

5. FOOD SECURITY

Ensure that all Manitobans have physical and economic access to healthy, safe, and affordable food.

Manitobans ranked food security as the second most important area to direct efforts in order to reduce poverty and improve social inclusion.¹²⁴ Food security is when all people have physical and economic access to enough safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs for an active and healthy life.¹²⁵ However, 17.5 percent of Manitoba children and 12.1 percent of Manitoba households experienced food insecurity in 2012.¹²⁶ In March 2014, 61,691 Manitobans used a food bank.¹²⁷ Almost half of all households that used food banks included children.¹²⁸ More than half were Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) participants and more than 16 percent were working.¹²⁹ This provides further evidence to suggest that EIA benefits and minimum wage are not sufficient to meet basic needs.

Access to adequate and healthy food is a key social determinant of health. Hunger can lead to serious and permanent physical and mental health issues. It is also associated with poor educational outcomes, which can create barriers to moving into other education opportunities that lead to employment and economic security.

Key barriers to food security include low income, geographic isolation, a lack of access to transportation, and low food literacy levels.¹³⁰ These underlying risk factors must be addressed if we are to achieve long-term solutions. The recommendations in this report do just that, by collectively working to improve incomes and therefore economic access to transportation and food. However, the Province of Manitoba should also take direct action to meet immediate food needs, improve food literacy levels, and support community-based initiatives that improve access to healthy and affordable food. We recommend the following actions:

5-1. Develop an adequately funded and nutritionally sound provincial school nourishment program that is available to all schools in need by 2020.

Many children living in families with low incomes go to school without having eaten a proper breakfast or packed a healthy lunch. Some children will not have eaten at all. Families with low incomes are often forced to choose between paying for housing or for food. Many families will turn to food banks when housing costs eat up their food budgets. Others will go through temporary periods with little or no food. In Canada, 31 percent of elementary students and 62 percent of secondary school students don't eat breakfast daily.¹³¹ Well over half of Manitoba youth in grades 9 through 12 report eating two or less servings of fruits and vegetables per day—far less than the recommended daily intake.¹³²

Studies show that well-nourished children are better positioned to succeed in school. Access to healthy food is linked to improved attentiveness, attitude, behavior, memory, problem-solving skills, and creative abilities.¹³³ Poorly nourished children score much lower on tests of vocabulary, reading comprehension, arithmetic, and general knowledge.¹³⁴ When students are not hungry, they can focus more clearly on their academic studies.

A long-term solution requires investments to ensure families have access to enough income to become food secure. In the short-term, school nourishment programs can provide students with regular access to healthy foods. The Child Nutrition Council of Manitoba supports nearly 200 schools across the province that are running programs to feed around 17,000 students healthy snacks, breakfasts, and light lunches. These school nourishment programs are open to all students and are delivered alongside nutrition education components that allow students to learn more

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about healthy eating and develop food skills. Studies of specific Manitoba programs show improved literacy scores, better behavior, school attendance, and ability to learn.¹³⁵

Budget 2014 provided new funding to the Child Nutrition Council of Manitoba to support more nourishment programs in high-need schools. The Council is now able to support close to 250 programs compared to 15 in 2001. The Council is able to assist schools with approximately 25 percent of their costs. But costs are high in schools that require programming every day of the week, especially if they want to deliver nutritious food. Schools work hard to develop partnerships that leverage support from the community, but available resources vary across communities and some require more help than others.

The Province of Manitoba should build on this support by developing an adequately funded and nutritionally sound comprehensive provincial school nourishment program. An adequately funded program would be available to all schools in need and would better support the purchasing and storage of nutritious food. There is a need to include a fund that supports the purchase of equipment deemed necessary by Provincial inspectors to deliver school-based programs. An adequately funded program would also better support the delivery of school-based programs. These are often delivered by school staff or volunteers from the community. School nourishment programs can provide training and employment opportunities for parents and other community members. Some school divisions have partnered with schools to address the needs of school-based programs, including human resources. More partnerships like these are needed. Partnerships with social enterprise to supply food for school-based programs provides another opportunity to support jobs for local people.

A comprehensive provincial school nourishment program would be flexible, allowing for programs to be designed based on community strengths and students' needs, which may include accommodation for culturally appropriate food and special dietary needs. A flexible program would also recognize and address the unique challenges and opportunities in First Nations schools.

Finally, a comprehensive program would incorporate opportunities for students to learn about nutrition and develop food skills. It would also support food program coordinators to upgrade skills and knowledge around nutrition, which could be facilitated by stronger connections between schools and public health dieticians attached to regional health authorities.

5-2. Immediately establish a Food Security Action Fund to provide grants that support food security initiatives across Manitoba.

People are taking action in communities across Manitoba to improve food security. They are building community gardens and kitchens that provide opportunities for people to learn how to grow and prepare healthy food in their community. They are establishing 'good food clubs' which provide community members with workshops on nutrition education and food skills, and improve access to affordable, healthy, and local food. Different food-related programs and projects have been developed and implemented to meet the unique needs of a variety of communities—First Nations, newcomer, Northern etc.

These successful community-based initiatives and other new initiatives should be better supported so that more Manitobans can become food secure. The Province of Manitoba administers the Northern Healthy Foods Initiative, which provides funding for local and regional food system projects in Northern Manitoba. This type of support can be expanded to other parts of the province through the establishment of a Food Security Action Fund that provides grants to deliver long-term and stable support to successful community-based food security initiatives across the province. Short-term grants should also be available to support new and innovative initiatives.

The fund should be created with new dollars rather than by dollars redirected from existing food-related initiatives. It should enable communities to develop, staff, and implement a wide range of projects that increase access to healthy foods and improve knowledge and skills around nutrition and food preparation. Communities should have the freedom to design projects that meet their unique needs and build on their unique strengths. A Manitoba Food Security Action Fund could be modeled after British Columbia's Community Food Action Initiative, which provides funding to food security projects in over 100 communities across the province.

5-3. Provide immediate funding to train and employ local community food coordinators who live in Northern Manitoba communities.

Food security can be a significant challenge in Northern Manitoba communities. The high price of healthy, perishable food items in the North poses a major barrier to food security. The lack of healthy food options has contributed to high rates of diabetes and obesity in Northern communities. Low levels of nutritional education mean that even when healthy food is accessible, it is not always purchased. While Northern communities are finding ways to become more food self-sufficient—growing and harvesting healthy foods locally—more can be done to develop community capacity.

A community food coordinator would help to coordinate the development and implementation of a community food security strategy in partnership with local stakeholders. The objective of the community food strategy would be to improve food security within the community. The community local food coordinator would work to ensure that local food security projects align with the community strategy.

Northern communities have been implementing food security projects and there is high demand for more to be developed. Individuals working with these communities report that many food security projects are supported largely by volunteers who are not always able to devote the time needed to ensure the project is successful, which can lead to high burn out rates that threaten the success of food security projects. They also report that projects are often supported by people who live outside of the community and do not necessarily have a strong connection to community partners or understanding of the communities needs and opportunities. Ideally, local players would develop the capacity and be leveraged to support local projects. The Province of Manitoba can improve food security and create employment opportunities in Northern communities by providing funding to train and employ local community food coordinators who live in Northern Manitoba communities. Coordinators should be part of a structure with reporting channels and resources, such as the health authority.

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