Improving Food Access

stories from the Mobile Good Food Market
A significant number of Torontonians face economic and geographic barriers to accessing healthy and culturally appropriate food on a regular basis. While low income is the biggest barrier, many also live in neighbourhoods that have few quality and affordable food retail options within easy walking distance, along with relatively poor access to public transit. Even people living in areas that are well served by healthy food retail can face challenges, especially seniors, newcomers, those with disabilities and single parents with young children. One of the solutions is to promote innovative food access options, such as mobile food vending.

In June 2012, the Toronto Food Strategy team (Toronto Public Health), FoodShare Toronto, United Way Toronto, and the Food Policy Research Initiative (CAMH/University of Toronto) partnered to launch the Mobile Good Food Market. It was made possible through initial funding from the Ontario Centres of Excellence and United Way Toronto, and with significant in-kind staff support from all partners. Building on the expertise and infrastructure of FoodShare Toronto, a retrofitted truck - the ‘Mobile Good Food Market’ - started by visiting 8 communities across Toronto selling affordable, fresh produce. Thanks to funding from Toronto Public Health, Diabetes Prevention Strategy, of the Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention Program for additional customer research and healthy eating promotional materials.

In its second year FoodShare operated the Mobile Good Food Market supported by partners the Toronto Food Strategy and United Way. Through a donation of a decommissioned Wheel-Trans bus from the Toronto Transit Commission in 2013, customers are able to shop through all seasons.

Improving Food Access tells the story of the Mobile Good Food Market in its first year of operation, and some of the profound impacts in improving food access for the communities served. You will also read about the experiences of program Coordinator Afua Asantewaa, as well as stories from customers at the Mobile Good Food Market facilitated by storytelling researcher and photographer Arlene Moscovitch.

The Mobile Good Food Market has shown that people will buy produce as long as it is fresh, affordable, culturally appropriate and available nearby. We also hope it will generate other healthy food access solutions for diverse communities across Toronto.
Introducing the Mobile Good Food Market

Afua Asantewaa, Coordinator of the Mobile Good Food Market, shares her enthusiasm for an innovative project that brings high quality, affordable, culturally diverse vegetables and fruit to communities across Toronto. This interview, and the personal stories in this booklet were compiled by Arlene Moscovitch.

What is the Mobile Good Food Market?

The Mobile Good Food Market is a market on wheels that goes to different neighbourhoods every week selling fresh vegetables and fruit. The markets are located in diverse neighbourhoods across the City that don’t have easy access to good quality, affordable, culturally appropriate fresh produce.

The Mobile Good Food Markets are able to take advantage of FoodShare’s $1.6 million a year buying power for its social enterprise Fresh Produce programs: The Good Food Box, School and Bulk Fresh Produce, and Good Food Markets. FoodShare prioritizes produce that is local and seasonal. That means that though we buy as much food as we can directly from small farms in Southern Ontario, most of the food we sell at the Mobile Good Food Markets is purchased from the Ontario Food Terminal. We also ensure cultural appropriateness in fresh produce and sell vegetables and fruits like bananas, avocados, coconuts and mangoes that do not grow here. Customers get high quality produce at affordable prices and they tell us it lasts longer than what they can buy at a discount grocery store. In FoodShare’s social enterprise model, customers pay the full cost of the food and some of the transportation costs, while salaries
and infrastructure such as our trucks and warehouse are covered through donations and grants.

At each of the Mobile Good Food Markets, Community Food Leaders help us with outreach and serving customers. We compensate them with green dollars that they can use to shop at the market or give to friends or family.

**Why is the Mobile Good Food Market important?**

Before beginning this job, I lived in Ghana. I knew of poverty. But then I came back to Canada, and I was hit with a poverty that I did not expect to see here. I’ve heard people say, “I’ve taken vegetables and fruits out of my diet because it’s just too expensive” and I ask myself, “Am I in Ghana or am I in Canada”?

We talk about high rates of diabetes and poor nutrition in our neighbourhoods and a lot of it has to do with inaccessible grocery stores. If you are a mom coming from your cleaning or babysitting job and you pick up your three children from school or daycare, you’re tired, maybe it’s winter, and you don’t have the energy or the time to get to the grocery store to buy fresh vegetables and fruits to take home and cook. Instead you grab whatever’s closest to you, whether it’s going to the local convenience store or to the nearest fast food restaurant.

The Mobile Good Food Market is making a difference. I see that having fresh produce at people’s doorsteps encourages them to make changes to their diet. Some people come with their children which is great for communicating how critical vegetables and fruit are to good health for a younger generation.

**How do you decide what vegetables and fruits to offer to customers?**

Toronto has many cultures, and food brings people together. At the market, people from different cultures are talking and saying, “What’s that? How do you cook that?” It’s about community building, neighbours getting to know each
other and saying, “Oh, I never spoke to her before the market started.”

I found that as much as the markets have different clientele, there are many common foods across cultures. For instance, okra is used in Asian and South Asian communities, just as it is in West African and Caribbean cooking, and our top sellers are papaya and avocado.

**What do you see for the Market moving forward?**

I get weekly phone calls saying, “Can the truck come to my neighbourhood?” but the biggest challenge is resources. It takes money to operate this project.

We go to communities where there are many people with fixed incomes. On the first of the month when cheques are coming in, sales are good. By the middle of the month, people don’t have as much money after they’ve paid their rent. We are still trying to get more customers out to the market and in certain mixed neighbourhoods, there are invisible boundaries that people don’t cross.

Word of mouth has been fantastic. People hear about the Market from friends, we have flyers in community centres and libraries, and it’s also been in the media. People call and say, “I heard about it on CBC or I saw it on the national news. How can I help?”

We started the Market hoping it was going to be a success but we didn’t know it was going to do so well that people are clamoring to have it in their neighbourhoods or in other cities. Organizations have come from across the country to see this project in action and to try to replicate what we’re doing.

It’s such a wonderful project and every time we give an interview about it, we hope somebody will hear about it and say, “Of course we’re going to fund it for another year. Look at the impact it’s having!”
Mornelle Court
Ellesmere Rd & Morningside Ave
90 Mornelle Court (Spring/Summer),
110 Mornelle Court (Fall/Winter)

Community Characteristics:
The Mobile Good Food Market at Mornelle Court is located in a diverse neighbourhood with many newcomers and youth, where the nearest supermarket is a kilometre away. Customers talk about the convenience of having the Market directly in their building or parking lot and not having to struggle up the hill or travel far to the grocery store, particularly in the winter, with a grocery buggy and young children.

Popular Vegetables & Fruit:
Mango, Banana, Apple, Papaya, Plantain, Cassava, Spinach

Tuxedo Court
Ellesmere Rd & Markham Rd
50 Tuxedo Court

Community Characteristics:
Toronto Community Housing is a key local partner in the Mobile Good Food Market at Tuxedo Court, where the nearest supermarket is 1.9 kilometres away. In this community, seniors have been the main beneficiaries of the Market and sometimes line up an hour ahead of the time the truck arrives.

Popular Vegetables & Fruit:
Papaya, Pomegranate, Mango, Orange, Okra, Spinach, Tomato, Corn
I’m Ana Ortiz and with Jonathan, we have Ruby and Max.

Here you have to take the bus everywhere and sometimes I don’t have a lot of money.

This market is easier access for me because with the two kids, I have to push the stroller and pull the shopping buggy if I go to the supermarket.

When I buy stuff here, it normally lasts about two weeks but when I get vegetables from the supermarket, the vegetables are bad within two to three days. And you can’t eat everything the same night.
Lotherton Pathway
Lawrence Ave W & Caledonia Rd
100 Lotherton Pathway (Fall/Winter), 50 Lotherton Pathway (Spring/Summer)

Community Characteristics:
Action for Neighbourhood Change is a key local partner in the Mobile Good Food Market at Lotherton Pathway. The Market is located within a cluster of high-rise residential apartment towers, in a community where the nearest supermarket is 1.7 kilometres away. This is the most culturally diverse community that the Market serves, including Chinese, Indo-Caribbean, Vietnamese and Caribbean people. The Market offers an important space where residents of many cultures can learn about each other in a relaxed social environment.

Popular Vegetables & Fruit:
Orange, Okra, Sweet Potato, Papaya, Grapes, Banana, Cassava, Bok Choy

North Kipling/Mount Olive
Kipling Ave & Finch Ave W
2 Rowntree Road

Community Characteristics:
North Kipling/Mount Olive is a vibrant neighbourhood with a large number of newcomers, youth and children living in high-rise apartment buildings. There are three schools in the area, but the nearest supermarket is 1.5 kilometres away. A nearby popular Multi-Service Community Hub on Panorama Court is a busy community recreation centre, and Action for Neighbourhood Change and United Way are active in the community as well. Baby carrots and fresh local apples are a hit with students walking in the lobby of North Kipling Junior Middle School, where the Market is hosted during the winter.

Popular Vegetables and Fruit
Papaya, Orange, Apple, Grapes, Okra, Cassava, Spinach, Broccoli
Roseanna

My name is Roseanna and I thank God every day for my life and for the market that comes every Thursday. I get out of the house. I comb my hair, I change my clothes, I put some makeup. I feel good that I’m going somewhere to buy something and I feel good that I dressed up. It’s good for my health too.

I see my friends there and I feel good because you’re stuck in the house, same work over and over. So when you come here and go back home, you feel good. Because you get something nice, you reach people and you feel good that you keep going. The only time I don’t come is my doctor appointment for this day. Only that keeps me back.
My name is Debbie Kirkland and I’m a Community Food Leader for the Mobile Good Food Market.

I like to be involved with my community so when I heard the Market was coming to our building, I volunteered. Where we live, there are more donut shops than grocery stores. That’s why I’m happy to work at the Market every week.
We are Adriana and Raúl and we grew up going to farmers’ markets in Mexico City. We love fresh produce.

The problem with this area is that there are not a lot of markets. You need to drive and we don’t have a car. For us, it’s important to have something in the community that’s available and easy for us to take home. Besides, we always try to interact and participate with the community and this is one of the activities that actually makes a community get together.
Neptune Drive

Bathurst St & Ranee Ave
155 Neptune Drive

Community Characteristics:
Neptune Renewal Group is the key local partner in the Mobile Good Food Market on Neptune Drive where the nearest supermarket is 1.7 kilometres away. George, a regular customer during the summer months, is always disappointed when he has to resume work as a school staff in the fall because he cannot be there for Market days. It is the more affordable prices and quality of the fresh produce of the Market that have encouraged him to eat more vegetables and fruits than ever before.

Popular Vegetables & Fruit:
Grapes, Papaya, Apple, Mango, Green Banana, Okra, Eddoe

Millie

My name is Millie Dyer and I love to cook.

West Indian people like to make soup. Many people use pumpkin but I prefer squash because it gives a richer flavour. I wash the skin when I get home with soap and a cloth. I like to keep the skin on because there are lots of nutrients there. I drop the cut-up squash into water and I’ll add chicken, crushed garlic, all-purpose seasoning without salt and fresh onion. Then I add chunks of sweet potato and Irish potato to the pot. You can also put in dumplings, West Indian chicken noodle packs and thyme. Then you let it simmer.

I don’t have any more children at home now but they learned to cook from me and they love it too.
My name is Shirley Alie. I choose these things because I’m a diabetic. I live in the building and I come every week. I came since the market started. I’m born and grewed in Guyana and these are the foods I grow up eating. When I go to the doctor and he tests my blood, it’s okay because I eat these greens. I depend upon this market.
Lawrence Heights
Allen Rd & Lawrence Ave W
10 Old Meadow Lane

Community Characteristics:
Action for Neighbourhood Change is a key local partner in the Lawrence Heights Mobile Good Food Market. The neighbourhood is home to many families with young children, and there are no discount supermarkets nearby. The highlight of this market is seeing children no older than 10 years old purchasing whatever produce they want while mom stands a distance away, watching them pay for their items.

Popular Vegetables & Fruit:
Mango, Papaya, Apple, Caribbean Sweet Potato, Yellow Yams, Plantain, Orange
These drawings were created by children who shop at the Mobile Good Food Market.
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For more information visit www.foodshare.net