



Winnipeg Food Council COVID-19 Statement

TREATY ONE TERRITORY, WINNIPEG, MB, MAY 20, 2020 – Decision-makers are paying attention to food security due to COVID-19. The Winnipeg Food Council Chair Councillor Brian Mayes provided \$500.00 to the Bear Clan Patrol to support training and food handling certificates for volunteers working in their emergency food distribution program. This program has expanded to meet increasing demand, and feeds more than 350 people per day. The Winnipeg Food Council is in conversation with over fifty community gardens around Winnipeg to determine essential needs to increase local food production during COVID-19.

The City of Winnipeg [redirected over 25 staff](#) to support emergency food operations, and made six community centres and recreation facilities available as food bank distribution sites. On May 1, [the City announced its intent](#) to facilitate distribution of local food, provide compost to City run allotment gardens, and grow food at City Hall this summer. The City further encouraged Winnipeggers to grow food for donation in home gardens and allotment plots.

These responses are even more urgent as COVID-19 reveals the importance of food and lack of resilience in our food system. Disruptions at many points along the supply chain are resulting in [increased food waste](#), [loss of restaurant revenues](#), temporary foreign worker and farm worker [labour concerns](#), [shut down of meat processing plants](#), among other issues. The Winnipeg Food Council acknowledges [support is needed](#) across the country for farm families and agricultural workers who feed the vast majority of Canadians, and particularly in Manitoba where [agriculture and food processing are key industries](#).

Long-term impacts of these disruptions are expected to [decrease the variety and availability of some food items](#), and [increase food prices](#). Essential physical distancing measures, job losses, and school closures are making it [more difficult to access food](#) through restaurants, grocery stores, food banks and meal programs. The first four weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic saw a [30% increase in demand](#) for food bank services, and community based organizations that provide food to disadvantaged populations report up to a 50% increase in demand for food. Indeed, we know that disadvantaged populations already face challenges to food access and are most impacted.

At the same time, people staying home to stop the spread of COVID-19 are doing more [home cooking](#) and [backyard gardening](#). Demand for regional food options and local foods with short supply chains is rising significantly. Many vegetable seed sellers reporting [sales increases of over 100%](#), local food buying clubs and farmers markets are [working hard to keep up with demand](#), and Community Supported Agriculture programs are [filling up earlier than usual](#). Growing food as a means of physical and mental health, and a way to increase the amount of available fresh produce is seeing a [resurgence in many cities across Canada](#).

While the challenges posed by COVID-19 are significant and expected to last several months, in our continued response we have an opportunity to set the stage for a more equitable and resilient food system able to withstand multiple shocks, and at the same time become more connected to and involved in where our food comes from.

In response to these challenges, Winnipeggers are already stepping up and coming together. [Funders have moved quickly](#) to [provide resources to organizations](#) working on the front line of emergency food

distribution. Small businesses and local restaurants have participated in [preparing and donating meals](#) to community food programs and [health care workers](#). Individual community members are [acting to support their communities](#). [Neighbours are supporting each other from a distance](#) through home cooked meals and combining trips to the grocery store. Winnipeg has a strong community spirit to build on.

Other cities are also responding, recognizing their role in supporting food security during COVID-19. The [City of Edmonton](#) is establishing new pop-up community gardens, providing residents with free planting boxes, soil and watering services. The [City of Montreal](#) has directed its Botanical Garden to grow food for community organizations, and is spending \$45,000.00 on vegetable seedlings and other materials to support home gardening. The [City of Calgary](#) is coordinating with frontline agencies and helping residents find community food programs and other supports through the use of Community Resource Specialists. The [City of Victoria](#) has redirected part of their annual ornamental plantings to grow over 50,000 seedlings free of charge for residents. The [City of Regina](#) is supporting 30 non-profit social service providers and providing information on food assistance programs in the city. The [City of Brampton](#) launched a Backyard Garden Program that provides free soil and seeds to residents wanting to grow food for donation. The [City of Greater Sudbury](#) is spending \$30,000.00 on a Home Garden Project to support new gardeners with free soil, seeds, and educational resources.

The Winnipeg Food Council urges the City to continue its response, and in conversation with the Winnipeg Food Council consider ways it is uniquely situated to support community food needs and food system resiliency. We ask the City to act quickly and decisively on those actions during this time of uncertainty and into the future.

1. Set up the necessary processes and procedures to allow the Winnipeg Food Council to resume meetings as a Citizen Advisory Committee of the City of Winnipeg.
2. As the growing season begins, support urban agriculture and the “Victory Garden” mentality to help contribute to the food supply and support physical and mental health:
 - a. Provide water access and water storage to garden plots
 - b. Eliminate wait lists by making additional lands available for gardening
 - c. Redirect City staff to increase support for community gardens
 - d. Allow for the sale of produce grown on residential property
 - e. Ease restrictions on front yard and boulevard vegetable gardening
 - f. Building on existing initiatives, work with community centres to make certified commercial kitchens accessible for food processing and preservation
3. Continue to partner with frontline agencies serving vulnerable populations experiencing food insecurity:
 - a. Continue directing city staff to support food banks and frontline agencies as needed
 - b. Convene a food systems emergency response team to rapidly coordinate local partners in the equitable distribution of food to vulnerable populations.
 - c. Support living wage initiatives to meet basic needs and combat root causes of household food insecurity
 - d. Respond to emerging needs of food programs such as seniors and school meal programs where possible
4. Support local food businesses that reinvest in local economy:
 - a. Partner with local businesses groups to raise awareness of food business service changes
 - b. Develop or support a directory of where to find local and regional food products
 - c. Support innovative local food distribution platforms and systems