

UNDERSTANDING THE GOOD FOOD BOX:

Is this the right program for your community?

The History of FoodShare's Good Food Box Program

FoodShare was founded in 1985 by then Mayor of Toronto, Art Eggleton, and others concerned about the growth of hunger in our city and the many food banks that had taken place in the wake of the recession of the early 1980's. FoodShare's original mandate was to coordinate emergency food services and to collect and distribute food. We were also responsible for the Hunger Hotline, which was established as a volunteer-run referral program for people seeking food services in their neighborhood. Another key part of FoodShare's mandate was to advocate for policies that would ensure adequate employment and the income necessary to enable all people to meet their basic needs.

In the late 1980's, FoodShare staff began to share the frustration of many that the problem of hunger was not diminishing. Income inequality and unemployment were, if anything, increasing. Food banks – originally intended as a stopgap solution – appeared to be here to stay. We heard from food bank users that the food they received was often limited in quantity and quality, and rarely included fresh produce. A strong tradition against resorting to charity means that many feel ashamed when they are forced to use a food bank – sometimes to the point of going hungry rather than doing so. Food bank organizers have stated that food banks are not a sustainable response to hunger and that they want to “put themselves out of business.”

So FoodShare began to explore self-help models like cooperative buying systems, collective kitchens and community gardens that would have the potential to address short-term issues of household hunger, while also providing longer-term benefits by building the capacity of individuals and communities.

The Good Food Box program was created as a cooperative buying system with a focus on local and seasonal fresh fruits and vegetables. In January of 1994, we packed forty Good Food Boxes in the basement of our office on Queen Street West. Now, in 2008, we pack and distribute just under 4,000 boxes per month in a 7,000 square foot warehouse with a walk-in cooler and forklift. We have also grown to have almost 180 active neighborhood-based drop-offs.

We have seen the number of weekly orders rise over the years. As a result, we are now able to get better prices on produce due to increased purchasing power and can pass these savings onto our customers. We have also been able to increase the number



of farmers from whom we purchase directly, especially for our organic boxes. The larger our orders are, the more feasible it is for farmers to work with us.

The Philosophy Behind the Good Food Box

We believe that everyone deserves affordable, healthy and sustainably produced food. Communities should not be dependent on handouts of food, nor should handouts be necessary. In the long run, government needs to make food a right and subsidize basic foods for the entire population. In the meantime, cooperative models of food distribution, like the Good Food Box, are created to improve access and affordability of fresh produce and to help strengthen local farm economies.

Over the years, we have broadened our focus to look at the entire food system – how food is produced, distributed and consumed. We see hunger as just one symptom of a food system that is geared to treating food primarily as a commodity. FoodShare believes that access to food is a basic human right because, like air or water, it is fundamental to our health and survival. But the question is how to make this right a reality. Should food be subjected to the same rules of market distribution that govern, say, soap or toothpaste? Or should governments help to ensure that basic foods are available to everyone in the same way that the health care system in Canada provides subsidized health care to all Canadians? We believe there is a role for not-for-profit food distribution mechanisms, of which the Good Food Box is one example, in helping to ensure that all people have the basic human right to access food. We believe that the government should support programs like the Good Food Box to make this right a reality.

What we've come to realize is that the "what" and "how" of food access is also important and that it's not just any food that we're talking about. We try to promote an awareness that fresh, whole foods are key to health, well-being and disease prevention, and to illustrate this principle through all our programs.

How people get their food is also important. Food distribution systems that involve communities and help to create neighborhood leaders have a great potential to enhance individual and community empowerment, by leading people to feel that they have control over this very basic part of their lives. All our programs are based on this community building principle. Again, because of its material, cultural and social importance, food is special in its power to mobilize people to action.

The Good Food Box – while subsidized by FoodShare through individual donations, foundation and government grants – aims to give its customers a

“Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations



stake in the food distribution process. It is not a for-profit enterprise, nor is it based on charity. It is a bulk-buying club that uses public subsidy to try and create a positive situation for consumers in the city and for farmers, by allowing farmers to earn better prices for their crops, while allowing consumers in the city to pay wholesale prices. Like all of FoodShare's programs, it does not distinguish between rich or poor, because we believe that everyone needs to eat healthier foods and increase their consumption of vegetables and fruit. We have learned from years of work in low-income communities, that people living on a low-income don't like participating in means-tested programs.

It is obvious that the Good Food Box program cannot solve the problems of food insecurity alone. However, we see the Good Food Box as a good start. At the very least, the box can improve people's access to healthy food, support farmers, bring people together and strengthen communities. We hope it can be a conversation starter about the kind of system we want to build in which everyone has access to healthy, affordable, local and sustainably produced food.

"A person who has health has hope, and one who has hope has everything."
Anonymous

Good Food Box Guiding Principles

Start with the food!

Food included in the Good Food Box is of the highest quality. It is geared towards being personally and culturally acceptable to the widest group of people possible, and is selected and arranged in order to appeal to all of the senses. Aesthetics matter. Handle the food carefully. Choose produce for colour and variety and thoughtfully arrange the produce for maximum appeal. A beautiful box reflects the fact that the Good Food Box is not a handout but a high quality product.

Improve the affordability of healthy food

Customers pay for a portion of what it costs to produce the Good Food Box, FoodShare and its various funding sources make up for the rest. Customers benefit from the cost savings of bulk buying and the time saved from this distribution method. This means purchasing high quality, fresh food is within the reach of many more people than through the regular retail system.

Make the Good Food Box fun

A large part of the Toronto Good Food Box's success arises from the sheer fun that people have receiving the box. Opening the box is a surprise each time, "What's in it this time?" Customers have even reported that their children are more interested in and willing to eat the Good Food Box food because of the novel method by which it arrives.

Support local and organic agriculture

We believe that to create a sustainable and affordable food system we need to invest in our local farmers and support sustainable farming practices. A healthy farm economy helps to boost urban economy and helps to ensure we have access to affordable local produce. In order to support one another, city dwellers and farming communities need to work towards a shared vision for food access. The Good Food Box creates an opportunity for customers to learn more about their local farmers and influence the variety of produce and how it is grown.

Make participation easy for everyone

Be aware of, and make the box meet the needs of low-income people and people on social assistance. For example, in Toronto communities, that means requesting payment in advance and delivering toward the end of the month, when money and supplies are running low. Families with little money for food take a risk when paying in advance to purchase a Good Food Box, so quality is of utmost importance. If the box arrives full of wilted vegetables, this can have a severe impact on a family's food for a week and can dissuade a family from future participation. Damaged food may also call up associations of "seconds," furthering stigmatization and reducing the chance of positive word of mouth advertising – an important component for success. Most importantly promoting increased fresh fruit and vegetable consumption is a worthy goal for people of all income levels, and the participation of diverse people in this program is a major component of its success.

Balance revenue & subsidy to achieve financial sustainability

Ideally a Good Food Box program will both improve access to fresh produce and generate the revenue necessary to cover all costs. This is rarely possible due to the financial limitations of low-income communities, the cost of supporting volunteers and local farmers and the cost of creating educational materials. A combination of subsidy and revenue are likely necessary.

A Week in the Life of FoodShare's Good Food Box Team

Here is a description of a typical week here at our FoodShare warehouse.

The sun rises on a snowy and cold Wednesday morning. The Good Food Box team arrives, they exchange comments on the weather, fill the coffee maker with fresh grounds and prepare for the beginning of the Good Food Box cycle. The fax machine chimes with orders, inboxes are filled, and the telephone rings with customers calling from living rooms and offices. The database quickly fills with orders, while the team meets to plan the contents for each of our seven different boxes.



Thursday a few more late orders arrive, along with apologies. The final number of boxes is printed and the warehouse begins to stir. Our green plastic Good Food Boxes are counted, labeled and arranged in preparation as a group of volunteers from the Center for Addiction and Mental Health arrives to wash our used boxes. The equipment is polished, greased, and the packing supplies are fully stocked. The produce buyer calls farmers and starts to accumulate information on what is available, what is in season, and what is of excellent value. The empty spaces in the newsletter fill up with recipes, farmer profiles, and articles on eating healthily, and food security.

On Friday, the produce buyer calls farmers and places the orders. The newsletter is finished and printed out.

On Monday, at a very early hour, one of our drivers picks up our produce from the Ontario Food Terminal and brings this produce back to our warehouse. The farmers arrive all at once, with overloaded pick-ups and large trucks. The empty warehouse fills with the color and aroma of a farmer's field. A moment later the warehouse is mostly empty, the cooler now full. The prices, quality, size, and origin of the produce is recorded and used to make any last minute adjustments to the contents of the boxes.

Tuesday morning the staff starts early in order to arrange produce into packing assembly lines and set up pre-packaging stations for loose produce that is to be bagged. The volunteers arrive between 9 and 9:30 a.m. The volunteer coordinator signs in volunteers, gives them name-tags and helps orient new ones. The warehouse assistant keeps all produce well stocked and manages the supply and flow of produce throughout the day. Volunteers are set up in the packing assembly lines and are shown in detail how to pack the boxes to prevent the produce from getting damaged and to make the boxes look presentable. A driver arrives at noon to start delivering boxes to community drop-off locations and picks up the previous week's empty boxes. Packing continues until all boxes are packed, usually about 3 p.m, with a half-hour break for lunch at 12:30 p.m. Volunteers are given a large box of produce to take home as our token of appreciation.

The volunteer drop-off coordinators receive the delivery of boxes from the drivers on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, which are then picked up by members of his/her community. The coordinator is responsible for collecting payments from customers, placing their collective order and making sure they pick up their boxes. The drivers return from their route between 3-7 p.m. and unload the empty Good Food Boxes destined to be washed and repacked for next week. While the boxes are being delivered our office staff also answers calls from customers and drivers if any issues arise.

Here is a chart summarizing our work rhythms for the week.

Weekly Work Rhythms Chart

(Based on a Good Food Box schedule of one delivery per week)

| Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff meeting • Receive produce • Produce is checked for quality and size to make sure there is enough for each uniform box • Preparation of packing signs, printing of newsletters and content sheets | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare the packing assembly lines and pre-packaging stations • Greet volunteers • Pack boxes until finished • Drivers deliver boxes to coordinators • Clean up • Create truck routes for the week | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drivers deliver boxes to coordinators • All orders must be in by 12 noon for the next week • Feature vegetable selected based on what is in season and local | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start calling farmers to see what is available for what price • Plan and write newsletter • Take inventory and restocking of packaging materials | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create box contents • Order produce |

Our Customers: Who Are They and Why Do They Purchase a Box?

Our experience leads us to believe that a typical Good Food Box customer is a middle aged female, who takes on the responsibility for providing food for herself and a spouse or family. They live in Toronto and their family earnings fall below or are at the median income. They are motivated to eat healthier and provide healthy food for their families, are knowledgeable about the benefits of supporting local agriculture and demand a box that contains local and/or organic produce. They also come from a variety of cultural backgrounds and are interested in items they can use in their home-cooking. They are interested in the Good Food Box because it offers value, is convenient, and gives them a feeling they are supporting a shared vision for food access.

In November 2007, a survey was distributed to Good Food Box customers over a two-week period. Its purpose was both to inform the content of the Good Food Box Manual and to help FoodShare better understand the demographics and opinions of



Good Food Box customers. 354 Good Food Box households returned the survey, or 24% of those surveyed. Here are several of the questions and responses that you may find interesting.

What are your main reasons for purchasing a Good Food Box?

| <i>Reason</i> | <i>Responses</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Support local farmers | 304 | 86% |
| Low cost | 226 | 64% |
| Helping me eat better | 211 | 60% |
| Freshness | 209 | 59% |
| Convenience | 194 | 55% |
| Quality | 187 | 53% |
| Supporting organic farmers | 153 | 43% |
| Connection to my community | 134 | 38% |
| Other | 50 | 14% |
| Total | 1,668 | |

This reveals that the top three reasons customers purchase the Good Food Box are also FoodShare’s top three program goals: to support local farmers, make food more affordable and promote healthy eating habits. Among the reasons cited, there was also a high appreciation of the box’s contents; over 50% of those who responded noted that quality, freshness and convenience were reasons for buying the box. Reasons in the “Other” category included: wanting to financially support FoodShare, wanting to reduce packaging, the surprise and variety of the box, being forced to cook more and supporting non-GMO (genetically modified organism) products.

What is your favorite thing about the Good Food Box?

- It is local and organic (comment from customers of the Organic Good Food Box).
- The cost is low.
- It keeps me healthy by forcing me to eat more vegetables or cook more.
- It teaches my children about nutrition.
- It’s convenient and saves time.
- It’s delivered to my house (in the case of some coordinators and Meals on Wheels participants).
- The newsletter and the recipes, especially, are excellent.

- The volunteer drop-off coordinator is great and picking up the box provides a chance to visit (one respondent said that their coordinator organized weekly potlucks for Good Food Box customers).
- The quality of the produce is high (some said higher than most stores).
- It supports FoodShare.
- It makes me feel connected to my community.
- It's an exciting surprise each time. Many said it's "like Christmas."
- The variety of the box.
- It forces me to try new things.

Good Food Markets, Another Produce Distribution Choice

Good Food Markets share the same philosophy and principals as the Good Food Box program. The main difference is that instead of distributing the produce in boxes, the produce is sold to community organizations to sell to their neighborhoods in the form of a market. Many communities are interested in having markets but making linkages with farmers who would find it financially viable to invest in the start-up of small markets is very challenging. For this reason the Good Food Markets have the ability to fill this need. Over time patronage and popularity will increase, thus creating a potential site for a farmers' market. If you are interested in learning more about Good Food Markets please inquire about FoodShare's Good Food Market manual.

Our research has shown that a Good Food Market customer spends on average \$7-10 each time they shop at the Good Food Market. Since the Good Food Box costs between \$12-32 per box, it may be that the Good Food Markets are a better vehicle than the Good Food Box for reaching lower income community members. Good Food Markets are often managed and further subsidized by community partners who also choose the produce that best suits their neighbourhood's needs.

