VANCOUVER FOOD JUSTICE COALITION

Endorsed by the vancouver FOOD POLICY COUNCIL

Advancing the Right to Food in Vancouver with Adequate Funding

Photo: Stephanie San, South Vancouver Neighbourhood House

Briefing Submission - City of Vancouver Budget 2026 Consultation

Executive Summary

The following brief urges the City of Vancouver to uphold the right to food by embedding it in budget decisions. Food is a human right and an inherent part of the right to life. A rights-based food system, as recognized in international treaties and declarations ratified by Canada, obligates our government to uphold people's dignity and agency in feeding themselves. This means ensuring access to food that is free from stigma, shame, and oppression, while protecting the fundamental right to health and well-being.

The Vancouver Food Strategy (2017) and the Parks Local Food Action Plan (2021) provide strong frameworks for advancing a rights-based food system, yet neither explicitly recognizes the right to food. Embedding this right into City of Vancouver budgeting decisions would create the accountability needed to ensure dignified, non-charitable food access, and strengthen resilience in times of emergency.

Greater action is needed to properly address food insecurity, as current social policy does not fully respond to the social, political, and economic realities we face. While all levels of government have obligations to act, municipalities play a key role in ensuring food security and justice. Strategic investment in local food systems also delivers proven health, economic, and climate benefits.

City food systems funding is currently inadequate and amounts to an insufficient .03% of the City's 2024 operating and capital budgets. While we applaud the council motion "Closing the Gap: Investing in the City of Vancouver's Food System to Increase Food Access and Support a Resilient, Equitable, and Sustainable Food System for All" (July 24, 2024), real commitment is still needed.

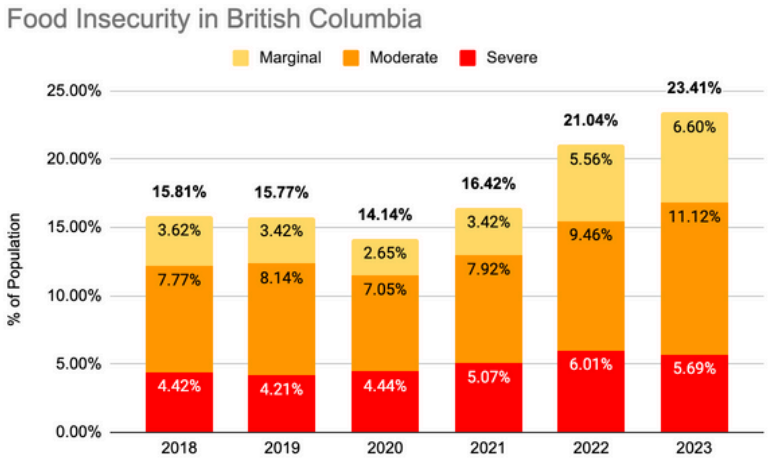
We urge....

1. The creation of an Indigenous Food Systems Grant – To support Indigenous-led food sovereignty, cultural revitalization, and self-determination.

2. An increase to the Sustainable Food Systems Grant – To strengthen Vancouver Neighbourhood Food Networks and other community-led food development programs.

3. The creation of a Mechanism for Food Recovery – To enable scaling up surplus food rescue and redistribution to support community food programming and decrease food waste.

The Urgency: Vancouver's Rising Food Insecurity Crisis



The number of people in BC who are food insecure rose from 15.81% in 2018 to 24.4% in 2023[1]. Meanwhile, 32% of Metro Vancouver families earn less than living wage income, citing food as the second-most expensive item after shelter[2]. In Vancouver, renters are spending an average of 37.46% of their income on rent, much higher than the recommended maximum of 30%[3].

The combination of soaring rents, stagnant wages, and skyrocketing food costs have created an affordability crisis in Vancouver.

Without municipal government support for providing accessible, affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate foods to residents who are food insecure, the burden has fallen onto the non-profit sector. This sector is already stretched for resources due to the rapid increase in people needing food assistance, precarious funding, and reliance on a shrinking pool of volunteers. The non-profit sector cannot keep up with the demand for services. With more people going hungry, mental and physical health decline, leading to more premature deaths, illnesses, and overall vulnerability. Municipalities then have an additional cost burden of emergency and social services that could be prevented by investing in a strong local food system that is equitable so more people are food secure.

All levels of government continue to fund and rely on charitable food banking to ensure the availability of food for low income households and individuals. Reliance on food banks fails to take a rights-based approach to addressing household food insecurity. Making food a legal right in B.C. would help put an end to the charity food bank model.

Food insecurity is directly tied to income inequity. In Vancouver, poverty rates are highest amongst Indigenous people (41%) and newcomers (40%)[4]. In addition to strengthening local food systems, municipalities must advocate and work with provincial and federal governments to address the structural causes of food insecurity.

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[1] Calculated from Statistics Canada Table 13-10-0834-01. Note that data specific to the City of Vancouver is not available.
[2] Working for a Living Wage 2023 Update
[3] B.C. renters near 'crisis territory' for amount of income spent on rent
[4] Vancouver City Social Indicators Profile 2020

The Right to Food & Canada's Obligations

What is the right to food?

Under international human rights law, the right to adequate food means that every person must have regular, permanent, and unrestricted access—either by producing food or purchasing it—to sufficient, safe, and culturally acceptable food that meets dietary needs.

Three core elements are recognized: availability (sufficient food supply); accessibility (both physical and economic access for all people, including children, older persons, and persons with disabilities); and adequacy (nutritious, safe, culturally appropriate). These elements and the State's role as 'primary duty bearer' to '***respect, protect, and fulfil***' the right to food are authoritatively set out by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) in General Comment No. 12, and echoed in FAO's Right to Food Guidelines.

Canada's international obligations

Canada has endorsed and/or joined several international instruments that articulate the right to food and related duties:

- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948)**: affirms the right to "a standard of living adequate for… health and well-being… including food." (Art. 25(1)). While not a treaty, the UDHR provides the foundational norm.

- **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966)**: Canada acceded on May 19, 1976 (in force for Canada Aug 19, 1976). Article 11 recognizes the right to an adequate standard of living "including adequate food" and the fundamental right to be free from hunger, creating legally binding obligations to take appropriate measures domestically and through international cooperation.

- **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989)**: Canada ratified on Dec 12, 1991. Article 24 requires measures to combat disease and malnutrition, including the provision of adequate nutritious foods and clean drinking water.

- **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007)**: While a declaration, Canada enacted the UNDRIP Act in June 2021 (B.C. in 2019) to align federal laws with UNDRIP. Article 24 affirms Indigenous peoples' right to their traditional medicines and health practices, and non-discriminatory access to health services—often interpreted to include access to traditional and nutritious foods as part of health.

Role of municipalities

These instruments, which are binding on Canada, establish a legal duty to progressively realize the right to food, with immediate obligations to take steps and to protect against hunger. In particular, General Comment No. 12 of the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR) on the Right to Adequate Food emphasizes that obligations related to economic, social, and cultural rights, as outlined in the ICESCR, apply to federal, provincial, municipal levels of government. Municipal governments, not just the central or national governments, are responsible for ensuring the realization of the right to food.

While treaty obligations bind the State as a whole, local governments share responsibilities to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to food through municipal policy, funding, planning, and systems-building—for example, by safeguarding access to food outlets and community food assets; removing discriminatory barriers; supporting and funding community food programs; and coordinating emergency and resilience measures. Municipal action should create an enabling environment, so residents can realize their right to food in dignity.

Canada's binding human rights commitments, together with Vancouver's own Food Strategy, imply a clear municipal mandate to uphold the right to adequate, culturally appropriate food with dignity. Closing the current funding gap for food systems in Vancouver is a necessary step to meet that duty in practice.

Why Local Food Systems Deserve Investment - Meeting Vancouver's Strategic Priorities

Enhancing Public Health and Equity

Access to nutritious, culturally appropriate and non-ultra processed type food promotes well-being and prevents chronic disease. Evidence shows that strengthening local food systems, alongside community-based programs such as community kitchens and school meals, rather than an over reliance on food banks helps ensure that everyone has access to nutritious food. These efforts also support the reduction of health disparities and long-term healthcare costs, while fostering a healthier population.

Supporting Reconciliation

Investing in local food systems creates opportunities to support Indigenous food sovereignty and strengthen relationships with local Nations and urban Indigenous communities. Indigenous-led initiatives, such as traditional food cultivation, harvesting, and land stewardship, preserve cultural knowledge, promote ecological restoration, and advance self-determination. By partnering with Indigenous Peoples on food system programs, Vancouver can uphold the rights of local Nations and foster mutually respectful relationships that contribute to reconciliation.

Economic Vitality and Community Resilience

Local food systems can support the right to food by strengthening economic access and empowering communities. By supporting small businesses, farmer's markets, cultural retail, urban agriculture jobs, processing, and distribution, local food systems can enhance economic security and ensure that people can reliably access nutritious food. Research shows that growers selling locally generate more jobs than those who do not. Local food systems enhance resilience by fostering social connections and providing reliable access to food during emergencies, thereby reinforcing the city's ability to withstand and recover from shocks.

Environmental Sustainability and Climate Adaptation

Sustainable local food systems protect the right to food for current and future generations. Investing in local food production reduces transportation emissions and supports farming practices that prioritize soil health, biodiversity, and climate resilience. Equally important is strengthening food recovery and waste reduction initiatives, which divert surplus food from landfills, support community food programs, and promote circularity within the city's food system. These measures reinforce Vancouver's commitment to the climate emergency, while ensuring food remains accessible, nutritious, and sustainable over the long term.

The Vision: A Caring, Equitable, Just, and Dignified Food System

Vancouver Food Justice Coalition Unity Values

1. Nutritious Food as a Basic Human Need and Right
We uphold dignified access to nutritious, culturally relevant, and sustainable food as a basic human right for all.

2. Sacred Responsibility to the Land and Life
We uplift Indigenous worldviews and knowledge recognizing our sacred obligation to protect the land and all life, acknowledging the interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings.

3. Justice, Equity & Sovereignty in Food Systems
We seek a future where food systems are just, equitable, and sovereign, empowering all people to thrive regardless of their life circumstances.

4. Dismantling Structural Oppression
We recognize that true food systems change requires addressing the deeper structural systems of oppression that perpetuate inequality and food insecurity.

5. Uplifting Lived Experiences
We strive to center the voices and solutions of those most impacted by food insecurity, measuring success through their engagement and leadership.

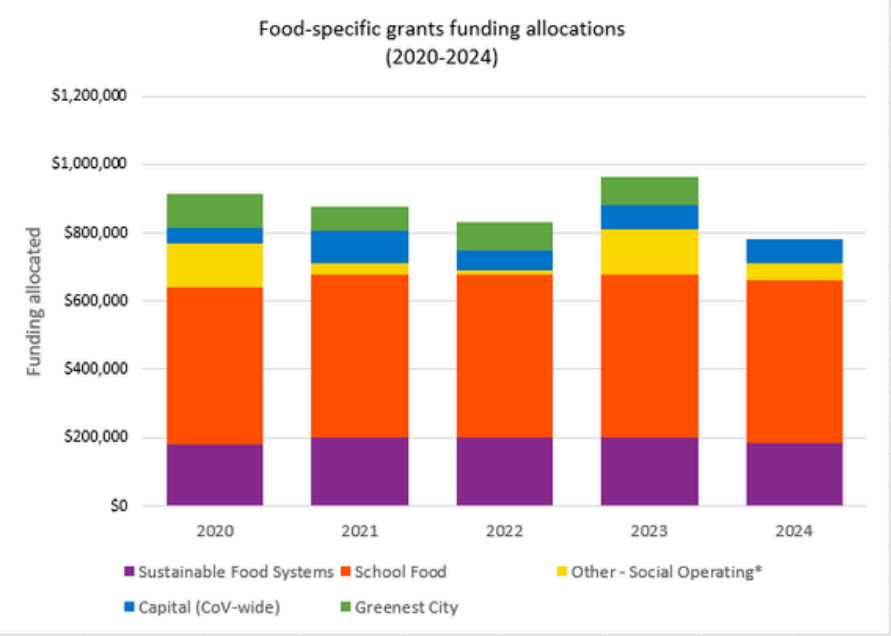
6. Collaboration & Inclusivity
We strive for meaningful participation, continuous learning and collaboration between individuals and organizations, recognizing that collective effort and understanding across diverse systems and communities is essential for change.

7. Bold & Creative Action for Change
We embrace diverse political strategies and commit to bold, flexible and creative action, moving us beyond words to tangible change.

8. Care & Intentionality
We recognize the urgency of hunger but strive to shift our mindsets towards a way of working that honours slow, thoughtful and intentional ways of being.

9. Celebration & Joy
We embrace joy, celebration, and cultural sharing, acknowledging that food is a key ingredient to fostering social connection, nutrition and mental health.

Recommendations & Budget Asks



The funding provided by the City of Vancouver for food systems remains inadequate to meet our human rights obligations.

As the chart above shows, food systems funding has remained fairly unchanged in the last five years and well before this. Funding has actually decreased over the past five years despite inflation and a one-time special grant in 2023.

Food systems funding is below $800,000 and represents a mere .03% of the City's operational and capital budget for 2024.

Food systems funding should be commensurable to building a food system that ensures dignified food access and community resilience. Each of the 52 Vancouver Food Justice Coalition members can speak to the immense challenges they face: lack of resources and funding cuts, low wages, increasing program demand, and more.

Funding Principles:

- Funding is long-term, predictable, and scalable to meet growing needs.
- Funding explicitly addresses equity and disproportionately affected communities (Indigenous peoples, newcomers, seniors, low-income residents).
- Funding amounts are sufficient for meaningful impact - phased rollout could be considered.
- Funding integrates all initiatives to build a coordinated and efficient food system.

1. Creation of an Indigenous Food Systems Grant

To support Indigenous-led food sovereignty, cultural revitalization, and self-determination. Indigenous ways of learning start with food - eating food together. Funding can uplift Indigenous healing in and with the community, building stronger relationships together and with wider society. Access to land to grow plant medicine and traditional foods, along with increased visibility through food celebrations, supports a healthy healing path. When paired with funding for anti-racism initiatives, housing, and mental health, these efforts strengthen Indigenous well-being.

2. Increase to the Sustainable Food Systems Grant

To strengthen Vancouver Neighbourhood Food Networks and other community-led food development programs. These build food assets, dignified food access, community resilience and other impacts beyond food security that foster social connection, inclusion and belonging at the core of community building. The SFS grant has not kept up with the cost of living, while many frontline community food staff are barely earning a living wage. Increased organizational sustainability is necessary to meet the food security needs within our communities as well as meeting both municipal and wider systemic policy priorities.

3. Creation of a Funding Mechanism for Food Recovery

To enable scaling up surplus food rescue and redistribution to support community food programming and decrease food waste. Four main food recovery organizations in Vancouver—Food Stash Foundation, Vancouver Food Runners, CityReach Care Society, and Quest Nonprofit Grocery Markets rescue 4.8 million pounds of food annually (in-kind value: $17 million), mitigating 9.54 million pounds of CO2eq, yet receive less than 5% of their funding from government sources, leaving their operations precarious. A modest city-level funding mechanism would sustain and scale this work, ensuring healthy surplus food reaches social service organizations and community food programs, while simultaneously advancing sustainable practices to support Vancouver's climate action goals.

Conclusion

The City of Vancouver has made commitments to equity, sustainability, and reconciliation. Now is the time to ensure those commitments are reflected in budget decisions. Upholding the right to food is not only a moral and legal obligation, but also a practical investment in the health, resilience, and well-being of our city.

By allocating adequate and sustained funding to food systems, the City can reduce reliance on charity, strengthen Indigenous food sovereignty, and create a more just and resilient future. These investments will prevent costly health and social impacts, while fostering stronger, more connected communities.

Budgeting for the three recommendations—an Indigenous Food Systems Grant, an increase to the Sustainable Food Systems Grant, and a mechanism for food recovery—will move Vancouver toward a food system that is equitable, dignified, and prepared to meet the challenges ahead.

The City has made promises. Now it is time to deliver.

VANCOUVER FOOD JUSTICE COALITION

The Vancouver Food Justice Coalition are 52 community organizations, along those with lived and living experience, who have joined forces to engage in meaningful policy and advocacy work. We aim to advance food justice with community knowledge - working through a community driven, collaborative, and cross-sectoral movement building that supports meaningful systems change work.

Contact

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