



COVID-19: Guidance for Community Food Programs

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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 17th, the Government of Ontario announced that it is taking decisive action by making an order declaring an emergency under the *Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act*. Under this decree, gatherings of 50 people or more are prohibited and the following 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. Though these services remain operational, the Grey Bruce Health Unit is asking individuals in these settings to limit congregating in groups while maintaining safe social distancing (the lower the number of people, the less the risk of transmission).

Recommendations

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:

- Use effective [cleaning and disinfection](#) strategies. Clean and disinfect high-touch objects and surfaces frequently (eg. tables, counters, handles, doorknobs, handrails).
- Ask sick staff, volunteers, or 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.
- Limit access to your building and screen staff, volunteers, vendors, and visitors before they enter. You can also use the passive screening poster to encourage self-screening.
- Encourage frequent handwashing and use [proper hand washing technique](#)
- Practice [social distancing](#) to reduce exposure to other people.
- Ensure proper food handling.
- Allow adequate time to clean and sanitize as needed.
- Offer alternative service delivery models in order to minimize person-to-person contact:
 - Temporarily switching to a pre-bagged or boxed distribution model.
 - Minimize gatherings of clients by scheduling client pick-ups and/or extending program hours
 - Use a take-away model for food provision. Clients may wait outside for a volunteer to bring their prepared meal/food provisions outside

- If guests are not feeling well or have no transportation, consider offering a delivery service.
- 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

Volunteers who are older adults

On March 16th, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of health advised all persons over 70 years of age and individuals who are immunocompromised to self-isolate for a period of 14 days. 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.

Receiving Donations

- 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](https://www.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](https://www.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](#)

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