

Feeding Halton: Co-location Food Hub and a Path Towards a More Inclusive Food System

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**Centre for
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“People are thinking more collaboratively. They want to feed people, and that takes a lot of hard work.”

- Meaghan Richardson

Executive Summary

In the absence of a national food policy, guaranteed basic income or the provision of an affordable housing strategy, community food security continues to be a rising need in Canadian municipalities. This leaves many local agencies struggling to secure funding to address a growing demand for emergency food provision. Feeding Halton is a co-location hub in Burlington Ontario that partners with the agricultural community to help deliver fresh produce to social service agencies throughout Halton Region to address the lack of fresh options. They also provide purchasing options to spread the local food network into low income communities.

Feeding Halton was formed in 2013 as an inter-agency partnership between several social service agencies, the municipality of Halton Region, and the Halton agricultural community. Their multi-stakeholder partnership of civic organizations, municipal government, and the private sector represent a path to achieving greater collaborative organization in the realization of collective goals, such as their current momentum towards the possible establishment of a community food hub that is linked with both the rural agricultural community and urban social agencies. Feeding Halton also represents a way of bridging divides across geographically dispersed regions where logistical challenges can be daunting for smaller agencies working in relative isolation. The co-location hub/collaborative model is a typology of food hub practice that brings together regional stakeholders for a shared vision of an inclusive food system.

“There are only so many dollars out there for people to support us. You’re better off collaborating. We are all doing great work and it is important that we work together where we can as we’re in it for the same reasons.”

- Gayle Kabbash

Research Overview

Research for this report was conducted between May-September 2016 as part of a Toronto City Region Food System Assessment Project. This work contributes to an international research project of seven global cities, including Toronto. Toronto's food system was defined for the purposes of this study to include the entire Greater Golden Horseshoe. I was hired as a research assistant and worked under the guidance of the project's research coordinator, Sally Miller. Overall, 66 interviews were conducted across the Greater Golden Horseshoe of food system stakeholders. I personally conducted 16 interviews with food security or food policy stakeholders. Sampling of participants used purposive sampling of food system experts, with semi-structured interviews that queried the nature of collaboration in local food system activities.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Feeding Halton is a co-location hub in Burlington, Ontario, which means it acts as an aggregator for several partner social service agencies in the Halton Region that deal with emergency and supplement food provision. It operates as an interagency partnership between these agencies and the agricultural community to procure fresh produce from local farmers and distribute it throughout Halton Region. As a case study, Feeding Halton represents an innovative example of an agency participating in building and maintaining multi-stakeholder partnerships within the Greater Golden Horseshoe to achieve broader systemic shifts towards enhanced urban-rural regional agricultural partnerships.

Project History

Feeding Halton started in October 2013, out of a conversation between community organizations and the agricultural community intent on engaging key community agencies regarding a need to create a single contact between them and the agricultural community. This was seen as necessary to reduce the complexity of the donation process for farmers who had been receiving competing donation requests, and who found the channels for donation in need of simplification. As Feeding Halton's Agri-Market and Food Coordinator Meaghan Richardson put it, "if a farmer is busy harvesting, it's very hard to remember the name of which organization is asking for donations." At the same time, there were several key farmers in the Halton Region Federation of Agriculture who were discussing the growing need in Halton by community agencies to access fresh local food, and how best to allocate donations.

The agencies that comprise Feeding Halton and partner with Halton Region and farmer representatives are: Halton Food For Life (a food recovery agency); Halton Food For Thought (a student nutrition program); Halton Fresh Food Box; Halton Fruit Tree Project (a gleaning project); Halton Region Federation of Agriculture; and Open Doors at St. Christopher's (a church charity program). Meaghan Richardson was hired in 2013 as Feeding Halton's liaison to bring the message of member agencies to agricultural partners in order to streamline the donation process. Feeding Halton has found that since inception, the momentum of the collaborative has grown

and farmers are becoming increasingly engaged with providing donations, and in some cases have begun delivering produce for free (rather than with Feeding Halton's refrigerated trucks).

Feeding Halton works by blending with Halton Food For Life's operations, where member agencies have access to square footage in Food For Life's warehouse to do box packaging. They also offer logistics support, and access to three refrigerated trucks. As well, the space is Food Safe, which helps member agencies, as every partnering agency has to complete a food safety survey to ensure compliance with food handling certification. Feeding Halton also provides purchasing options for agencies to access grade and non-grade produce from farmers that typically would go to waste, such as irregular vegetables that do not meet grocery standards (for examples peppers with green stripes that would be considered aesthetically unappealing).

In addition to securing agricultural donations and below-cost purchasing power for member agencies, Feeding Halton has also started offering programming to enable community members to better access local food networks. One of their new programs is Farm Fresh Markets, where the collaborative purchases products from farmers at wholesale prices and then extends those prices at regular community events. As well, they have also begun running farmer's markets in low-income areas throughout Halton.

Feeding Halton is run by a steering committee formed by the original member agencies. They created a terms of reference to guide their mandate, and created a role for associate members as a route for non-members to participate and benefit from aspects of the collaborative's work. The steering committee also votes on bringing in new members, a process that is done to prevent restaurants and market retailers from gaining the cost-efficient pricing available to partner members, as farmers offer produce at generous rates. While cropland agriculture is not as extensive in Halton Region as in other regions in Southern Ontario, Feeding Halton currently works with 13 farmers.

Geographical Context

Halton Region is a large (964.01km²) and relatively wealthy regional municipality in the Greater Golden Horseshoe, with an estimated population of 501,669, (Statistics Canada, 2011). It has a strong farming community at the northern end, in Halton Hills and parts of Milton, and a dense, urban community to the south in Burlington, Oakville and the remainder of Milton. In comparison to Toronto, its geographic size is greatly dispersed which affects processes such as bulk purchasing and logistics. While agencies in Toronto can generally rely on proximity to the Ontario Food Terminal to take advantage of its cost-effective purchasing options in the market, agencies in Halton have more difficulty in circulating goods as efficiently. Also problematic is that it can take at least an hour with no traffic to drive from the agricultural north to the urban south.

The Region of Halton's "Household Food Security Overall Findings and Trends Over Time" reports that in 2011/12, 2.9%(±2) of Halton households were food insecure, which compares against Ontario households 8.2%(±1) that are food insecure (Halton, 2014). While this need is lower than many regions and the Ontario average, Food For Life reported that having served

an average of 175,000 meals a month, they are now creeping towards 190,000-195,000 this year - and demand keeps rising. In addition, Halton Food For Life has recently gone from 27,000 client visits to 36,000 visits a month. Finally, food weights have grown from just under 2.5 million pounds a year to an anticipated 2.8 million pounds to supply an increasingly diverse community, and which includes some of the fastest growing municipalities in Ontario. This indicates that despite relative wealth, growing food insecurity is placing greater demands on agency capacity amidst a difficult funding environment.

Halton's Public Health Department also notes that "providing a basic healthy diet for a family of four living in Halton (two parents and two children) costs \$199.31 weekly or \$864 per month." As well, "the average cost of a healthy diet in Halton Region has increased by 7.5% since 2013, and by 49% since 2003. Halton Region has had a consistently lower cost of a Nutritious Food Basket compared to the Ontario average since 2005" (Halton, 2014).

Human Resources

Feeding Halton currently has one full-time staff person, Meaghan Richardson, the project's Agri-Market And Food Coordinator. She works within Halton Food For Life's building in Burlington to coordinate the logistics of Feeding Halton. Meaghan's agricultural background has given her a particular skill in liaising with the agricultural community and an understanding of how to communicate and negotiate with farmers within their often demanding and erratic schedules (as perceived by urbanites). Meagan also works closely with Halton Food For Life's Executive Director, Brenda Hadju, to perform tasks with both Feeding Halton and Food For Life's mandate, as the two organizations are closely entwined.

Physical Infrastructure

As mentioned, Halton Food For Life's building in Burlington is the brick-and-mortar location for Feeding Halton. Its infrastructure contributes all of the logistical support to the collaborative. Food For Life has been operating as a recovery agency in Halton since 1995 and their infrastructural capacity has since expanded to include a 22-pallet refrigerator, ample warehouse space, and three refrigerated trucks – all of which are used to in service of both Feeding Halton and Food For Life's work.

Financial Resources

Feeding Halton relies on granting from the Halton Community Investment Fund, The United Way, Greenbelt Fund, Trillium Foundation and private donors. This means that their funding is contingent upon the lifecycle of various grants, and is unstable over the long-run. Meaghan's current staff position is a 3-year contract that started in 2013, and while subsequent funding is likely on the horizon it is not guaranteed.

Community Resources

The strength of Feeding Halton's partnership derives partially from a broader collaborative spirit around food and agriculture in Halton Region. One of these figures was Anna De Marchi Meyers who was hired as Agricultural Liason Officer in 2012 to support communication between the agricultural community and the region. Halton also has active civic organizations involved with food and agriculture, including the Halton Region Agricultural Advisory Committee and the Halton Food Council, both of which have Halton Region staff support. They are also included as consultants for Halton's Rural Agricultural Strategy, a framework for strengthening Halton's rural economy.

Playing a key role in increasing food system awareness in the region is the Halton Food Council, which was initiated by Halton's Public Health department in 2008. The Region and public health have both played large roles in providing resources. Halton Council recently passed a Rural Agricultural Strategy to ensure the long-term viability and sustainability of Halton's agricultural system, emphasising the importance of focusing on "agricultural systems" and have been included as consultants on Halton's Rural Agricultural Strategy. The Halton Food Council has also been included for consultation within the Rural Agricultural Strategy.

Finally, Food for Life and the Halton Poverty Roundtable have been active in supporting food security within Halton Region by contributing to bridging these collaborative activities and holding regular public consultation meetings such as the Raising the Bar Forums, which centre on how food assistance programs can achieve more through better collaborations.

Collaborative Model/Co-location Hub

As a coordinating entity, Feeding Halton gives social service agencies more reliable access to fresh, local food and greater procurement options within Halton's local food system. The co-location model also allows Feeding Halton to pool scarce resources between agencies that are doing similar, though not identical work. This last point suggests a method of resolving escalating tensions between agencies involved in emergency food provision, and erasing the often false binary between competing service models. Social service agencies - like food banks - have grown out of the retreat of the welfare state over the past several decades, and are struggling in an uncertain funding environment to deal with the consequent rising demand for emergency food provisions. While there may be different ideological views on how to resolve the tension of this rising need, the collaborative model posits a path to resolution - that while not all agencies may have the same mandate, the core need for coordinated logistics can be used to gain efficiencies across regions and can achieve better results in a collaborative arrangement than each agency can by working within a more localized, smaller supply chain.

"I'm a firm believer that you need to work with partners - your power is much greater when in a collaboration than isolated" said Halton Food Council member Gayle Kabbash of the arrangement. "There are only so many dollars out there for people to support us. You're better off collaborating. We are all doing great work and it is important that we work together where we

can as we're in it for the same reasons.”

Local Food Act

Feeding Halton has positioned itself to take advantage of donations stimulated by the Local Food Act, a bill passed in 2013 to provide a tax credit to farmers making agricultural donations (Bill 36). While farmer donations to Food For Life precede the Act, it has made things easier for Feeding Halton. It has also been perceived as an advantage to the agricultural community, as there are some benefits to donating.

As Meaghan describes, “What I've heard from a lot of farmers is that - yes the product is there and they are willing to donate excess produce - but if they have to send their harvest crews out there then that's a significant amount of dollars, and the harvest crews need to move onto the next thing. They're moving very fast with crops. That's where [The Local Food Act] is helpful the most.” Meaghan is also an asset to the organization, being a farmer herself, as the Local Food Act requires donation recipients to estimate the fair market assessment of donated produce for tax receipt purposes and her background gives her strength in this regard.

Fostering System Change

In positing a theory of change in Halton Region, the key shifts came with a combination of grassroots community activity, leadership at the regional level, and the timely delivery of funding for key staffing positions that capitalized on the robust collaborative energy and citizen-driven food networks already present in the region. In Feeding Halton's case, the Region of Halton's Community Investment Fund provided the initial funding to the collaborative, and allowed it to hire Meaghan which then helped crystallized the already growing relationships existing in the region. Halton Food For Thought's Executive Director said of this step, “the program was in danger until we hired a person to be able to do things we needed to do and wanted to do.” However, this step has not always been replicable in other regions where there is one of these key pieces missing. In one surveyed region, a lack of interest from the regional government led to the collective losing momentum once a Greenbelt funded staff position expired.

Feeding Halton proposes a solution to an issue facing social agencies and securing fresh produce – to act in collaboration rather than defensively or in isolation. “People are thinking more collaboratively” said Meaghan. “They want to feed people, and that takes a lot of hard work.

Creating Networks

Part of Meagan's role with Feeding Halton is to maintain and grow community networks between social service agencies, donors, and the agricultural community. Networking within Halton is a key feature that is often missing in other surveyed regions, where initiatives thrive or falter depending on available resources. Meagan's role is crucial in keeping these burgeoning networks threaded to ongoing initiatives and in continuing to build momentum.

Building Knowledge

Feeding Halton offers a case study in how to gain efficiencies in supply chain logistics for social service agencies looking to partner with regional agricultural partners. Its story over the coming years will build into the Greater Golden Horseshoes typology of best practices for food hub trajectories and how best to maintain multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Bridging Divides

Throughout the Greater Golden Horseshoe, interviewees spoke of an urban-rural divide that inhibits partnerships and collaborations – an attribute that is common among many of the regions in the Greater Golden Horseshoe immediately outside of Toronto. Kate Greavette of the York Region Food System Alliance crystallizes this relationship: “There’s a perception that the rural-urban divide or geography of the region is very different - but there are also many commonalities, as an us-vs-them perception gets pushed when there are still many commonalities. Bridging those gaps and that information [...] we’re trying to encourage people to see it as a region, and forming a network to construct coordinated movements and actions. We don’t have an opportunity to have those urban/rural conversations in Toronto as we could have in York Region.”

An example of this urban-rural divide is in Peel Region, which has a similar, urban-rural divide to Halton region: urban density to the south in Mississauga and Brampton, and rural agricultural activity to the north in Caledon. Yet, they do not have the same logistical coordination in circulating fresh, local food throughout key food agencies, even with a large provincial network of food banks that generally have intensive capital in their operations. Chris Hatch, the executive director of the Mississauga Food Bank, spoke of the lack of connectivity in Peel in that it is unable to treat its assets like a region, echoing views expressed in recent newspaper headlines that the southern end of Peel has little in common with the agricultural North: “[Politicians] are talking about breaking up Peel [that] they should be on their own.”

Other interview findings point out that agencies in the more rural Caledon are oriented towards Dufferin region rather than to the urban south, and which generate food programming that largely remains within that rural network to the north. Despite these regional agricultural networks existing, Chris Hatch said that, “We just cannot get enough fresh. Sobey’s used to be in Milton and they would give us excess fresh [...] They just closed that distribution centre [...] So that source of fresh has stopped.”

Nevertheless, being land-locked has inspired an experiment in incorporating aquaponics – and the cultivation of microgreens and tilapia - into their food distribution system. In August 2016, the Mississauga Food Bank began an experiment with a scalable aquaponics set-up in their distribution centre warehouse. “We were going to get [the tilapia] processed [but] the regulations are incredible”, said Hatch. Instead, the Mississauga Food Bank will partner with a local high school, giving the fish to students in their culinary program where they will fillet and clean them, and then send the product back vacuum sealed and frozen. This is an innovation spurred by lack of access to fresh food, yet is likely only possible with an organization like the

Food Bank network which has greater access to capital than many smaller organizations. An example of the difficulty in making aquaponics feasible is that one surveyed agency recently closed their aquaponics experiment, suggesting the possible lack of replicability of this solution across regions.

In another surveyed region, an interviewee described the challenges in finding funding to provide adequate staffing to do something approaching the broader regional work being achieved by Feeding Halton. The agency received a refrigerated truck from a foundation with the purpose of building relationships with farmers, though were largely going to farmer's markets and not taking advantage of broader institutional procurement efficiencies that could exist in the region with collective purchasing power. To the executive director, the driver functioned as more than just logistical support; he also did PR work for the agency, yet was not perceived as needing to be compensated for that work by the agency's board. This made it challenging to compensate him for the work being done, and the work necessary to secure relationships with the agricultural community and donors. This agency was one of several in the region doing similar work in approaching farmers and hoping to secure fresh produce, and who are guarded about sharing their agricultural donors.

At the same time, foundation donors have been offering funding for regional collaborations. However, without the staffing capacity necessary to do the work to build the networks to make these conversations happen, this objective fizzled. Though there was funding available from a foundation for a broader regional collaboration, that plan was scaled-back to instead fund individual agency programming. This shows the necessity of those broad regional collaborations, that once solidified can begin to attract more efficient funding towards achieving systemic goals. Organizational capacity at the local level is needed to better pool resources and help partners pursue a collective impact and therefore approach something like a system change. Rather than having agencies operate in relative isolation, they should pursue logistical efficiencies that are better realized at the regional level.

While The Mississauga Food Bank approached the problem of access to fresh food with a technological experiment with its aquaponics set-up, Feeding Halton proposes a collaborative relationship to pool logistical capacity. Where surveyed agencies approach regional problems in relative isolation and are unable to achieve effects that could be better realized through economies of scale, the collaborative model can free up staffing that can better focus on an agency's core operational mandate, rather than spread themselves thin to do "side-of-desk" networking.

Fostering Innovation

In an era of dwindling financial resources to support non-profits, Feeding Halton's collaborative model shows that stakeholder engagement between agencies can provide efficiencies that support growth and maintenance of enhanced community food networks. While collaboration by itself is not an innovation, Feeding Halton's people-driven network-based solution centred on finding common ground among agencies tackling similar supply chain issues, offers a model for a way forward in engaging in broader multi-stakeholder relationships in the steps towards

building a regional food hub.

Resources Needed to Sustain the Project

As with many non-profits, funding was granted to staff Feeding Halton on a 3-year contract. This means at the very least a reliable funding source is needed to sustain the network connections, as it is unclear whether the networks can become self-sustaining without the direction of a network manager.

Constraints

• Weather

By summer 2016, Feeding Halton and Food For Life were anticipating a lean year because of reduced yields in the area as a result of record hot temperatures and reduced rainfall. In one example of the strain this put on relations with the agricultural community, Feeding Halton was worried that a local farmer in Milton who had been growing sweet corn and donating consistently in previous years, might not be able to supply anything. In the past, he had grown enough for food banks throughout Halton, which averaged around 35,000 lbs. This year he was worried whether or not he was going to be able to supply his own markets, and the prospect of losing that source of fresh would mean a much greater reliance on canned or processed goods within their distribution system.

• Weekend Gap

The weekend gap (the challenge of running an organization on a Monday-Friday 9-5 schedule) can present challenges in maintaining fresh produce, especially as many participating organizations only operate between regular business hours. If a donation of 20 pallets of fresh produce is made on a Thursday, this can make the distribution of fragile crops like lettuce to get to where it can be consumed before spoiling a challenge. If partnering agencies are not open on weekends that product will likely not be fresh on a Monday.

• Food Hub in Northern Halton Region

The size of the region continues to be a logistical challenge. "To try to get up to Acton - it's at least an hour with no traffic" said Chris Burr, executive director of Halton Food For Thought, and one of the collaborative partners. "The geographic size of the region is not as compact as Toronto, and that falls into bulk purchasing and getting things into multiple sites [...] This is where the northern food hub comes in." However, this idea has been difficult to proceed with as the vision is to include processing and value-added retail, and there are not currently any locations with cold storage, a freezer and a kitchen in the north-end of Halton to fill this need.

• Funding

As with many non-profits, Feeding Halton faces the challenge of inconsistent funding. Throughout the Greater Golden Horseshoe, interviewees describe how when funding arrives there is stakeholder buy-in and engagement, but engagement lessens when funding disappears. The challenge many organizations face is how to keep the momentum growing despite an uncertain funding environment. “It’s always tough with non-profits” says Chris Burr, who adds that the networking necessary to sustain relationships often comes at the expense of core activities. “Everyone is doing it off the side of their desks.”

Chris Burr discussed the goal of drafting a White Paper with Food For Life’s Brenda Hadju to begin to petition the federal and provincial governments on food security issues after receiving political support to do so from a local MP. However, this work is “side of desk” and research and drafting a position paper competes with having to run an organization that already operates on tight margins.

Future Plans

Feeding Halton currently has a 3-year strategic plan. The first phase of this plan is to better understand the needs of member agencies and incorporate those into agricultural production planning. While farmers are willing to grow food for member agencies, they need to know what they should be growing. Feeding Halton is working on production planning with agencies and farmers, helping facilitate the discussion between what agencies want to receive during harvest season so that farmers can factor this into their growing schedules.

Another phase of their strategic planning is scale: “We really want to scale up Feeding Halton” said Chris Burr. “There’s now dialogue with FoodReach to see if there’s a purchasing capability [...] to see the best solution for purchasing.” While Feeding Halton does offer limited purchasing solutions, they are not comprehensive enough to fulfill more complex food orders. However, the momentum is for a broader regional dialogue in achieving greater efficiencies through partnership. As stated by Chris Burr, “We’re starting to see buy-in from people [and...] seeing momentum and the right people around the table. We’re seeing if we can keep a foot to the pedal.”

How this scaling might look is not certain at this point, though examples like Toronto Food Starter and Ontario Agrifood Venture Centre show one direction food hubs can take to incorporate value-added processing at a scale that is approachable and affordable. In Toronto Food Starter’s case, they are discussing the feasibility of an interagency partnership with FoodShare and North York Harvest to produce a dry soup mix that can be sold inexpensively but still return a profit to the agencies, providing an affordable, nutritious food source that has aspects of social enterprise and provides employment. This is a component that offers a more holistic solution to food insecurity, by offering job training and employment opportunities as well as a source of earned revenue for the not-for-profits involved.

Relevance to Other Projects

The timely provision of funding to create staffing positions that solidify community networks has been crucial to the success of Feeding Halton, as well as the broader food networks in Halton Region. However, the lack of funding for core operations to support that active networking and relationship-building across the region is something that may be holding back comparable initiatives in other jurisdictions.

In other regions surveyed within the Greater Golden Horseshoe, the strength of collaborations can change depending on the reliability of funding and the willingness of regional municipalities to provide resources and supports. If that funding is absent and there is a lack of vision from the region, then those networks can suffer - and in some cases were reduced to a core circle of food system champions. In other regions, interviewees spoke of receiving similar funding from the Greenbelt Foundation that stimulates a project or initiative, but that the momentum soon dissipates once the funding contract expires.

In Feeding Halton's case, that initial organizational support from the Region led to broader conversations around partnerships and regional collaborations, which then created the collaborative that made funding more accessible. The collaborative/co-location model also offers a method by which local agencies can realize broader systemic goals and efficiencies, helping achieve more effective logistical support in regions that have an urban-rural divide similar to Halton. These relations can also help form the basis for broader systemic change, bringing urban and rural partners together over a shared vision of an inclusive regional food system.

Conclusion

The co-location hub/collaborative model as shown with Feeding Halton is a typology of food hub that brings together regional stakeholders through a formal sharing partnership and a shared vision of an inclusive food system. This model reveals key advantages in generating an improved outcome for non-profit agencies in a tight funding environment. There are still challenges with this model in areas as geographically dispersed as Halton, and coordinating the logistics necessary to serve all regions, such as Feeding Halton's continued need for the resources necessary to create a food hub space in the northern end.

However, the model adopted by Feeding Halton creates a best practice for other jurisdictions to look at in the coming years, as both a guide to achieve broad, regional collaborations, as well as a lesson in the challenges and opportunities of using such a model. The following are recommended practices for food system collaborators:

Recommendations

- **Creating Networks**

The co-location hub and collaborative model supports growing a food system network by creating opportunity for future food system actions. The collaborative aspect makes space for a deliberative forum and voting council among food security stakeholders, while the co-location hub opens opportunities for shared efficiencies with tight material resources.

- **Fostering System Change**

Systemic change in food systems is difficult to manifest as food system governance is decentralized across many diverse stakeholders operating in relative isolation. The co-location/collaborative model

- **Bridging Divides**

The co-location/collaborative model bridges divides. It bridges social divides by bringing stakeholders together to view problems as regional, and bridges geographic divides by proposing that solutions facing stakeholders can best be achieved in partnership and collaboration.

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Appendix A

List of Interview Participants:

Chris Burr, Executive Director of Halton Food For Thought

Anna De Marchi Meyers Agricultural Liaison Officer at the Region of Halton

Brenda Hadju, Executive Director of Halton Food For Life

Chris Hatch, Executive Director of the Mississauga Food Bank

Gayle Kabbash, Member of Halton Food Council

Meaghan Richardson, Food Procurement Manager, Halton Food For Life and Agri-Market and Food Coordinator of Feed Halton.