

Creating a municipal-level emergency food plan: Lessons from Thunder Bay, Ontario

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Abstract

Emergency food planning is an emerging field of study and practice evolving from lessons learned about the need to be prepared to respond to increased food insecurity in the face of emergency events. In this era of climate change, geo-political conflicts, and growing inequality, disruptions to the global food system are occurring more frequently. Many of these disruptions have the potential to impact food access on a large scale, a reality that communities need to be ready for through preparation to mitigate impacts. Like other municipalities around the world, the city of Thunder Bay in Northwestern Ontario, Canada, and its surrounding areas were caught unprepared by the impacts of

the COVID-19 pandemic on food insecurity. Prior to the pandemic, there was no coordinated body to address a sudden increase in food insecurity, particularly among already vulnerabilized populations. In late 2020, Thunder Bay + Area Food Strategy (TBAFS), the regional food policy council, led the coordination of emergency food response and researched the early emergency food response that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings from this research identified the need for a collaborative Emergency Food Plan that brought together the municipality and a range of civil society organizations, institutions, and agencies. Acting on this research, the TBAFS coordinated the development of an Emergency Food Plan for the region, leveraging a group of primary partners who make up key components of civil society's food access infrastructure. This article provides an overview of this process in the context of existing

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Authors Note

At the time of this writing, Courtney Strutt was employed by the Thunder Bay + Area Food Strategy as the Emergency Food Plan Coordinator and Charles Levkoe served as the volunteer chair of the Thunder Bay + Area Food Strategy.

research and literature along with lessons learned throughout the process.

Keywords

COVID-19, pandemic, emergency food planning, food policy council, food security, Thunder Bay

Introduction

Emergency food planning is an emerging field of study and practice evolving from lessons learned about preparation for response to increased food insecurity in the face of emergency events (Avrutina et al., 2020; Biehl et al., 2018; Hecht et al., 2019; Office of the Auditor General, 2021). In this era of climate change, geo-political conflicts, and growing inequality, disruptions to the global food system are occurring more frequently. Many of these disruptions have the potential to impact food access on a large scale, a reality that communities need to be ready for through preparation to mitigate impacts (Savary et al., 2020). Disruptions to food access during times of emergency cannot be considered apart from existing pressures of inequitable and unsustainable food systems (Holt Giménez, 2017; Clapp, 2023) and chronic food insecurity. Chronic food insecurity is defined as the persistent inability to meet minimum food requirements over extended periods of time, resulting from inadequate access to financial resources and inequality (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2008; Wolfson & Leung, 2020). While emergency food planning is not a solution to these broader food systems challenges, it is an important step in ensuring more equitable, dignified, and just responses to basic human needs during times of emergency.

This article presents an overview of emergency food planning in the municipality of Thunder Bay in northwestern Ontario, Canada, which was initiated in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. We explore the role of the Thunder Bay + Area Food Strategy (TBAFS) and the ensuing action taken by civil society organizations to develop, practice, and

grow an Emergency Food Plan (EFP) for Thunder Bay. The EFP is a collaborative civil society initiative to enhance municipal emergency preparedness regarding food insecurity during unexpected medium- to large-scale events. Leveraging the food access infrastructure, connections with vulnerable populations, and leadership of nonprofit organizations, the EFP provides a roadmap for a coordinated response led by civil society actors in collaboration with the city of Thunder Bay. The authors of this paper played a central role in the EFP research and development as members of the TBAFS: Courtney Strutt through the role of EFP coordinator with the TBAFS, and Charles Levkoe through the role of volunteer chair of the TBAFS.

We begin by providing an overview of the Thunder Bay context in relation to food access and recognition of the need for coordinated emergency food planning. We then discuss the development of the EFP and conclude with a reflection on the lessons learned from this initiative. We suggest a collaborative and democratic process to emergency food planning is necessary to ensure a coordinated approach to the use of community-based resources during an emergency. Furthermore, we argue food policy councils are well situated to host emergency food planning processes because they are already positioned to connect food system actors and are hubs for collaborative food systems advocacy.

The Thunder Bay Context

Thunder Bay is a mid-sized city on the north shore of Gitchi Gami (Lake Superior), on Anishnaabek, represented today by Fort William First Nation, and signatory to the Robinson-Superior Treaty of 1850 (see Figure 1). The Thunder Bay metropolitan population of 146,862 (Statistics Canada, 2022) only represents permanent residents and doesn't account for the hub-city role in health and social services that Thunder Bay plays to many rural and remote communities and First Nations in northern Ontario.¹ Thunder Bay is the only major urban center within 700 km (435 miles) in each di-

¹ The city of Thunder Bay is located within the census metropolitan area of Thunder Bay along with the municipalities of Oliver Paipooonge and Neebing, the townships of Shuniah, Conmee, O'Connor, and Gillies, and the Fort William First Nation. In this area, municipalities and townships are self-governing jurisdictions, and First Nations are governed by the Indian Act with elected chiefs and councils that make decisions on their behalf.

Figure 1. Map of Thunder Bay and Area



Map created by Reg Nelson.

rection. Over 30 remote First Nations do not have year-round road access. According to Statistics Canada (2017), approximately 13% of the population of Thunder Bay identified as Indigenous, although a study conducted by Anishnawbe Muskiki estimates the Indigenous Population is more than three times higher (McConkey et al., 2022).

Thunder Bay was established by European settlers as a fur trading outpost in the late 17th century and became a hub for transportation, forestry, and mining. Over time, the slow violence of settler colonialism resulted in the erosion of Indigenous foodways and local food sources with the population becoming highly reliant on the global food system (Lowitt et al., 2020). Located in the boreal forest within growing zones three and four, the region has a short and difficult growing season. While local food production and processing is increasing, the region has a limited ability to generate sufficient food to feed its population (Levkoe et al., 2021). Currently, most food is transported from Winnipeg and Toronto via transport truck, making

the community highly reliant on external jurisdictions and single transportation routes, leaving supply chains vulnerable to disruption. As a hub city, Thunder Bay is often depended on to assist rural and remote communities as well as First Nations with food access.

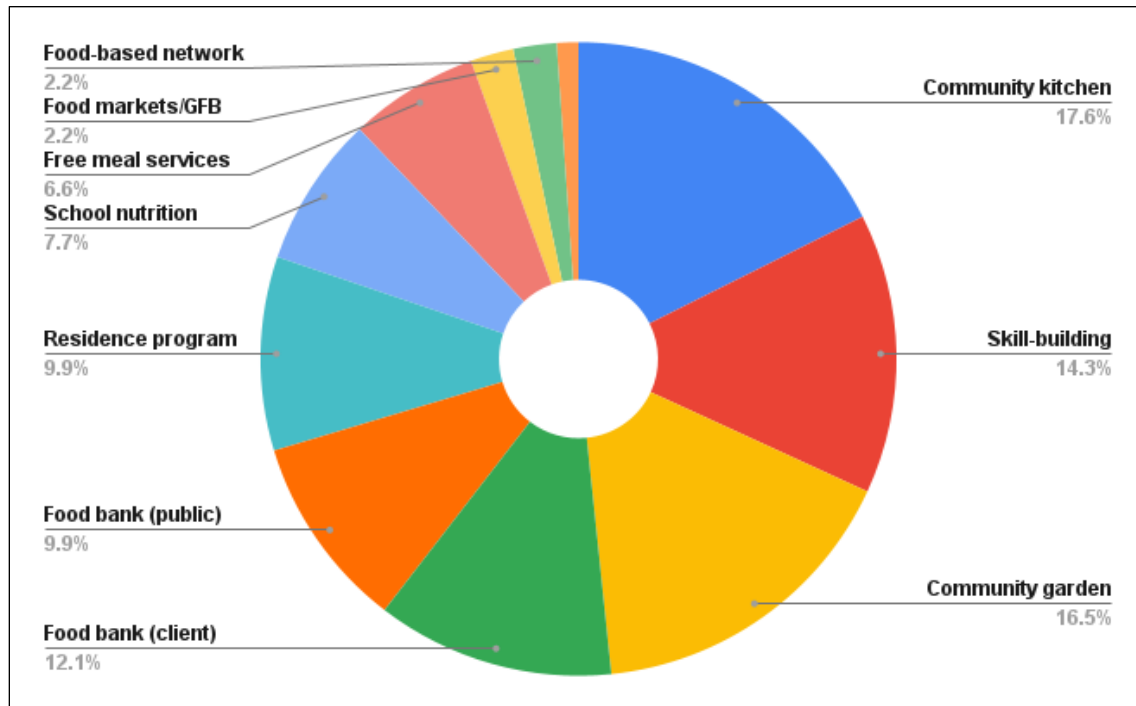
A critical social issue in Thunder Bay's food system is the ongoing crisis of chronic food insecurity. Like other parts of Canada, low-income households, single-parent families, people who rent rather than own their homes, Indigenous people, racialized people, newcomers, and residents of Northern communities disproportionately experience food insecurity (Kerk et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023). According to the Lakehead Social Planning Council, 15% of the population in Thunder Bay earn less than the Low-Income Measure, indicating several key risk factors for chronic food insecurity (Lakehead Social Planning Council, 2018).

In response to the prevalence of food insecurity (see Kerk et al., 2023), a robust (yet underresourced) food access infrastructure has been established over the past four decades.²

This includes organizations and community groups that provide food to those facing food insecurity on a regular basis, through a specific program or food charity (see Figure 2). Thunder Bay offers a variety of food access supports. Thunder Bay offers a variety of food access supports but food charity has a strong presence with the vast majority being coordinated by the Regional Food Distribution Association (RFDA), a nonprofit organization that gathers and distributes food from both government and privately funded sources throughout the city, as well as regionally in Northwestern Ontario. Beyond food charity, there are several organizations using cooking and/or food production to connect people through learning, socializing, skill building, and empowerment. Notwithstanding important critiques of the food charity sector (Poppendieck, 1999; Thunder Bay District Health Unit, 2018), these supports build a sense of community that acts as an essential contact point in supporting individuals and families facing chronic food insecurity.

² See Riches (2018) for a detailed discussion of the establishment of food access infrastructure in Canada.

Figure 2. Types of Regular Food Support in Thunder Bay (Percentage of Total Number of Programs Identified by Organizations Surveyed)



Source: Strutt & Thunder Bay + Area Food Strategy, 2022.

The Thunder Bay + Area Food Strategy

The TBAFS is a regional food policy council that serves as a network of over 50 organizations and businesses in the Thunder Bay region that aims to build a healthy, equitable, and sustainable food system through the implementation of research, planning, policy, and program development. Established in 2014 through official endorsement by the city of Thunder Bay and five rural municipalities, the TBAFS originated from an informal coalition of individuals and organizations that came together in 2008 to create the Thunder Bay Food Charter (Levkoe et al., 2021). Today, the TBAFS is guided by seven core pillars developed through a community-based consultation process to represent the region's food systems: food access, forest and freshwater foods, food infrastructure, food procurement, food production, school food environments, and urban agriculture. Its activities are governed through an elected Executive Committee with a paid coordinator and core funding from the

city of Thunder Bay. When the COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March of 2020, many people and organizations were unprepared, especially the food access sector. The TBAFS worked with its members to engage in a collaborative research and action project that led to the development of the Emergency Food Plan (EFP).

Why an EFP?

COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).³ Cases of COVID-19 were first detected in China in late 2019, and as the virus spread across the globe, Canada confirmed its first case on January 25, 2020. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, and on March 17, the province of Ontario declared a state of emergency. As cases increased through the fall of 2020, the province instituted rolling lockdowns and a shutdown on December 26, another state of emergency on January 12,

³ For information on COVID-19 see https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1

2021, and a stay-at-home order two days later. On April 1, 2021, the province announced another province-wide shut down, and schools were closed on April 12. In January 2022, the province instituted a partial lockdown that included closing non-essential indoor facilities. For most of 2020, Thunder Bay avoided widespread community transmission of COVID-19, but by March of 2021, the region was experiencing the most active cases of any public-health unit in Ontario (Anderson, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic led to challenges throughout many social and economic systems. The pandemic exposed structural weaknesses and interconnected vulnerabilities in the food system, resulting in supply shortages, transportation bottlenecks, loss of jobs, increases in food loss, and price spikes. Reflecting on factors that exacerbated food system challenges during the pandemic, scholars pointed to excessive corporate concentration, the vulnerability of food supply chains and dependence on imports, the just-in-time food supply model, and unequitable labor practices (Blay-Palmer et al., 2021; Clapp & Moseley, 2020; Hobbs, 2020; Larue, 2021; Weiler & Encalada Grez, 2022).

Like other jurisdictions, the city of Thunder Bay and its surrounding areas were caught unprepared by the impacts on its food system. A report from the Office of the Auditor General of Canada (2021) noted, “the government had not developed a national emergency preparedness and response plan that considered a crisis affecting the entire food system and Canadians’ food security” (p. 6). In Thunder Bay, the city was unprepared for the impacts of an increase in immediate food insecurity. The 14.8% of individuals facing food insecurity before the pandemic increased significantly to almost 19% in 2022 (Public Health Ontario, 2024), altering peoples’ lives in a short period of time (Men & Tarasuk, 2021; Strutt & TBAFS, 2022). Recent statistics demonstrated the ongoing impact of the pandemic on provincial household food insecurity rates across Canada, increasing from 15.9% in 2021 to 17.8% in 2022 (Li et al., 2023), and Ontario food bank visits in 2023 increased 36% from the previous year and 101% from pre-

pandemic levels (Quan, 2023). Importantly, those experiencing food insecurity were already economically and socially vulnerabilized (Li, 2021; Idzerda et al., 2022).

Prior to the pandemic, there was no plan or local body in place to respond to an increase in the need for immediate food access in the Thunder Bay region. Initially, many organizations worked to provide services, at times creating duplication or making it challenging for the public to understand how to access support. Acting quickly in response to this gap, civil society organizations, institutions, and agencies in Thunder Bay came together in an ad-hoc manner to address the growing need. This coalition became known as the Emergency Food Response Table and was coordinated by the TBAFS as a space for dialogue and problem solving.

In May of 2020, the Indigenous Food Circle⁴ led an assessment of emergency food support and identified a major gap in services for Indigenous populations. This assessment revealed the community-level response was fragmented, with little collaboration between existing food access infrastructure and other community organizations. The assessment also exposed a need for a more integrated and effective approach to food access during times of emergency. Using these findings, the TBAFS partnered with the city of Thunder Bay to conduct a research study in the fall of 2020. In order to be better prepared for future emergencies, researchers sought to understand the food access landscape in Thunder Bay before the pandemic and how food access changed. Surveys were conducted between March and June 2020, with 46 social service organizations that offered food access support and over 150 recipients of food assistance.

The research was guided by an advisory committee that represented key local organizations. The resulting report, entitled *Learning from Emergency Food Response During Covid-19 in Thunder Bay, Ontario* (Strutt & TBAFS, 2022) painted a picture of Thunder Bay’s food access support system before the pandemic, offered overarching lessons about

⁴ The Indigenous Food Circle is a grassroots network of Indigenous-led and Indigenous serving organizations in the Thunder Bay region (see Levkoe et al., 2019).

providing emergency food access, and made recommendations to a variety of stakeholders about tackling future emergency food responses, including the need to develop a community-led EFP.

The call to develop a local EFP in Thunder Bay initiated a process at the intersection of emergency planning and food insecurity. While the former can be unexpected, the latter is a chronic condition caused by poverty and inequity (Tarasuk, 2021). Traditionally, emergency planning has been left to municipalities or other government bodies; however, research on Thunder Bay suggested emergency food planning needed to be grounded in civil society (Strutt & TBAFS, 2022). This finding is consistent with others who have observed that civil society organizations and coalitions play an essential role in filling these gaps. Reflecting on the pandemic, Raja (2020) suggested planners should have been paying more attention to community advocates who “have been drawing our attention to structural disparities in our food systems for a long time. Our policy makers just didn’t listen” (p. 553). Food access is a fundamental human right that is not only within the jurisdiction of municipalities to address (Rideout et al., 2007). The resources and infrastructure needed to address medium- and large-scale emergency food responses, like those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, belong to a network of nonprofit organizations, community groups, and civil society actors. Reflecting on responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in their communities, several scholars noted that despite the shortcomings of the charitable food sector in addressing chronic food insecurity, the existing infrastructure and networks played an essential role in facilitating post-pandemic recovery, addressing longer-term issues, and responses to future emergencies (Warshawsky, 2023; Winkler et al., 2023).

Creating the Thunder Bay EFP

The plan to create an EFP was based on the initial research and built through a collaborative process of civil society partnerships across sectors that began in 2022, coordinated by the TBAFS through the role of the EFP coordinator. The EFP was also inspired by the city of Thunder Bay’s COVID-19 Severe Weather Response Plan, which demon-

strated a format for connecting multisector emergency response initiatives into the city’s Emergency Plan, while allowing for flexibility and responsiveness of independently mandated agencies. Working in collaboration with key city staff members involved in community development and emergency response, the TBAFS hired an EFP coordinator. The EFP coordinator reviewed emergency response procedures (e.g., Incident Management System) and planning tools such as a Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment (HIRA), as well as all available material on food security planning and Thunder Bay’s existing emergency response planning.

The first step in creating the EFP was to bring together a core group of organizations with experience in food access and control of key infrastructure to guide the EFP’s initial creation. This group was named the Primary Partners Table (PPT). PPT organizations were asked to identify a high-level representative, and many of those identified sat on the advisory committee for the initial emergency food response research. The PPT was comprised of 11 organizations (eight nonprofit organizations, the district’s public health unit, the municipality, and the TBAFS) who committed to forming the central decision-making body. PPT members agreed to send a representative upon the activation of the EFP to determine necessary leadership and direction for action and to contribute in-kind resources (e.g., physical infrastructure, human resources, funding, food, etc.). The initial PPT also committed to build the first iteration of the EFP through a collaborative development process based on the core principles of emergency planning. All members of the PPT were assured equal voice around the table through a democratic decision-making process during the EFP creation and ensuing updates and changes. Once the first version of the plan was in place and ratified by the organizations, the PPT agreed to attend annual meetings to conduct a tabletop exercise of the plan, ensuring the plan remained a living, stewarded process that evolved and was adjusted.

While the PPT became an essential group to build and implement the EFP, research identified a wider network of civil society actors who were also essential for emergency food response. While these

actors were not able to contribute the same time or expertise, they had key resources needed to implement a wide range response (e.g., human resources, vehicles, physical space, contact with hard-to-reach populations, etc.). In 2022, when the PPT was being formed, the Emergency Food Response Table (who had been meeting regularly since May 2020 and included this wider network of actors) recognized the pandemic-specific needs of food response were transitioning to a “new normal” of chronic food insecurity. As such, the Emergency Food Response Table transitioned to the Food Access Coalition (FAC). The FAC continues to be coordinated by the TBAFS at the time of this writing, offering a food access networking space for organizations or groups who support, provide, or advocate on behalf of food access. The terms of reference for the FAC state the group seeks to improve food accessibility and security by ensuring those involved in the regular work of food access stay connected and share information; have a space to discuss and action broader advocacy around food access issues; and support stewardship of the EFP.

Once the PPT and the FAC were established in early 2022, building of the EFP began. The first step was to modify the standard HIRA tool to be relevant for considerations in emergency food planning. The HIRA is a structured process for identifying hazards that exist in a selected area and defining their causes, characteristics, and potential impacts to assess the potential risk of hazards with the capacity to cause a disaster and thus inform emergency planning (Office of the Fire Marshal and Emergency Management Ontario, 2019). Using the HIRA process to plan for food emergencies, the tool needed to be adapted. Not all hazards identified in a municipality’s general emergency plan apply to the context of food access (e.g., overdose, medical supply shortage, etc.). Hazards relevant to emergency food planning had to carry a high degree of potential to impact food access at a mass scale. Using an adapted version of Emergency Management Ontario’s 2019 risk scoring tool, the PPT was guided through the risk scoring tool to assess eight potential hazards for the Thunder

Bay area: infectious disease; forest fire, flood, food contamination, communications failure, power outage, economic crisis, and major highway blockage. The HIRA process helped to narrow the focus of initial emergency food planning to preparing for the impacts of medium risk events with slow and rapid onsets.

From this point, an EFP working draft was shared with the PPT for review and revisions. This led to official ratification of the EFP by members of the PPT during the first tabletop exercise in November 2023. The following sub-sections outline the purpose and scope of the plan, the Concept of Operations, and key stakeholder roles.

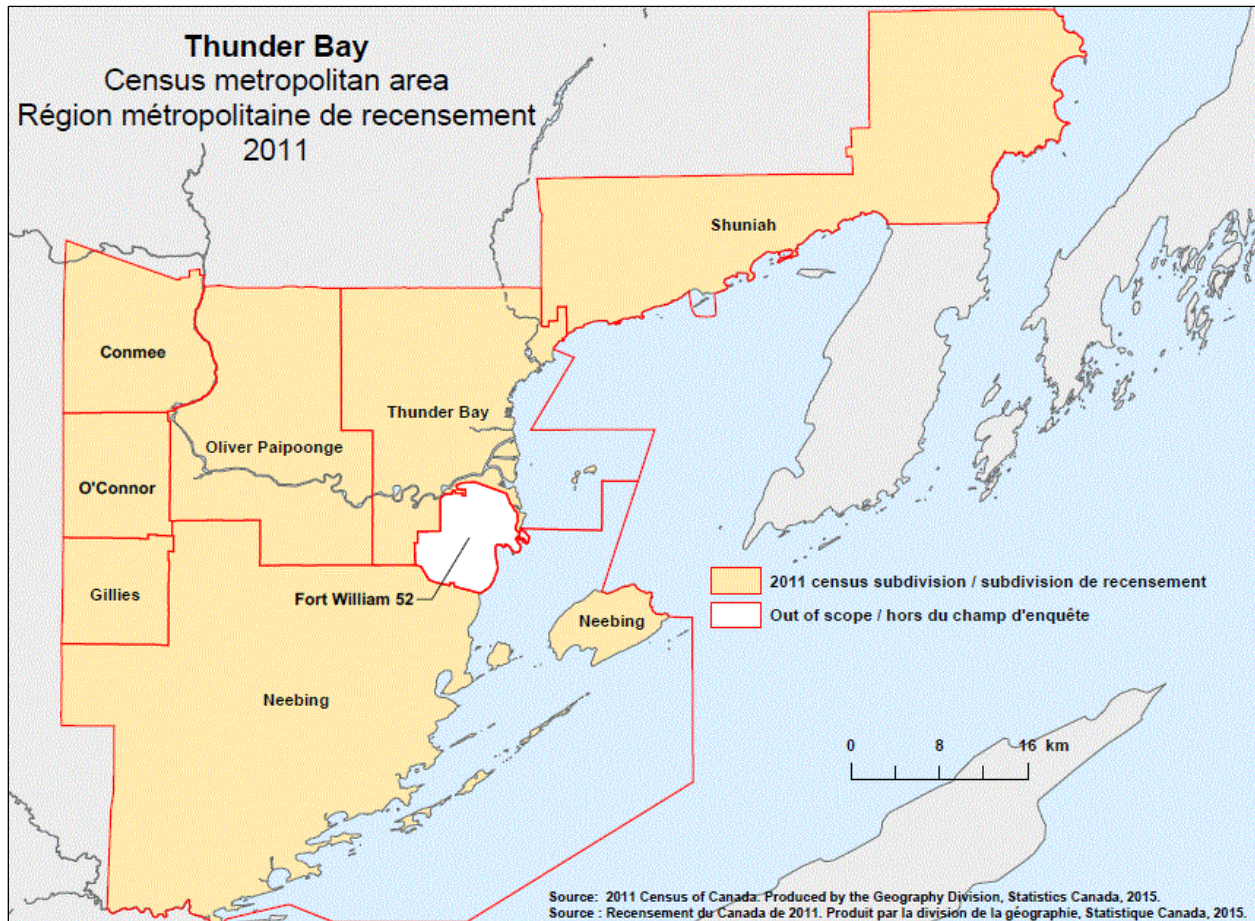
Purpose and Scope

The purpose of the EFP is to address the challenges related to food access and food access’s associated impacts on health and wellbeing during emergency events in Thunder Bay. The EFP identifies potential hazards and risks to food access to prepare, plan, and respond in the most effective manner. The EFP centers on the realities of chronic food insecurity while focusing on addressing the added pressures on food access from unforeseen, communitywide emergencies. Research suggests those facing chronic food insecurity are at an increased risk when faced with the additional strains of an emergency (Strutt & TBAFS, 2022). Employing an ethic of dignified food access within a response means beginning from a place of respect and offering access to quality food in a way that is free of stigma and judgement.⁵

The scope of the EFP can be understood in terms of prioritized populations and the prevalence of chronic food insecurity, geographic area, activation levels, and jurisdictional responsibility. Geographically, Thunder Bay’s EFP includes the city of Thunder Bay and recognizes the wider census metropolitan area extending to two rural municipalities, four townships, and Fort William First Nation (see Figure 3). While collaboration and communication are essential components of the plan’s stewardship, it was not within the scope of the plan to include all of these areas as each maintains their

⁵ The ethic of dignified food access as part of the EFP was driven by research conducted by Roots Community Food Centre (Roots to Harvest, 2021).

Figure 3. Map of 2011 Census Metropolitan Area of Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada



Source: Geographical map of the 2011 Census metropolitan area of Thunder Bay, Ontario. Statistics Canada, 2015. (https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/statistical-programs/document/3701_D28_T9_V3). Copyright 2015 by Statistics Canada.

own jurisdictions and emergency processes. While many of the hazards and risks overlap with the city of Thunder Bay's Emergency Plan (e.g., flood, winter weather, infrastructure failure, etc.), the EFP seeks to specifically address the impacts and challenges these emergencies will place on the food system and the ability for the population to maintain access to food, ensure fair distribution, and/or safely consume food in real time.

Concept of Operations

The basis of the EFP is its Concept of Operations, an iterative cycle of activation, response, deactivation, and stewardship (see Figure 4). The EFP utilizes the overarching principles of the Incident Command Structure commonly used in emergency response environments in Canada and around the

world. This system is based on command and control principles developed by the military and was created as a tool for responders from multiple jurisdictions to work together to better respond to incidents. It delineates job responsibilities and organizational structure to manage day-to-day operations of an emergency response (Emergency Management Ontario, 2008) and allows the EFP to be integrated into municipal emergency response structures if necessary.

The EFP's conditions for activation include medium- or high-impact emergencies at a regional or national scale that impact Thunder Bay's ability for food to be imported, distributed, and/or safely consumed. This includes situations that come with intensity and little warning, lasting a relatively short time (e.g., natural disaster, power outage), longer

Figure 4. Emergency Food Plan (EFP) Concept of Operations



Source: Thunder Bay + Area Food Strategy, 2024.

duration events that are social or economic in nature (e.g., pandemic, recession), or a localized emergency that prevents food access organizations from providing services.

Activation of the EFP means the need for food access support has widened to include a new subset of the population or potentially the entire city. The plan can be activated by any member of the PPT or by the city of Thunder Bay. In either instance, the TBAFS coordinator (or their alternate) is notified with an activation request. An activation request might look like a clear and determined emergency signaled by an order of government, or it may include frontline organizations

presenting early warning signs of significantly increased food access needs or food shortages. Depending on the severity of the situation, various activation levels can be implemented (see Table 1).

Once activated, the PPT is called to attend an initial assembly, which is a first-step meeting with all parties to review the scope and context of the emergency at hand and determine how to structure a response. Some roles within the organizational structure of the response have an organization’s name assigned, given their skills and connections; however, all roles must be evaluated at the time of initial assembly to take into consideration all partners’ current capacities and resources needed. For

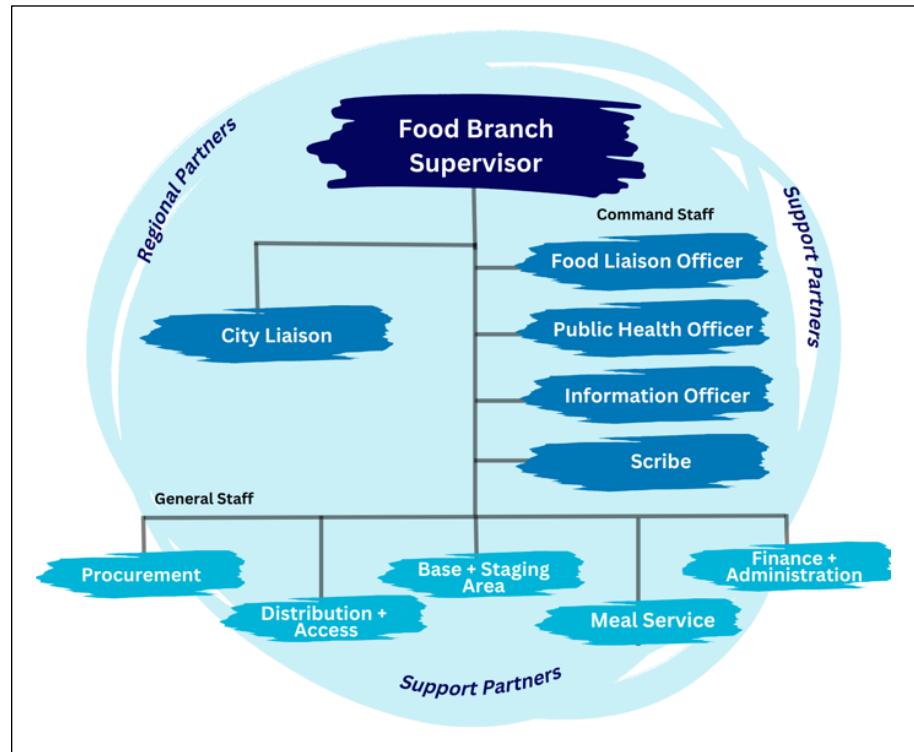
Table 1. Emergency Food Plan (EFP) Activation Levels

Level	Action
1. Stand-by Notice	TBAFS coordinator contacts the PPT to notify of a possible initial assembly and gets a status update from each organization.
2. Food Branch Command Established	The food branch supervisor in place; monitoring community needs, states of emergency or warnings; and updating primary and support partners of the situation. Command staff may also be established, as well as contact with the city liaison.
3. Initial Assembly	An initial assembly of the PPT is called. During an initial assembly, a collaborative strategy for activating the EFP response structure is determined by the PPT. The initial assembly will occur at the base and staging area.
4. Activation of Response Structure	Activation of the full breadth of the response structure.

example, the food branch supervisor is determined at the time of emergency based on who has the training, capacity, and approval from their agency to take on this role. This process is similar for all other lead and officer roles.

The response structure, as depicted in Figure 5, is composed of a food branch supervisor, command staff (includes the roles of city liaison, scribe, food liaison officer, public health officer, and information officer), and general staff (meal service lead, distribution and access lead, procurement lead, fundraising, and administration lead, and the base and staging area lead, as well as any arising task forces). Not every situation will require all sections to be activated; in smaller-scale situations, one person may be able to take on several functions. The parts of the response structure that will be activated and who assumes those roles change based on the circumstances of the emergency. The response structure is merely a tool to help with decision making and creation of a response during the initial assembly where a plan of action is determined based on the known needs for food response.

Figure 5. Emergency Food Plan (EFP) Response Structure



Source: Thunder Bay + Area Food Strategy, 2024.

Deactivation of the EFP occurs at the discretion of the Food Branch Command and the advice of response staff and partners. Each response requires its own deactivation and recovery processes, which occur over the life span of the response. Steps toward deactivation must take into consideration the status of regular food access systems and deactivate accordingly to ensure chronic food insecurity needs remain met while accounting for recovery of personnel and resources. The deactivation levels for the EFP are tiered (see Table 2),

Table 2. Emergency Food Plan (EFP) Deactivation Levels

Level	Action
1. Preparation Meeting	Food Branch Supervisor calls for Food Branch Command meeting to discuss a strategy for deactivation
2. Initiate Deactivation Strategy	Food Branch Command initiates the determined deactivation strategy, ensuring clear communication to all partners and the public
3. Initiate Recovery Phase	Move into preparing and supporting organizations to resume their regular responsibilities and duties
4. Debrief	Food Branch Supervisor initiates an after action review involving all Food Branch Command staff and lead roles

allowing for flexible scaling while ensuring clear communication about food access processes throughout the transition and an opportunity for feedback to continually improve the EFP.

Stewardship of the EFP through ongoing maintenance and updating is an essential component of the Concept of Operations. In the context of the EFP, stewardship refers to the ongoing care of the plan itself and the network of relationships at its core to ensure the plan remains a living, adaptable, and relevant tool for the community. The stewardship process is fourfold, occurring through the annual PPT meeting where partners conduct a tabletop exercise, offering suggestions and feedback to update the plan; the presence of the EFP as a standing agenda item at the FAC; annual updating of primary partner contacts as well as biannual updating of FAC member contact information; and through the coordinating role of the TBAFS.

Overall, the EFP's Concept of Operations provides context for decision-making, informed roles and responsibilities, and consideration of financial needs and implications of a response. While the Food Branch Command, command staff, and general staff roles within the organizational structure have the authority to make operational decisions during a response, collective decision-making is still required throughout the operation cycle. The EFP relies on the participation of independently managed organizations and institutions. As such, it is important that collective decision-making occurs among the PPT when it comes to the overall strategy and ongoing direction of the EFP. Within these planning spaces, decisions aim to be made by consensus.

Stakeholder Roles

While the Concept of Operations outlines the roles and responsibilities within an activated food response, the plan also acknowledges the roles and responsibilities of the many stakeholders that contribute to and make the activation of an EFP possible, both outside of and during an emergency. These key stakeholders include PPT organizations, Food Access Coalition members, the EFP coordinator, the city of Thunder Bay, designated food response facilities (predetermined organizations

strategically located geographically and with the physical space needed to be a food distribution point), Fort William First Nation, and the rural municipalities within the census metropolitan area.

Embedding the EFP in the Regional Food System

Since the creation of the EFP, a central goal of this work has been to ensure it is embedded within the regional food system. This means the EFP becomes an integrated tool at a city level to support emergency response and to bolster the region's connectivity and ability to work collaboratively across food system sectors. By building stewardship into the Concept of Operations, the EFP ensures there are people who tend to the plan's growth and adaptation process as well as to the relationships that form the underpinning network. The TBAFS provides a point of contact to other regional and essential food system actors, such as food producers, harvesters, and retailers. The EFP is intended to be in an ongoing process of development with an intention to remain an embedded part of Thunder Bay's food system.

The EFP was officially ratified at the PPT annual meeting in November 2023. This ratification involved all organizations signing three-year agreements of cooperation. It was celebrated with a ratification event honoring the process and sharing the EFP's official implementation with the community. During this annual PPT meeting, the first tabletop exercise was conducted using a severe heat scenario, which resulted in minor changes to the Concept of Operations and identified several priority next steps in the EFP's evolution. These priority next steps included making annual changes to the EFP as needed through tabletop feedback, resulting in ratification of new versions of the EFP by the next annual PPT meeting; conducting a critical food infrastructure inventory; developing draft plans for communications, financing, and recovery appendices in the EFP; inviting new members to the PPT; and expanding and re-engaging FAC membership.

While the EFP has yet to be implemented in a real-world emergency, the community of food access actors have participated in a collaborative process to better prepare and respond as a coordi-

nated entity in the face of a future emergency. The community now has a process and a network to guide future responses to be timelier and better utilize community-based resources. Thunder Bay has seen success through initiating a process of emergency food planning, and this article aims to share experiences and learnings to support building similar collaborations. Food is a basic need and human right. Preparing communities to address food access equitably is an essential undertaking in these uncertain times and must become an embedded tool within food systems work.

Insights from the EFP Process

The process of creating an EFP for Thunder Bay took three years from its inception in community-based research to the forming of key food system partnerships and development. EFP's are an emerging field of practice and study, with early iterations like Thunder Bay's paving the way for more refined practices over time. From the beginning of Thunder Bay's process, participants were unsure about what it would become but agreed that any plan was better than no plan at all. Participants recognized that an EFP needed to be a living process that adapted to changing circumstances within its place-based context, both during and outside of an emergency. Throughout the creation process there were many insights about why EFP's are important, who needs to be at the table, how to engage in collaborative planning that navigates politics and tensions, and how to ensure inclusion of sustainability and stewardship from the beginning.

EFPs are needed in all communities because their use is not a question of "if" but "when" as societies continue to face disruptions with wider effects on human populations. Research has shown chronic food insecurity is exacerbated by emergencies, hence the need for community plans backed by skilled humans and the financial resources to ensure no one falls through the cracks during a crisis. An EFP seeks to meet a basic human need, so equity and dignity also are essential factors in developing and implementing responses. During an emergency, a social justice lens that considers the increased vulnerability of those already experiencing chronic food insecurity and serves those made food insecure by the

emergency itself, is essential for a compassionate and effective response.

Given the importance and timeliness of this work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, all municipalities or regions should consider engaging in this preparation work. Leveraging food system actors in the community who already have knowledge, expertise, and the relationships needed to respond to medium- and large-scale emergencies that affect food access is an excellent place to start. When an emergency hits, it is a lot easier to already know who needs to be at the table, how they show up, and how decisions will get made than to have to develop those processes on the fly. Research of the ad-hoc response to food access needs during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that without a coordinated approach, key actors were excluded, work was duplicated, resources were not used as effectively as they could be, and those in need fell through the gaps.

Research on Thunder Bay's ad-hoc response in 2020 and the process of developing a response plan have demonstrated building an EFP is not possible without the participation of civil society organizations. Despite the limitations of food charity (Riches, 2018), current emergency food response relies on regular food access infrastructure. Municipalities and other levels of government do not have jurisdiction over these resources, nor the expertise, knowledge, and experience. Commonly relied upon organizations for the human side of emergency response do not have the solo capacity to provide widescale and sustained emergency food response in medium- and high-risk emergency situations. There would not be an EFP in Thunder Bay without independent organizations signing on to the plan, committing to playing a role, and lending their resources. The reality that this could change in a moment's notice because of each organization's autonomy is an identified vulnerability of an EFP but a reality that cannot be avoided. All communities must ask themselves if they are prepared to mount this kind of response in the face of the next widescale emergency. And if not through the use of nonprofit organizations and other civil society actors in their community, then through whom? As the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated, cities do not have the infrastructure

or resources alone; they require partnerships and collaboration.

While noting that municipalities may not have the resources to implement this type of emergency planning in addition to city-wide emergency responses, municipalities are essential partners. Most likely, a scenario that will activate the EFP will include the city activating its emergency plan. It is essential the two bodies work together with clear communication and delineation of responsibilities. For this to happen during emergencies, key city staff need to be a part of the EFP planning table. In Thunder Bay's model, a city liaison joins the Command Staff to ensure a direct line of communication and information sharing with the city. Cities also have access to important information and other resources and training that can help to strengthen the development of an EFP locally, making them critical partners in this work.

An inherent challenge of depending on multiple independent organizations and institutions is that they have their own funds, mandates, and jurisdictions that will dictate their participation. First and foremost, creating an EFP is an exercise in network building that can function as a unique entity for the common good. Cooperation, relationship building, and carefully navigating the politics and tensions involved in cross-sectoral work is essential for the success of this kind of collaboration. Processes like developing an EFP depend on people showing up to a common table in good faith and working with one another even if there are differences of opinion or process outside the planning space. Everyone at the planning table offers something unique to the process, and the whole doesn't work without its parts. Coordination is essential to navigating these tensions. Having someone in a neutral position who tends to the relationships with and between members is crucial. In the case of Thunder Bay's EFP, the TBAFS played an essential part in fulfilling that role.

Overall, developing the EFP was a fairly smooth process, which we attribute to wholesale community buy-in due to the meticulous work of building trusting and meaningful partnerships over time. Everyone involved in the process saw the value and need for the EFP, and the work was grounded in community-based research and


engagement processes. However, working with diverse people and organizations came with some challenges. For example, there were several pre-existing tensions among organizations that had to be navigated throughout the process. Despite attempts to ensure equality at the planning table, not everyone engaged in the same ways. To address this, the EFP coordinator checked in with individuals through one-on-one conversations to ensure they felt heard and reflected in the outcomes. Working with the TBAFS as a host of the EFP enabled the process to build on past relationships and establish a neutral coordinating body that could step outside of existing social dynamics.

The most anticipated challenges with the EFP surround its sustainability and long-term maintenance. To do this well, the EFP will require ongoing resources and commitment. While the TBAFS's in-kind contribution to the EFP is in its coordination and hosting, maintaining the EFP will require ongoing capacity and funding. Further, while there is a high level of participation, stewardship will require stronger networks in some sectors (e.g., producers and suppliers). Participating organizations also will need to send appropriate representatives who understand the full scope of the work required, which can be challenging with larger organizations that have more internal hierarchical processes. All of this will require additional funding and support, challenges that the TBAFS will need to address in coming years.

A final insight that has come from the development of Thunder Bay's EFP is that food policy councils are a great host for this kind of work (also see Palmer et al., 2020). Food policy councils are already embedded within the fabric of their regional food systems and typically work in collaboration with local government. They often have paid or volunteer coordinators who can do the important work of convening people, already have networks established, and are in the position to steward this work in the long term. Within Thunder Bay's EFP, the TBAFS has offered EFP coordination that includes maintaining relationships, making updates to the plan, hosting and coordinating the annual PPT meetings, and ensuring stewardship is not just a word but an action. In Thunder Bay, the funding for the position of EFP

coordinator has always been part time, made possible through small pots of funds acquired primarily through local funding sources one year at a time. A consideration for future practitioners of this work and governments that want to see this work sustained in local communities is the need for more access to funding for coordinating work.

In conclusion, emergency food planning in Thunder Bay demonstrates this work is essential in these changing and precarious times, and it is possible when collaboration and robust food system network building are prioritized. The need for emergency food planning cannot be thought of as

a nice-to-have but instead should be a need-to-have. The sooner communities determine who needs to be at their table and the challenges and opportunities that exist within their local spaces, the better prepared they will be in advance of the next emergency. 

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