



# Bridging the Gap between Funders and Food Assistance Providers

How might funding agencies and service providers collaborate towards greater outcomes within Calgary's emergency food system?

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Catamount Fellowship • Institute for Community Prosperity  
April 2023

# Foreword

This research report was developed in collaboration with the Institute for Community Prosperity at Mount Royal University (MRU) and Vibrant Communities Calgary, stewards of the *Enough for All* poverty reduction strategy, to explore how funders fund emergency food assistance and what changes might be needed to help improve collaborations and outcomes among agencies providing emergency food assistance programs in Calgary.

Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) has been working for more than a decade advocating for long-term strategies that address the root causes of poverty in Calgary. VCC works collaboratively with stakeholders and partners to advance the Enough for All Poverty Reduction Strategy.

With the help of my community partners at VCC, as well as my faculty mentor, Heather Nelson, I began my research into Calgary's emergency food system to clarify the funding structure of the emergency food system, and how it enhances and inhibits the capacity for formal and informal organizations to meet the needs of Calgarians. I am still in a position where there is much to learn about how people and organizations influence and address complex systemic issues.

As such, I chose to explore the ways in which funding agencies and service providers could collaborate towards greater outcomes within Calgary's emergency food system.



# Food Insecurity in Calgary

## Hunger and Food Insecurity

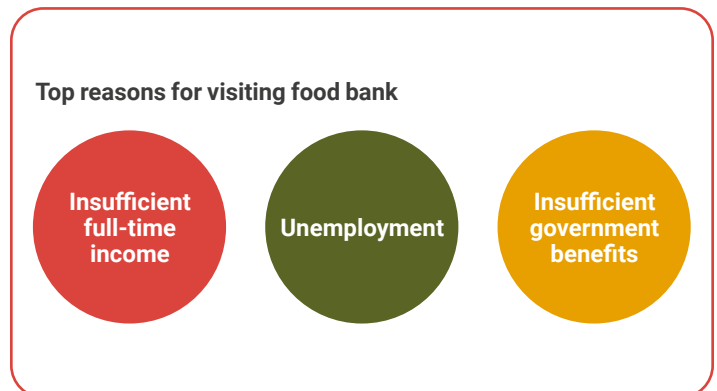
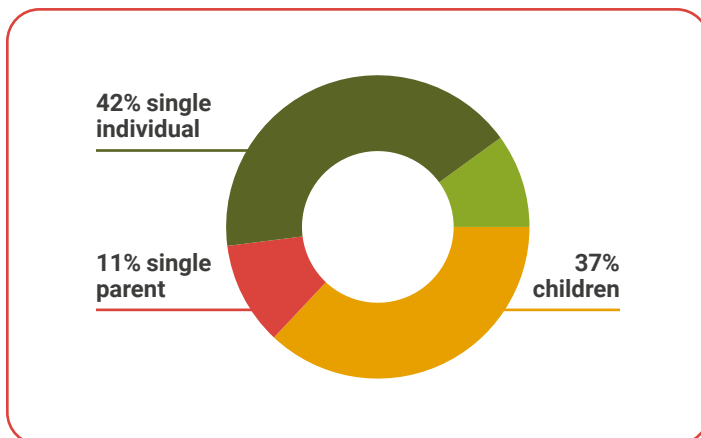
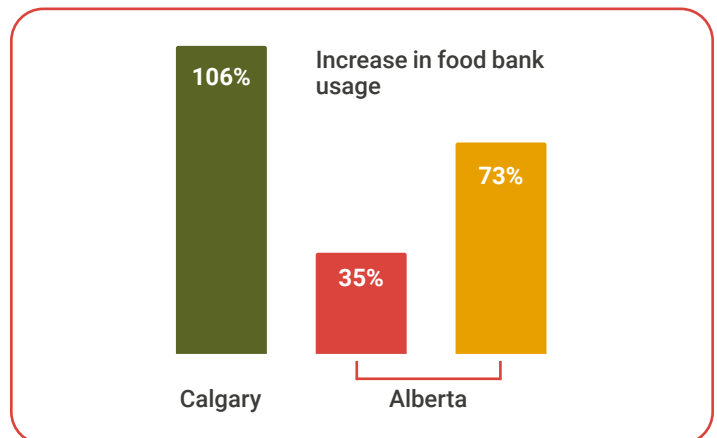
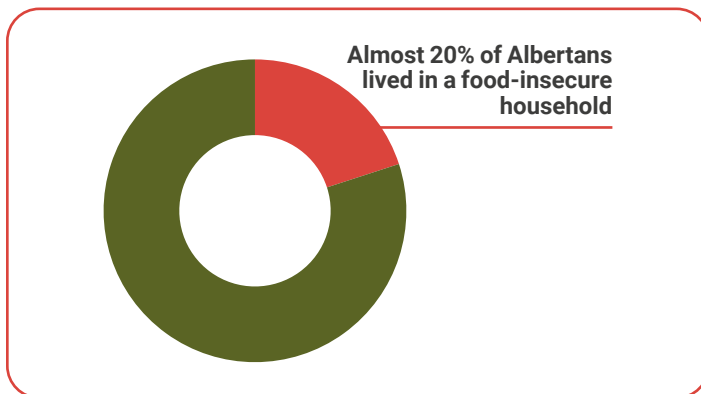
The terms 'hunger' and 'food insecurity' are often used interchangeably, but the terms are not synonyms. Hunger is a broad, imprecise, emotionally and politically charged term that advocates find useful. As such, 'hunger' takes center stage to frame the issue in promotional material and event titles, but will not be further referenced in this paper.

In academic, government and industry publications, in contrast, 'food insecurity' is more commonly used.

In Canada, food insecurity is defined in the following ways:

- **Marginal food insecurity:** People worry about running out of food and/or limited food selection due to a lack of money for food.
- **Moderate food insecurity:** People compromise in quality and/or quantity of food due to a lack of money for food.
- **Severe food insecurity:** People miss meals, reduce food intake, and at the most extreme go day(s) without food. (PROOF, n.d., in VCC, 2021)

Measuring food insecurity can be difficult through the most commonly utilized datasets of year-to-year census data, and it is likely that food insecurity is underreported and underestimated. (VCC, 2021)



- Data from a variety of sources suggest that, as of 2021, almost 20% of Albertans lived in a food-insecure household.
- In 2022, using March as a snapshot, Food Banks Canada reported an increase in food bank usage of 106% year-over-year in Calgary, compared to a national increase of 35% and 73% in Alberta.
- Of those clients, 37 per cent were children, 11 per cent were single-parent households and 42 per cent were single individuals.
- The top three reasons clients visited the Calgary Food Bank in 2022: insufficient full-time income, unemployment, and insufficient government benefits. (Condon, 2022)

# Methodology

The research focuses on the relationships and systems that define the funding system in Calgary. The initial stages of the research for this project included community learning opportunities facilitated by VCC as well as a literature review of both academic and non-academic sources. For academic sources, the review included items such as scholarly journal articles, books, and case studies. The non-academic sources consulted included reports and articles compiled by local, regional, and nation-wide non-profit organizations such as philanthropic foundations, think tanks and food assistance providers. Where possible, sources were kept to a local and Canadian context. However, a relative paucity of academic studies on emergency food assistance and funding in the Canadian context resulted in the consultation of some American and international sources.

Additionally, this scholarly output is informed by data gathered from Canada Revenue Agency and GrantConnect databases, as well as conversations with multiple individuals and organizations working towards greater food security in Calgary and area. These sources were used to identify key themes and systemic gaps between stated goals and actions from both funders and fund-seekers. Furthermore, recommendations to seek potential levers for change will be considered as a part of this scholarly output.

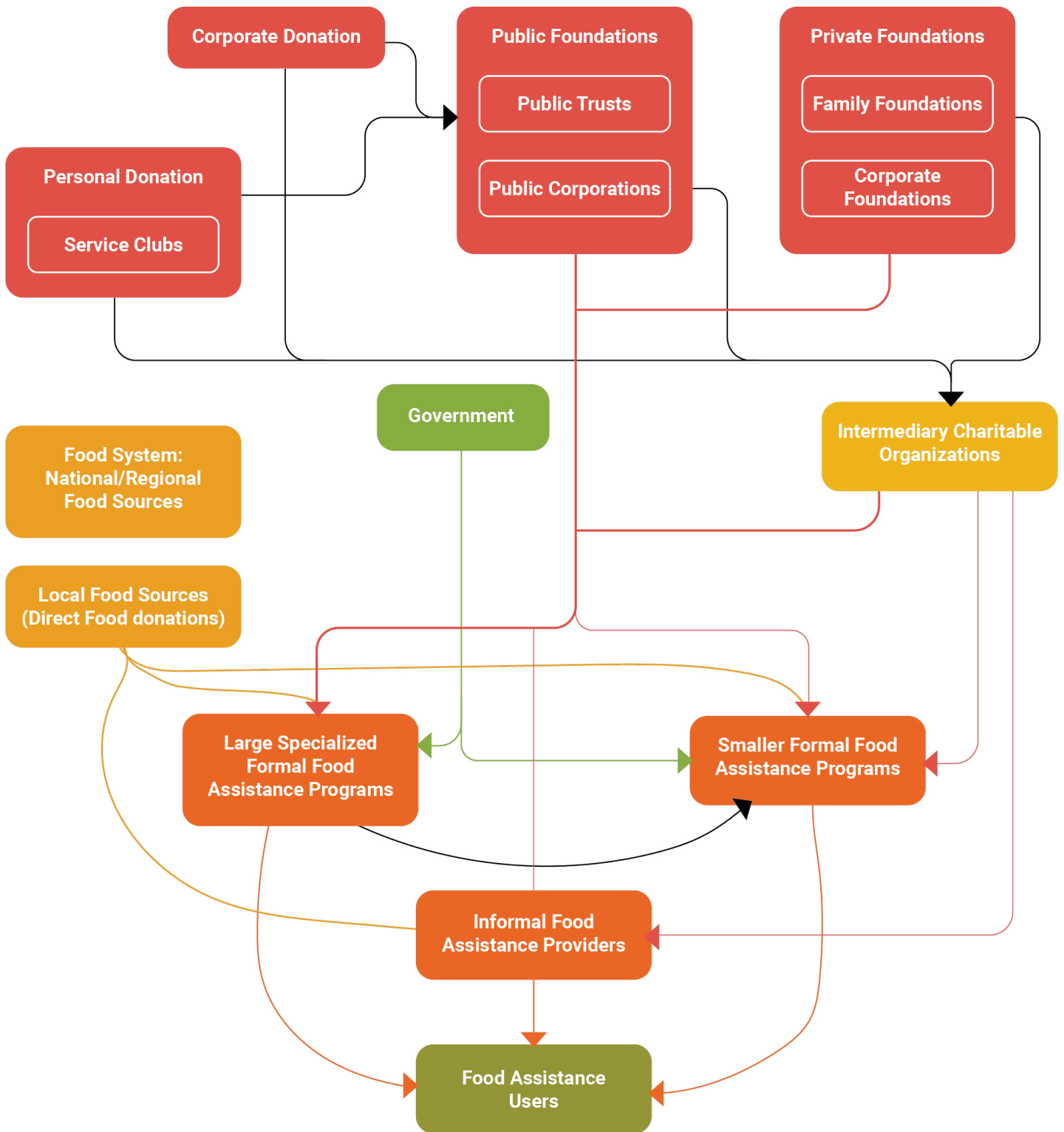


# Findings

## The Emergency Food Sector

**Funding constraints** have been repeatedly highlighted as the **biggest barrier** to emergency food provision. (VCC, 2021, VCC 2022) There is an acknowledged problem amongst food security providers that funding agencies tend to shy away from funding existing services and encourage start-ups and pilot programs. (Unwin, 2005) This is felt more by smaller organizations without the capacity to engage in continued grant-writing. While newer programs may be innovative, they cannot sustain their efforts in the long-term without continued support. Alberta’s cultural ethos tends to celebrate enterprise and individual initiative, which suggests a bias toward social enterprise and “self-sufficiency” approaches. Even worse, the proliferation of programming leads to a situation where organizations are competing for funding even while they are encouraged to collaborate. (VCC, 2021)

# Funding System



**Figure 1: Funding and interactions within Calgary’s Emergency Food Assistance System**

The funding of emergency food assistance providers in Calgary is performed by a wide range of actors including but not limited to community and municipalities, family and corporate foundations, rotary clubs, other charities acting as grant-makers, and government actors. Furthermore, not all charitable organizations perform food assistance as their sole mandate.

# Relationship Management: Funders and Fund-Seekers

The maintenance of funding is an existential need for service providers, but not so for funders. Such an imbalance of power inherent in the funder/service provider relationship means that the onus is typically on the service providers as fund-seekers to maintain and stabilize the relationship. Discussions with service providers surfaced the need to maintain credibility while utilizing the tools of emotional appeal to successfully acquire funding. This relationship management takes several different forms, varying accordingly to the intent, means, and assessments preferred by each funder. This mismatch between stated goals and measured objectives leads to service providers and their funders being continually engaged in a complex and mutually unsatisfactory dance to reconcile perspectives and agendas. (Phillips & Wyatt, 2021)

To analyze this, I utilized Unwin’s (2005) framework of intended impacts and organizational responses to aid in exploring and developing a greater understanding of how the prevalence of private funding may have constrained or facilitated outcomes for end users in Calgary’s emergency food assistance system. The first dimension, ‘Intended Impacts’, identifies three different objectives. The first objective, ‘Funding for Delivery’ is the maintenance of ongoing services and activities. This involves finding interventions and responses that work and backing them. While this approach has a core philanthropic intent, it is important to understand its drawbacks and benefits, as outlined in Table 1. The second objective is institution-building, or ‘Funding for Capacity’, which forms a substantial part of many grant-making trusts’ portfolios. Understanding the different styles of funding that suit capacity for institution building is crucial to achieving effectiveness in this approach. The third objective is ‘Funding for Systems Change’, which is explicitly designed to influence the way in which the government and other entities with sway in policy systems operate. This objective is achieved by funding research and exemplar projects, for example.

Funding Intents	Trends	Funder Risks	Provider Risks
<b>Funding for Delivery</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Keeping good things going.”</li> <li>• Defined metrics of success</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May limit ability to innovate</li> <li>• Hard to exit commitments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning constricted by available funding</li> <li>• Potential for “mission drift”</li> </ul>
<b>Funding for Capacity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Systematic in evaluating impact</li> <li>• Organizational Development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Navigating a complex system, difficult to assess where best to expand</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenges to independence</li> </ul>
<b>Funding for Systems Change</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investment in knowledge, research, policy</li> <li>• Platforms for influence (Websites, conferences)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires careful relationship management between funder and applicant</li> <li>• Long term commitment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires careful relationship management between funder and applicant</li> </ul>

**Table 1: Funding Intents, Trends, and Associated Risks**

The second dimension of Unwin's framework describes four main survival strategies for voluntary organizations. The first strategy is called the "overheads" strategy or 'Cost Recovery', which involves allocating costs to activities and charging the price that meets the real costs of delivering it. The second strategy, 'Cost Diversion', involves managing core costs by converting them into projects, which requires a creative mind and cooperative funders. The third strategy of 'Cost Donation' involves pursuing voluntary income from various sources such as grants and donations, which provides strategic independence to trustees. Finally, 'Cost Reduction' is a fourth strategy that involves reducing costs by making efficiencies and seeking grants and support. All of these strategies are not mutually exclusive, and many organizations use them in combination.

Response Types	Methods	Typical Organizations:
<b>Cost Recovery</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Careful budgeting and accounting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most, but established organizations in particular</li> <li>Aim to deliver a definable service</li> </ul>
<b>Cost Diversion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organizational re-launches</li> <li>Managing core costs by converting them into individual projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Informal food assistance providers: (Start-ups, volunteer-led programs)</li> <li>Filling targeted service gaps</li> </ul>
<b>Cost Donation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tends toward voluntary fundraising</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Established Organizations</li> <li>Deliver towards clearly defined objectives</li> </ul>
<b>Cost Reduction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Searching for efficiency savings</li> <li>Mergers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organizations delivering services on a larger scale</li> </ul>

**Table 2: Organizational Responses**



Organization Name	Charity Status Since	Received donations	Non-received donations	Other Charities	Government Funding	All Other Revenue	Total Revenue
Calgary Inter-Faith Food Bank Society	1989	\$9,150,167	\$41,696,202	\$4,253,352	\$52,969	\$1,291,542	\$56,444,232
Brown Bagging for Calgary Street Kids Society	2002	\$1,253,192	\$1,510,000	\$0	\$94,514	\$147,849	\$3,005,555
Calgary Meals on Wheels	1967	\$1,045,995	\$592,985	\$283,309	\$1,387,524	\$30,018	\$5,456,591
Community Kitchen Program of Calgary	2000	\$424,876	\$252,950	\$543,410	\$407,893	\$389,190	\$2,383,027
Leftovers Foundation	2018	\$109,352	\$1,662,432	\$581,454	\$213,008	\$0	\$2,569,309
Veterans Association Food Bank	2019	\$815,349	\$63,571	\$648,281	\$301,016	\$124,563	\$1,895,568
Victory Outreach Foundation	1995	\$471,978	\$56,300	\$234,088	\$64,029	\$9,211	\$1,433,113
I Can for Kids Foundation	2017	\$128,430	\$250,273	\$552,050	\$50,000	\$0	\$980,753
ECSSSEN Career School	2004	\$11,074	\$10,445	\$0	\$607,908	\$0	\$631,151
Hillhurst-Sunnyside Community Association	1980	\$1,060	\$4,658	\$10,844	\$1,111,271	\$0	\$1,957,078

**Table 3: Revenue Sources of Select Calgary Food Charities, 2020-2021**

As indicated in Table 3, the bulk of donation funding is being allocated to large organizations. These larger organizations will also act as distributors to other service providers. Some types of service providers buck this trend, being community organizations, or are newly involved in this area, and derive funding from various levels of government. Preferential funding of large and established organizations is reflective of their presence, knowledge, and proven quality, but also precludes more involved understanding of the issue of food insecurity and its causes by funders themselves.

There is then a disconnect between funders and results, as these donations are made knowing that redistribution will take place. This may indicate a mismatch between stated goals and actions. It is unlikely that all funders are willingly spending money in order to maintain the status quo.

Rather, their behavior can be explained by the fact that this layout of funding distribution allows funders to delegate risk. Long-established organizations have proven track records and are measurably successful at alleviating the symptoms of food insecurity. Furthermore, traditional approaches are also the most well-suited to generating operational data, another aspect that is highly prized by larger, institutional funders.

Finally, not all of these organizations have food security as their primary mission, with one example being the Hillhurst Sunnyside Community Association, who have a more varied portfolio of programming.

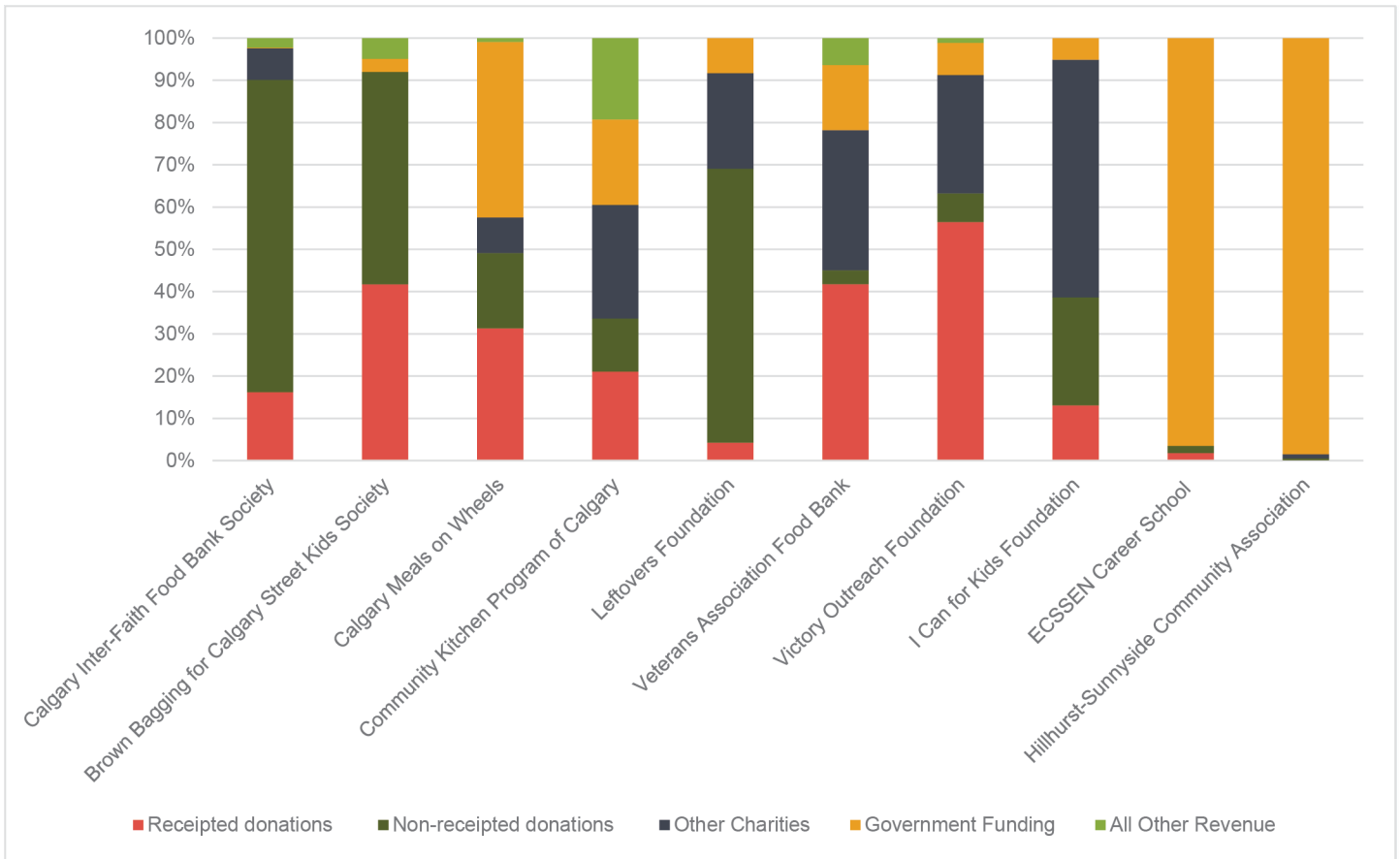


Organization Name	Charitable Programs	Management and Administration	Fundraising	Gifts to other Charities or Qualified Donees	Other	Total Expenses
<b>Calgary Inter-Faith Food Bank Society</b>	\$10,742,109	\$4,114,141	\$2,515,223	\$32,898,567	\$0	\$50,270,040
<b>Brown Bagging for Calgary Street Kids Society</b>	\$46,425,527	\$1,091,959	\$648,028	\$2,250,065	\$0	\$48,165,515
<b>Calgary Meals on Wheels</b>	\$1,784,804	\$482,958	\$421,702	\$0	\$9,071	\$2,698,535
<b>Community Kitchen Program of Calgary</b>	\$3,599,074	\$742,513	\$246,673	\$0	\$338,459	\$4,926,719
<b>Leftovers Foundation</b>	\$2,205,367	\$254,117	\$61,116	\$0	\$0	\$2,510,602
<b>Veterans Association Food Bank</b>	\$2,835,535	\$985,635	\$11,946	\$0	\$0	\$3,833,116
<b>Victory Outreach Foundation</b>	\$1,657,151	\$172,450	\$33,242	\$10,667	\$53,271	\$1,926,781
<b>I Can for Kids Foundation</b>	\$904,786	\$281,555	\$153,877	\$81,130	\$0	\$1,421,349
<b>ECSSSEN Career School</b>	\$889,244	\$62,902	\$85,700	\$0	\$0	\$1,035,846
<b>Hillhurst-Sunnyside Community Association</b>	\$316,543	\$2,395	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$318,938

**Table 4: Expenses of Select Calgary Food Charities, 2020-2021**

Calgary's emergency food assistance providers are responding to these trends. Established organizations like the Calgary Food Bank, whilst receiving the lion's share of funding, have also engaged in efforts to assist other charities in the system. Certain organizations have engaged in more efforts to engage voluntary fundraising, while smaller, informal programs are engaged in organizational re-launches and expanded operations to take advantage of additional funding. Across the board, all providers have been engaging in cost-cutting exercises. Many organizations are operating on low management and administration costs relative to their size in order to balance their books and search for greater efficiencies.

These means of funding drive efficiency through cost recovery and reduction but are most often expansions of traditional activities, focused on traditional assessments, rather than developing new processes. Such expansions may result in increased capacity but fail to address the drivers of new demand, such as unemployment, low wages and stagnating incomes, inadequate social assistance, food cost inflation. In this traditional system of funders and fund-seekers, the onus is placed on fund-seekers to maintain relationships. The typically inflexible, transactional, and metrics-driven nature of grant-writing leads to transactional relationships that allow funders to operate at arms' length. This also pushes service providers to engage in cost-diversion and cost-reduction. While leaner and diversified operations may be admirable in a business sense, these are diversions of effort that strain operational capacity.



**Figure 2: Organizational Revenue Mix of Select Calgary Food Charities, 2020-2021**

Furthermore, there are limits to these response strategies. As can be seen in figure 2, Revenue diversification is already prevalent as a practice in Alberta’s non-profits. In Grasse and Lam’s 2021 study on the effects of revenue diversification, it was found that maximizing revenue diversification did not benefit the financial health of organizations. Moreover, scope creep through project expansion and attempts at revenue diversification was noted as a concern in communications with stakeholders. This perceived need for growth to maintain funding competitiveness is further straining already limited organizational capacity. Consequently, the non-profit sector understands that there are clear links between poverty and food insecurity, but are prevented from designing, testing and implementing this knowledge through less traditional programs that may reduce food insecurity.

Another issue is the distortion of the approach to ‘solving’ food insecurity in terms of misapplied metrics and inappropriate timescales. There is a tremendous funding focus on service delivery, thus resulting in a focus on measurable outcomes centered around a given tonnage of food being distributed. This is then utilized to calculate other metrics in dollar amounts, meals served, and even environmental footprints. Such measurements are undoubtedly useful, but this metric-driven approach has been criticized for leading to the system acting on the end user rather than acting for the end user. (Lenczner, Bourns, and Lauriaut, 2021) While funders need to understand what they are paying for, impact measurement is a highly contentious matter as it involves the assessment of highly subjective, if not intangible areas. This data-driven approach tends to use metrics that incentivize cost-driven approaches from service providers when they engage in grant-writing or solicit donations.

Metric-based assessments may work in the private sector, where inputs and outputs are tangible. It is much harder to establish metrics in a sector that revolves around tangible inputs being spent on intangible outputs. That is not to say, impossible, but rather more difficult and less presentable as objective in a manner like an input/output analysis. Relief versus root cause is also a concern, with funders focused on proven and measurable actions, such as the distribution of meals or hampers. It is much harder to prove long-term success outside of reduced demand, which is harder to attribute to the efforts of a single organization. These short-run efforts may alleviate symptoms but result in duplication of effort as organizations simultaneously collaborate and compete with one another, a phenomenon referred to as co-opetition. (Gnyawaliet al., 2006 in VCC, 2021) This environment reflects the complexity of the issue and the variety of responses possible, and also drives competition between organizations in a way that is perhaps not conducive to greater systems-wide outcomes.

There is a particularly poignant statement quoted in Bailey's 2021 study where a City of Calgary Councillor blandly states that "food isn't sexy". A touch ironic, but such a statement reflects the disregard towards food insecurity as an issue that requires government action. This disregard is compounded by the belief that the existing food security system is sufficient in its methods, but only needs expansionary funding to meet demand. These sentiments reflect the bulk of funding for food

security in Calgary being directed to established organizations with proven track records. This approach can lead to a focus on specific programs and initiatives that address immediate needs but may not have a long-term impact on the food system as a whole. In contrast, systemic change requires a longer-term commitment by funders and service providers with a focus on addressing underlying issues and challenges that affect the entire food system. Unfortunately, funders who may be more interested in innovation and new ideas remain hesitant to commit to long-term support, which is reflected in the reported ease of attracting funding for pilot programs, but the lack of long-term funding can make it challenging to implement systemic changes.

The other half of the funding equation lies in corporations and private individuals. These large sources of giving wield outsized influence on the actions of nonprofit organizations. (Canada Helps, 2022) However, the need for impact evaluation to maintain long-term commitments restrict actors in the emergency food assistance system in the types of work they do. Overall, it appears that there are several areas that need to be addressed to ensure that efforts to address food insecurity are effective and efficient.

Throughout the process, two major themes surfaced in the interactions between funders and service providers: the purported "ideal" user of emergency food service systems and the insufficiency of the current system to meet rising demand. Taken together, these two themes spotlight potential barriers in the system that prevent the achievement of greater outcomes.



# The “Ideal” User

Existing preconceptions of emergency food service users colour the system. In a broad sweep common to Anglo-American jurisdictions, welfare is approached in a quasi-punitive manner. Driven by the conception of the ‘deserving poor’, such an approach relegates welfare recipients to a second-class citizenship status. (Mosher, 2007) This creates a distinction between the “good citizen” who bears responsibility for their own lives, and those who refuse to accept individual responsibility in maintaining their economic security, and by extension, their food security, fueling the political discourse surrounding the potential abuse of social safety nets despite repeated evidence to the contrary.

## Food bank Myth/Reality

Myth	Reality
Only people who do not have jobs access food banks.	<b>31% of food bank users work.</b> One of the top 3 reasons for using the food bank is <b>income insufficiency.</b> (Calgary Food Bank, 2022a)
People take advantage of the food bank system.	Clients often seek to minimize their food bank usage, with <b>most only receiving 1-3 hampers annually.</b> (Calgary Food Bank, 2022a)
Food assistance creates dependence.	<b>Demand is directly correlated to the state of the economy</b> and does not grow independently. (Calgary Food Bank, 2022b)

These preconceptions about the ‘lazy’ or ‘incompetent’ food bank user individualizes, depoliticizes, and erases systemic constraints that lead to food insecurity, allowing the issue to be reconstructed as a failure of individual responsibility. These conceptions of personal failure drive the prevailing concern that aid expended in alleviating food insecurity may be misused. As a result, significant amounts of effort are being expended on monitoring, means-testing, and control, making traditional responses to food insecurity top-down, technocratic, and siloed. These unnecessary intrusions into privacy make for a stigmatizing experience that asks the end user to exchange dignity and autonomy for support.

This desire to control what the end user accomplishes with their aid runs contrary to findings from researchers and the experience of service providers. Lee’s 2022 study conducted in partnership with I Can for Kids (IC4K), demonstrated that not only did the transition away from hampers result in reduced food insecurity, it generated additional beneficial outcomes for users in terms of autonomy and dignity, dietary patterns, and food skills. This transition also reduced logistical burden and generated opportunities for collaboration with other partner agencies.

# Insufficiency and Rising Demand

Thus, insufficiency is reflected in various ways: a core systemic insufficiency, an insufficient amount of support capacity, and an insufficient impact on reducing food insecurity.

## *Insufficient support capacity:*

The aforementioned preconceptions lead to a sort of institutional inertia that limits more direct approaches to addressing food insecurity as an issue entangled with other wicked problems – like that of poverty. Unless faced with an external crisis, the discussion revolving around food security remains mostly complacent, treating it as a “necessary plague”. (Thériault & Yadlowski, 2000) When crises occur, the system’s extant funding and access issues are compounded due to its dependency on external funding from donations and public grants, none of which are dependable in times of economic strain. This was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when typical donation drives were cancelled and fundraising became difficult, even as organizations had to contend with a sharp increase in demand.

Even now, the emergency food system is facing increased demand year over year due to rising costs of living. This increased demand results in increased need for funding for program expansion. Unfortunately, this insufficiency goes deeper than a need for additional funding. There is a clear connection between food bank usage and the state of the economy: as the amount of people receiving government assistance increases, so too does the amount of hampers distributed. On a very Albertan note, the number of food hampers distributed was inversely correlated with the barrel price of crude oil, showing how intertwined Calgary’s economy is with the oil and gas industry. (Lissel, 2023) Various researchers have made clear the connection between the rise of neoliberalism, with its push for deregulation and smaller governments, and the corresponding downloading of government activities onto the nonprofit sector. With respect to Alberta, the 1992-2006 Klein government justified its spending cuts by citing the “can-do” attitude embedded in the Albertan cultural psyche that preferred workfare to welfare. (Elson, 2016)

## *Insufficient impact:*

Contemporary reports and studies of the system tended to go further and are now highlighting **structural poverty and income insufficiency** as the root cause of food insecurity. (Stauch & Snowdon, 2021; Vibrant Communities Calgary, 2022) The academic literature goes even further. According to Vennen (2020), “scholars are critical of food banks’ for failing to address food insecurity, depoliticizing hunger, [...] and romanticizing the power of local communities to make systemic change”.

On the local scale, Elson (2016) observes in his examination of Alberta’s social policy that public spending in Alberta is “closely tied to oil and gas prices”, the volatility of which makes public funding unpredictable. This unpredictability is further amplified as corporate donations are also generally tied to the price of oil. This instability pushes Albertan non-profit organizations to diversify their funding sources, engage in commercial venture activities, and expand their marketing and public relations efforts (Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations, 2019). For governments and non-profits alike, this creates tension between sound fiscal management and the implementation of progressive social policy.

## *Insufficient system change*

This is present in Calgary’s food security system. Bailey (2021) notes in his study of the Calgary Eats! initiative that while it was intended to break down the traditional siloed approach using a systems approach involving municipal authorities, the very involvement of the City of Calgary displaced extant advocacy groups. The initiative highlighted social enterprise models with the aim of avoiding undue expense, risk, and accomplishing the municipal mandate of encouraging local business activity. Furthermore, the city targeted existing operations which were already successful, further emphasizing a risk-averse approach to food security.

At the same time, the initiative had to overcome reluctance to commit municipal resources to what was seen as a non-issue. City councilors were unsure of the “correct role for the municipality” and were reluctant to champion “unproven and innovative interventions.” (Bailey, 2021) Ultimately, this sidelined controversial voices and perspectives that sought to approach the food insecurity issue as one of income insufficiency and poverty.

# Moving from challenges to solutions

Food insecurity is a complex and multifaceted issue that requires a comprehensive approach to address effectively. Downstream food security could be reduced to a matter of logistics, but getting into issues about income and poverty politicizes the issue and complicates the solution landscape. One of the most significant challenges in addressing food insecurity with potential for change in the short term is the imbalance of power and expertise between funders and service providers. Funders often hold the power in the relationship and may act as “shoppers” or “investors” in deciding which programs to support. This is not unjustified, and recipients of funding should be accountable to their funders, but overly onerous reporting goals force organizations to compromise on outcomes.

Thus, non-profits and funders alike are putting forward calls to action to change the funding and service delivery models. United Way stands out as both a funder (one of the largest intermediary funders for community initiatives) and as an organization that works through intermediaries to provide food assistance. Khovrenkov’s 2021 paper on the pressures facing United Way in Canada clarified that it is struggling to balance donor preferences, falling donation amounts, and selectively funding programs that meet community needs. As dedicated funders of a wide variety of programs and a service provider itself, United Way Organizations across Canada have begun to adopt a ‘Community Impact’ model to “strike a balance between meeting donor preferences, funding programs based on outcomes, and preserving valuable community relationships.” (Khovrenkov, 2021) More locally, The Calgary Foundation has stated that its designed impact is to strengthen communities and the charitable sector. They have identified five ‘Vital Priorities’ on which to focus additional support, with “Living Standards: Poverty Reduction” attracting the most grants by number and second most by dollar amount. Other funders are also re-evaluating the time scale of the disbursement of their funds. This attempts to move away from disbursements that favor short-term, small-scale interventions in the name of measurability and efficacy but ultimately fail to tackle the root of problems due to uncertainty and incomplete evidence. One hopeful trend is that of ‘trust-based investment’, which transitions impact investment to something broadly similar to venture capital investing. In this method, investors make investments based on long-term growth potential, rather than immediately visible metrics. (Trust-Based Philanthropy Project, n.d.) Such

an approach aims to blur the line between funders and service providers and encourages funding organizations to take a more active role by ‘buying-in’ to the impact and change desired. It operates on the premise that funders who are more closely engaged with the issues they wish to challenge and causes to champion will naturally be able to determine more effective metrics for impact evaluation. More involved funders participating in the push for systems change would help redistribute the balance of relationship management burden between parties. A shift in the funder-service provider relationship is crucial when it comes to addressing food insecurity. Programs must be able to connect with funders who are interested in the issue rather than expending energy on converting funders who do not share core goals or beliefs. Closer ties between funders and service providers would help align intent, funded actions, and measured impacts to progress beyond one-size-fits-all measurements.

The importance of how metrics are being used cannot be understated. To address complex challenges, it is important to consistently engage in re-evaluation of the intent and assessment of programming and funding. This means looking at how metrics and data are used and assessing the impact of programs using suitable methods tailored to the purpose of the funding. For example, start-up funding, transitional support, and growth funding may require different respective metrics to determine success. Matching the purpose of funding to the appropriate methods of impact assessment can help ensure that programs are evaluated effectively. A ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to data creates evidentiary gaps. As it stands, this gap is filled by organizations who can leverage the closest relationships to funders or tell the most persuasive story using data and past successes. While this is certainly convenient for funders, this results in lesser outcomes for end users.

Another significant challenge in addressing food insecurity is to alter prevailing beliefs and perceptions about deservedness and user competence. While heartstrings and storytelling can be effective in persuading people to support programs, they may also affect how food insecurity is being addressed. For example, if food insecurity is being marketed simply as ‘hunger’, or ‘not eating enough’, the issue of income, nutritional quality, and food costs may be overlooked. Additionally, controlling how users access and utilize aid can perpetuate the idea of the “deserving” poor and undermine their dignity.

Finally, as another funder in the system, the government is also critical in addressing food insecurity and poverty. While private sector partnerships can provide financial support, the government has a unique responsibility to ensure that all residents have access to healthy, affordable food. When funding for food system work is reliant on private sector partnerships, it can create a perception that the government is less responsible for addressing these issues. This can increase the vulnerability of the local food system to disruption and exacerbate the challenges faced by food-insecure residents. However, to alter how governments act as funders in the food emergency system would take more capacity than is available from service providers alone. Such a shift would demand tremendous investment into systems change. There must be a shift in the political discourse and public policy priorities surrounding basic needs, income, and greater adoption of rights-based approaches to issues.

In conclusion, tackling food insecurity requires a comprehensive approach that considers power dynamics, marketing, and impact assessment. In the short term, a shift to funding systems built on trust between funders and service providers would help build stronger relationships, shift beliefs about food insecurity, and aid in the development of more flexible and equitable metrics. By taking these steps, stronger partnerships between funders and service providers would allow for greater change and open the door for conversations surrounding a move towards income-based solutions.



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