

LEGACY IN

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ACTION



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Dining menus in Edmonton
adapt to climate change



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12

**12
BRAIN FOOD**

The Campus Food Bank helps students with an immediate need, and provides information for the future

**14
FOR THE TREES**

Sustainable Food Edmonton takes on the McCauley orchard and community garden to help grow food for the community

**16
CLIMATE CHANGE**

Farm-to-table restaurants bring local food to you ... how will we adapt with our changing climate?



16

**5
START HERE**

Begin a fund with Edmonton Community Foundation and make an impact today... and into the future

**7
FROM THE CEO**

Edmonton Community Foundation's CEO Tina Thomas reflects on how, through government support, great things can happen for arts organizations in our city

**8
IN HIS WORDS**

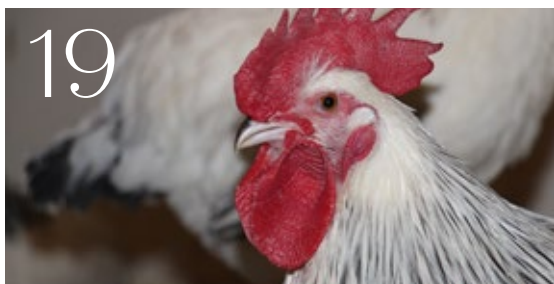
Foraging for solace with Sheldon Hughes

**9
HAMPER HELPER**

Edmonton's Food Bank is focused on what food (and other resources) go to support those who face challenges with food security.

**10
IN THE BOX**

Yellowhead Tribal Council is thinking INSIDE the box with a hydroponics project that is helping feed urban Indigenous peoples



19

**19
IT'S THE CHICKEN AND THE EGG**

University of Alberta boasts a program that keeps heritage chickens thriving (and eggs in your fridge)

**22
IT'S VITAL**

A by-the-numbers look at food security in our city with Vital Signs

**29
JOE KNOWS**

Thanks to donors like Joe Kirman, food security can be within reach for post-secondary students

**30
TO COMMUNITY, WITH LOVE**

WECAN Food Basket Society works with community partners to assist those who experience 'Empty-Fridge Syndrome'





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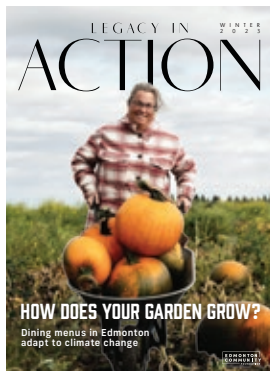
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Cover photo by Eric Beliveau

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON PEDERSEN

TINA THOMAS
CEO, Edmonton Community Foundation

MESSAGE FROM THE CEO

Music Festival, Fringe Theatre Adventures, Theatre Network, Northern Light Theatre, Metro Cinema and Edmonton Opera, to name a few.

You can donate to any of the applicable endowment funds held at ECF and it will be included in our application for matching dollars through the CCIF. The deadline to donate is November 20th and you can find more details at DoubleTheSupport.ca.

While the CCIF is a fantastic example of how government programs can help the charitable sector, there have been recent policy decisions that are challenging for charities. I joined a contingent of leaders from across Canada to participate in Non-Profit Hill Day where we met with Members of Parliament to discuss opportunities and challenges facing the charitable sector.

This includes the proposed changes to the Alternative Minimum Tax to reduce the amount donors can claim after donating securities like stocks, shares or bonds. These types of gifts accounted for 25 per cent of ECF's donations in 2023. This proposed change could erode the financial incentive for individuals to give and will impact ECF's ability to support the vital work being done in the charitable sector.

Even more challenging is the potential requirement for Foundations to file trust returns for each of our funds. This would mean an additional 2,800 returns annually for ECF and Calgary Foundation alone, resulting in an estimated \$1 million in accounting fees.

ECF shows fiscal prudence and has a record of keeping our operating costs, including investment management expenses, between 1 and 1.5 per cent. Our donors trust that their gifts are being used to support the charities and causes that are important to them — not on unnecessary accounting fees. I was encouraged by the conversations we had with elected officials and senior staff and will be following the issue closely to keep our community informed. ■

As autumn winds down and the winter months approach, I'm proud to reflect on the work that Edmonton Community Foundation (ECF) is doing with our wonderful community partners.

This includes our 10th annual Vital Signs Report, which will be released on November 9th. This year, we revisited our very first Vital Signs topic, food security, which is also the theme of this issue of *Legacy in Action*.

I would like to thank the Edmonton Social Planning Council and our dedicated committee volunteers who have brought their expertise to this project.

This is also our 24th year partnering with Edmonton performing arts organizations to access matching dollars from the Federal Government for their endowments through the Canada Cultural Investment Fund (CCIF). The CCIF helps performing arts organizations build sustainability and autonomy by encouraging them to create and grow their own endowment funds. The Government then matches contributions up to 100 per cent.

Through the CCIF, 21 arts organizations have contributed \$36 million to their endowments including \$15 million in matching dollars. Because of ECF's solid investment results, those funds are worth over \$47 million today. Most importantly, granting from these funds over the past 23 years has amounted to \$14.5 million!

This year's cohort of eligible partner organizations includes Shumka, Citadel Theatre, Edmonton Folk

Heartsong & Turtle Island

By **Sheldon Hughes** Photography **Kevin Tuong**



IMAGE SUPPLIED

IN MY WORLDVIEW, which is based on the Woodland Cree upbringing, Mother Earth takes care of us all. Each of the animals — birds, plants, fishes and insects, as well as people, have a vital place in creation. In Cree, we call this *wahkohtowin* or the law of relationship.

I liken this to quantum theory where the energetic field that comprises all creation truly supports the statement that “we are all one.”

We have reached a time in history where we can see what’s happening across the planet with just a few clicks; we can create a list of all the devastation and destruction, decay and degradation with very little effort. The world we inhabit can become overwhelming, dark and inspire fear.

When I was told I couldn’t be around people a couple of years ago, I leaned into nature. The birds had no mask edicts; the medicines and the mushrooms welcomed my attentions and encouraged me to take them home with me.

In the quiet of the wilderness and riverside paths that fill the Edmonton landscape and surrounding area, I reacquainted myself with my childhood training — gathering berries, herbs and other edibles that were familiar to me: wild peppermint, saskatoons, cranberries, strawberries and raspberries, chokecherries in the late summer, when their bitterness becomes softened by the sun’s rays and they darken to near-black, with pits that can now be chewed.

But as I ventured into the wild during the lockdown, seeking reprieve from the chaos of society’s convolutions, I noticed myself foraging and gathering in ways that hadn’t been taught to

me. It became clear that I was gently being shown by the plants and animals themselves which I should bring home, in exchange for prayers of gratitude and a tobacco offering, as I had been taught.

In opening my heart before each walk, breathing deeply and setting intentions to be open, kind and respectful, I found myself being impacted by new layers of awareness that seemed to come from the land itself.

“It’s as though Mother Earth herself has a crush on me,” I whispered to a friend, forcing her giggle of disbelief. And truly, it was: I was exposed to a whole new world of foraged gifts that I’d never noticed before, even in all my years of being a Cree hunter-gatherer and bushman.

The land itself shared her bounty with me, seemingly directing me to those things that my body, mind or spirit needed.

In my understanding, my Indigenous ancestors welcomed the settlers to these lands and waters because we did not “own” them. French river lots or fee simple title was not part of the Indigenous lexicon or understanding. There was enough here to sustain us all and to allow us to not just survive, but thrive harmoniously.

The treaties that were forged were spoken to us as “nation-to-nation relationships”, but in writing, said just the opposite and we have struggled mightily to find the balance of ways of life since that time.

In my heart of hearts, we are all treaty people — learning to live in harmony, sharing our gifts on this great land, our Turtle Island.

It is my belief that if we can learn to walk with our hearts open to her songs, the way will be made that much easier for us to do so. ■



Thinking OUTSIDE the Hamper

Edmonton's Food Bank has a radical appetite for change

BY LIAM NEWBIGGING

DESPITE AN INITIAL influx of high demand — and having to pivot with plexiglass barriers, masking and social distancing — things were manageable at Edmonton's Food Bank for most of the first year of the pandemic. It was the calm before the storm.

In the early morning of Friday, October 16, 2020, two masked men stole catalytic converters off of three food bank vehicles, rendering them inoperable.

Tamisan Bencz-Knight, manager of strategic relationships & partnerships at Edmonton's Food Bank, recalls the aftermath. When the food bank posted a video of the theft, she says Edmonton Community Foundation (ECF) stepped up.

"Edmonton Community Foundation was really good to us that October," Bencz-Knight recalls.

ECF and Kingsgate Automotive paid for the replacements on the three vehicles. But even more catalytic converters were stolen in December of 2020, prompting the food bank to invest even more funds into repairs as well as security — and then came the cost-of-living crisis.

Edmonton's Food Bank's client numbers have doubled since June 2020. The flagship food hamper program reached heights of 35,000 people a month with children accounting for 40 per cent of that number. This doesn't include the other 300 organizations (including 88 schools) that Edmonton's Food Bank serves.

ECF provided a \$50,000 Rapid Response Grant in July 2022, a \$75,000 BIPOC grant for culturally diverse food security needs in December 2022 and an additional \$50,000 investment in February 2023. In fact, Edmonton's Food Bank has accessed more than \$400,000 in funding through ECF since 2022. However, food insecurity and demand for Food Bank services keep skyrocketing.

For Bencz-Knight, the solution to an ever-growing clientele lies beyond just giving out food.

"Edmonton's Food Bank will never solve, nor have we ever said that we will solve, food insecurity," she



says. "Food insecurity will always be a symptom of poverty."

In the early 2000s, the food bank added a second part to its mission statement: to seek solutions to the causes of hunger, but, at the time, the non-profit didn't "know what that truly meant." That changed when the Beyond Food Program started in 2017, funded in part by ECF.

The program allows food bank staff to sit down with people and ask them what factors outside of food are causing them to come up short. Sometimes, it's mental health issues, and the food bank is able to refer clients to the Canadian Mental Health Association. Sometimes it's addiction or domestic violence. Other times, its occupational skills like specific training, soft skills or language skills.

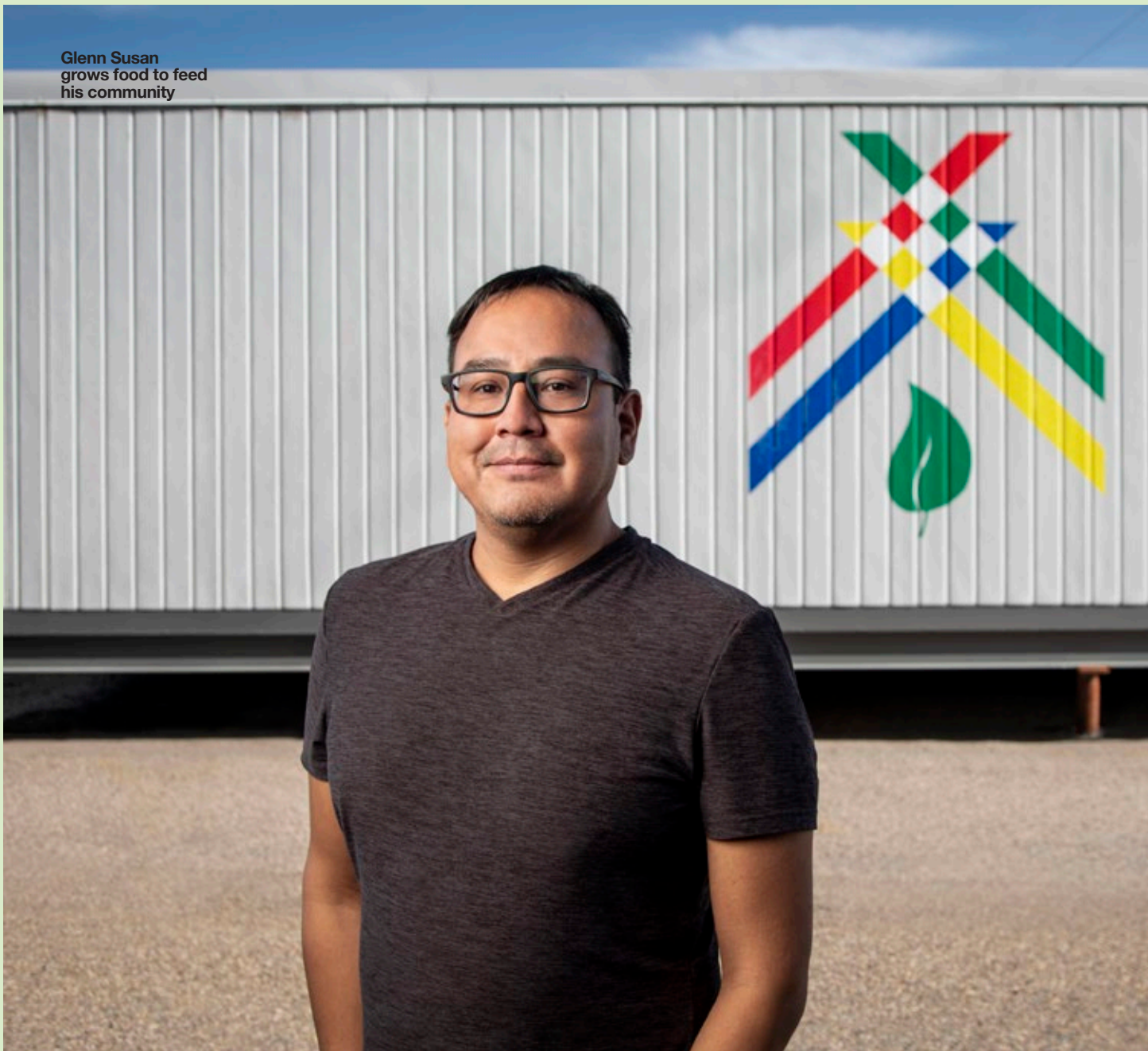
Bencz-Knight recalls one Beyond Food client who was a newcomer to Canada and needed help. He was a frequent food bank user, but Bencz-Knight hasn't heard from him since the non-profit helped him receive the additional English and fork-lift training he needed for employment.

Edmonton's Food Bank opened its new Niso building this year, which houses The Depot — for community members needing to access a food hamper — and a new service called The Pantry, which is still in development but was identified as a possible solution to the rising need and will help clients stock up on certain essentials in-between hampers.

The new space will expand the Edmonton's Food Bank's ability to store and deliver food, free up more space for programs like Beyond Food, and help address some other rising needs seen in the community. But Bencz-Knight is still looking for other creative solutions, some that might be more radical.

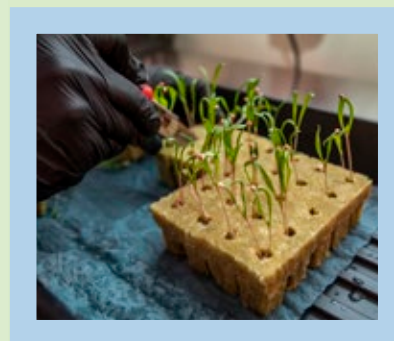
"Right now, I think we have to try some extremes and some real change," she says. "We have to create an appetite for failure, to try something different with the ultimate goal of truly making an impact. Our community has many challenges. We are grateful for the continued help from ECF and Edmontonians as they continue to give." ■

Glenn Susan
grows food to feed
his community



HYDROPONICS ARE NEXT

Yellowhead Tribal Council's container farm feeds
Edmonton's urban Indigenous population by Jesse Cole | photography Laughing Dog



Glenn Susan never thought he'd have a job that married all of his varied interests — from carpentry to culinary arts to technology — so he was pleasantly surprised when he found himself interviewing for a position that did just that.

“This fell into my lap,” Susan says of applying for the position of hydroponic technician with the Yellowhead Tribal Council (YTC) container farm project. “I come from a carpentry and IT background, but growing food — and growing food with

technology — has been a passion of mine.”

The job — a hydroponic technician — was more chemistry than carpentry, Susan says. But a year into the role, he spends his days tending to crops and testing pH levels in the facility's water system.

“It was a big learning curve,” he says. “Understanding the chemistry of the water was the big trick. It's so much more than adding nutrients ... there's a lot of science behind it.”

The food Susan is growing — mostly leafy greens like romaine lettuce or kale — feeds his community. It's part of a pilot project spearheaded by the Yellowhead Indigenous Education Foundation (YIEF) and the YTC. The idea is to address a growing level of food insecurity among Edmonton's Indigenous population and the community at large.

“YTC reached out to YIEF to support them in seeking funds for a container farm. Their nation members living in Edmonton need easier and more affordable access to food, and container farming begins to address this need,” says Cheryl Savoie, executive director of YIEF.

The trends Savoie and her colleagues were seeing are accurate. Indeed, Alberta experiences the highest rate of food insecurity of all Canadian provinces. Indigenous people who live in Alberta,

on average have a lower income than their non-Indigenous counterparts and are, therefore, more susceptible to food insecurity, were particularly impacted by inflation and high cost of living.

“It's an economic constraint. The inflation, the cost of living, the fact the living wage is not reflective in mainstream society, let alone in the Indigenous market,” Savoie says, adding that need was spread across a variety of demographics.

“Single parents, single family units and students just weren't able to get their needs met,” she explains. “They were suffering, so we put together a program.”

So far, that program has been successful. It can produce hundreds of heads of lettuce in just a matter of weeks and can stagger various types of crops so that it continually produces food. Susan says a single batch of crops can produce anywhere from five to eight kilograms of produce all from a single shipping container. To date, Susan has harvested and distributed enough plants to provide 7,280 meals.

Susan believes the model should be expanded — and, to some degree, it is. The Alexis First Nation is in the process of setting up its own container farm. But Susan thinks the method could be a solution on a global level to what he sees as an increasing problem of food supply and demand.

“With everything being so expensive, I just don't think we're ever going to see a point where the cost is low again,” says Susan. “I think this is probably the next step. These things can be stacked up and in terms of efficiency, I think growing food with hydroponics is next.” ■

Fernanda Talarico
and Erin O'Neil at the
Campus Food Bank



Piece of the Puzzle

The Campus Food Bank is expanding its programs to help increase students' food security, giving them energy to focus on their studies

by Caroline Barlott | photography Mat Simpson



Fernanda Talarico loves organizing and sorting food items as a volunteer with the Campus Food Bank at the University of Alberta, where she's a PhD student about to graduate. But it's also rewarding because she's giving back to a program that helped her and her husband when they first arrived as international students from Brazil in 2019.

"We didn't know anything about Canada. I wish we had like a Canada 101 type of thing," says Talarico.

It was a surprise when they needed a deposit for their apartment on top of rent, and they struggled with budgeting for skyrocketing food prices. But the Campus Food Bank provided immediate relief, especially in the form of basics like rice, beans and tomato sauce. The couple also didn't know where to find inexpensive food.



Erin O'Neil, executive director of the Campus Food Bank, says these challenges are incredibly common. Demand for its services has grown significantly — in 2021-2022, the food bank gave twice as many hampers as compared to the previous year.

Four years ago, says O'Neil, tuition increased and the U of A lost millions in provincial grants, resulting in fewer resources. International students — who make up about 70 per cent of the food bank's clientele — especially suffered as they lost supports that would explain things like the cost of groceries or how to rent an apartment or even direct them towards the food bank. These students also struggled to budget appropriately because prices are increasing so incredibly quickly.

“Food insecurity is just one piece of an affordability puzzle. But if we can remove the stress around food for students then at least it lowers their stress overall and they can have that energy to focus on advocating for themselves in other ways,” says O'Neil.

The Campus Food Bank has students do price comparisons with grocery stores and consistently the ones closest to the campus are the most expensive. In response, the food bank started a grocery bus service four years ago that transports students to several more affordable options in the city including grocery stores, a spice centre and a halal butcher. Talarico used the service in the past and said it was incredibly helpful.

“It used to be a fairly lightly used service. But the demand for it went up maybe three times last year because of grocery inflation,” says O'Neil. It's especially popular with students who are not originally from Edmonton — so those like Talarico who rely on public transit and have no one to drive them to far-away stores.

Now, the Campus Food Bank, with help from a \$7,000 grant from Edmonton Community Foundation (ECF), plans to expand that bus service to Campus Saint-Jean, in addition to a breakfast program that expanded to the University's French campus last year. The Cinders Fund, a family fund stewarded by ECF, has supported the breakfast program for the past three years and recently agreed to double its contribution to support programming at Campus Saint-Jean. The ECF Small Grants program also provided \$10,000 to the food bank to pay students professional rates to help with the design of a pantry project. This initiative provides 24/7 access for donations and pickup of fresh food and non-perishable items.

After COVID-19 restrictions, O'Neil noticed a concerning trend — many programs that had been shuttered were struggling to come back. That, she says, is due to several factors including about 2,000 layoffs that happened over the past three years that affected student support staff

grab-and-go type thing, it's developed into a social hangout at Campus Saint-Jean. That also allows students to learn more about the food bank and the other services they provide, says O'Neil; and it's something that had been missing in the last few years.

The Campus Food Bank has been around since 1991 when it was primarily about providing food to graduate students. But in the past decade, the focus has shifted to include food education, workshops, providing students with culturally appropriate foods — including freshly grown herbs — and snack stations.

“We've been able to [help] people who are concerned about their food intake but maybe are OK with getting themselves groceries here or there. Or they don't know how to cook for themselves or meal planning is tough, those sorts of things,” says O'Neil. “We are trying to diversify our program to support as many different people's situations as possible.”

At the time of the interview, Talarico was just one week away from starting a new

“It used to be a fairly lightly used service. But the demand for it went up maybe three times last year because of grocery inflation.” — Erin O'Neil, Executive Director, Campus Food Bank

from course selection to financial aid to mental health support. She started looking at feedback and where help was most needed.

“It was apparent that Campus Saint-Jean was getting minimal food security support after the lockdown break. We decided the breakfast program was the easiest first try for the campus. Then, through that relationship with the staff we heard that the grocery bus had not started back up and they didn't have funds,” says O'Neil.

While the breakfast program is a stop,

job as a biostatistician at a pharmacy. She still loves being part of the Campus Food Bank community where she says it's just an incredibly welcoming space. The food bank leads projects to determine what culturally rich foods to include on their shelves; they provide food and supplies like diapers to families; and even play music that comes from different parts of the world.

“They really care about other cultures and welcoming different people,” says Talarico. “I honestly love going there.” ■



PLANT, G

SPROUTING KNOW

With rising costs due to inflation, food has become less affordable, or even completely unaffordable, for many Edmontonians. Promoting food security has never been more important, and Sustainable Food Edmonton (SFE) is integral to this work locally.

“We try to take the approach that through education and community, there are alternative and complementary ways to address food security in our city,” says Kareema Batal, communications and marketing strategist for SFE.

To help combat food insecurity, SFE focuses on promoting and supporting urban agriculture in Edmonton and surrounding areas through three programs. The Little Green Thumbs/Little Green Sprouts programs provide indoor gardens for elementary school teachers to guide students with growing, and eating, their own herbs and vegetables. Urban Ag High supports junior and high school teachers and students with resources and connections needed to pursue projects that promote urban agriculture. The third program involves working with the City of Edmonton to fund community gardens so that people can take a hands-on approach to growing sustainable food like fruits, vegetables and herbs that can be accessed by all Edmontonians.

In Spring 2023, SFE encountered a new and exciting opportunity to expand its community garden program. The

McCauley orchard and community garden in Edmonton’s inner city had been untended since 2021 when its previous owner, Operation Fruit Rescue, was unable to continue its programming. A space that was once a hub of activity — especially during apple-pressing events in the fall — had been vacant for two years. Knowing the space still had potential with the right resources, Operation Fruit Rescue and the City of Edmonton approached SFE about taking over and reviving the space. “The relationship happened through ongoing conversations and a sense of community,” Batal says. “It’s a really good fit to promote urban agriculture in the city.”

To ensure the McCauley orchard and community gardens received the care and attention it needs, SFE applied for an Edmonton Community Foundation (ECF) Community Grant and received \$35,500.

“The McCauley Orchard is an urban agriculture project that also creates a sense of belonging in the community,” Joanne Currie, ECF’s Director of Grants and Community Engagement says. “This important, multi-faceted project will have a long-term positive impact on

by Breanna Mroczek | illustration Amanda Goddard



ROW, EAT

LEDGE AND FOOD

the community, and we are incredibly happy to have been able to support it.”

With the funding, SFE will rejuvenate the space and revive the orchard and garden as a well-used, well-loved public space centred on food sustainability, food security and community. “Taking over this space is a growth opportunity,” Batal says. “The more we’re able to grow and expand, the more we can promote our mission and what we want to see in terms of people engaging in urban agriculture in the city.”

In its first season, SFE made significant progress including planting new trees, adding and rebuilding community garden beds, and initiating an orchard steward program. “Community volunteers can learn about growing trees in the orchard, and then take care of their own little plot,” Batal says. “For those who aren’t ready to take care of a plot or even grow their own garden at home, they can dabble in caring for the plants in the community garden.” Thanks to ECF’s support, SFE was able to purchase a new shed, hire a local artist to refinish a permanent outdoor table, host programming and events, and hire an orchard coordinator to organize events

and survey the community about what they’d like to see happen in the orchard and garden. In the fall, the famous apple-pressing event returned. “[In 2024] it will be really nice for people to participate in the full cycle: tending to the trees that grow the apples in the spring, and picking and pressing — and eating — apples in the fall.”

In 2024, SFE plans to expand and introduce new offerings based on community feedback. “We want to do more events for the community at the orchard, and just continue to offer more ways to engage people in growing food,” Batal says. “Our theory of change is that if people are engaged, they’re aware. If we teach them some food skills, they will more likely develop these skills and nurture them and practice them in their own life, whether it’s their own community garden, or in their own garden beds at home where they will be growing food for themselves, which is an important element of food security.”

When it comes to food security, SFE is part of an ecosystem alongside food banks and food donation programs. “Anybody who is interested in getting more involved in food security and sustainable food in Edmonton, especially if they have a project or an idea, or they want to volunteer with us, should reach out because we’d love to build those connections.” ■

NEW ZONE. Who's this?

EDMONTON'S FARM-TO-TABLE SCENE IS GETTING CREATIVE IN RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

BY **TOM NDEKEZI**

PHOTOGRAPHY **ERIC BELIVEAU**

WHEN YOU VISIT RGE RD, the one thing you can be certain of is an expertly prepared meal made with locally-sourced ingredients. With over 30 suppliers all located within northern and central Alberta, the farm-to-table restaurant is committed to using ingredients sourced no more than a few hours outside the city limits. That dedication to in-season ingredients also means that what exactly makes it onto the menu isn't a sure thing — you never know when a favourite dish might have a fresh spin or a new creation might make a guest appearance.

"We have a saying around here that the farm dictates the menu," says Chef Blair Lebsack, an Edmonton Community Foundation donor who started RGE RD with his partner Caitlin Fulton in 2013. "If [the farms] tell us that the corn is amazing for the next three weeks, we quickly hop into lots of dishes that have corn in them. If they tell us that the fennel is amazing, that's where we go with it."

A result of that dialogue is that the farms growing and raising RGE RD's ingredients aren't suppliers as much as they are partners. Layered onto the

fact that RGE RD's partners are mostly small and family-owned farms, it means that the restaurant is especially sensitive to the impact of climate change on farmers' ability to produce certain ingredients.

"We've definitely had bad years where the farmers tell us that they got half the harvest they thought they were going to," says Lebsack. "It used to always be that farmers were trying to get their crops off in the end of September or early October, and now you can see them getting their crops off earlier because the weather is just so different."

The concerns shared with Lebsack are indicative of a wider trend regarding Alberta's changing climate. According to Environment and Climate Change Canada, Alberta has warmed by about 1.9 degrees since the 1960s. And while the province is known to cycle through all four seasons in the space of an afternoon, the growing unpredictability of Alberta's climate has become increasingly worrisome. In 2019, for example, the Edmonton area experienced its driest ever summer and wettest ever spring on record, all

in the space of the same year. That goes without mentioning the impacts of the warming climate on the province's intense wildfire seasons.

"It makes a huge difference, because the window of when you can plant and when you can harvest is changing every year," says Tam Andersen, farmer and owner of Prairie Gardens and Adventure Farm.

"Usually your wettest year is followed by the driest year and then it might be on a 10, 25, 50 or a 200-year cycle. But those one-in-a-century cycles are coming every five years now, not every 100 years. So it's making it a gamble every time you buy seed."

In light of those warming trends, the federal government recently redesignated the Edmonton area from a Zone 3 to a Zone 4 plant hardiness zone. Practically, that means the region is now suitable for plants that couldn't typically withstand the coldest Alberta winters.

For farmers accustomed to growing single crops according to predictable growing seasons, those changes are a small but worrying shift towards a more uncertain future. But like her friends at RGE RD — Prairie



Tam Andersen harvests pumpkins at her farm, Prairie Gardens and Adventure Farm

“CHANGES IN THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT ARE CERTAINLY A BIG THREAT, BUT WITH THAT IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ADAPTATION.”

– DR. HENRY AN

Gardens is one of the restaurant’s oldest and longest suppliers — Andersen and her team are responding to that change by being flexible and creative.

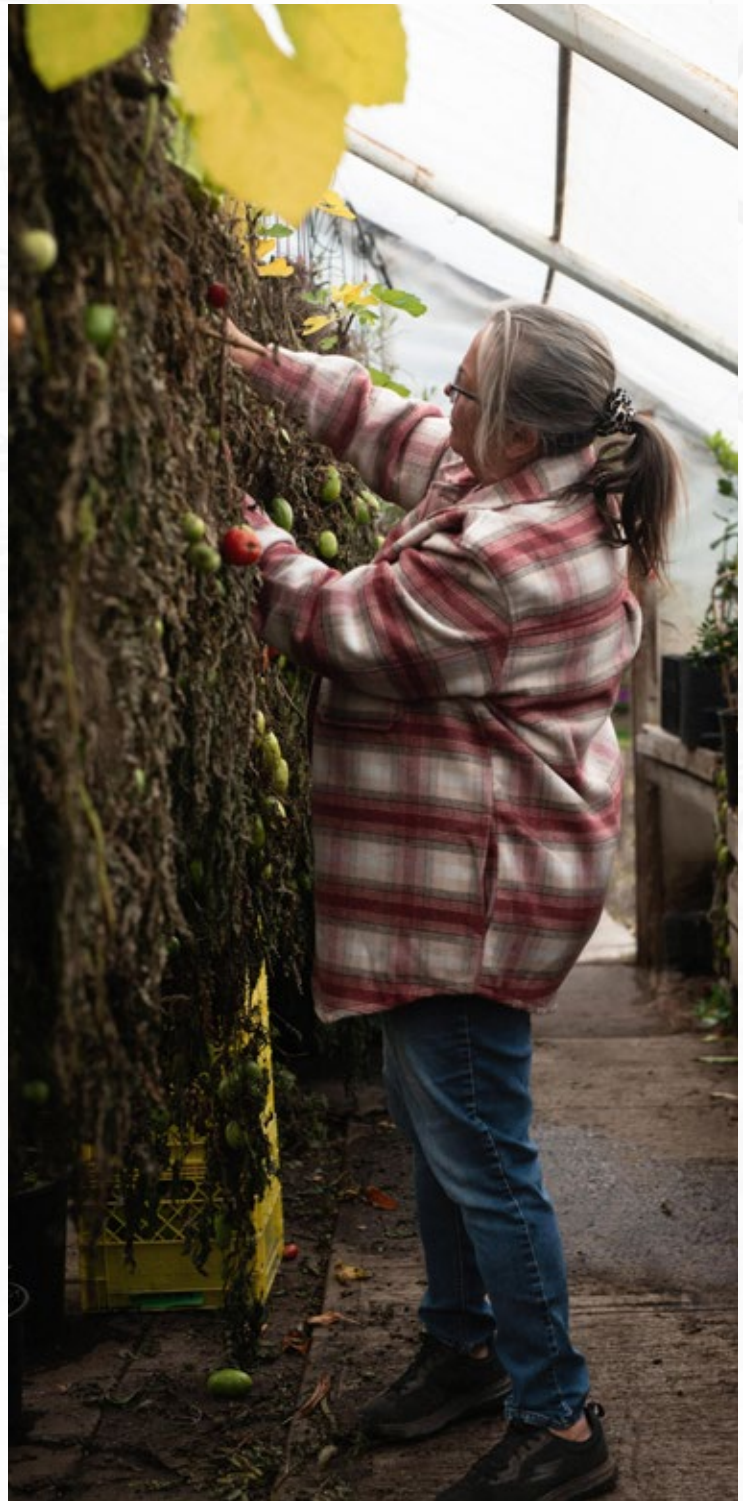
“We’re experimenting with new crops,” Andersen says, describing her team’s approach to the region’s warming climate. “This is the second year we’ve successfully grown watermelon up in Edmonton, which is kind of unheard of. We’re also actively looking at other crops and planting crops in the shoulder seasons, so things that grow really quickly and have a 35 or 40-day life span.”

When Andersen talks about experimenting with growing blue pumpkins, dwarf nectarines, blackberries and Chicago fig trees — the latter is an especially ambitious project that involves growing the trees year-round under cover — she says it with the playful smile of a tinkering scientist. But beyond all the fun she’s having exploring the region’s changing growing season, there are also tangible benefits to her flexible approach.

“Changes in the natural environment are certainly a big threat, but with that is an opportunity for adaptation,” says Dr. Henry An, a professor in the University of Alberta Faculty of Agriculture studying agricultural technology. “Some people don’t like the word adaptation because it feels as if you’re giving up on climate change as opposed to trying to slow it down or stop it. But if we can’t slow it down, then we have to adapt.”

“You can switch out certain crops and grow other things,” An adds, discussing some of those potential adaptation strategies. “One angle would be more drought tolerant crops or crops more resistant to large variations in temperature.”

At Prairie Gardens, adaptation means pushing the envelope of what’s typically grown in the province, while at RGE RD, it means promoting sustainability inside and outside the restaurant. “We own a butcher shop, but we still say you should eat less meat,” Lebsack mentions, explaining his own approach to valuing quality



ingredients over pure consumption. Ultimately, both are part of a movement to shrink the distance from the farm to the table and maybe help save the planet in the process.

“[Our suppliers] definitely don’t just think of this year and how they can make the best for now,” Lebsack says, speaking about the inspiration he draws from farmers like Andersen. “When you talk to them, you understand that you can’t just think of what’s on your plate tomorrow. You have to think of how things are going to be affected next year and the year after.” ■

NEST EGG

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
PROGRAM PRESERVES GENETIC
DIVERSITY ONE HERITAGE
CHICKEN AT A TIME

BY **ELIZA BARLOW**
PHOTOS **LAUGHING DOG**



Katrina Foster
shows off
eggs from
the heritage
chickens at
the U of A



"WE GIVE THEM A VARIETY OF EGGS AND IT'S ALL RANDOM; JUST ALL THESE DIFFERENT HERITAGE BREED EGGS. IT'S SORT OF LIKE A LITTLE RAINBOW"

– TARESA CHIENG

EVERY OTHER WEEK, Katrina Foster picks up a dozen eggs. They're not uniform or all one colour, like the eggs you'd find at the grocery store. The shells range from white to light brown. Some have speckles. Inside, the yolks tend to be orange rather than yellow.

The size isn't always the same, either. Foster has noticed the eggs she gets in January are smaller than the ones she gets later in the year. No matter the season, though, they're delicious.

"I can taste the difference," says Foster. "They just taste richer and more substantial."

Foster is a longtime subscriber to the University of Alberta's Adopt-a-Heritage-Chicken program, which launched in 2014 with help from a \$40,000 grant from Edmonton Community Foundation.

Through the program, eggs from the 1,200 heritage chickens who live at the U of A's Poultry Research Centre are sold to help cover the costs of keeping the flock at the farm. The program helps promote the conservation of unique genetic lines of poultry – from breeds such as Plymouth Rock, Light Sussex and Brown Leghorn.

Currently, the program has about 425 subscribers, who pay an annual

subscription fee of \$200 to get 20 dozen eggs per year. There's also a mini-subscription of 10 dozen eggs. The eggs come from all the different breeds, not just the subscriber's particular adopted chicken.

"We give them a variety of eggs and it's all random; just all these different heritage breed eggs. It's sort of like a little rainbow," says Taresa Chieng, Heritage Chicken Program Coordinator.

Chieng enjoys interacting with the chickens.

"My favourite is the Light Sussex, because they're really pretty. But the really friendly ones most often you see on TikTok videos, you see a lot of Plymouth Rocks, they're really friendly and they're really cuddly and fun."

But along with the delicious eggs and cuteness factor, keeping these rare breeds of chickens — some of which were donated to the university as far back as the 1990s — is incredibly important for the future of poultry farming.

"Because a lot of the commercial breeds use the genetics from these heritage birds, if anything were to happen to the commercial breeds, we can actually go back to the heritage breeds and see where we went wrong, and correct it," says Chieng.

It's also important to have them as a link to the past.

"It's sort of like a living museum," says Kerry Nadeau, Unit Manager at the Poultry Research Centre. "They're the different types of chickens that used to be important to people back in the days where you'd raise all your own food."

Today, commercial chickens are bred to be uniform, producing cartons of the same size and colour of eggs. "It's the same with meat birds. You go to find a roasting chicken, they're all sort of the same. Whereas with the older, heritage breeds, they show a lot of variation," says Nadeau.

Over the years, they've also been

“selected” to have various characteristics, according to trends of the day — for example, preferences for more breast meat or larger eggs.

“Most chickens now, for meat, are white-feathered chickens, because people sort of get turned off if they see little pinpoint black marks on their chicken, which would be normal for a bird that had black feathers — it leaves a little bit of colour behind in the feather follicles,” says Nadeau.

But selecting for ostensibly more desirable characteristics can have consequences — another reason maintaining the genetic diversity of heritage breeds is important, Nadeau adds.

“There’s some interesting things that happen when you select birds for different traits,” she says. “Like, if you’re selecting for egg size and you always pick the birds that lay the biggest eggs, you may find that you’re selecting out — this is just a random example — resistance to disease or any number of things,” she says.

“So if you end up with a selection of birds where, after you



IMAGES SUPPLIED

select them over many generations, you find out the birds really aren’t very good at dealing with any of the diseases you might find in the environment, you can go back and look at heritage breeds and try to breed that hardiness into the flock.”

Genetic selection in chickens is a bit different than in cows, for example, Nadeau says, because chickens go from one generation to the next in a much shorter time — a chicken can have its first chicks at five months old.

The chickens at the Poultry Research Centre are rare breeds and random bred strains, partly obtained from Dr. Roy Crawford’s research flocks at the University of Saskatchewan. Crawford kept the breeds as an unselected population — often used as a reference group for comparison in genetic studies — since 1965. When he retired, they were given a new home at the U of A’s poultry centre.

The crucial need to protect the genetics contained in the flock is one of the reasons program subscribers don’t actually get to meet their adopted birds, Nadeau says.

Maintaining the integrity of poultry flocks by guarding against infection or other contaminants is an imperative element of food security.

“If the birds got sick and died, there’s nowhere to get new ones from. They would just be gone. So we have to be pretty careful. We do a lot of things to try and reduce the risks, so we keep out people that don’t really need to be on site.”

The chickens, which live in a free-run environment with wood shavings to use as bedding material, can also get stressed by changes in their space. “Sort of as a general rule, they don’t like strangers,” says Nadeau.

Foster was first captivated by chickens while living in the Cayman Islands, where feral chickens roam at will.

“I just thought they were charming, and they always looked so soft,” she says, adding the Adopt-a-Heritage-Chicken program is a great way to satisfy her chicken interest without raising them in her backyard.

Foster’s first “adopted” hen was a Rhode Island Red she named Yolk-abel. Over the years, she’s adopted a chicken from each of the different breeds raised at the poultry centre.

Though she doesn’t get to hang out with the chickens like she did in the Cayman Islands, she still feels a connection with them.

“I know my chickens, I know where my eggs are coming from,” she says. “I can talk to the people in the program and say, ‘How are the chickens doing?’ And I know I’m supporting this worthwhile program.”

Find out more at heritagechickens.ualberta.ca. ■

Food Security

Lack of choice and insecure food and water sources are alarmingly close to home.

This year marks the **10th anniversary of Vital Signs**, an annual assessment of community life. For 2023, Edmonton Community Foundation and Edmonton Social Planning Council look back at the first topic of Vital Signs — Food Security — and where we are today.

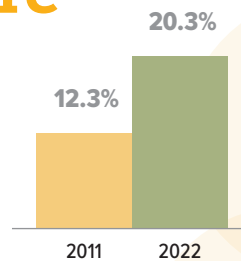
In this report, we explore 3 topics: *Hunger Happens Here*, *Food Security In Our Time* and *The Future of Food Security*. Each topic examines the impact of food inaccessibility, what it looks like in our community, and invites us to consider how access to food helps communities thrive.

Hunger Happens Here

Prevalence of Food Insecurity

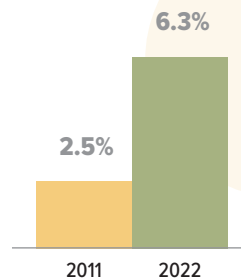
“Food insecurity refers to when a household has inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints” *PROOF, 2022*

Severe food insecurity describes when a household misses meals, reduces food intake and may even go days without food.



On the rise

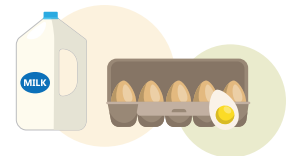
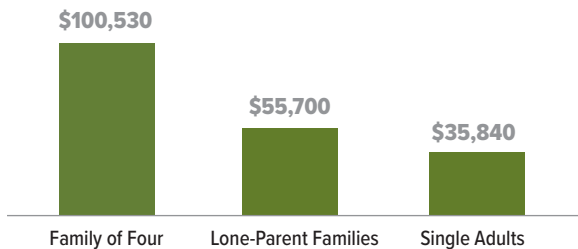
In 2011, **12.3%** of Albertans experienced food insecurity. In 2022, that number jumped to **20.3%**.



In 2011, **2.5%** of Albertans were **severely** food insecure. In 2022, that number jumped to **6.3%**.
PROOF (2022) How many Canadians are affected by household food Insecurity?

Income is Not Keeping Up with Increasing Food Prices

Average incomes in Edmonton in 2020 were:



Working Canadians experience food insecurity at high rates.

In 2021, while only **13.7%** of working Canadians experienced food insecurity, they make up **51.9%** of the population of food-insecure households. *PROOF (2022) How many Canadians are affected by household food Insecurity?*

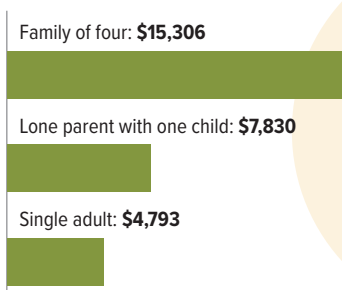
Statistics Canada. (2022). Census families by family type and family composition including before and after-tax median income of the family (Table 11-10-0017-15). Statistics Canada. (2022). After-tax low-income status of census families based on Census Family Low Income Measure (CFLIM-AT), by family type and family composition (Table 11-10-0020-01).

Edmonton Vital Signs is an annual checkup conducted by Edmonton Community Foundation, in partnership with Edmonton Social Planning Council, to measure how the community is doing. Vital Topics are a quick but comprehensive look at issues that are timely and important to Edmonton.

Unless otherwise stated, “Edmonton” refers to Census Metropolitan Area and not solely the City of Edmonton. Statistics Canada’s definition of non-visible minorities refers to everyone who is not a visible minority and includes Caucasian peoples and Indigenous peoples.

In 2013, healthy food for a year cost **\$10,920** for a family of four.

In 2022, healthy food for a year cost:



That's a difference of almost \$5,000

Sheloff, S. (2022) Living Wage. Edmonton Social Planning Council.



Income Supports are Not Sufficient

Food insecurity is more common for those who rely on government assistance.

- **63.1%** of social assistance recipients in Canada experienced food insecurity in 2021. **31.1%** of social assistance recipients in Canada experienced severe food insecurity in the same year. They make up **9.4%** of the food-insecure population.

PROOF (2022) How many Canadians are affected by household food Insecurity?

Social Assistance Usage:

- In 2022, an average of **22,444** households received Alberta Works each month. (Ministry of Community and Social Services. (2023). Income support caseload [Data set]. Government of Alberta.
- In 2022, an average of **25,783** households received AISH each month. Ministry of Community and Social Services. (2023). Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) caseload [Data set]. Government of Alberta.

Some are More Likely to Experience Food Insecurity than Others

21.7%

of children (people under the age of 18) lived in food insecure households in Alberta in 2021.

PROOF (2022) How many Canadians are affected by household food Insecurity?

Food Bank Use

The number of individuals who are served each month at Edmonton's Food Bank has increased drastically in the last decade.



28.9%

of Black households live with food insecurity compared to

11.1%

of white households (2017-18).

PROOF (2021) When it comes to tackling food insecurity, tackling anti-Black racism is an important part of the puzzle.



Fruit and Veggie Consumption is Declining

- **36%** of Edmontonians in 2012 consumed the recommended five servings of fruit and veggies per day. Vital Signs 2013 Report.
- **19.4%** of Albertans in 2021 reported eating five servings of fruit and veggies per day. Statistics Canada (2022). Health characteristics, annual estimates (Table 13-10-0096-01) [data set].

30.7%

of Indigenous households in Canada experienced food insecurity, more than twice that of white households.

Food Banks Canada (2022) Hungercount 2022.

A note on language: This document uses the language and terms as reported in the original sources, and as such, may not reflect the language and terms people identify with and use in their daily lives.

Food Sustainability

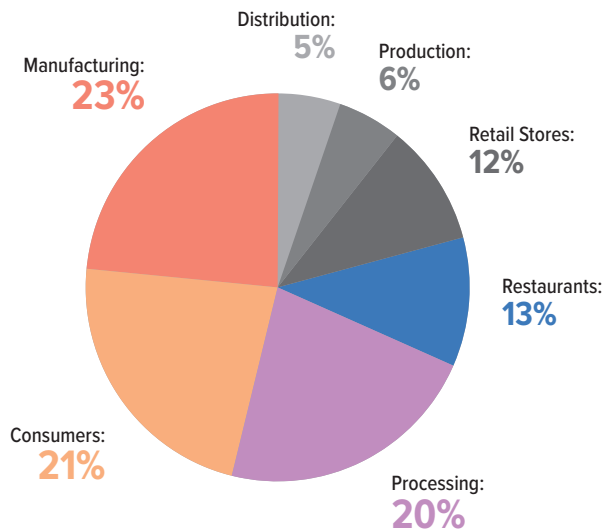
Food Waste

In Canada, an astonishing **58%** of food produced is lost each year — **35.5 million tonnes of food**. **32% of this is avoidable food waste** — food that could have been eaten before it was thrown away.

The average Canadian household spends **\$1,766 on food that is wasted each year.**

Waste Reduction Week Canada (2019). Food waste in Canada: The facts.

Responsibility of Food Waste



Food Security in Our Time

Farming

Big Business in the Farming Sector

- Family farmers must buy fertilizers, chemicals, machinery, fuel, technology, land, and pay rent and interest to large corporations, which eats at their profits. **Agribusiness corporations have captured 95% of all farm revenues, leaving just 5% for farmers.**
- Farmland is increasingly being purchased by investors — which shifts ownership and access to land and its resources from local communities to financial capital and corporate interests, and pushes up farmland market values.
- Farmers are increasingly working on farmland that they rent rather than own. This forces farmers to think in the short-term as their position is precarious and restricts their ability to engage in long-term projects that are essential to making farming sustainable.

Not Everyone has Access to Water

The water supplied to many First Nations reserves is contaminated, hard to access or at risk due to faulty treatment systems.

Contaminated water directly risks Indigenous peoples' ways of life — Indigenous women are seen as the keepers and protectors of water. Contaminated water makes it hard for Indigenous peoples to engage in ceremonies, customary fishing and hunting practices and teaching children and sharing traditional knowledge.

Human Rights Watch (2016). Make it safe: Canada's obligation to end the First Nations water crisis.

- Kehewin Cree Nation had a Boil Water Advisory (BWA) in place from April 2012 until September 2020 — for **8 years, all 1,000 residents did not have access to clean drinking water.**
- Kapawe'no First Nation had a BWA from September 2010 until April 2018.

No long-term advisories are currently in effect in Alberta. However, there are several short-term boil water advisories in place.

Government of Canada (2022). Map of long-term drinking water advisories on public systems on reserves. Government of Canada (2022). Short-term drinking water advisories.

Our Water is at Risk

Run-off from glaciers provides a lot of the water that Albertans rely on. The North Saskatchewan River, for example, is fed by glacier run-off. Climate change is melting these glaciers and putting our water sources at risk.

The loss of glacial water sources will cause shortages for Rocky Mountain House, Lake Louise, Hinton and the Bighorn Dam. This will affect more than **1 million people out of 4.4 million living in Alberta** — that's almost a **quarter of Alberta's population.**

The Rocky Mountains could lose **90%** of glacier volume by the year 2100.

Rieger, S. (2020). Melting glaciers will bring instability to more than 1 million Albertans' water supply. CBC News Calgary.



Canadian farm debt has doubled since 2000, now standing at \$129 billion.



Food Programming

There is a wide variety of food program models available to Edmontonians. These may share shelf stable goods, fresh produce, fresh breads, and/or meat and proteins.

It is important that food programs operate from a place of **dignified food access**, which means “providing quality food choices, in a respectful way, in welcoming places.” *Roots to Harvest (2021). Dignified food access: A framework for action and handbook for organizations. Roots to Harvest: Thunder Bay, Ontario.*

There is no shame in asking for food.

Food hamper programs:

- Collect food from donations or bulk buying and then distribute it to clients through pre-packaged hampers of food.
- **Examples:** Edmonton’s Food Bank, CANAVUA Food Hamper Program, Multicultural Health Brokers Cooperative Grocery Run and Campus Food Bank.

Market model:

- Collect donated food and hygiene essentials, and allow clients to shop these items for free or at subsidized costs.
- **Examples:** C5 Community Market, Food4Good Market.

Hot meal programs:

- Deliver hot meals directly to where people are — organizations may ‘patrol’ neighbourhoods or locations with known needs, and hand out meals, set up food trucks or deliver meals directly to clients’ homes.
- **Examples:** Nekem, Bearclan, CANAVUA Community Food Truck, WeCAN Food Basket.



Low cost food boxes and markets:

- These programs allow individuals and families to purchase boxes of fresh food in a market for 30-50% below retail value.
- **Examples:** Food4Good boxes, Riverbend Good Box Food Program, WeCAN Food Basket.

Faith-based programming:

- Many faith centres in Edmonton provide groceries, hot meals and free bread.

School food programs:

- Provide a meal or snack to children during school hours.

Note: This is not a list of all services available. Edmonton’s food programs are rapidly changing, and as such, some programs listed here may no longer be active at the time of report publication and new programs may have been created.

Food and Ethnocultural Communities

Food Insecurity is a Challenge in Ethnocultural Communities.

One in five households of recent immigrants to Canada **experience food insecurity.**

Community University Partnership (2017) CUP impacts 2017.



A survey of newcomers accessing services in Edmonton found that **62% pay 50% or more of their income on their rent or mortgage.**

This leaves very little money for food.



60% of participants experienced severe food insecurity:

- **24%** said they **often** cut the size of their meals or skipped meals because there is not enough money for food
- **36%** said they **sometimes** cut the size of their meals or skipped meals because there is not enough money for food

Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations (2021). The housing stories of newcomers in Edmonton: A snapshot of the lived experience 2020.

Food Insecurity Impacts Newcomers' Ability to Engage in Culture.

- A lack of income means people cannot buy the food they want — that they like and enjoy eating. This has impacts on people's sense of happiness, self-worth and respect.
- For many immigrant families, food is often a part of celebrations, and brings communities together as they prepare, share and enjoy it together.
- Food is seen as a way of sharing cultural values, traditions, memories and helps children to develop cultural self-esteem. It is a way of preserving culture and heritage in a new country and sharing intergenerational wisdom.
- Growing, cooking, eating and sharing cultural foods can support well-being in the face of stress and isolation.

The Persimmon Project (2021). Newcomers engaged in food dignity: Edmonton 2020-21.

It can be isolating when people do not have food to share.

How the Food System Affects Us Locally

- Supply chain disruptions often lead to fewer options in grocery stores. *Hui, A., Robertston, S.K., and E. Atkins (2022). How Canada's fragile food supply chain is being disrupted.*
- Canada's largest grocery stores (including Loblaws, Sobeys) control **70%** of the market.
- Suppliers say Canadian supermarkets have fewer products and higher prices compared to stores in the United States because consolidation allows our grocery chains to charge sky-high listing fees and fines, which push out small producers. *Alsharif, G. (2023). 'Supply chain bullying': Inside the food fight between Canada's grocery giants and their suppliers.*
- All this means higher prices and fewer choices for all Edmontonians at the grocery store.

The food system is huge and complicated, but it deeply affects our access to food.

Canada is over reliant on transporting goods across long distances.

Hui, A., Robertston, S.K., and E. Atkins (2022). How Canada's fragile food supply chain is being disrupted. von Massow, M. and A. Weersink (2020). Why we aren't running out of food during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Future of Food Security

Food Security is Rooted in Income Security

The best system is where everyone can buy their own food on their own terms.

Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) provided a lesson for how we can transform our income security net — people need a stable and sufficient income to meet their basic needs.

The financial assistance CERB offered allowed recipients to pay for their basic needs and avoid taking on excessive debt at a time of great financial uncertainty. **85%** of respondents reported they used CERB to buy groceries and household goods.

CERB played a key role in easing the transition back to the labour force, allowing recipients to think about the career they wanted and look for the right job rather than just the first that came along, allowing Canadians to get better jobs. *Scott, K. and T. Hennessy (2023). CERB: More than just an income program.*

Studies on basic income have similar findings: Research on a basic income pilot in Ontario revealed positive impacts on physical health, mental health and well-being for the recipients. *Ferdosi, M., T. McDowell, W. Lewchuk, and S. Ross (2022). On how Ontario trialed basic income.*

With basic income:

46%
reported better living accommodations

69%
went without food less often

86%
ate better

85%
could afford more essential household items

Farming to Feed People

Alternative Farming Practices are on the Rise

Urban Farming

The pandemic shed new light on the cracks in the food system and supply chain issues. This increased desire for local and sustainable food.

Examples include:

- Using underutilized space (empty lots and abandoned spaces) to grow food.
- Rooftop and greenhouse gardening in urban settings.
- Vertical gardening.

Stall-Paquet, C. (2021). Fresh from the city: The rise of urban farming. Canadian Geographic.

Fresh: the City of Edmonton's Food and Urban Agricultural Strategy is a local response to the increased demand for urban agriculture. It includes initiatives such as:

- Bees, chickens and a public edible fruit tree database
- Zoning bylaws to ease process of gardening on un-used plots
- Guidelines and a streamlined permitting process for boulevard gardening to encourage citizens to garden in underutilized spaces.
- Urban farms
- Funding and support for community gardens
- Partnering with Sustainable Food Edmonton to offer growing and education programming.

City of Edmonton. Fresh: Edmonton's Food and Urban Agriculture Strategy.

Indigenous Ways Forward

Indigenous people living in urban centres are often displaced from their home territories and are seeking opportunities to reconnect with culture and identity through land and food.

Employing self-determined processes to grow, harvest and share food among the Indigenous community provide pathways towards Indigenous Food Sovereignty.

Miltenburg, E., H.T. Neufeld, and K. Anderson (2023). Relationality, Responsibility and Reciprocity: Cultivating Indigenous Food Sovereignty within Urban Environments (2022). Nutrients.



Inspiration for Policy

A circular economy is based on the idea that wastes are resources that aren't being used well (yet), and food waste can be better utilized or navigated in ways that decrease hunger, increase affordability of food and increase the environmental sustainability of the food system.

Three policy suggestions to create a more circular food system are to:

1. Implement a landfill ban for organics.
2. Build infrastructure to support food rescue organizations and circular food practices.
3. Obtain more information and create data systems to track food waste. This will improve distribution to avoid food waste in the first place, and target and fund innovation for the high waste areas in the system.

Anthony, L., & Messer, D. (2023, February 7). The circular opportunity to fix food waste. Policy Options.

Profile of Toronto's Black Food Sovereignty Plan

The Black Food Sovereignty Plan seeks to use 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.

With sustainable support from the city, the plan will support the development of Black-led food insecurity initiatives, support and fund Black-led and -serving food organizations and food sovereignty community infrastructure, and leverage new and existing City strategies to advance systems change to realize Black food sovereignty.


City of Toronto (2021). Toronto Black Food Sovereignty Plan.

Future Risks

Climate Change and Agriculture

Agriculture is highly dependent on the weather. Climate affects everything – from the planting, maturing and harvesting of crops, to the spread of disease and pests, to storage and transportation.

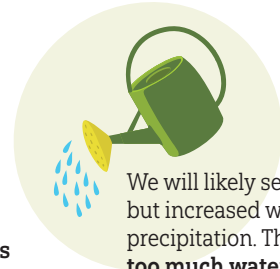
Climate models are showing that Canada will have longer growing seasons as the temperature increases, but at the same time...



There comes an increase in **high temperature events** and **risk of wildfires**.



Precipitation patterns will change — **which can lead to both floods AND droughts**.



We will likely see drier summers, but increased winter and spring precipitation. This may mean **too much water during seeding and not enough in the growing season**.

The agricultural sector has begun to look at inventive ways to reduce emissions and pursue land-use practices that can help mitigate climate change. These strategies boost resilience of farms and have better environmental outcomes.

Examples include:

- Different crop cultivation, rotation strategies and seeding dates
- Using strategies that till the soil less
- Transitioning to lower-carbon fuel sources
- Improving fertilizers and fertilizer application approaches
- Using gas-capture systems for livestock and manure
- Using drought and heat tolerant varieties of crops.

Laforge, J., Corkal, V., & Cosby, A. (2021). Farming the Future: Agriculture and climate change on the Canadian Prairies. International Institute for Sustainable Development. Climate Atlas of Canada (n.d.). Agriculture and Climate Change.

READ MORE: 2023 Vital Signs report is out now.



Discover more about local food insecurity with Vital Signs and how **YOU** can help be part of the solution for **food insecurity, including eliminating food waste**.

Inflation is Unpredictable

After disruptions caused by the pandemic, extreme weather events and the war in Ukraine, supply chains are going back to “normal” which should “put the breaks” on rising food costs.

But, economic experts predict global food prices will remain 25% higher than they were during the pre-pandemic decade.


Heaven, P. (2023). Posthaste: Why high food prices could be here to stay for Canadians. Financial Post.

Local Pathways

Strengthening Local Pathways

Agenda 2030: Edmonton Food Security Report found that community organizations can't tackle food issues on their own; we need a commitment to the right of food from all levels of government. Governments should use these types of budget guidelines to ensure more equitable distribution of resources.

- A need for strengthened collaboration and connection among agencies is necessary to strengthen capacity to leverage each other's unique skills, talents and community connections.
- The City of Edmonton needs to **support grassroots agencies and organizations**. Grassroots agencies need to be given more value for their voices as they are on the front line and have the most insight and thus able to suggest and implement the most relevant solutions.
- Efforts to decolonize major agencies and approaches are also necessary. There needs to be commitment made by stakeholders to ensure voices are heard in decision-making processes and informed policy change.



Many agencies are starting to allocate **30%** of their budgets to specifically focus on **ethnocultural communities and vulnerable groups**

- Strengthen growing, processing, and storing of food through collectives and at the individual level. **Focusing on locally produced and grown food leads to less waste** and less environmental impact. On the individual level, we are creating autonomy and education for people to grow their own food. *Vaugeois, R. and J. Kinsella [2022]. Agenda 2030: Edmonton Food Security Report.*

Professor
Joe Kirman
feeds the future



Food for Thoughts

Joe Kirman's career—and retirement—is a testament to helping students flourish on full stomachs by Cory Schachtel

One evening in early April of 1968, Joe Kirman — a teacher at a special service school in New York City — debated whether to accept a professor position in the University of Alberta's Department of Elementary Education. He made up his mind at about 10 p.m., when his wife woke him up and told him Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated.

"The school I was teaching at was in a depressed neighbourhood with predominantly African American students, and there were riots going on in New York City at the time. My principal there was walking around with a plainclothes detective as a personal bodyguard, and we thought, *all hell's gonna break loose*, so I was on the phone the next morning to the U of A."

That dark day led to a bright U of A career for Kirman, one that spawned a social studies textbook used across Canada that went through four editions and 194 published papers researching elementary education — including one on using "birds as a teaching tool for geography."

It also brought him up close with the Campus Food Bank, which provides meals for students who aren't in a position to provide for themselves. As a professor, Kirman didn't "see the students in that position because they're not going to let [me] know," but he knew enough to donate to it regularly over the decades. When he retired, Kirman eschewed the customary department gift and asked those who would have chipped in to donate to the food bank instead.

But retirement only seemed to make

Kirman more giving, so he established his first fund with Edmonton Community Foundation under the Edmonton Jewish Community Charity Fund — and then he established six more (including one to support Edmonton's Food Bank).

Kirman says he established the fund for two big reasons. "The first is that I liked the idea that long after I'm gone, this favorite charity of mine is going to be getting money. And the second is that I had a friend — his name is Zane Feldman, he was a philanthropist — and his motto was 'Give while you live so you know where it goes!'"

And as an orthodox Jewish person, Kirman says "it's considered a *mitzvah*, a righteous act, to do whatever you can with your money to try to make this world a better place to live in. So this dovetails with my religious philosophy." ■

FIGHTING FOOD INSECURITY THROUGH COMMUNITY CONNECTION

THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS, WECAN FOOD BASKET SOCIETY WORKS TO HELP ALLEVIATE FOOD INSECURITY

BY LISA CATTERALL

EVERY MONTH, HUNDREDS of Edmonton families turn to WECAN Food Basket Society for help. Since 1993, WECAN has been helping people with a limited or fixed income make the most of their grocery budgets.

“WECAN was founded to combat what was called, ‘Empty Fridge Syndrome,’” explains Joshua Topliffe, program manager at WECAN.

“Basically the phenomenon was noticed that people didn’t have enough food to get them through the month, with the last two weeks of the month in particular [being] the most difficult before payday.”

In response, WECAN was developed to help Edmontonians access items like fresh produce and frozen meat items through every week of the year.

Members of the society prepay for groceries at the beginning of each month — when they already have some food in the fridge, and money in the bank. As money gets tighter towards the end of the month, they’re then able to pick up prepaid items from WECAN. The organization buys fresh food in bulk, and then sells it to members for 15 to 30 per cent less than what they’d pay if buying the same items from the grocery store.

“When folks are living paycheque to paycheque, or are underemployed or unemployed, that amount of money is quite significant,” says Topliffe.

WECAN is just one piece of the puzzle working to solve food security issues in Edmonton. Its services are designed to add to the work of other community groups, such as community leagues, food banks and family resource centres.

“We have a role in the food security ecosystem and we really view it in a collaborative way,” says Topliffe. “Hopefully by using different sources, different partners, we can alleviate food insecurity, together.”

Edmonton Community Foundation (ECF) is one of the partners that has helped WECAN give families and individuals access to nutritious food. Since 2013, ECF has supported WECAN’s efforts, first with a three-year grant as part of a Vital Signs initiative. In more recent years, WECAN also received funding through ECF’s COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund, as well as a grant to develop and revamp its online ordering capacity.

In that time, Topliffe says the need for food support in the Edmonton area has only grown.

“There has been more demand, and although it’s not in the same way that free food services have experienced an increase in demand, it has definitely gone up,” he says. Over the past decade, WECAN has seen an increase of about 200 orders per month.

Through the years, to meet growing demand, WECAN has expanded

its geographic reach. Today, there are 22 WECAN depots in the Edmonton area, including some of its busiest locations in neighbouring communities like Barrhead, Tofield and Westlock.

The way that WECAN operates has also evolved. When it first began serving Edmontonians, WECAN managed all of the volunteer teams needed to run each pickup depot. But as demand grew, that model became unsustainable. So in the spirit of WECAN’s commitment to collaboration, it’s gradually shifted to a partnership model, working with other community groups who manage the volunteers for each location.

In a way, this shift has also established WECAN as a hub for connection.

“Some of our members, and even some of our volunteers literally don’t interact with anyone in person outside of our depot pickup days. So it’s also a source of community for a lot of people,” says Topliffe.

Looking forward, Topliffe sees more growth and evolution in WECAN’s future. He knows its continued success is only possible if it continues to work alongside other organizations who are committed to helping Edmontonians in need.

“We’re going to continue the partnership model that we’ve engaged in. We want to be more involved in the food security movement, and to try and collaborate more to alleviate food insecurity,” he says.

“WECAN as an organization wouldn’t exist without collaboration, whether it’s our volunteers or our partner organizations. They really are the lifeblood of the organization, and what we’re able to do.” ■



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