

LFS 350 Group 12: VFAM - Free or Low-Cost Meals Project Proposal

Purpose:

The Greater Vancouver population includes many individuals and families vulnerable to food insecurity. Suitable and accommodating assets for nourishment exist, but various difficulties, including remoteness, language barriers, limited access to technology, low incomes, or disabilities often prevent vulnerable populations from accessing such resources.

As a solution, Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) Dietitians have created a food asset map inspired by the Toronto Food by Ward initiative. Our LFS 350 community project will involve collaborating with VCH and contributing to the existing map by updating information on free or low-cost meals in the city. This project will highlight strengths of the community food system, and bring attention to issues for future focus, such as unequal distribution of assets within the city. In creating a more accurate representation of Vancouver food initiatives, we hope to increase knowledge of available food assets, and display this information in a user-friendly way.

Significance:

According to a 2008 survey, as many as 8% of Vancouver households are suffering from food insecurity (Statistics Canada, 2013), which is often compounded by disability, disease, and lack of transportation (Miewald & Ostry, 2014). A stark example of this is seen in Vancouver's downtown eastside (DTES). Of approximately 18,025 individuals living in DTES low-income housing, more than 50% are below the poverty line (DTES Kitchen Tables, 2010). In fact, 59% of interviewed individuals listed charitable meal programs

outside their residence as their primary food source (Miewald and Ostry, 2014). This highlights the need for the city to facilitate a way in which individuals and organizations can easily identify the locations of food assets, and assess their distribution and accessibility throughout the city.

Food assets are physical facilities or social services in the community, such as farmers markets, community kitchens, or neighborhood food networks, which help to facilitate connections between individuals and their local food system (Vancouver Food Policy Council, 2013). While there are plenty of food assets in neighborhoods, food insecure individuals may be unaware they exist or don't have the means to commute to the locations. Mapping these assets into an easy-to-use resource is a solution to raising this awareness of the distribution, and potentially making these assets more accessible. This mismatch in knowledge of assets compared to what is available was exemplified in a study in Boston. The researchers found that assets were available in the community did not align with residents' perceptions, due to a lack of awareness. (Florian, J. et al., 2016). A food asset map will provide a visual aid that will help to address the gaps that prevent individuals in need from locating and accessing food assets in the community.

Food asset mapping involves community-decision making and thus capitalizes on diverse community knowledge and experiences in accessing meal services in the city. This integration of local knowledge can direct future food security initiatives towards a common goal that reflects the values of its community. In *Mapping Food Matters*, the author points out that through this process of mapping assets, we can also identify relevant cultural, ecological, and economic assets that also contribute to public health and well-being

(Rosenblatt, S., n.d.). Developing a food asset map aims to enhance local capacity to access food and facilitate an initiation of long-term food systems change. This ideology fits into the second stage of Food Systems Change: Food systems in transition, constructed by McCullum et al. (2005). In keeping with the third goal of the Vancouver Food Strategy to “improve access to healthy, affordable, culturally diverse food for all residents”, food asset mapping is one method in which the city of Vancouver hopes to identify and increase the distribution of food assets across the city (Vancouver Food Policy Council, 2013).

At the start of this course we were introduced to the idea of community-based experiential learning (CBEL). The Centre for Community Engaged Learning states “[CBEL] encompasses a number of community-based pedagogical practices,” (Centre for Community Engaged Learning, n.d.), which identifies it as a leading principle which gives students the opportunity to translate knowledge from academic settings into applied community activities. According to Gottlieb and Joshi (2010), food justice represents an increased mindfulness and equality of what and how we grow, purchase, transport, access, distribute, and eat food. This method allows us to draw on the strengths of community members to fuel the transition of our food system towards a consolidated, just, and sustainable system.

Objectives:

1. Update an existing Food Asset Map with locations and details showing the availability of free or low cost meals.
2. Evaluate the performance of the VFAM in terms of ease of navigation and usability.
3. Assess the extent to which the VFAM helps users identify and utilize food assets.
4. Determine opportunities for continued improvement and development of the VFAM.

Research Questions:

1. Does the VFAM tool help individuals identify the location of free or low cost meals in Vancouver?
2. How effective do users find this tool for locating suitable and accessible free or low cost meals?
3. How relevant and clear is the information provided on the VFAM?
4. What ways can the VFAM be improved?

Research Methods:

We will initially update the existing Excel spreadsheet from VCH, by contacting each community partner via email, phone, and/or in person, to ensure the information is complete and current. This contact is necessary to obtain consent to use their information and to confirm accuracy of key information. We will also collect information about new free or low-cost meals in Vancouver to add to the VFAM spreadsheet.

In the second part of the project, we will conduct a trial of the food asset map with individuals on UBC Vancouver campus. Feedback will be gathered qualitatively, using short surveys or questionnaires. Questions asked will inquire about ease of locating desired food assets, availability of assets within the participant's neighbourhood, possible usage of the map in future, accuracy of information provided, and more. All group members will be present to trial the map and conduct questionnaires on a specified day, at a location to be determined. With ethical considerations in mind, data collected during the trial will remain anonymous, and we will obtain consent of the individual to collect their data. Further analysis

by VCH will then be carried out to determine the impact of the project and incorporate user feedback into opportunities for future change.

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