



Inclusion

- ✓ Create welcoming food environments
- ✓ Be inclusive of all cultures
- ✓ Be inclusive of diverse gender identities
- ✓ Encourage social interaction and community building

Access

- ✓ Improve meal availability
- ✓ Offer menus with choice and variety
- ✓ Create safe spaces

Quality

- ✓ Allow a place for occasional comfort food
- ✓ Offer homemade meals using fresh, whole-foods
- ✓ Take care in food presentation
- ✓ Maximize ingredients and reduce food waste
- ✓ Seek food safety guidance from an Environmental Health Officer



The Role of VCH

Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) provides a range of food offerings to clients through its diverse programs and funded services in the community. This food can vary from grab-and-go snacks at drop-in services, to three meals per day provided in some VCH funded supported housing services. While VCH cannot solve the complex issue of food insecurity – which affects one in eight Canadian households¹ – we can do our part in the community to define what high-quality food programming means to us as an organization, and to optimize food accessibility and overall experiences of our clients who receive food as part of our services.

A healthy diet is not only essential for providing energy and nutrients to support physical health, it has also been demonstrated to encourage social and emotional health by creating opportunities for social interaction and community building, encouraging program participation, and supporting the development of food knowledge and healthy lifestyle habits.² Therefore, The Standards go beyond nutrition, emphasizing informed choice, social inclusion and safe, dignified access as important tenets to maximize the multiple value-added impacts that food can bring to client programs and services.

Who are The VCH Food Standards for?

Anyone can use The Standards. Developed primarily for VCH owned and operated or co-managed sites, The Standards can be used by VCH employees, contracted service providers and partner agencies who are responsible for planning and implementing meal programs and food service contracts. Other community programs and organizations external to VCH are also welcomed and encouraged to adopt any of The Standards or ideas presented here that align with their mandate and values, or otherwise help to achieve desired program outcomes.

While The Standards are rooted in the DTES, we hope that they prove useful in other areas of Vancouver, and beyond. Ultimately, they are intended to stimulate creative ideas to improve the dining experiences and nutrition of all individuals, regardless of where they are accessing food.

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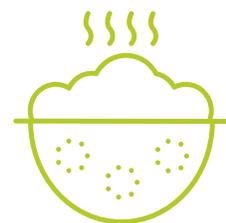
How to use The VCH Food Standards

VCH and Contracted Service Providers

The Standards should be used by VCH leaders, partners, and contracted service providers to guide contract negotiation and meal program planning under VCH contracts with a food service component. Beyond formal contracts, The Standards should also be used by VCH employees who are providing food during meetings, group programs or other engagement initiatives.

External to VCH

VCH recognizes and values the breadth of knowledge, expertise and on-going work happening to support food security initiatives in the DTES and across Vancouver. It is important to note that all recommendations within The Standards are intended to be implemented “**wherever possible**”. They are not meant to be prescriptive or fully comprehensive, rather can be used to initiate discussion and stimulate creative approaches to improving food service delivery that fits with individual programs’ mandates, values, and available resources.





Food Insecurity

Food insecurity has been defined as *“the inability to acquire or consume adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways”*³ and it is a challenge faced by many people who live in the DTES, and throughout Vancouver.

While closely linked to financial constraints, food insecurity is a complex issue influenced by many contributing factors. Marginalized individuals including, but not limited to: single mothers, new immigrants, those who are homeless, struggle with substance use and addiction, and Indigenous people are at increased risk of experiencing food insecurity compared to the general population¹ and are more likely to become high-cost users of the health system.⁴ Those experiencing food insecurity are more vulnerable to developing multiple chronic conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease, and may struggle with chronic disease management. They are also more likely to suffer from poor mental health including anxiety disorders, depression, or suicidal thoughts.⁵

Context: Why Food Standards?

VCH developed Food Standards (“The Standards”) as part of the Downtown Eastside (DTES) Second Generation Strategy, which aims to improve the health and wellness of residents of Vancouver’s DTES by reshaping the delivery of VCH services.⁶ During stakeholder engagement, DTES community members raised concern about the availability and accessibility of quality food in the neighbourhood. As a result, a DTES Food Framework was developed, which called for creation of standards to support VCH programs and funded contracts that have a food service component, with a goal to improve health outcomes and client-reported quality of life related to food. The Standards can be applied both in Vancouver’s DTES and beyond, and are available for other organizations to adopt and use.



Inclusion

Food has an ability to connect people with one another and to build strong communities. This potential is maximized when spaces are welcoming, foster interaction, and not only include – but celebrate – diversity in its many forms.



Access

There are a number of factors that can limit or enhance access to high-quality, nutritious and appropriate food for all. Emphasizing physical and social safety, as well as providing flexibility and choice in where, when, and what to eat can help to reduce some barriers to access.



Quality

High quality food is about more than food safety and nutrition. It’s about using fresh, local, and seasonal ingredients and getting the most from them. It’s about reducing food and packaging waste in the process and ultimately creating visually appealing and delicious meals.





Guiding Principles

Client Centred

VCH is committed to serving and supporting clients in a way that respects their individual needs, backgrounds and beliefs, values and preference, and that allows clients to participate in care decisions. This means providing as much choice as possible in food menu offerings in a safe space where clients can be confident that the quality of service will not be compromised by how they self-identify or their current life circumstances.⁷

Harm Reduction

VCH is committed to providing the safest space possible for clients to engage with services and supports. Harm reduction is an approach to reducing harms associated with substance use and sexual health for both individuals and communities. It meets clients where they are at, acknowledging and respecting their lived reality and self-determination.⁷ How and when people are able to access food plays an important role in harm reduction, and VCH acknowledges and endorses the need for access to safe and supportive food environments as a means to reducing nutrition-related harms.

Build Capacity

VCH understands that, when it comes to food, keeping people healthy and energized is just the beginning. Access to quality food in safe and inclusive environments can play an important role in building capacity within individuals, as well communities. It can do this in many ways, including:

- increasing food knowledge and cooking skills
- developing healthy lifestyle habits
- offering an approachable and positive introduction to new cultures

Trauma Informed

VCH is committed to fully integrating knowledge of trauma into policies, procedures and practices; seeking to actively prevent re-traumatization. This approach emphasizes safety and trust, and opportunities for choice – including choice in where, when and what to eat.



Peer Engagement & Employment

VCH believes in the importance of engaging – and where possible, employing – peers. Employing peers helps to create safe, welcoming environments for clients accessing services and provides employment opportunities for people with lived experience.⁶

Food Safe

VCH understands that the ability to access sufficient, safe and healthy food is a daily challenge for many people in Vancouver. On occasion, some organizations and individuals with good intentions may not be familiar with the processes or resources available to ensure that safe, quality food is provided. VCH is committed to working with other government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to support initiatives that promote food security and safety.



It is important to note that all recommendations within The Standards are intended to be implemented “wherever possible”. Looking for more information? Check out the list of links to additional resources in the [Appendix](#).

<h2>Inclusion</h2>	
Standard	Examples of ideas for implementation
S1. Create welcoming food environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make dining environments warm and welcoming. Avoid spaces that feel “institutional” • Provide variety in table set-ups: large communal tables, quiet individual spaces, or options for take-away • Provide a restaurant-style experience for diners by taking orders and delivering meals to them at their tables • Create family-friendly meal environments • Designate a staff member or volunteer to provide take-away meal options outside of the facility for those who are not able, or may not wish, to stay • Avoid line-ups as much as possible, but if they are necessary: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduce wait times by creating more than one service line - Keep people informed of the estimated length of wait times - Designate a staff member or volunteer to greet people in line and hand out samples, such as fresh fruit, a warm cup of tea, or soup (depending on the season)
S2. Be inclusive of all cultures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize the role that food plays in social connection and building community, within and across cultures • Be aware of the diverse cultures that live locally, and seek diners’ input on culturally appropriate menu offerings • Honour diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious celebrations that are important to members of the community. In addition to food, consider creating space for music, dance, and other traditions that may be part of these celebrations • Allow space for prayer or food blessing • Embed an Indigenous approach to developing service policies, practices and contracts by engaging a community elder in these processes • Offer variety and/or substitutions in meals to meet diverse cultural preferences. For example, provide a choice of rice and noodles as sides; or offer two protein options (one vegetarian) • Offer a selection of sauces and condiments for diners to personalize their meal • Provide choice in utensils and dishes such as spoons, forks and chop sticks; and plates and bowls • Partner with community gardens for access to traditional plants, herbs and vegetables for use in meals • Support staff and volunteers to complete Indigenous cultural safety training
S3. Be inclusive of diverse gender identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide women-only eating areas and/or dining times. This should include trans women and also permit children and youth under 18 years, regardless of their gender identity • Support staff and volunteers to attend VCH Prism Services Transgender Inclusion Training • Be mindful of the multiple intersecting stigmas that trans or gender diverse people can face, including: sexism, racism, classism, and colonialism. Apply this lens to program and service planning • Assess your program or service to understand how inclusive it is of gender diversity, and develop a policy and protocols to support enhanced gender inclusion • Use the VCH Washroom Design and Monitoring Guidelines to create washroom facilities that are safe and inclusive for all
S4. Encourage social interaction and community building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not rush meal service. Allow people to enjoy their meals and socialize with one another, as well as with staff and volunteers • Offer family-friendly or family-only dining times • Encourage interactive activities that foster comradery and develop healthy eating knowledge and skills. For example, the DTES Kitchen Tables Project hosts Iron Chef Competitions and Food Jeopardy. Contact them to learn more • Establish community partnerships to make use of urban gardens to not only improve access to a range of healthy, seasonal food choices; but to provide space for social gathering and connection to nature • Create relationships with local businesses, including independent stores and local farmers, to encourage fresh, local sourcing of ingredients that support community economic development • Consider strategic partnerships with like-minded organizations, such as through group-purchasing programs • Invite a VCH Registered Dietitian from your community area to provide healthy eating education for staff, volunteers and/or program participants • Where community kitchen spaces are available, offer food preparation and skill building workshops and encourage participants to share their own cooking knowledge with one another



Access

Standard	Examples of ideas for implementation
S5. Improve meal availability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer flexible meal service hours, outside of 9am-5pm. Include evening, late-night, and weekend options • Coordinate with nearby service providers to stagger hours, so that some food is available in a given area for as close to 24/7 as possible • Employ peers to deliver meals to residents who are homebound • Offer take-away options to be consumed later, including brown bag lunches
S6. Offer menus with choice and variety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate a wide variety of fresh, unprocessed foods such as lean protein, whole grains, fruits and vegetables, and dairy on menus • Post meal ingredients for all to see, and to help diners in making informed meal choices • Provide options for substitution to accommodate those with food allergies or other dietary restrictions • Allow for substitutions, such as providing two protein options, including one that is plant-based • Allow residents to have input on plating, such as “less pasta, more vegetables”; or “sauce on the side” • Offer child-friendly menu items • Post menus as far in advance of meals as possible to allow people to plan where they would like to eat in the days ahead • Consult a VCH Registered Dietitian in your area for menu analysis and education about diverse chronic illnesses in the community, and their nutritional implications • Provide healthy beverage options, limiting those high in sugar and caffeine. For instance, offer more water and low (or no) caffeine tea • Provide methods to offer feedback about meals, such as a vote on favourite meal options, creating a suggestion box, or simply asking what people would like to see on future menus • See also, S2 and S8
S7. Create safe spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create empowering environments by being respectful and empathetic to each individual’s needs • Employ peers as an integral part of multi-disciplinary teams and to reduce barriers to accessing service • Build relationships with diners by initiating conversation during meal service; be respectful of those who do not wish to converse • Support staff and volunteers to attend Trauma Informed Training or a Mental Health First Aid course • Offer conflict resolution training for staff and volunteers • Model and encourage a friendly, positive culture with open communication between staff and diners • Educate staff and volunteers on navigating conflict and providing leadership during tense situations and develop accompanying policies and procedures • Develop a list of ground rules that detail both the rights and expected behaviours of clients, volunteers and staff alike. Ensure clients are engaged as key informants of these rules • See also, S2 and S3



Quality

Standard	Examples of ideas for implementation
<p>S8. Allow a place for occasional comfort food</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be mindful that some foods that may not be considered “nutritious” but have cultural or personal significance and; therefore, may play a role in social and emotional wellbeing. No one should be made to feel guilty for enjoying comfort food • Improve the nutritional value of comfort foods. For example, if offering macaroni and cheese, serve it with vegetables and a lean protein • When offering something sweet to end the meal, make desserts using fresh fruit and whole grains
<p>S9. Offer homemade meals using fresh, whole-foods</p>	<p>Offer more⁸</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vegetables and fruits • Fish and beans/legumes • Lean protein (including plant-based proteins) <p>Switch to⁸</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whole grains • Healthy fats • Cooking from scratch using whole, raw ingredients <p>Offer less⁸</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Processed foods and meats • High-sodium foods • Sugar and refined carbohydrates (for example, cookies, cakes and white bread)
<p>S10. Take care in food presentation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create visually appealing plates that include a variety of colours and textures • Refer to VCH’s Healthy Plate and aim for ¼ grains, ¼ meat/alternatives, and ½ vegetables and fruit • Take time and care when preparing and serving meals • If available, offer edible garnishes, such as fresh herbs or a slice of lemon • Consider partnering with, and learning from, a trained chef or a culinary teaching program
<p>S11. Maximize ingredients and reduce food waste</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and implement food composting and recycling programs • Prepare meals using raw, unprocessed foods to minimize packaging waste and improve nutritional value • Employ trained chefs or cooks to benefit from their knowledge in budgeting for efficient use of ingredients
<p>S12. Seek food safety guidance from an Environmental Health Officer</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support staff and volunteers to obtain FoodSafe Level 1 certification • Support managers to obtain FoodSafe Level 2 • Keep copies of the certificates of FoodSafe trained staff on-site for verification purposes • Follow the BC Centre for Disease Control’s Guidelines for Food Distribution Organizations with Grocery or Meal Programs • Obtain foods from approved sources and, when working with donated food, base acceptance on the BC Centre for Disease Control Industry Food Donation Guidelines • Contact VCHs food safety experts for suggestions and one-on-one guidance on how you can achieve your desired food service outcomes, while meeting food safety best practices



Use this tool to help plan and incorporate The Standards into your program or service.

Standard	Y/N	Notes and/or actions	Timeline for completion
Inclusion			
S1	Create welcoming food environments		
S2	Be inclusive of all cultures		
S3	Be inclusive of diverse gender identities		
S4	Encourage social interaction and community building		
Access			
S5	Improve meal availability		
S6	Offer menus with choice and variety		
S7	Create safe spaces		
Quality			
S8	Allow a place for occasional comfort food		
S9	Offer homemade meals using fresh, whole-foods		
S10	Take care in food presentation		
S11	Maximize ingredients and reduce food waste		
S12	Seek food safety guidance from an Environmental Health Officer		



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Community Partners

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APPENDIX – List of Resources

The following is a list of select additional resources related to The Standards. This is not intended to be an inclusive list and we encourage program planners to conduct additional research to support the specific needs of their clients within available resources.

S2 – Be inclusive of all cultures

- [Vancouver Coastal Health Aboriginal Health](#) offers a variety of resources, program links, and contact information which can support the provision of culturally safe services.
- [Healthy Food Guidelines for First Nations Communities](#) is a printable resource provided by the First Nations Health Authority.
- [Traditional Foods Fact Sheet](#) is a printable resource providing information on the nutritional and historical value of a range of traditional foods.
- [First Nations Health Authority Traditional Food](#) webpage provides links to a series of printable resources related to traditional foods.

S3 – Be inclusive of all gender identities

- [Vancouver Coastal Health Prism Services](#) is an education, information and referral service for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, Trans, Two-Spirit and queer + (LGBTQ2S+) communities.

- [Transgender Health Information Program \(THiP\)](#) is a BC-wide resource hub providing information about gender affirming care and supports.
- [Trans Rights BC](#) is a project aimed at disseminating human rights information that is accurate, accessible and relevant to the safety and well-being of trans and gender-diverse individuals and their allies across BC.

S4 – Encourage Social Interaction & Community Building

- [City-Affiliated Kitchen Design Guidelines](#) support renovation and builds of kitchens to better enable their intended use.
- [Putting Your Kitchen to Work](#) is a toolkit supporting the integration of food-based programming into services

S5 – Optimize Meal Availability

- [DTES Kitchen Tables Food Access Map](#) available in PDF or real-time digital screens, the map provides information about free and low-cost meal availability in the DTES. Contact the [DTES Kitchen Tables Project](#) for details.
- [Vancouver Food Asset Map](#) highlights places throughout the City where people can grow, share, prepare, learn about and access food.
- [Senior's Food Asset Map](#) is a resource developed by the DTES Neighbourhood House, highlighting places to find fresh and healthy food in the DTES.

S6 – Offer menus with choice and variety

- [VCH Nutrition webpage](#) provides information about VCH nutrition services in the community, and how to connect with a community dietitian in your area.
- [VCH Healthy Plate](#) and [Healthy Bowl](#) are printable resources, available online, to support nutritious meal planning.
- [Promoting Mental Health through Healthy Eating and Nutritional Care](#) is an online position paper from Dietitians of Canada.
- [Meals and More](#) is a food and nutrition manual for homes of adults and Children with 24 persons or less in care.

S7 – Create safe spaces

- [VCH Peer Framework](#) is a resource to support inclusion of peers in integrated health service delivery. Designed as part of the VCH Second Generation Strategy.
- [Food as Harm Reduction](#) is a summary report detailing the intersection of food security, food access and harm reduction services for people living with HIV/AIDS who use drugs in Vancouver BC.
- [Mental Health Commission of Canada](#) offers resources and courses to recognize, respond to, and guide individuals who develop a mental health problem or are experiencing a mental health crisis.
- [BC Trauma Informed Practice Guide](#) is an online resource offering strategies to guide the professional work of practitioners

assisting clients with mental health and substance use concerns in BC.

- [Healing Families, Helping Systems](#) is a Trauma-Informed Practice Guide for Working with Children, Youth and Families, produced by the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development.
- [PACE Society](#) offers low barrier programming and support to Vancouver's most marginalized populations, with an emphasis on providing sex-worker led and driven programs.
- [Living in Community](#) is an initiative offering resources and training to reduce the harms and isolation experienced by sex workers.

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