

A Guide to

Accessibility and Equity for Food Banks

May 2023





Acknowledgements

Food Banks BC would like to express gratitude to the food banks who shared their stories, provided onsite tours to our research team, and continued to send us ideas about how they are working to create more accessible and equitable services. Keep the ideas coming!

This guide was developed for Food Banks BC (FBBC) by Trish Kelly and the team at Untapped Accessibility with guidance from the FBBC team.

Accessibility Statement

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Territorial Acknowledgement

Food Banks BC is grateful and honoured to work on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the Salish Peoples, including the ḡícəy̓ (Katzie), ḡʷɑ:ḡłəḡ (Kwantlen), and Semiahma (Semiahmoo) land-based nations. We are a provincial organization, and our work goes beyond the place where we live and impacts the lives of nations across BC and Turtle Island.

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Foreword



What are we doing to make our programs and services better for the clients who use them?

When I began working in the non-profit sector, a simple sentiment was shared with me that has since become a motivating principle in my approach to this work: what are we doing to make our programs and services better for the clients who use them? We can never lose sight of the people we serve. This maxim was central to developing the Guide to Accessibility and Equity for Food Banks.

Since March 2020, the demand for food bank services has increased dramatically. While we still see over-representation among client populations who belong to groups disproportionately impacted by poverty, including racialized groups, Indigenous people, and people with disabilities, there have been some significant shifts in the profile of clients accessing services. The seismic impact of recent events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis triggered at the beginning of 2022, has resulted in people turning to food banks in record numbers, broadening the diversity of the overall client population. In addition, international humanitarian



I hope that this guide will support you and your organization in creating a more equitable and accessible environment for your clients. I hope you see yourself reflected in the changemakers profiled in these pages.

crises have meant that food banks are supporting an increasing number of refugees and people fleeing war and persecution from different parts of the world. BC's food banks are serving more people than ever before.

At Food Banks BC, we envision a future where food banks are no longer needed. But, until we see the necessary systemic changes to social policies that ensure all people possess the financial means to acquire the food they need, food banks and hunger relief agencies will remain a significant and necessary part of the social safety net.

Our member agencies and the hundreds of emergency food access charities and grassroots organizations continue to provide essential services to those in need under circumstances more challenging than many could ever have imagined. This has been a tireless time of considerable strain, but the need is great, and the critical work of ensuring everyone receives the support they need continues. This work happens at all levels, from the individual to society.

I hope that this guide will support you and your organization in creating a more equitable and accessible environment for your clients. I hope you see yourself reflected in the changemakers profiled in these pages. Finally, I hope that in learning how other food access organizations are rising to the challenge of creating more accessible and inclusive spaces, you feel compelled to ask what changes could help your community feel safer and more welcome.

In collaboration

Dan Huang-Taylor

Executive Director, Food Banks BC

Introduction



Who is this guide for?

This guide is a practical document to help food bank operators within our membership and beyond to adopt more equitable and accessible practices. We've written this guide keeping in mind the people or person in your organization responsible for the day-to-day operations of your food bank. The information shared will support frontline staff and volunteers in better serving clients, but we also hope it can support the creation of a safer environment as a whole.

How was the guide created?

In Fall 2022, Food Banks BC reached out to Untapped Accessibility to help us create a resource for our members which could answer the following research question:

What are food banks and other community-serving organizations doing to improve accessibility and equity internationally, nationally, and in our home province? What practices can we recommend to Food Banks BC members?

It was important for us to look at how food banks in other parts of Canada and internationally create more dignified and inclusive environments. Our first step was a scan of publications from Canada, the US, and the UK that included academic papers, food bank “industry” publications, and resources from food banks.

With this context in mind, we then reached out to food banks in BC, some already members of our association and some community-based programs beyond our network, to compare notes and understand more about what food bank operators here are already doing to make their services more welcoming, dignified, and inclusive for all community members.

Why this work is important

In the decades food banks have existed, much has changed in the world. Over time we have seen shifts in how food banks understand their role in addressing hunger and food insecurity. We've come to understand that our role includes advocacy and naming the social challenges that cause food insecurity. And as we name challenges, we are being called to apply our new understanding to how we serve our communities.



No one gets turned away without something at our food bank.

Our communities themselves have also changed in many ways. Global migration patterns have brought new communities with unique cultures, languages, and dietary needs we need to adapt to. At the same time, some communities that were once made invisible by discrimination and stigma have emerged with a clearer voice and service needs that we need to consider.

These changes call on us as food bank operators to adapt our services to support the community we have today. Sometimes it means stepping outside our comfort zone to get help with what we don't know.

“No one gets turned away without *something* at our food bank.” We heard some variation of this repeatedly during our site visits and calls. Even in the face of global pandemics and supply chain issues, floods and forest fires, food bank operators amaze us with their capacity to look at what is in front of them and see it as something to work with.

We encourage anyone who is reading this guide to hold on to that spirit of abundance that you find every time a community member comes through the door and consider the suggestions in this guide to create a more welcoming, accessible, and equitable food bank for your community.

Thank you to the food bank operators who shared their experiences and practices

We want to say a big thank you to the food banks who took the time to speak with us. We learned so much from our in-person visits to [SHARE Family and Community Services](#) in the Tri-cities, [Pemberton Food Bank](#), and [Surrey Food Bank](#).

We're also grateful to those who spoke with us by Zoom. Thank you, [Revelstoke Community Connections Food Bank](#), Victoria's [Mustard Seed, The Link Food Centre](#) in Burns Lake, and [Chetwynd Tansi Friendship Centre Food Bank](#). And finally, we are so lucky to have learned from leaders at [Vancouver's Saige Community Food Bank](#) and Surrey's [Muslim Food Bank](#).

How to use this guide

Equity and accessibility are journeys our organizations are being called to embark upon. As we saw in our interviews and research, many organizations already have goals and practices for creating a more equitable, welcoming, and accessible food bank. And others are just beginning their journey of asking, “Who is not coming to our food bank and why?”

This guide walks you through some of the reasons why food insecure members of your community may not be coming to your food bank, focusing on the reasons that may be within your control to change.

Part One of the guide follows the experience of food bank users from the time they consider coming to pick up food for the first time to their arrival at your front door and their experience receiving food.

Part Two of the guide includes leading practices organized by equity-seeking groups. For organizations that are further along their journey, this section may help you focus on a particular community you already know needs your attention.

Using the Accessibility and Equity Checklist

In the appendices, you will find a quick Accessibility and Equity Checklist that you can use to evaluate your own food bank.

Key definitions

Below is a list of key terms to help you use this guide. Please see the glossary at the end of this guide for a longer list of key terms.

Accessibility

Accessibility is the work we do to ensure people with disabilities can access services and all aspects of society on an equal basis with others. It includes seeking ways to remove barriers to access including physical barriers, attitudes, policies, technology, and how we communicate information.

Dignified Service

Delivering service supports the self-respect of the person, recognizes their inherent value, and does nothing to undermine it.

Equity

Equity refers to achieving parity in policy, process, and outcomes for historically and/or currently underrepresented and/or marginalized people and groups while accounting for diversity. It considers power, access, opportunities, treatment, impacts, and outcomes.

Talking About Accessibility and Equity



What does it look like when you create a welcoming and dignified space?

Our research showed us that many food banks and food security groups are asking this question, and the answers guide their work daily.

The moments when you know your food bank is offering a dignified and welcoming environment have a calm and even feel to them, but they are also the result of paying attention to details.

Maybe you know it's a good day for dignity because the people coming into the food bank meet your eye, and you can greet some of them by name. Perhaps you knew it was happening the day that one of your staff brought in lilacs from home to decorate the tables, and the flowers seemed to relax everyone who paused to admire them.

Maybe you knew you'd achieved a new level of welcoming the day an Arabic-speaking volunteer greeted a Syrian family in their language for the first time, and you heard relief in their voices. Or maybe it was the day you finally got the landlord to agree to open the washroom to your clients. It might have been when a client picked up a shopping basket to shop the new choice-based model, and you saw people keenly reading labels.

Maybe it was that time a community member approached you and said, "Can I give you some feedback?"

In 2021, food security groups in Vancouver met to discuss the core elements of dignified food access. As they share in their [Dignified Food Access Report](#), they name four key features that come alive in a dignified space:

01



Community members **have a voice and are engaged** in how the program runs and have a say in how to remove barriers.

02



Community members **feel safe expressing themselves** freely and without fear.

03



Relationships start to form, where community members socialize, share information, and show care towards each other.

04



Food choices are **fresh, comforting, and familiar.**

What do we mean when we say accessible and equitable?

Equity. Diversity. Inclusion. Belonging. Accessibility. Currently, there are many terms that help us ask, “Who isn’t getting the help they need from us, and what can we do to welcome them?” For some, it feels like as soon as we get comfortable with one concept, another term gains preference.

We’ve included definitions of many of these terms in the glossary as we think they can all be helpful “lenses” to apply to how a food bank is set up and run.

Why equity?

While all these terms bring value to the driving question, we chose equity because it prompts us to think in two directions.

First, equity invites us to think about how an individual’s identity might impact their experience of our food bank. For example, how does a client’s identity as a queer person or person with a disability impact what they feel they can share without jeopardizing their access to your services?

Second, equity nudges us as food bank operators to think about how we can adjust the rules, opportunities, and resources at our disposal to ensure a diverse group of community members feel welcome.



Equity helps us consider what we can do to ensure that a diversity of people, including racialized people, Indigenous people, trans and nonbinary people, and others, can access our services on an equal basis to others.

Why accessibility?

While equity is about seeking parity for many marginalized communities, including people with disabilities, our research showed that the access needs for people with disabilities are often overlooked. This is especially concerning given that people with disabilities experience poverty and food insecurity at disproportionately higher rates, and this has been true for a very long time.

We found that research into the food access issues for people with disabilities is often outdated or focuses on barriers without many solutions. We worried that without extra emphasis in this guide, people with disabilities might find their equity issues once again sidelined.

Happily, when we began our interviews with food bank operators in BC, we found many practical ways that food banks have been improving access for people with disabilities. The recommendations we make in this guide include what food banks have been quietly doing to improve accessibility for people with disabilities.

What Keeps Food-Insecure People Away from Food Banks?



The first barrier: stigma

Research from the Canadian Community Health Survey has shown that only 1 in 5 food-insecure people access a food bank.¹ Stigma, or negative social attitudes toward a particular characteristic or identity, keeps many food-insecure people away from food banks.

Food bank operators recognize that the day someone comes to the food bank for the first time may be one of the most challenging days of their life. In dominant Canadian society, self-sufficiency and individualism are embedded in the definition of success and having to ask for help can incite feelings of shame and embarrassment.

In smaller communities, the fear of being recognized by a neighbour or co-worker brings home the risk of stigma in a genuine way. Where inner city folks may travel to a food bank outside their neighbourhood to avoid being recognized, this is not an option in many small communities.

For racialized community members, including Indigenous people, stigma can be layered. While any Canadian may feel stigmatized visiting a food bank because of the value placed on individualism and self-sufficiency, Indigenous people also contend with racist narratives that suggest Indigenous communities are already too dependent or receive more help than white Canadians. Refugees and newcomers may also feel this stigma or different stigma related to their culture of origin and how asking for help is viewed.

Reducing stigma: What are food banks doing?

Food banks are trying many things to reduce the stigma of accessing food. Some organizations are taking the word food bank out of their name in hopes that this will reduce the stigma.² Sometimes the renaming is a simple rebranding, and in other cases, it follows an effort to offer food alongside wrap-around supports like counselling, parenting programs, or community programs.

Other food banks have aimed to remove stigma by moving from common locations like church basements to community spaces like neighbourhood houses and friendship centres. By locating the food bank within a building with many programs running at the same time someone might be accessing, food bank visitors may feel less stigmatized stepping into the space.

Outdoor lineups can be very stigmatizing, as food bank users are often in view of the public, exposed to the elements and possibly their neighbours. Some operators have taken steps to bring lineups inside or created indoor waiting areas. Others have implemented appointment times or increased their open hours to wait times.

Some food banks are looking at how filling out paperwork increases anxiety and fear of stigma for new members. Food bank operators have reduced the level of detail they request from community members at registration. In these cases, food banks are balancing their desire for good data practices and diligence for their funders with the comfort and dignity of their community members.

What more can food banks do?

What action your food bank can take to reduce stigma depends on many unique factors, but all food banks could benefit from asking community members.

In 2021, the US Institute for Hunger Research and Solutions surveyed 1,000 people about their concerns and experiences using food banks. Their report [Creating a Dignified & Welcoming Environment in Food Pantries](#) offers recommendations for addressing stigma, including how to ask community members for their perspectives.

The next barrier: discrimination

If stigma is the first barrier, then discrimination is the second.

Discrimination is what happens when stereotypes impact the way a person is treated. Community members may have experienced discrimination because they live in poverty or because of other aspects of their identity, like their gender identity, disability status, race or cultural background, or experience with the justice system. The discrimination may have occurred at your food bank, another food bank, or another type of organization. Wherever the discrimination occurred, it may inform how a person behaves or feels when they arrive at your location.

Later, we'll look at how trauma-informed practices are used in food bank settings to reduce conflict and promote dignity.

What food bank operators bring to work: bias

Bias happens. Much of the time it is unconscious and unintentional. While it's impossible to completely rid yourself of bias, staff and volunteers can work to ensure that bias is not in the driver's seat in decisions.

Learning to recognize [the types of bias](#) can be a helpful first step. From there, there are many recommendations on how to disrupt implicit bias, namely slowing down your decision-making process, formalizing the way you make decisions, and working with your team to make automatic processes more conscious.³



As with the experience of discrimination, food bank clients may have been burned by bias before, which may inform how they receive requests for personal information or how policies are applied. A good decision-making process that can be explained or provided in writing can help build trust and assure clients that decisions are fair and unbiased.

Communication barriers

When community members don't understand the rules and expectations of them at your food bank, the consequences can be harmful. They may be prevented from accessing services at all. They may behave in ways that may be interpreted as disrespectful.

Some of the most common communication barriers are related to a mismatch in the languages spoken by community members compared to your staff and volunteers. If your food bank relies on sharing information verbally, this can present barriers for hard of hearing and D/deaf people and for people who process written information better. For clients with anxiety or who are English language learners, taking in a lot of verbal communication can be overwhelming.

Food banks that reduce communication barriers provide a more welcoming experience and tend to run more smoothly for all.

Physical barriers

A set of stairs, a lack of available washrooms, or a location without accessible parking are just a few of the ways that the physical location of your food bank might get in the way of accessing food. We may default to thinking about people with mobility-related disabilities when we think about physical barriers.

The design and workings of your food bank location can also welcome or discourage people who have experienced trauma or violence. Parents with strollers and seniors will also benefit from a space where physical barriers have been reduced.

The perceived safety level in a space may also present barriers for some food bank users. Food banks located in commercial areas with poor lighting or a grimy appearance, or where member conduct is unmanaged, may deter community members from returning. For more details, see the resource introducing trauma-informed practices in Part Two.

Transportation barriers

Transportation barriers come up for many low-income people. In small communities with little public transit, just getting to the food bank can require carpooling, hitchhiking, or arranging with neighbours or family members to share in pickups. In larger communities scheduling issues, lack of bus fare or difficulty carrying heavy items can leave people weighing whether a visit is worth it.

Loralee Seitz, Foodbank Coordinator at Pemberton Food Bank, noted that they adjusted their opening hours to align with transit schedules so that community members living in an adjacent rural community could make the trip.

“This was to help not only with accessibility but to ensure individuals could get home quickly with fresh foods needing refrigeration. The bus only runs a few times a day between communities, so this was a priority for our open hours,” Loralee reported.

The Indy Hunger Network, out of the Indianapolis area, published a [**Manual of Best Practices for Food Pantries**](#) which advises that the best food banks locations are easy to get to by transit, have free parking for clients, and have a good supply of bike racks.

Getting in the Door: Creating More Inclusive and Accessible Experiences for New Food Bank Visitors



What exactly is a disability?

All this may have you wondering about the definition of a disability. The definition of what is or isn't a disability is changing. For example, in 2017, Statistics Canada changed the definition of a disability to include mental health conditions and addiction.⁴

Then in 2019, the federal government passed the Accessible Canada Act, which includes a definition of disability that says a disability isn't just a health condition, but what happens when a person with that health condition comes up against a barrier that hinders their full and equal participation in society.⁵

This idea is known as a social model of disability. The social model recognizes that attitudes, stigma, and how we design policies and spaces are the factors that actually disable a person, not their medical condition.

You may have policies that look at disability as a medical condition that requires accommodation. For example, you may have a policy that people who can't stand in line must bring a doctor's note confirming their disability. This sort of policy doesn't align with a social model because the social model argues that people with disabilities are the authorities on their needs, not their doctors.

Food access and disability

The physical location of a food bank can significantly impact who can access food and who feels safe there. Changing the site itself may be within the operational control of the food bank, but it may not. In each case, food banks are taking action to improve the physical accessibility of their spaces.

Some food banks have a permanent space and others use borrowed space. Some can improve their physical space, for example, by upgrading the front door with an automatic open button or adding grab bars in the washroom.

Some food banks have created policies that support people with apparent disabilities like mobility challenges or obvious frailty to avoid lining up. SHARE Family and Community Services

in the Tri-Cities reduced wait times and lines for seniors and those with physical disabilities by arranging different pickup days for these groups. SHARE has also extended its hours of operation, which reduces the wait time and the need for anyone to line up.

Beyond mobility

Physical accessibility doesn't just impact visitors using mobility devices like scooters and wheelchairs. Many people can experience physical access issues. While it would occur to most people that a building entrance with stairs but no elevator is likely preventing some people from accessing the food bank, there are other barriers here to consider.

Some food bank visitors may have invisible or non-apparent disabilities. Conditions like Crohn's disease, anxiety, autism, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can find lineups as an insurmountable barrier.

People with less visible disabilities may have been told by people in positions of power that they are not disabled enough to qualify for an accommodation. They may have been doubted or accused of exaggerating their health condition. These past experiences may make it difficult for people with non-apparent disabilities to risk asking a food bank operator to excuse them from a lineup. They may not speak up or could avoid coming again.

Non-apparent disabilities

Neurodivergent individuals

Neurodivergent people may process sensory information differently and find the noise level or the brightness of the food bank space too much to handle. Neurodivergent individuals may also benefit from clear signage explaining the rules and how the food service works as they may receive written information better than oral. Without these simple supports, they may feel anxious about the possibility of getting the process wrong. To understand more about how to create sensory-friendly spaces, you can [watch this video](#).

Environmental allergies and sensitivities

Scented products, including perfumes, cleaning products, and even scented garbage bags, can create barriers for people with chemical sensitivities. Posting a scent-free policy for your facility may help. Templates are available at the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety [website](#).

Developmental and cognitive disabilities

People with developmental disabilities or cognitive disabilities may visit the food bank with their support worker. Keep this in mind if your food bank is still placing capacity limits on the food bank space. In such cases, some food banks have confirmed support workers can pick up on behalf of their clients.

Vision and hearing related disabilities

The extent of a person's vision or hearing disability may determine whether a non-disabled person views it as apparent. The best way to prepare a welcoming and accessible environment for people with these types of disabilities is to offer information and greetings in both verbal and written formats.

Vision-related disabilities include folks with low vision and those without any vision who describe themselves as blind. In either case, you may find that the person uses a white cane or a service dog to help them navigate their trip to the food bank. In BC, the Guide Dog and Service Act states that you must grant access to the food bank to a person and their certified guide dog.⁶

Blind and low-vision community members may use certain apps or assistive technologies to research community programs online. If your website is not accessible, blind and low-vision visitors may not be able to use your website to find out basic information like when the food bank opens. In fact, 96% of websites are not accessible.⁷ If your website is not accessible, you should plan for alternate ways for people to get information about your services by phone or email.

Hearing-related disabilities include people with some degree of hearing loss, others who have more "profound" hearing loss but may speak, and D/deaf people who rely on writing or American Sign Language to communicate with hearing people. Providing information in writing can reduce barriers for D/deaf and hard of hearing community members. If finding a volunteer who knows American Sign Language is not possible, staff and volunteers can learn some basic signs that will help create a welcoming environment for D/deaf visitors.

This short video [covers 50 signs that can help you provide customer service in ASL](#). Other folks may have apps on their phone to communicate with you. [Otter.ai](#) is a dictation program that instantly transcribes a conversation. The program has a free version food bank operators can also upload to a phone or tablet.

New home, fresh start

Rome wasn't built in a day, as the saying goes, and neither is an entirely accessible food bank. Several food banks we spoke to in BC have used recent moves as a good time to prioritize accessibility. Community Connections in Revelstoke moved into a new space in 2022 and were able to renovate the new space to include a covered walkway and wheelchair accessible front door. Likewise, Pemberton's food bank moved into a new site recently and now has a door with an automatic open button. Shelving units are mindful of access issues for strollers and wheelchairs.

If you aren't expecting to move anytime soon, a first step to take is to use our Accessibility and Equity Checklist in Appendix B to assess some key issues. Including any discoveries you make on your website or in your pamphlets is another small step you can take to ensure disabled



guests are at least prepared for the potential issues. For example, [Gordon Neighbourhood House](#) in downtown Vancouver includes a list of accessibility features on its website.

If you identify accessibility improvements you want to make to your physical space, some funding is available. Disability Alliance BC administers the [Accessibility Project Grant](#) stream and provides as much as \$40,000 to non-profits in BC. For federal supports, you can [subscribe to receive email notifications](#) when new grants become available.

Registration requirements

An unclear or lengthy registration process can be a barrier for many community members. A 2017 study by the US-based Indy Hunger Network suggested that nearly 40% of people in need of food assistance will go hungry rather than submit to a poorly structured screening process.⁸ The question of how a food-insecure person accesses food is a tricky subject. Food banks may feel they have solid values-driven policies. Others may feel swayed by the opinions of donors and funders.

Many food bank operators we spoke to expressed empathy for community members coming to a food bank for the first time. At Community Connections Revelstoke Society, Melissa Hemphill, Community Outreach & Development Co-Director, and Hannah Whitney, Community Food & Outreach Coordinator, told us that the organization carefully weighed the cost of a lengthy registration process against the valuable data it can provide. Ultimately, they decided that minimizing stigma and potential anxiety for food insecure people was more important than the data collection.

Now, the food program has no eligibility requirements. Instead, staff offer new food bank users an optional questionnaire. Melissa and Hannah have a long-term relationship in mind for new visitors and are committed to getting to know community members. Over time, they make inquiries about personal information to connect the individual to other resources at their centre or elsewhere that can also be helpful.

Melissa and Hannah also find more informal ways of gathering data, such as running informal surveys or posting a question of the week. These casual activities still act as conversation starters

and help Community Connections understand who they are serving. They can then use this information as a qualitative data source in reports or in discussions with donors.

Most of the food banks we interviewed are putting the comfort of community members ahead of data collection to some degree. Saige Food Bank serves trans and gender-nonconforming members of the community. Saige has a barrier-free approach to its services. There is no requirement to provide ID.

For gender diverse and transgender community members, their ID may be outdated and no longer reflect their name and gender. Also, ID can be hard to hold on to for trans and queer youth who may be experiencing homelessness and don't have a safe space to store essential documents.

The issue of ID can be complicated for other community members as well. Temporary foreign workers, refugees, and undocumented people may not have ID to present or may find an invasive registration process triggers memories of traumatic experiences in their country of origin or in their journey to Canada.

While most food banks are looking to reduce barriers related to registration, not all food banks feel they can step away from this traditional approach. Some food banks still require financial "proof" of hardship, including gathering bank statements and tax information.

Some food banks said they feel a responsibility to donors who see an extensive registration process as showing diligent use of donor dollars. Others may know that the concerns about abuse of service are usually unfounded, but they feel powerless to change donor perceptions.

Very practically, at a time when food bank use is climbing, some food banks holding on to means-testing may use it to limit the volume of people who access services. They may rationalize the policy as reserving limited resources for those who need them most. Unfortunately, this approach may include harmful assumptions about who needs support most and deserves it. If your food bank still requires financial proof or unexpired ID, you may be serving those who can comply with your requirements at the exclusion of others living with a deeper level of food insecurity.

Food banks who have stepped away from financial means testing note that such processes were administratively expensive to run, and management of private information was a burden that didn't serve their mission or their community.

In 2022, Food Banks BC's members responded to a survey on the question of means testing. Online surveys conducted during regional meetings showed that only 10% of respondents still practice means-testing.

Community Food Centres Canada's [**Beyond the Emergency: How to evolve your food bank into a force for change**](#) includes the following list of questions to help you assess whether your registration process may be creating barriers for some community members:

Intake self-assessment

The following questions will help you assess if your food bank's intake process adequately conveys respect and supports people's dignity:



- ▶ Do you collect more than name and address? If so, why do you need this extra information?



- ▶ How much time do you spend determining someone's eligibility? Is that where you want to spend your time?



- ▶ Consider the perspective of someone coming to get the food. How would it feel to be asked the questions in your intake process?



- ▶ Does your organization have an undue emphasis on preventing fraud or "double dipping"?



- ▶ Do you do means testing? If so, why is this important?
-

The same guide recommends that food banks looking to create a more equitable registration process collect the minimum amount of information required to distinguish households from each other.

Their other key piece of advice is to not overly focus on fraud because it doesn't happen that often. A 2018 study by a research team at the University of British Columbia confirmed that most food bank users do need food support. Many fall into the category of severely food insecure, which means missing meals due to a lack of food. Severe food insecurity is linked to adverse health impacts.⁹

Registration requirements can create barriers to equity for some of the most marginalized and food-insecure people in our communities. Food banks need to think carefully about how they may reinforce the stigma and stereotypes that follow people living in poverty.

Community outreach

With the growing number of community members experiencing food insecurity, your organization is probably dealing with growing numbers of community members finding you with no effort on your part. But it's worth asking who is finding your food bank and who is not.

Are there particular communities that are underrepresented in your food bank usership compared to what you know about your community's makeup? You can research the local groups that have strong relationships with that community and meet with them to learn about their community's needs. They may have ways to share information about your food bank hours and registration requirements.

We suggest asking what programs they offer or wish to offer and how you might support each other. Also, compare notes to ensure that your programs don't run at the same time each week.

Language support

Many of the food banks we spoke to are taking steps to ensure that community members can still get the information they need about how the food bank works. Signage and printed information are the first steps to improving the experience for community members.

Signage

To ensure that signage is helpful to as many people as possible, try using signage that relies more on images and numbers to convey information. This type of signage can help people with learning disabilities too. Food banks using a choice model can label shelves or tables with image-based signs to show the maximum number of items available based on family size.

If you have recruited volunteers or staff who represent the language diversity of your community, they can help with signage translation.

Consider posting signage that notes the languages spoken by your volunteers and staff close to the entrance of the food bank or near your registration area. To make signage accessible, use large print and high contrast between text and background.

Paperwork

For more complicated documents like a registration form or handbook, paying a professional translator may be worth the expense so you can be confident it reflects the information and the tone you wanted. Like any writing exercise, unconscious bias may impact the word choices or tone a writer uses. If you are using a volunteer or staff member to translate materials, it may be helpful to have a few proofreaders confirm that the tone and language choices work and will contribute to a welcoming and dignified environment.



Assistive technology

Even when you have recruited bilingual volunteers and translated materials, there will be days when someone arrives at the food bank and there is no fluent speaker available to welcome them.

At these times, [Google Translate](#) is a free website and app you can download to a phone, tablet, or iPad. While not perfect, it can help you converse in over 130 languages.

If the person is D/deaf, you can use a pen and paper or load [Otter.ai](#) on your phone. The free version transcribes what you say instantly.

[Handtalk](#) is an app that can translate English into American Sign Language for Deaf community members.

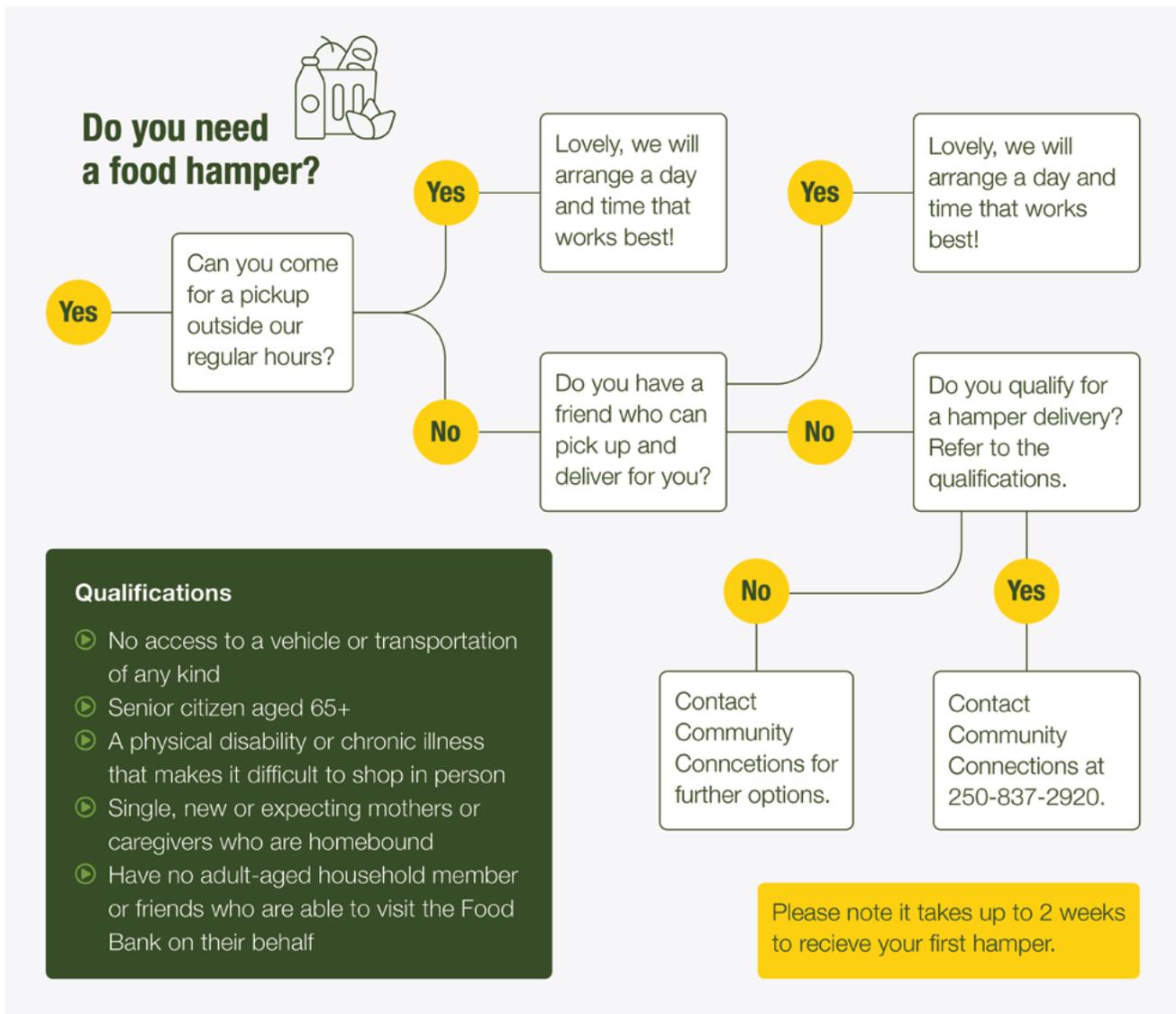
For community members who are literate but unable to use their voice due to aphasia, nonverbal autism, stroke, or other speech and language disorders, [Spoken](#) is an app that can help them to verbalize what they type in.

Delivery options

Food banks have developed creative strategies for welcoming community members by coming to their community. Mobile food markets, hamper deliveries, and partnerships with other organizations that can act as satellite pickup locations are all strategies BC food banks have developed to meet people closer to home.

Community Connections in Revelstoke began experimenting with home delivery options during the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health orders that limited the number of people who could come into their space at once inspired them to develop a food hamper delivery program. While the program had value for many community members, they found it especially helpful to people with disabilities. They have chosen to keep the program running as an accessibility support.

Their Food Hamper Flowchart isn't just an internal document. It is made available to the community and offers transparency about how Community Connections staff decide if someone qualifies for home delivery. While other food banks may use a similar process less formally, putting this process in writing with friendly but clear language assures a fair and consistent process.



Pemberton Food Bank makes some deliveries for people who cannot get to the food bank. Though a less formal process is applied, the concept is very similar. Since their ability to deliver hampers is limited, they have found that some community members can arrange for a friend or family member to pick up on their behalf if they know this is an option.

In Burns Lake, The Link addresses transportation barriers by running a Mobile Food Centre, which makes weekly trips to 5 outlying communities. The program is still in the pilot phase.

Mobile markets may be a better option for some community members.

Interestingly, the mobile market concept may be more appropriate for reaching certain community members, including seniors with limited mobility, wheelchair users, and some newcomer populations. Mobile markets tend to be highly visible, so in addition to shortening travel times, they may attract community members not yet aware of local community programs. This was a key find in a 2022 study from the US, which found that mobile markets work well for reaching people aged 60 to 80 years and immigrant people of colour.¹⁰

The First Two Faces You See: Creating a Welcoming Food Bank Environment for All



Tansi Friendship Centre Society in Chetwynd, BC credits their “first two friendly faces” practice as key to setting up a welcoming and dignified experience for food bank visitors. Very simply, staff and volunteers ensure that from the moment a potential food bank visitor steps inside their Centre, they are welcomed with a smile and a greeting. This starts with ensuring the right type of person staffs the front desk.

“Tansi” is a welcoming greeting in the Cree language, and the Centre’s practices are informed by an Indigenous worldview, as well as principles of harm reduction.

Tansi functions as an essential service hub for the community, offering childcare, mental health and addictions support, and a food bank. Executive Director Laurelle Watson has been involved in the Centre for more than 15 years, first as a volunteer and then as Executive Director for the past three years. Jessie Solbrekken wears many hats for the organization, including Finance Director and Food Bank Manager.

Tansi’s team is careful to create a space that welcomes all, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members, and holds strong to a policy that no one will be turned away. Because the centre offers many types of community programming alongside the food bank, they have reduced the stigma of coming to the food bank. Tansi puts in a lot of effort to create a welcoming space, offering a lunch service and a visiting circle when the food bank opens, which makes the experience of accessing food one that comes along with culture and community building.

What about your food bank?

Does your food bank have something like The First Two Friendly Faces practice to help set a welcoming environment for your guests? If not, what would it take to try this practice at your location? Who might benefit from it?

What can you do to create a more welcoming environment?

Set the tone

Community Connections in Revelstoke sets the tone for their space in extra-large font. They post their Belonging Agreement at the entrance to the food bank space. The Agreement includes guidance for conduct as well as their approach to service. The poster uses simple language and soothing colours.

The Muslim Food Bank is a national organization with a busy Surrey location. Executive Director, Azim Daiya, credits their supportive and welcoming service to two things: a focus on training and a common value system. Like many faith-based organizations, Muslim Food Bank tends to attract volunteers with a common religious worldview, which can ground any discussion about what dignity or respectful service looks like.

Muslim Food Bank builds on this shared experience with a comprehensive training and orientation program for all volunteers and staff. Muslim Food Bank offers their food bank clients with wrap-around services, including culturally competent and trauma-informed counselling. They also train Volunteer Community Caseworkers who support clients in breaking the cycle of poverty, through their ASPIRE Community Caseworker program.

Tansi Friendship Centre's approach to setting and holding a welcoming tone also includes training for all volunteers. This initial training is reinforced daily in the opening and closing circles that bookend food bank service.

Decorate your space

Saige Community Food Bank is well-known across Vancouver as a queer and trans-friendly place to access food. Saige recognizes their program can be a haven for new arrivals to Canada, including LGBTQIA+ refugees who may have fled very unsafe situations in their country of origin. They decorate their space with pride flags, the pastel trans flag, and Black Lives Matter posters. These visual cues help set the tone of the space. Director and Co-founder Tanya Kuhn and Lead Volunteer Jessica Atari notice that these symbols seem to be universally recognized regardless of a visitor's English skills.

Staff at Mustard Seed, Vancouver Island's largest food bank, put a lot of effort into decorating their space to create a warm and welcoming environment, using tablecloths, potted plants or flowers, and a highly visible kids colouring table. Mustard Seed's Community Services Support Worker, Anita Zacker, also notes that Mustard Seed provides a free book area for families, and she finds that this is another low-cost way to set the tone of their space.

Community Food Centres Canada encourages you to "never underestimate a coat of paint." They also suggest that colourful photos of food and people can create a more welcoming environment.

In [**Laying the Groundwork for Trauma-informed Care**](#), there are echoes of the benefits of some intentional decorating, including the use of artwork, murals and soft lighting to reduce stress.

Staff and volunteers reflecting the community

Mustard Seed's Director of Operations, Treska Watson, notes that a diverse group of volunteers who reflect the community's diversity is needed to maintain a welcoming space for all.

Scott Zayac, Executive Director at The Link in Burns Lake, notes that ensuring staff represent local First Nations communities is a priority, given that 30% of food bank visitors and the local population are from 6 neighbouring First Nations communities. The Link also looks at their board composition to ensure the overall community sees itself reflected in the organization.

Choice models that create dignified and healthier environments

Choice for health or dignity?

Choice models, or food banks laid out to allow clients to “shop,” have gained popularity in recent years. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, many food banks were experimenting with choice models to improve experiences for clients with dietary restrictions, increase opportunities for social connection, and, very practically, to reduce waste.

The Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma developed a [Client Choice Workbook](#), which describes the many benefits of this style of food bank layout. The workbook also provides schematics that offer a spectrum of choice options to suit any size of space. They list four key benefits of a client choice model:

01

Reduced volunteer labour: Creating hampers is more labour-intensive than packing items onto a shelf in a grocery store-like setting. It can also be more engaging for volunteers. If you doubt the labour savings, be prepared to be convinced by the time study provided by the authors.

02

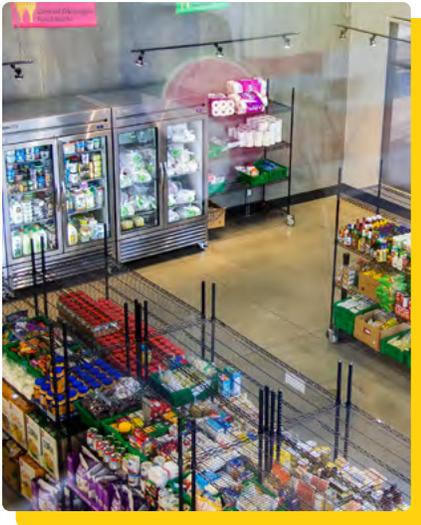
Increased interaction: Volunteers and staff can be reallocated to engaging with clients, which results in a more meaningful interaction for all.

03

Less waste: Food banks that have not yet made a switch to a choice model may find that the check-out area or parking lot becomes a dumping ground for the items that a client cannot use.

04

Choice provides dignity: Clients who have the freedom to choose their food items experience a positive impact on their self-esteem and are more likely to come back to access food or other services.



The Client Choice Workbook details four versions of a choice model, providing different levels of choice that are progressively closer to a supermarket layout. A supermarket model requires shelving and advanced planning to lay food out in food groups but frees up staff and volunteers for engaging clients and allows for a high volume of clients. For food banks with small spaces, there are alternative approaches that provide clients to “window shop” and request the items they need or provide clients with an inventory list to order from.

Scott Zayac, Executive Director of The Link in Burns Lake, and Roni Larsen, who runs their Food Centre, shared they had made good strides in creating a choice model. The pandemic disrupted the new choice model at The Link, but they hope to reinstate some hybrid version in the future. While they like the dignity and choice in a shopping model, they observed that some clients valued the return of hampers as safe and quick ways to pick up food. The Link’s mobile food market programs also became a valuable way to respect clients by helping to reduce their need for travel time.

Is a choice model really better?

A 2021 study of Ottawa area food banks looked at whether choice models affect the food security of clients. The study found “significant reductions in food insecurity for people who accessed food banks that offered a choice model of food distribution and food banks that were integrated within Community Resource Centres.”¹¹

They also found that the choice model was particularly helpful for people avoiding some foods for medical reasons, such as following a diabetic-friendly diet or managing a gluten allergy.

In another report published by a coalition of food organizations in the King County area of Washington State, food banks using a shopper choice model saw clients responding to abundant displays of fresh produce by choosing healthy foods more often.¹² Their **Behavioral Economics workbook** includes photos and plans for putting into action the key principles behind the shopper model.

Labour savings with a choice model

The Food Bank of Oklahoma developed an analysis of the labour required to offer the choice model and confirmed the choice model doesn't require more volunteer labour.¹³ Instead, your volunteers or staff perform different roles. The time study graphic below shows the comparison between a traditional food bank (pantry) model and a client choice model:

	Volunteer Slots 8 am – 12 pm	Volunteer Slots 12 pm – 4 pm	Volunteer Slots 4 pm – 6 pm	Total volunteer hours per day
In a Traditional Pantry	2 volunteers to pre-make boxes 3 volunteers to distribute boxes (20 hours)	2 volunteers to pre-make boxes 3 volunteers to distribute boxes (20 hours)	None	20+20 = 40
In a Client Choice Pantry	4 volunteers to help clients shop for food (16 hours)	4 volunteers to help clients shop for food (16 hours)	4 volunteers to help clients shop for food (8 hours)	16+16+8 = 40

Looking to make the move to a choice model?

There are so many great resources to help you explore or start switching to a choice-based model. In addition to the [Client Choice Workbook](#) and [Food Shopper Equity](#) website from King County, you can also gain much from reading Community Food Centres Canada's [Beyond the Emergency: How to evolve your food bank into a force for change](#).

Gift cards: The ultimate in choice models?

Several food banks we spoke with are experimenting with offering grocery store gift cards to their clients, recognizing that this option allows for the fullest experience of choice.

Tansi Friendship Centre is piloting gift cards from a local grocery store. The program started after a donation of gift cards, but it also has the potential to solve some logistics issues for the food bank. While Tansi aims to provide fresh, healthy foods to their clients, they have found that purchasing 30 to 40 units of a particular item, such as milk or a bag of apples, can be challenging. They buy off the shelf at grocery stores and availability at that volume can be tough to depend on. During the pilot period, the food bank provided clients with dry goods and a gift card for fresh food purchases.

Because each family receives the same dollar value, staff see this as a fair initiative. The staff notes it also aligns with [principles of harm reduction](#), which affirm that individuals are the authorities on their own needs. Tansi staff acknowledge that they don't know everyone's stories

and realize it's not their job to become authorities on each client's situation. It's also saving staff time as staff are no longer heading out to shop for fresh foods before each food bank.

Mustard Seed staff also noted that they use gift cards to enhance client choice and offer flexibility if a family arrives with special dietary needs that they can't satisfy with what the food bank has on hand.

A 2022 study from the University of Calgary and Calgary-based nonprofit [I Can for Kids \(IC4K\)](#) found that grocery store gift cards provided to food-insecure families promoted a sense of autonomy and dignity among program recipients. The study also found that recipients developed improved dietary patterns.¹⁴

Time vs choice

Food bank users may have different preferences or competing priorities. Some community members may still want the convenience and time-saving a hamper provides. Parents of young children and women fleeing violence may value a short visit over a choice-based model. At the same time, other community members may want the time to browse, visit, or ask questions while in the food bank.

Some food banks offer appointment times to reduce wait times. SHARE Community Services in the Tri-cities offers appointment times for seniors. SHARE also will schedule a unique pickup time for people who exhibit behaviour that may pose a risk or be uncomfortable for other food bank users.

In several cases, food banks have extended their open hours to minimize lineups and wait times. A longer open period allows people to come when they feel it works best with their schedule and can result in reduced lineups. However, SHARE and other high-volume food banks have to keep in mind that being open longer only reduces the lineup if food bank users are sure that the same food will be available later in the service. This may require that staff and volunteers hold back some inventory of especially high-volume items and restock throughout the service.

The layout of the space can also reduce lineups. While the shopping style choice model may encourage browsing and socializing, an open environment that places food options at circular "islands" throughout the space can allow people to shop the table from several directions, reducing lines at each station. The buffet approach, which places tables in a line but allows community members to travel down either side of the tables, can double the volume of people who can access the space in the same amount of time.

Ultimately, a dignified space is one where people feel that their opinions and feelings are considered and that they can speak up about their needs without fear. By asking your members what is most important to them, you can be sure you are infusing dignity into whatever design you land on.

On the Menu: Flexibility that Supports Dignity



Flexibility is one of the ways that we show community members that they matter as individuals. It's also true that there can be tension between providing flexibility and offering service to a whole community. While some aspects of flexibility may be more challenging to offer, there are many ways to practice flexibility.

Culturally appropriate foods

Many food banks have found ways to shift their menus to be more flexible for culturally relevant foods. Food banks that provide fresh foods may find that certain foods are more “universal.”

In the [Cultural Food Guide for Pantries](#), published in 2022 by Gleaners Food Bank of Indiana, they name ten foods that are commonly eaten across cultures:

- ▶ Rice (white or whole grain)
- ▶ Beans (dried over canned)
- ▶ Onions
- ▶ Garlic
- ▶ Tomatoes
- ▶ Oil
- ▶ Potatoes
- ▶ Flour
- ▶ Lentils
- ▶ Fish

This list may or may not ring true for your community. Maybe you've found that eggs fly out the door or that yogurt is always a crowd-pleaser. Testing this list with your food bank users would be a helpful way to spark conversation and help you service the widest number of people well.

Setting family and individual limits

Some food banks using a choice model have found creative ways to maximize flexibility by creating a points system, where each available food is assigned a value and community members can “shop” for a maximum number of points. In this kind of system, a shopper can

double up on items they use frequently and leave other items for others. The Ohio Association of Food Banks detail this option and others in their guide [Making the Switch: A Guide to Converting to a Client Choice Food Pantry.](#)

Restricted diets

There can be an overlap between culturally relevant foods and diets restricted by preference or health issues. Offering flexibility to people who are gluten intolerant, avoid dairy products, or follow a vegetarian diet can be very meaningful to some community members.

We all make food choices for a variety of reasons, and the amount of choice that a person has in choosing their food is often a reflection of how much choice they have over many aspects of their life. Thinking back again to what we mean by dignity, being able to ask for food that lines up with their preferred diet without fear of judgement or penalty is at the core of dignified access.

Food banks that use recovered foods or have no purchasing budget still find ways to support restricted diets. Food bank operators will sometimes reserve select items that work for restricted diets instead of putting them out on distribution day so they have something for a particular user's next visit.

Takeaway foods and meal services

For people without access to kitchen facilities, a food bank that allows for some flexibility from the usual hamper or allotment can be critical.

While larger food banks may have special offerings for community members with limited kitchen facilities or who are experiencing homelessness, smaller food banks may again hold certain items behind the counter or in a back room for people dealing with these challenges. Ready-to-eat foods, canned goods with pop tops, and sugary snacks are good options to keep on hand. Bottled water and juice are also helpful choices.

Of course, if your food bank can offer meal services or hot drinks in a hospitality area, these are great ways to provide flexibility. If you don't offer these options, you can make sure you have information about other programs that are available at other service providers.

Beyond Food, What Else Have You Got?



As we heard from Tansi Friendship Centre and SHARE Community Services, placing a food bank as part of an overall suite of services can reduce the stigma for food bank users. When the food bank is part of a broader group of services, community members entering the building could be accessing any number of options in the building.

This approach can also save time for community members by creating a one-stop shop for relevant support services. For example, Surrey Food Bank hosts a community librarian, which allows food bank users to develop a relationship with the service provider. Some food banks also offer “pop-up” support services. Seasonal supports like an information table about how to register for the voters’ list or how to get help with filing taxes are examples.

Some food banks offer emergency food as part of a much bigger group of community services. The Muslim Food Bank and Community Services reflect this broader view in their organization’s name.

As Azim Dahya, Executive Director of the Muslim Food Bank and Community Services Society (MFBCS), noted in our interview, “food insecurity doesn’t happen in isolation.” While the immediate need for anyone coming through the doors is a need for food, it’s likely tied to other issues. This holistic perspective is why Muslim Food Bank and Community Services offer support in employment, housing, medical/dental and mental health in addition to their food bank and meal services. Muslim Food Bank and Community Services serves many vulnerable newcomer and refugee populations. A recognition of trauma and mental well-being is at the centre of their programs. Volunteers and staff receive training on the ASPIRE counselling model, which is trauma-informed and culturally appropriate to Muslim culture and values.

Recent research shows that Ottawa food bank users who accessed a food bank that provided other community resources experienced a significant reduction in food insecurity.¹⁵

Unsure what services would be welcome by your community members?

What resources would be welcomed by your members is a great topic for a survey. Consider posting an open-ended question on a whiteboard or poster board and providing markers, or offering a more formal ballot and ballot box to community members. This is also a great time to start translating materials so that everyone can participate.

Here is a list of some of the possible resources and services that your food bank users might find helpful:



▶ Job search supports



▶ Agencies that can help with applying for ID or disability benefits



▶ Voter registration or awareness info.



▶ Housing referrals



▶ Haircuts



▶ Community librarians and free book programs



▶ Vaccination clinics



▶ Peer advocacy clinics

Who is at the Centre of Your Food Bank?



Food banks tend to attract volunteers and staff that are service-oriented people who want to make a difference in their communities. Given that food bank operators are clearly people who care about their community, it may seem obvious that food insecure people would be the focus of the work.

And yet even with these good intentions, food banks can be places where the food insecure people who are most impacted by the services don't have a voice.

The disability rights movement explains the difference between “doing for” and “doing with” the people most impacted by an issue. It's the principle “nothing about us without us.”¹⁶ This principle works for many issues, including food insecurity. At its core, it acknowledges that the people who are being affected by an issue must be at the centre of the solution. Any work that doesn't centre the people most impacted and doesn't give them a voice risks becoming more about the helpers than the community it says it serves.

A member-centred food bank not only cares about the community that needs the service but seeks to find ways to solve the issues with the community, not for them.

Member-centred services

Who started your food bank? Some food banks may still have a crystal-clear understanding of why they came together to solve their community's issues. But given that the first food banks in BC started in the early 1980s,¹⁷ it's likely that the original founders who know that story have moved on, retired, or become ancestors to your current leaders.

As many food banks genuinely hoped they were a temporary solution to an economic downturn, it's possible that the stories of founders and their rationale were not well preserved. The food bank may have felt like a solution *from the community for the community* at some point, but it's a good exercise to revisit the question to see if you have held on to a community-centred approach.

Food banks may find that other goals have become a priority. If your food bank has existed on a shoestring budget for decades, if staff and volunteers have cycled through, or if donors with strong voices and values have had their say, you may find clients are no longer at the centre of your decisions.

For example, you may have a registration policy that makes your donors feel comfortable, even if it means some community members can't meet the requirements. Or you may be setting early opening hours based on what works for your current volunteers, even if you know that community members need later hours to work around after-school pickups.

What does it look like to centre the voices of those most impacted?

Simply, it means uplifting, trusting, and valuing the voices of people most impacted by food insecurity.¹⁸ In practice, it means that the people most impacted by this are a part of leading, identifying solutions, and setting priorities.

A 2021 study by [Institute for Hunger Research & Solutions at Connecticut Foodshare](#), which surveyed over 1,000 people accessing emergency food, suggests you can create a more member-centric food bank by:



- ▶ Engaging with food bank users to create a culture where all voices are heard and respected and use their input to inform program changes.



- ▶ Committing to prioritizing member experience over volunteer tradition or convenience.



- ▶ Setting up a committee of diverse staff, volunteers, and food bank users to offer input on how service is offered.

Starting the work of centring or recentring members

The work to centre or recentre food bank users is about starting a conversation. Many food banks use surveys to get the conversation going. Then, of course, like in any good conversation, you need to listen and respond.

Survey your food bank users

Not sure what to ask? The Oregon Food Bank's [Client Engagement Best Practices Handbook](#) offers advice on how to adopt a member-centric approach. They recommend you start by surveying community members about what they want to see at the food bank. The handbook includes a [client satisfaction survey](#) template with basic questions about how



people experience your service. The [Food Shopper Equity](#) project from Northwest Harvest offers two alternative shopper survey templates.

Informal surveys

Running a “dotmocracy board,” where a question of the week is posted on poster board or a whiteboard and markers “vote” with a coloured dot or by placing a checkmark on their preferred choice, can be a fun way to start asking questions about your menu (though it may only work for some folks who can read and write English or see a board).

A comment box may offer folks a bit more privacy to share their feedback anonymously.

Plan an observation day

If directly engaging community members is an overwhelming idea, a less public first step might be to hold an observation day. The [Behavioural Economics Workbook](#) includes a suggested template you can use to evaluate your food bank in action.

Create a member advisory council

Northwest Harvest in Washington describes its [Participant Advisory Council](#) as an invaluable resource because it has given them better relationships and communication with community members. The council provides feedback on whether Northwest Harvest’s services are working or not. The members of the council are compensated for their time and are provided reimbursement for transportation and childcare costs.

Include community members at leadership tables

Larger food banks might also consider how member voices can be included in official bodies like the board of directors. Stateside, there are several initiatives that will support food banks that wish to create a community member advisory or leadership council. Virginia’s Capital Area Food Bank shares its [Client Leadership Council](#) model and offers a curriculum to other food banks that want to use this model.

Who's Missing at Your Food Bank?



You may already know that some underrepresented groups are not coming to access your food bank. If you don't have a good sense of who is missing at your food bank, you could ask other community organizations that work with low-income community members.

Direct service to underrepresented communities

If you know that some communities are underrepresented in your food bank clientele, the tip sheets in Part Two will provide you with some practices you can consider adopting to make your services more welcoming.

Connecting through community partners

Many food banks shared that they know there are communities they are not reaching directly. Partnerships with other community agencies working directly with equity-deserving communities extend the reach of a food bank to communities who may not be aware of your services.

In Northwest Harvest's [Anti-Racist Assessment Tool for Food Banks](#), they recommend you look to create relationships that are authentic and values-based. The most equitable partnerships allow both organizations to see value in continuing the relationship.

It may make sense to have a written agreement that details how you will support each other's work. This kind of agreement could also include expectations about equitable service of all community members and note how often you will discuss how the relationship is going for both parties.

Considerations in partnerships

As food banks look toward offering wraparound supports and programs, there's even more reason to look at partnering with other community groups. Urban Institute's 2020 report [Effective Programs and Policies for Promoting Economic Well-Being](#) offers advice to food banks about the opportunities and challenges that come with partnerships.

They flag that setting up partnerships should include deciding what data and information may be shared. It's also important to be clear about which partner is leading and which is supporting.¹⁹

Conclusion



From Food Banks BC

We are truly inspired by the food banks within British Columbia and beyond that continue to seek ways to make their services more welcoming and accessible to the community. We hope that reading this guide inspired in you both pride in the way you have been caring for communities and a desire to make changes to be more welcoming, accessible, and inclusive of all.

There is a role for each of us in this work. To create more accessible and equitable environments, it will take commitment from all of us, at both the individual and systems level.

One role that is common for us all is that of a learner. There will always be more for us to learn about each other and how we can better care for each other.

As an association of food banks, we know that we are all stronger together. We look forward to continuing to learn from our members and leaders in accessibility, equity, diversity and inclusion. We look forward to finding more ways to support your efforts and amplify your successes in creating more welcoming environments.

SPOTLIGHT



Spotlight on

-
- ① **Welcoming People with Disabilities**

 - ① **Welcoming 2SLGBTQIA+ Community Members**

 - ① **Using a Trauma-Informed Approach**

 - ① **Welcoming Newcomers to Canada**

 - ① **Welcoming Indigenous Communities**

 - ① **Welcoming Racialized Communities**





Welcoming People with Disabilities

Know the facts

22%



22% of Canadians aged 15 years and older **have a disability.**²⁰

40%



Over 40% of people with disabilities **experience barriers to communicating** via phone, in-person, or when accessing written materials.²¹

1 in 10



Nearly 1 in 10 Canadians aged 15 and older has a **mobility-related disability,** making it one of the most common disability types.²²

Action Tips

Assess the barriers at your food bank

- ▶ Complete the Accessibility and Equity Checklist in Appendix A to get a sense of some of the access issues your members may be facing.

Stay updated on respectful language choices

- ▶ Some terms that used to be considered acceptable, including “handicapped” and “wheelchair-bound,” are no longer acceptable. It’s better to use terms like “a disabled person” or “person who uses a wheelchair.” This focus on dignity of the person includes talking about people who have mental illnesses and who are living with an addiction.
- ▶ Preferences can change from person to person, so ask each person when possible and take the person’s lead.

Review your current policies

- ▶ If your supports for people with disabilities only apply to people who use mobility aids like wheelchair and canes, you might be creating barriers for people with less evident disabilities. Folks with pain-related disabilities, fatiguing conditions, anxiety, or with neurosensory disorders can find line ups and limited pick-up times a barrier.
- ▶ Do you require a doctor's note confirming a disability before a member can access home delivery or other supports? This type of policy can be a barrier for community members who cannot afford the cost of a doctor's note.

Learn more

Visit the University of British Columbia's Equity and Inclusion Office website for a look at their [Inclusive Language Resources](#) for more advice on current language choices.

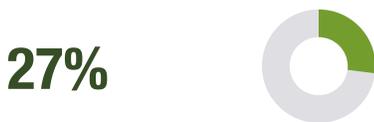
[Learn more now](#)





Welcoming 2SLGBTQIA+ Community Members

Know the facts



US-based data shows that 2SLGBTQIA+ people face **food insecurity rates** of 27%, which is more than the double the national rate for the general population.²³



The 2015 US Transgender Survey revealed that 68% of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals had **no identity documents** with their preferred correct name and gender.²⁴



Canadian 2SLGBTQIA+ youth are over-represented in poverty statistics, with between 25 and 40% of **homeless youth identifying as LGBTQ+.**²⁵

Action Tips

Offer visual cues of a safer space for 2SLGBTQIA+ visitors

- ▶ Rainbow flags and welcoming statements can help attendees feel welcomed.
- ▶ If your food bank posts a code of conduct or belonging agreement, ensure that it specifically welcomes this community. Be specific and state that homophobic and transphobic language is not acceptable.
- ▶ If your food bank displays religious symbols or is located in a faith-based facility, some 2SLGBTQIA+ may not feel comfortable accessing food. Consider minimizing religious symbols or providing food to a community partner known as a safe space for 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

Make space for pronouns

- ▶ Educate your volunteers on gender identity and the **significance of making space for pronouns**.
- ▶ Add a pronoun field to your registration forms and offer options like she, he, and they.
- ▶ If volunteers and staff wear nametags, include a place for their pronouns. This creates a space for all volunteers to self-identify. Adding pronouns to your nametag normalizes asking and helps prevent incorrect guesses.

Be considerate around family assumptions

- ▶ Choose family terms that leave space for all families. Start with gender neutral terms like spouse, kid, and parent and follow the guest's language choices.
- ▶ Be mindful that 2SLGBTQIA+ youth and adults may have been rejected or estranged from their family of origin, and food insecurity or homelessness may be a direct result.

Be flexible with ID requirements

- ▶ Transgender and non-binary people may not have ID that matches their current name or gender. Processes for correcting ID may be onerous, expensive, or emotionally difficult. If your registration process requires presentation of ID, this may exclude transfolks from accessing food.

Learn more

BC's Qmunity offers an affordable self-guided course "**Foundations of 2SLGBTQIA+ Inclusivity**" which covers the importance of advocacy and allyship, key terminology, the history of 2SLGBTQIA+ peoples across the globe and more.

[Learn more now](#)





Using a Trauma-Informed Approach

Know the facts

1 in 3



One in three Canadians have experienced **adverse childhood experiences** including sexual or physical abuse, exposure to family violence, or harmful experiences like neglect.²⁶ These traumatic experiences can result in higher rates of negative health outcomes.

Action Tips

Use a trauma-informed approach to your service

- ▶ Start by building your team's awareness of trauma. Seek out training for yourself and staff.
 - ▶ Give team members training or reading materials that can help them provide service in a way that isn't triggering or doesn't escalate the situation.
 - ▶ Create a food bank space that is calming
 - ▶ Is your space setting a tone of safety for community members? Make sure spaces are well lit, including parking lots and bathrooms. Does your food bank space flow well, with a clear entrance and easy exit?
 - ▶ Think about using warm colours, adding artwork or murals to walls, and signage that asserts the space is safe for all.
 - ▶ Keep noise levels down while service is underway. While low level music might be soothing for some, make sure that music is not so loud that people need to speak over it.
 - ▶ Think about trauma for your staff and volunteers too
-

Use a trauma-informed approach to your service continued

- ▶ People who deliver care can experience secondary traumatic stress, vicarious trauma, burnout, or compassion fatigue. Signs that staff or volunteers might be experiencing these impacts include emotional exhaustion, impatience, and feeling disconnected from their body or thoughts.
- ▶ You can help staff manage these risks by keeping open communication. Try hosting a closing circle so the team has a place to share what happened that day. Or consider setting up “listening partners” which get a chance to share with a co-worker at the end of their shift.

Learn more

Leah’s Pantry is California-based non-profit that uses a trauma-informed approach to food distribution. **Trauma, Resilience, and Nourishment** is an online course they created which looks at Adverse Childhood Experiences and the role of trauma and adversity in food insecurity. The 90-minute course is available for a minimal charge via their website.



[Learn more now](#)



Welcoming Newcomers to Canada

Know the facts



Newcomers to Canada experience **cultural food insecurity**. They may not have access to the foods they consumed in their home countries. In many cases, their traditional diets were healthier than the Canadian diet, and healthy newcomers eventually see declines in their health as they transition to a Canadian diet.²⁷



Newcomers may be from countries where emergency **food distribution was very different**. Not understanding how food banks work can create barriers. Add a language barrier and newcomers can be unaware of when food banks are open, how to qualify, or how their confidentiality will be protected.²⁸



Clients who do not yet have permanent citizenship might **fear risking their status** by using assistance programs.²⁹

Action Tips

Offer the right languages

- ▶ If your existing staff and volunteer team don't speak the languages required by newcomer communities, recruit volunteers with these skills.
- ▶ You can also create partnerships with community organizations serving newcomer populations to recruit volunteers.

Offer culturally appropriate foods

- ▶ Poll your food bank users to ask what foods are most helpful.
 - ▶ Aim any food purchases at items that cross cultural lines and diets.
-

Learn more

The Centre for Race and Culture, an Alberta based organization, has developed this free open-access resource for service providers and the general public. [Unmasking Micro-inequities](#) encourages readers to learn ways to hold themselves and others accountable when faced with everyday moments of discrimination in their own lives and workplaces.



[Learn more now](#)



Welcoming Indigenous Communities

Know the facts

30%



In 2021, research by Proof Canada found that Indigenous households have the **highest rates of food insecurity**. Over 30% of off-reserve Indigenous Peoples in the ten provinces were found to be food insecure.³⁰



Canada's Food Guide, what many non-Indigenous Canadians may consider a significant and ethical document, was informed by research conducted on malnourished children at Indian Residential Schools. These **studies were not consensual** and left some children in a prolonged state of malnourishment to benefit the study.³¹



Both historically and today, Indigenous communities are **denied access to the traditional, healthy foods** that were their normal diet before colonization.

Action Tips

Make space for all types of families

- ▶ The definition of family changes from culture to culture. In Indigenous communities, family members and neighbours may play significant roles in each other's lives, providing assistance and sharing resources in ways that reach beyond what is expected in Westernized family units. Acknowledge these differences when you set policies.

Don't let stereotypes slide

- ▶ If your volunteers or food bank members say things about Indigenous people that lean on stereotypes, don't tolerate it. To make a safe space for all, you need to learn how to address anti-Indigenous stereotypes. Learn about [methods to disrupt bias](#) when you see it impacting how people are treating each other.

Get to know the traditional territory where you operate and live

- ▶ Do the research to find the traditional, and often unceded territory, that your food bank is located on. Online maps like the [map developed by BC Assembly of First Nations](#) can help.

Learn more

Indigenous Perspectives Society (IPS) offers a 3-hour workshop called [Building Local Relationships](#).

This training shares Indigenous cultural perspectives and promotes allyship. In this workshop, participants explore ways both organizations and individuals can build strengths in areas that impact relationships with Indigenous individuals, organizations, and communities.

[Learn more now](#)





Welcoming Racialized Communities

Know the facts

28.9%



Racialized communities, sometimes called Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC), experience **higher rates of food insecurity** than white Canadians. In 2017 to 2018, 28.9% percent of Black households were living with food insecurity, compared to 11.1% of white households.³²

2021



Canada's main data source for understanding the income levels and food security for Canadians **only started tracking race-based data in 2021.**³³ As a result, the **Canadian Income Survey** is missing a lot of detail about how different racialized communities experience food insecurity.

1 in 4



In the US, where more detailed data is available, nearly 1 in 4 Black and Hispanic families **faced food insecurity during the pandemic.**³⁴

Action Tips

Don't let racial stereotypes slide

- If you hear team members or community members using racial stereotypes, make sure to talk to them about it. Plan how you will **interrupt racist comments** when you hear them.

Learn when to call in and when to call out

- ▶ Learn when you need to respond immediately and when coming back to the person might have a better effect. This is the difference between calling people out and calling people in.

Show your support for racialized communities

- ▶ Make it a regular practice to talk about how racialized communities might be hit hard by what's going on in the news or your community. Local issues like transit strikes and global issues like civil war can be impacting some communities more directly than others. Talk about how you can show support and who might need extra care or patience at the next service.

Reflect the racial diversity of your community

- ▶ Review the current diversity of your volunteers and staff team. If needed, do outreach to community organizations that work with racialized communities to recruit volunteers to your food bank and any leadership tables at your organization. Community members are more likely to trust the safety of your space if they see people like them working the food bank.

Learn more

Northwest Harvest's [Anti-Racist Assessment Tool for Food Banks](#) helps food bank managers and other staff in decision-making roles assess where they are in their anti-racism journey and where they want to be.

[Learn more now](#)



Appendix One



Glossary

Accessibility

Accessibility is the work we do to ensure people with disabilities can access services and all aspects of society on an equal basis with others. It includes seeking ways to remove barriers to access including physical barriers, attitudes, policies, technology, and how we communicate information.

Culturally Safe Environment

Describes an environment that is spiritually, socially, and emotionally safe, as well as physically safe for people. It is a space where there is no assault, challenge, or denial of their identity of who they are and what they need.

Dignified Service

Delivering service supports the self-respect of the person, recognizes their inherent value, and does nothing to undermine it.

Discrimination

Discrimination occurs when a person is treated unfairly by either imposing a burden on them or denying them a privilege, benefit, or opportunity enjoyed by others, based on characteristics or differences protected by human rights legislation.

Protected characteristics include Indigenous identity, race, colour, ancestry, place of origin, political belief, religion, marital status, family status, physical or mental disability, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age of that person, or because that person has been convicted of a crime or a summary conviction offence that is unrelated to the employment or to the intended employment of that person.

Diversity

Describes the differences in the lived experiences and perspectives of people including race, ethnicity, colour, ancestry, place of origin, political belief, religion, marital status, family status, disability status, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age, class, and socio-economic situations.

Equity

Equity refers to achieving parity in policy, process, and outcomes for historically and/or currently underrepresented and/or marginalized people and groups while accounting for diversity. It considers power, access, opportunities, treatment, impacts, and outcomes.

Inclusion

Inclusion is an active, intentional, and continuous process to address inequities in power and privilege and build a respectful and diverse community that ensures welcoming spaces and opportunities to flourish for all.

2SLGBTQIA+

An acronym that stands for Two-Spirit (2S), Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and Aromantic identities. The plus sign recognizes that not all identities within the community are reflected in the acronym.

Racialized

Previously called “visible minorities” in Canada, this term refers to people that are non-white in Canada. Racialized people experience discrimination and racism at an individual and institutional level.

Appendix Two



Accessibility and Equity Checklist for Food Banks

Category	Item	No	Somewhat	Yes
Accessible Communication	Does the food bank have signage or other materials that explain how the food bank runs and what to expect?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Accessible Communication	Does the food bank offer options for non-verbal communication?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Parking	Is there an area where a HandyDart vehicle or accessible taxi can safely drop off a member?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emergency Response	Does the food bank communicate sudden changes to service to members?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emergency Response	Do food bank operators have an emergency evacuation plan for the food bank site?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Emergency Response	Does the food bank display signage indicate that naloxone is available?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Entrance	Is the path from the entryway to the food bank accessible to users of wheelchairs, walkers, and strollers?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Entrance and interior doors	Is there an automatic door at all doorways and washrooms?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Entrance and interior doors	Are non-automatic doors adjusted to be free swinging or have properly adjusted door-closer mechanisms so they're easy to open and stay open longer?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Entrance and interior doors	Are non-automatic doors equipped with lever-style handles?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Equity	Does the food bank provide signage or information in languages other than English?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Equity	Do food bank operators have the language diversity needed to service the membership?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Equity	Does the food bank display signage that reassures LGBTQ2S+ community members they are welcome?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Food Quality	Does the food bank accommodate food allergies or other dietary restrictions?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hours of Operation	Are service hours sufficient to reduce wait times and crowding?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lighting	Is there sufficient lighting to allow someone with low vision to navigate the space?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Location	Is the food bank near public transit?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Parking	Is there designated accessible parking available?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Policy	Does the food bank have the authority or influence to make changes to the building, i.e., to improve doorways or washrooms?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Policy	Does the food bank communicate how a member can request accommodation of their disability, i.e., reduced wait times and home delivery?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Policy	Does the food bank communicate a complaint process or how to report an accessibility issue?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Policy	Is a code of conduct posted or communicated to members and operators?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Policy	Are food bank operators trained in de-escalation or other methods for holding safe space?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Waiting area	Is there a rest area available to members with health conditions that limit their ability to stand or wait for extended periods of time?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Waiting area	Is there an area to wait protected from weather and the elements?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Washroom facilities	Is there a washroom available for member use when the food bank is in operation?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Washroom facilities	Does the washroom have grab bars and easy-to-use accessories such as sensor-controlled faucets and hand dryers?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Wayfinding	Are floors and walls colour contrasting with no busy patterns?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Welcoming Environment	Do food bank operators greet members as they enter the space?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Welcoming Environment	Do members have a degree of choice when engaging with the food menu?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Welcoming Environment	Are serving or cooking suggestions available for items that may be unfamiliar to members?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

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