

Guidance for Community Food Programs



Community food programs, like food banks and community meals, provide a critical service for some of our most vulnerable community members. Recent efforts to limit and slow the spread of COVID-19 have had a significant impact on how these programs are able to operate. This resource has been developed in collaboration with the [Bruce Grey Poverty Task Force](#) to support community food programs in adapting to the recommendations shared by the federal and provincial government and public health professionals. This document will be updated and shared through the [Grey Bruce Health Unit](#) website as new information becomes available.

On March 28th, the Government of Ontario announced that it was taking decisive action by making an order declaring an emergency under the *Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act*. Under this decree, gatherings of more than 5 people are prohibited and many public establishments were required to close immediately, including churches and other faith settings from which community food programs frequently operate.

Grocery stores and food banks are recognized as essential services and were exempted from these closures. On April 25th, the Government of Ontario reopened community gardens, allowing them to operate under the guidance of their local health unit. Though these services remain operational, the Grey Bruce Health Unit is asking individuals in these settings to adapt their operations to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19.

There are important steps we can all take to protect the safety of the staff, volunteers, and clients of these settings.

Please review the following recommendations:

Physical Distancing

- Limit access to your organization or garden to avoid over-crowding. To calculate the maximum number of people allowed in your building:
 - Divide the maximum occupancy in half for how many people are allowed in at one time

- Include staff and volunteers along with clients in the total number
- Remove unnecessary clutter for more floor space
- Decrease the number allowed if still difficult to maintain two meter separation in the building
- Limit gatherings in community gardens to five 5 people.
- Post the calculated occupancy limit at the building/garden entrance and within the garden/building or specific rooms.
- Post signage that only garden members/owners are able to access the garden.
- [Screen staff, volunteers, vendors, and clients](#) before they enter. You can also use the [Attention Visitors Poster](#) to encourage self-screening.
- Ask sick staff, volunteers, and clients to stay home. Staff, volunteers, or clients who become sick during the day should be separated from others, supported to access health care services, and sent home immediately.
- Offer alternative service delivery models in order to minimize person-to-person contact and to allow individuals to keep a distance of 2 metres from others. This may involve:
 - Temporarily switching to a pre-bagged or boxed distribution model.
 - Minimize gatherings of gardeners by scheduling gardening times and/or extending program hours.
 - Minimize gatherings of clients by scheduling client pick-ups and/or extending program hours.
- Remove or tape off picnic tables and other structures meant for communal seating and gathering.

Promoting Hand Hygiene

- Create accessible hand hygiene stations for staff, volunteers, or clients (eg. Handwashing station at entrances).
- Encourage staff, volunteers, and clients to wash their hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
 - Remember gloves are not a substitute for proper hand hygiene.
- Provide an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available.

- All gardeners should wash their hands before entering the gardens and as they leave the gardens.
- Encourage staff, volunteers, and clients to avoid touching their eyes, nose and mouth.
- Encourage staff, volunteers, and clients to cough and sneeze into their sleeve or a tissue. Dispose of tissue immediately and wash their hands.
- If staff or volunteers wear personal protective equipment (PPE) (eg. masks, gloves), ensure they are trained in the proper use of PPE.

Creating a Clean and Safe Environment

- Provide a screen or other barrier between individuals where physical distancing is not possible (eg. Pick up station)
- Maintain a [clean environment](#)
 - Frequently used equipment or surfaces (eg. Door handles, tables, taps, watering cans) should be cleaned and wiped down with an approved disinfecting solution often.
 - Equipment and tools should be cleaned and disinfected at least twice a day (at opening and closing).
- Allow adequate time to clean and sanitize as needed.
- Use a take-away model for food provision. Clients may wait outside for a volunteer to bring their prepared meal/food provisions outside.
- If the garden has gate access consider leaving the gate open during hours of operation so individuals do not have to handle or touch the gate to enter.
- Discourage sharing of personal gardening equipment. Do not provide shared tools, instead ask that volunteers or plot owners bring their own tools, or if this is not possible assign tools to each person.
- If clients are not feeling well or have no transportation, consider offering a delivery service.
 - [Delivering Items to a Senior or Immunocompromised person](#)

- [Delivering items to someone in self-isolation who is potentially or confirmed infected with COVID-19](#)
- If gardeners are at higher risk of COVID-19, consider providing potting supplies and seeds for at-home growing.
- Consider restricted points of entry and exit that force people to be in close proximity and/or pass through high-touch areas (e.g. gates, turnstiles, fingerprint entry, doors and elevators).

Offering Safe and Nutritious Foods

- Ensure safe and [proper food handling](#).
- Consider offering a greater quantity of food provision to reduce the frequency of contacts needed per month and meet needs of individuals self-isolating.
- Use the [Sample Menu Guide](#) and [supporting recipes](#) as tools to plan for this.
- Reassure clients of the strength of the food supply chain in Canada. While being prepared is a positive step, practicing normal grocery buying habits helps make sure that everyone gets the supplies they need.

Communication

- Inform clients of guidelines and operational changes prior to allowing access to the building/garden.
- Post signage reminding clients of the rules no sharing of food or personal items and physical distancing requirements.
- Be clear that not following the rules will result in access to the program being revoked.
- Have gardeners sign an agreement to follow new rules.

Volunteers who are older adults

Older adults are vulnerable to COVID-19 and have been encouraged to self-isolate. Self-isolating means that these individuals should only leave their home or see other people for essential reasons.

Many of the individuals impacted by this may be volunteers of community food programs. Programs should ask volunteers to abide by this recommendation; however,

these volunteers may still wish to contribute to program efforts. Consider asking these volunteers to participate in tasks from home, including scheduling pick-ups, calling vulnerable community members to ensure that they are safe and have the resources they need, and sharing fundraising information through their networks.

Giving and Receiving Donations

- Review the health unit's [Community Gardens Guidelines](#) for information on giving and receiving donations from a community garden.
- Encourage donation of funds rather than food products to limit contact between donors and food bank personnel and to better meet the needs of clients.
- Evidence of transmission of COVID through contact with food products is limited, however efforts should be made to reduce transmission risk when receiving these donations including:
 - Washing hands before and after receiving donations
 - Make hand sanitizer available for donor use before donations are transferred
 - Ask donors who are sick to stay at home
- Register your organization with [FoodRescue.ca](#) to ensure your organization receives notice of all available food donations in our area.
- Encourage producers and retailers to register with [FoodRescue.ca](#) as donors to facilitate efficient communication with local charities and support traceable donations.

Adapting Your Services

Remember that all community food programs are different, so your solutions may look the same or different from an agency down the road. You can contact public health to help you decide what will work to meet the need in your community while keeping everyone as healthy as possible.

Additional Resources:

- To find out about the community resources operating in your area call 211 or visit 211.ca.
- [Information for Food Premises](#)
- [Community-based measures to mitigate the spread of coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) in Canada](#)
- [Risk-informed decision-making for mass gatherings during COVID-19 global outbreak](#)
- Toronto Public Health's [Infection Prevention and Control Guide for Homelessness Service Settings](#)
- [How to Handle Surplus Food Safely](#)

- [FAQs about FoodRescue.ca](#)
- Grey Bruce Health Unit - [Community Gardens Guidelines](#)
- Windsor Essex Health Unit – [Public Health Memo re. Community Gardens](#)

We continue to encourage people to connect with trusted sources for information, including canada.ca/coronavirus, publichealthgreybruce.on.ca and ontario.ca/coronavirus.