details and Accessibility Recommendations

Location

- Need for centralized distribution centers and neighbourhood food hubs
- In the interim, support with bus fare to get from location to location

Hours of Operation

- Afternoon and evening times are needed to serve greatest number of food insecure people

Distribution Procedures

- Interviewees generally advocated for no restrictions in how much food each person accesses
- ID requirements were largely perceived to be a barrier

- One individual, however, shared that ID's were helpful for families, as long as the information was kept confidential

Quality and Choice

Recommendations

Quality and Freshness of Food

- Quality was dependent on which food resources folks accessed. Some places were known to have more fresh vegetables and fruits whereas others were described as sites with a shortage of food
- Emphasis on vigilance around expiry dates

Availability

- Availability of certain foods such as, dairy, meat, and alternatives, are severely lacking from current food re-distribution programs
- Recommended that communities organize food drives asking for these specific foods

Choice and Preferred Food

- Important for foods to match in hamper - e.g., cereal with milk or pasta with sauce - as well as for food to reflect individual's cooking facilities (kitchen can be limited in subsidized housing)
- Desire for culturally appropriate foods such as seafood, food without pork, halal, etc.
- More options for folks with diet specifications (e.g., gluten-free, vegetarian, etc.)
- Foster dignified shopping experiences for folks and transparency in meals provided (e.g., ingredient list)

Equity and Inclusive Food Environments

Recommendations

Equity

- More equity needed in distribution, especially with single individuals
- Challenge favoritism of families and discrimination of single individuals occurring in emergency food services

Accessibility

- Accessible gardens and food pantries in social housing
- Making the Good Food Box more available for people without a permanent place of residence

- Continue to expand the Nutrition Coupon Program so more people can shop at local farmers' markets
- Availability of neighbourhood stands where garden abundance can be shared (similar to the "little free library" model)

Non-denominational Spaces

- Comments on the predominance of churches being involved in food distribution. Some felt that this is something that the government should be more involved in
- One interviewee commented that they would like to see supermarket chains like Thrifty's give out food directly instead of having to rely solely on the redistribution processes

Information Sharing and Educational Programs

Recommendations

Availability of Information

- Most were aware of the 'Food in Greater Victoria' list put out by the Coalition to End Homelessness
- Folks recommended that the list be available at all food banks, meal programs, shelters, media newspapers, and bulletin boards at community centres
- Better promote and share information about other community food initiatives such as community kitchens, urban fruit picking, farm gleanings, etc.

Community Food Learning Opportunities and Future Dreams

- More gardening programs for folks with mental health and living on a low income
- Need for the City of Victoria to hire a "Food Navigator" who would support connecting people to food programs
- Create a map that identifies garden commons such as public food forests, orchards, berry foraging spots, and gardens
- Develop a shuttle program that regularly transports community members to these food access sites, and supports in harvesting education
- Increase access to community kitchen educational programs

Food Access

Recommendations

- Continue to develop more local food hubs that are low barrier and include a diversity of foods to select from;
- Design and implement educational programming that regularly transports community members to local food access points (fruit trees, orchards, food forests, berry foraging, and gardens)

- Provide regular and equitable access to nourishing foods that are fresh, high-quality, and culturally appropriate. For example, protein rich foods and fresh produce
- Offer more food choices and educational programs for single individuals
- Increase opportunities for community leaders to play active roles in developing or revamping food initiatives - e.g., food literacy ambassador model

Pilot Project Reflections

Strengths

Rooted in Community Collaborations and Programs

This pilot's main partnership was between Cool Aid's Downtown Community Centre (DCC) and LifeCycles Project Society. The Food Literacy Pilot was designed to help inform both of these organizations' existing community programs, particularly DCC's community kitchen and LifeCycles' Fruit Tree Project. The participants and Food Ambassadors had previous relationships to the DCC, which was integral to the development of the project.

The Food Literacy Pilot brought together community food initiatives and other community organizations with a shared interests in learning diverse perspectives and experiences around food access in Victoria. Two groups in particular played an important role - Yates Street Community Garden Association and the Mustard Seed Street Church. Both organizations are involved in food security endeavors in different ways and were open to hosting our events to learn from community members who live in food insecure environments and have firsthand experience with the emergency food system.

Community Knowledge Sharing and Local Food Access Points

Another benefit of this pilot was the practice of sharing food knowledge and developing stronger connections to local food places. The Food Literacy Ambassadors co-led two out trips to local food places which are open to the public throughout the year for harvesting food.

On our first trip to Welland Community Orchard thirteen people jumped on a bus from the Downtown Community Centre and travelled to an abundant orchard ripe with Shipova and blackberries. JJ, LifeCycles' Orchard Coordinator, led us in a tour and apple pressing. Participants and Food Ambassadors were keen to participate in fruit pressing and we pressed different varieties of local backyard apples to make 4 liters of juice. Participants loved the juice and had a number of inquiries about the orchard (e.g., how to visit using public transit, how to care for fruit trees, when different fruit would be ripe to harvest). The out trip helped to spread awareness of public food places that are available for community members to engage in and will hopefully foster continued engagement with Lifecycles' programs.

On our second out trip to Spring Ridge Commons thirteen folks met at the Fernwood neighbourhood's food forest and participated in an indigenous plant walk with cultural knowledge keeper, J.B. Williams from Tsawout Nation. He shared his vast knowledge of the land and food/medicinal plants, such as Indian Plum, Oceanspray, Thimbleberry, and Camas. The group asked a number of questions about the healing properties of the plants - for digestion, colds, pain, etc. We feasted on local plums and found ripening

grapes. Those who had never visited the space before expressed how special the food forest was. It is our hope that folks feel welcome to visit this site again in the future.

Community Leadership that meets folks where they are at

Meaningful engagement with diverse communities was an overarching goal for this project which was explored through the Food Literacy Ambassador model. The ambassadors were consulted and involved in planning the dialogues, out trips, and group agreements. Each person also led different parts of the pilot - facilitating dialogues, brainstorming questions, food preparation, stewarding place, etc. - based on their self-identified strengths. The 'superpowers' or community skills that Food Ambassadors shared with the project enriched our growing community and helped introduce some resiliency into the fabric of our program.

The Food Literacy Program sought to meet folks where they were at and to be flexible and responsive to the needs of the Food Ambassadors. Some of the participating ambassadors lead complex lives with other pressing responsibilities and experiences. As well, specific ambassadors shared how they live with numerous insecurities (food, housing, health, etc.) which made it difficult to predict how much time they could commit to the project. Therefore, the structure of community engagement was in constant flux, dependent on availability of ambassadors, coordinator capacity, and ongoing communication-feedback.

Nurture Community Connections through Food

Lastly, this pilot played a role in growing more social relationships between community members who participated in the various events. During the program there were numerous chances to gather together as a group which strengthened community connections. There were multiple opportunities for participants to roll up their sleeves and fully engage in food harvesting and processing. During the debrief, some ambassadors shared how "I feel like I have a community now", or "I had fun being with everyone". While there were challenges that arose in ensuring everyone felt respected, appreciated, and safe, we learned a lot alongside one another. Future steps in community engagement will require ongoing chances for ambassadors to meet and continue to deepen relationships as we work together to support local food initiatives.

Challenges

Community Agreements

When we came together as a group for the planning BBQ, community agreements were decided upon by everyone. Points like "being brave", "be considerate - wait for folks to go as a group", "provide orientation and introductions", and "being welcome and friendly", were different norms identified by people. The agreements were not regularly revisited and edited/added upon throughout the course of the program. An important learning from this pilot was how crucial is to treat the community agreement as a living document that is reviewed every time we meet. This would provide the opportunity for

the group to reflect on whether they wish to add any points or emphasize particular agreements.

A few suggested agreements that came up during our ambassador debrief at the end of the project were: 1) having a buddy system during outings to help people feel comfortable, 2) have a facilitator who is tasked with dealing with challenges and preventing volunteers from being placed in a difficult situation, and 3) having a practice of check-in and check-out during outings where everyone goes and returns as a group.

Transportation and Accessibility

In traveling from the Downtown Community Centre to different sites, we had various transportation challenges such as not being able to find quick and direct route to our location. Initially, we had planned to walk to most of the sites, but received feedback that the blistering heat, chronic pain, etc. were real barriers. Ideally, for community outings we'd have a chartered bus to transport participants or we'd have trained travel ambassadors to help us navigate public transit with participants with various support needs.

Honoraria and Budget

To acknowledge and appreciate the dedicated time and engagement of the eight Food Literacy Ambassadors, grocery gift cards were distributed to the group. Since, however, we had a budget on how many grocery cards could be purchased, we were unable to provide honoraria to all the ambassadors at every session. We therefore asked for people to register (with limited spots) with the aim for everyone getting equal chance. We quickly learned that this particular format was confusing and restricted engagement. As the program unfolded, some people were unable to attend, leaving space for others, but it would definitely be ideal if there was the budget for *all* ambassadors to participate as much as they wish.

Next Steps

One Food Ambassador emphasized how it was her hope that the information gathered would be used and not filed away. We all resonated with that and strongly hope that this pilot will serve as a call to action and help bring about change in the food system.

In the short term, LifeCycles and the DCC commit to:

- Create interesting and accessible written documents that highlight learnings. These documents will be passed out to the ambassadors, community food initiatives, non-profit organizations, and other interested community members.
- Coordinators to facilitate a workshop during upcoming community food gatherings such as The Good Food Summit (November, 2017) with the aim of inviting community food service providers into a future dialogue with emergency food recipients.
- Provide ongoing opportunities to include Food Ambassadors within existing programming. This is a way to maintain engagement between funding gaps.
- Continue to grow this Food Literacy Project by developing and fundraising for a second year project to dig deeper into how community members can be players and decision-makers in local food systems.

Key goals for this second year project include:

- Continue to provide opportunities for Food Ambassadors to gather and discuss food literacy and food security issues in the region.
- Support growth of Food Ambassador network.
- Provide opportunities and support for increased engagement in food systems work from members of Food Ambassador network.
- Continue to learn from Food Ambassadors and disseminate learnings to community food service agencies.

For more information about this project contact:

Shereen Kukha-Bryson, LifeCycles Program Manager
shereen@lifecyclesproject.ca
250-383-5800

Zinnia Clark, Downtown Community Centre Assistant
zclark@coolaid.org
250-383-0076