

Promoting Food Security in Public Libraries

April 2022

This project was facilitated through the Community Research Platform and was a collaboration between Hamilton Public Library and:

Kiara Pannozzo, McMaster University MPH 2023
Moizza Ul-Haq, McMaster University MPH 2022
Maiura Muralitharan, McMaster University MPH 2023



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hamilton Public Library (HPL) identified a need to clarify its role in improving food access and security for people in Hamilton. This project reviews relevant literature on food insecurity, investigates current food access initiatives in Hamilton, and outlines promising practices and initiatives from other Canadian public libraries to help inform HPL's involvement in addressing food insecurity in Hamilton. Its methodology consisted of a literature review to determine what is known about the state of food insecurity in Canada, Ontario, and Hamilton and what is known about the initiatives and interventions that address this issue in these regions. The literature review set the groundwork for an environmental scan of food programs in nineteen public library systems and in-depth interviews with four community leaders in Hamilton who are working to address food insecurity. This document includes charts and figures that summarize key findings and helpful sources from the literature review, environmental scan, and interviews. In the appendices, we provide information on our methods and interview guide.

FINDINGS

- Food literacy is not food access / access to food
 - Food access is a systemic issue which cannot be solved through food literacy programs.
 - Food-related initiatives should distinguish their goals in the context of providing food access, improving food literacy, or perhaps a combination of both.
- Sustainability of food distribution requires providing food on an ongoing basis, ongoing funding, staff capacity and buy-in, and sustained partnerships.
- Public libraries play a crucial role in providing information about and supporting local food programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Serve as an informational resource hub for food-insecure individuals.
 - E.g., Staff act as liaisons to available programs and provide up-to-date informational materials to community members.
 - E.g., Staff help to connect community members to local food access programs by providing information, such as the program's hours of operation, bus routes, eligibility requirements, and available services.
 - E.g., Continue to promote the HPL RedBook.
- Establish and grow relationships with Hamilton's food security organizations, such as Food for Life, Hamilton Food Share, local food banks, and pantries.
 - E.g., Support food access organizing via collecting donations, partnering on food programming, mobilizing volunteers, and providing other resources, such as spaces for organizations to set up booths in the library.
- HPL may be able to curb immediate hunger needs.
 - E.g., Provide snack and/or meal kits on an ongoing basis.
- Continue to provide a safe space for community members through programs, such as digital literacy classes, reading and art classes, social gatherings, and food-related programming.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Literature Review

While a variety of resources supported the research presented throughout this report (see references), the following five resources proved to be the most informative in identifying the trends associated with food security in Hamilton and throughout Canada:

1. Household Food Insecurity in Canada. PROOF. Published n.d. Accessed March 30, 2022. <https://proof.utoronto.ca/food-insecurity/>
2. *Hamilton COVID-19 Hunger Report*. Hamilton Food Share; 2020. <https://www.hamiltonfoodshare.org/wp-content/uploads/Hamilton-Food-Share-Hunger-Count-Report-2020.pdf>
3. *Eating in Ontario: What Do We Know?* Nutrition Connections; 2021. https://nutritionconnections.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Eating-in-Ontario-CCHS-2017-and-COVID-19_Mar_2021_Final-1-1.pdf
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Environmental Scan

The following resources provide insights into food-related programming at public libraries in Canada. While these media sources are not reflective of all public library food-related programming, they provide a glimpse into the social value and impact of such programming.

1. Closed down coffee shop in Millennium Library may be used as a space for people in need | CTV News. Accessed April 1, 2022. <https://winnipeg.ctvnews.ca/closed-down-coffee-shop-in-millennium-library-may-be-used-as-a-space-for-people-in-need-1.4770488>
2. Embracing access and inclusion at the Downtown Eastside's Carnegie Library | BCLA Perspectives. Accessed April 1, 2022. <https://bclaconnect.ca/perspectives/2017/05/01/carnegie-library/>
3. Nova Scotia Library Association. Food Literacy: Building Community Through Food.; 2021. Accessed March 14, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5yEvBp5bOI>
4. People in need can get free snacks from fridge at Fredericton Public Library | CBC News. CBC. Published July 24, 2019. Accessed April 1, 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/community-fridge-installed-public-library-1.5221897>
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LITERATURE REVIEW



Overall, literature has suggested that such constraints in food consumption, as defined through food insecurity, is largely associated with the income levels of those impacted.²⁻⁹

Public Health Implications



Throughout the literature, food insecurity has been indicated to impact childhood development.¹ Among children, food insecurity has been shown to adversely affect mental and physical health.^{1,10} Children experiencing food insecurity are at increased risk of developing asthma, depression, and in some cases, potentially experiencing suicidal ideation.¹



With respect to the adult population, food insecurity can also worsen physical and mental health.^{1,5} For instance, the literature has suggested that food insecurity worsens chronic disease symptoms. Food insecure adults experience an increased risk of developing diabetes, arthritis, back ailments, and cardiovascular disease, including hypertension.^{5,11}

Overall, food insecurity is observed throughout the literature to be associated with premature death and mortality.¹¹

Vulnerable Households	
Region	Characteristics
Canada/Ontario	<p><i>Food insecurity was found to be highly prevalent within...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children under the age of 18.¹ • Single-parent households, specifically those that are female-led.^{2,5,8,12} • Individuals who identify as Indigenous or Black.^{5,12,13} • Individuals who rent their households.^{7,12-14} • Individuals working in precarious working conditions, as well as those with low-paying wages.^{1,8,14} • Individuals living on senior incomes as their primary sources of income, as well as individuals receiving social assistance.^{1,3,4,7,8,14,15} • Individuals with lower incomes, especially those who rely on income support. Those living on Employment Insurance and Workers' Compensation, for example, are more likely to be food insecure than those with higher incomes.^{1-5,7,8,12,13,16}
Hamilton	<p><i>Food insecurity was found to be highly prevalent within...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children under the age of 18.¹ • Single parents under 25 years old, especially households led by single mothers.^{2,5,17} • Individuals with low incomes, as well as those who rely on income support. • Individuals who identify as Indigenous.^{2-5,16} <p>COVID-19 Pandemic:</p> <p>Given the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the number of jobs lost, adverse mental health outcomes, decreased socializing, changes in meal habits, and overall income strain, it's understandable that food insecurity has increasingly become an issue during the COVID-19 pandemic.^{12,16} As such, the literature emphasizes strengthening policy and community-level food security supports during the pandemic and recovery.</p>

Public Health Burden

<p>Food insecurity has a large public health impact, burdening the healthcare system, and significantly increasing associated healthcare costs.^{1,5}</p> <p>Ontario's total healthcare costs associated with unhealthy eating were estimated to be \$5.6 billion in 2015.⁵</p>		
<p>~1 in 8 Canadian households are impacted by food insecurity.¹</p>	<p>~4.4 million Canadians are impacted, with 1.2 million being children.¹</p>	<p>13.3% of the Ontario population experience food insecurity.¹</p>

Overall Insights

- There is no significant difference between food preparation skills, budgeting skills, and cooking skills between those who are food secure and those who are food insecure.¹
- Increased emphasis should be placed on empowering and supporting the affected individuals.¹⁸ Empowering and supporting food insecure individuals may take the form of providing information about transportation routes and distances to food programs, as well as methods in which food and food programs can be accessed, such as through Hamilton's Food Access Guide and HPL's RedBook.^{19,20}
- Focusing on community health by facilitating social cohesion between community members can be a way of improving the health of those who are food insecure.^{12,14,18,21} For example, urban farms and community gardens can facilitate social connectedness while raising awareness and providing education.^{14,18,21}
- Supporting local food initiatives through coordinating volunteer recruitment for local food initiatives, while also facilitating communication and connections between stakeholders within the food system can strengthen food services, increasing their accessibility to those impacted by food insecurity.^{14,21,22}
- Indigenous- and community-led food security initiatives are needed.¹⁴
- Although these methods can help those who are food insecure, understanding the root cause of food insecurity as being an income and economic constraint, there is an increased need for policy change to provide those impacted with a living wage.^{14,22} These changes would most significantly support food security in Hamilton and throughout Canada.

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INTERVIEWS WITH FOOD LEADERS

We conducted interviews with four local food leaders who represented Food for Life, Hamilton Food Share, Parkview Church, and St. Matthew's House.

Overarching Interview Insights

- Public libraries offer accessible physical spaces for community activities that would benefit people who are facing food insecurity and other systemic issues.
- Community members see the library as an important informational resource hub.
- There is an abundance of food distribution programs so public libraries can help reduce redundancy and aim to improve community awareness about food programs and resources.
- Public libraries can serve as a hub to recruit and mobilize volunteers for food distribution programs.
- Some food organizations are not familiar with HPL's RedBook so efforts can be directed to promoting the RedBook with these organizations. The RedBook can be beneficial to both food organizations and community members.

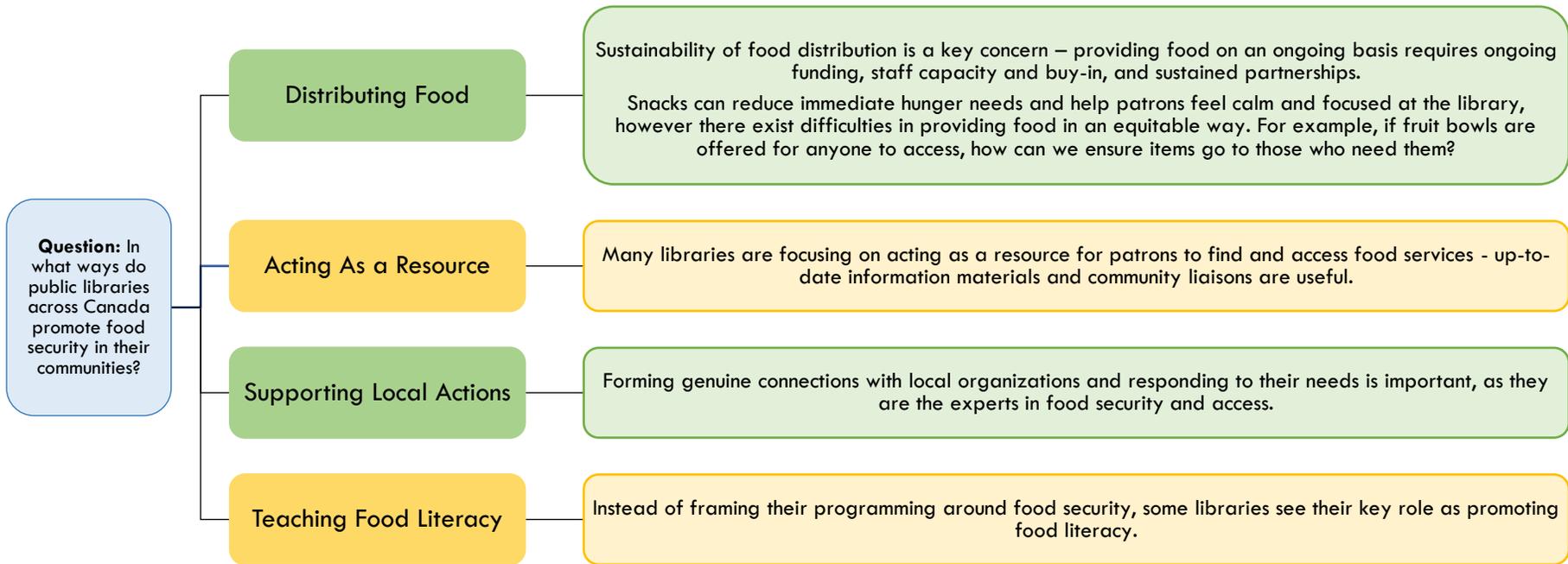
In the chart below, we present descriptions of the organizations/programs and key insights provided by the four interviewees.

Organization/ Program	Description	Insights
<i>Food for Life (FFL)</i>	<p>FFL is a food rescue and distribution organization that serves the Hamilton and Halton regions with a focus on redistributing fresh food.</p> <p>They provide food to the community fridges in the Halton Hills Public Library system.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Barrier-free</i> programming is crucial. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Intake systems can be inaccessible with paperwork. ○ Language barriers must be overcome. ○ The location of food programs is often inaccessible as they are in the downtown core and require travel. ○ FFL's greatest impact is on people who may struggle against such barriers • Able to provide large quantities of fresh food. • Importance of <i>information sharing</i>. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ HPL can share resources with people who may be unaware.

<p>Hamilton Food Share (HFS)</p>	<p>HFS is the emergency food distribution hub and systems coordinator for Hamilton.</p> <p>HFS fundraises and collects food to support 16 agencies and 23 emergency food programs. They meet 40-80% of these services' needs. 74% of the food distributed by HFS is fresh and frozen and they source culturally-appropriate food as well. They are also a member of Feed Ontario.</p> <p>Programs serve over 21,000 hot meals each month, supporting over 12,565 unique individuals, 36% of whom are children.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to consider the difference between food security and food literacy. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ People who are food insecure are sometimes mistaken for having poor food literacy. ○ Food literacy programs can be patronizing for those who face structural and systemic barriers to accessing food. • Need to consider the level of impact and extent of resources available for libraries. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Aim to avoid redundant efforts. • There is a need to improve community awareness of available resources. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ On average, food banks provide 5-7 days of food (3 meals and a snack for each household member). ○ HPL may help address food insecurity by directing households to these existing supports and connecting people to other resources.
<p>Quote:</p> <p>“Until income equality and affordable housing are addressed – emergency food programs will be an essential part of the social safety net.” — Hamilton Food Share representative</p>		
<p>Parkview Church</p>	<p>Parkview Church (Compassionate Ministries Outreach) is a full-service agency on the Hamilton Mountain that provides clothing, furniture, and food to people in need. They serve women, families, newcomers, and people in encampments or on the street.</p> <p>Food-wise, they provide on-site 24-hour access to food and do street outreach weekly. They serve a wide area and are expanding to other regions including Brantford and Cambridge where they are filling food pantries.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accomplishing goals is contingent on volunteers. • Importance of forming partnerships and networks within the community. • Food programs need to be able to respond to the evolving needs of the community (e.g., with COVID-19) • There is an immense need among food insecure Hamiltonians for fresh produce and dairy. • Parkview is working to improve its communication of food security resources. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Word-of-mouth is key to the success of most food access programs. • A public library is a great community resource. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Public libraries are safe spaces for those facing barriers and systemic issues. ○ Library members can read, convene, immerse themselves in activities, learn, and get warm.

	<p>Quote: “You cannot do this on your own, you need other organizations and peoples’ support just as much as they need yours.” —Parkview Church representative</p>	
<p>St. Matthew’s House (SMH) (Seniors in Kitchens, SinKs program)</p>	<p>SMH is a charitable not-for-profit multi-service agency that serves persons of all ages, with poor health, limited or no income, and newcomers. All programs at SMH tackle food insecurity (e.g., emergency food deliveries, crisis prevention, and SinKs).</p> <p>SinKs is a food literacy program that uses a holistic approach to teach seniors cooking skills, budgeting, and nutritional education.</p> <p><i>The interview was conducted with a representative from SinKs, who was also able to comment on other programs more closely related to food access.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word-of-mouth is the most successful outreach method. • Holistic approaches enable safe spaces and clients to feel less stigmatized. • The biggest challenge for SinKs is to engage clients with virtual programming. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Other issues: sourcing culturally-appropriate food, staffing, program evaluation, and closing their "mobile market" for winter which operates as a booth in an accessible place offering free food to people in need. • Are exploring options to set up mobile market booths in library parking lots. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Public libraries can offer a convenient location to access food for low-income seniors and other individuals who struggle with food access.

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN OF LIBRARY FOOD INITIATIVES ACROSS CANADA



Distributing Food

Providing Meals

- During the pandemic, 5 Halifax PL branches **distributed lunches** to community members weekly.
- Before the pandemic, Fredericton PL collaborated with local businesses & organizations to provide **hot meals or bagged lunches**.

Providing Snacks

- Fredericton & Halifax PL offer **grab-and-go snack** packs
- Some libraries, such as Kitchener and Saskatoon PL have offered **after-school snack programs** for kids and youth.

Providing fresh food and produce

- **Open-access fridges** in Halton Region's PLs are supported by a partnership with Food for Life.
- Fredericton PL's **Community Fridge** has provided produce and dairy products obtained from local food organizations and businesses.

Providing non-perishables

- Halton Region's PLs host **community food shelves** with non-perishable food items supplied by Food for Life or local organizations.
- Smaller libraries like Grand Prairie PL host **food pantries**, accepting donations that are placed on shelves for anyone to take as needed.

Acting As a Resource

Informational Resources

- Halifax PL provides regularly updated **meal calendars** that inform patrons where they can go to access a meal on any given day.
- Fredericton PL librarians supply **information packets** and “survival guides” that inform patrons about where they can access food services.

Social Work Support

- Winnipeg, Fredericton, Saskatoon, and Edmonton PLs, among others, have **outreach/crisis/social workers on-site** that connect people to food services and may also provide limited snacks/beverages.
- As part of its upcoming Community Connections project, Winnipeg PL will offer an inclusive space that includes a **kitchen area** to provide coffee and snacks to those in need.

Supporting Local Actions

Donations

- Many libraries, such as Milton, Calgary and Winnipeg run **annual campaigns** to collect donations for local food banks.
 - Food For Fines campaigns has allowed patrons to donate items to waive overdue fines (Milton, Edmonton, Greater Victoria PLs).
- Kitchener and Halifax PL have **donated extra food** from their own programming to nearby food organizations.

Offering Space

- During the pandemic, Toronto PL provided alternative service locations for numerous food banks, hosting 11 **pop-up food banks**.
- Halifax and Saskatoon PL have hosted **local mobile food markets** outside branches that are located in food deserts.

Community Connections

- Vancouver and Saskatoon PL **bring library materials** and services to patrons of local food services.
- Saskatoon and Halifax PL sit on city-wide **food action alliances**.

Teaching Food Literacy

Community-based agriculture

- Greater Victoria, Saskatoon, Kitchener PL, Vancouver PL, and Winnipeg PL have **seed libraries/exchanges**.
- Greater Victoria, Winnipeg, and Kitchener offer gardens on-site and/or workshops that **teach food gardening** skills.

Community Kitchens

- Edmonton and Halifax PL have **kitchens** that host cooking programs for patrons, whereas Kitchener PL has a mobile kitchen.
- Many cooking **workshops and demonstrations** are currently being offered online.

Acknowledgment

The authors thank Kaitlin W. Baluk, Hamilton Public Libraries Researcher-in Residence, Leora Sas van der Linden, Community Research Platform Program Manager, and Lisa Weaver, Hamilton Public Libraries Director of Collections and Program Development, for their continued guidance and feedback on this project.

Appendix 1: Methods

Literature Review

We identified relevant literature through Google Scholar and Google Search Engine. To examine the literature about food insecurity/security, as well as characteristics of vulnerable households in Canada, Ontario, and Hamilton, we used the following search terms: *food insecurity, food security, Canada, Hamilton, and Ontario*. To identify literature reporting Canadian and local interventions, we used the terms: *food insecurity, food security, Canada, Hamilton, Ontario, Initiative, Intervention, and Library*. We included both scholarly and grey literature. We included literature reporting on food insecurity/security, associated interventions and initiatives, literature specific to Canada, Ontario, and/or Hamilton, and literature specific to the general population within these regions. We excluded literature about regions outside of Canada.

Interviews

We identified local food leaders through the recommendations of a representative from Food for Life, a Google search of Hamilton initiatives, and HPL's RedBook. We contacted 9 individuals across food banks and related programs and conducted 4 interviews, each with someone from Food for Life, Hamilton Food Share, Parkview Church, and St. Matthew's House. We developed the interview questions which were then approved by HPL's Researcher-in-Residence and the Community Research Platform's Program Manager. Interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes and were conducted over the phone or Zoom as per the interviewee's request. Consent for participation in the interview was recorded separately in a document containing participant information. The interview guide can be found in Appendix 1. Key insights were drawn out from the de-identified data based on the relevance to HPL's mandate or knowledge that may inform their actions and initiatives going forward. Regrettably, we were unable to conduct more interviews with food leaders due to the time constraints of the project. We would have liked to interview more food leaders in Hamilton who also represent non-religious organizations.

Environmental Scan

We included the following public libraries in our environmental scan of public library food programs and initiatives, between January and March 2022.

Greater Victoria Public Library
Vancouver Public Library
Calgary Public Library
Edmonton Public Library
Saskatoon Public Library

Regina Public Library
Winnipeg Public Library
London Public Library
Kitchener Public Library
Ottawa Public Library

Halton Hills Public Library
Milton Public Library
Oakville Public Library
Burlington Public Library
Toronto Public Library

Montreal Public Library
Quebec City Public Library
Fredericton Public Library
Halifax Public Library

We began by searching library websites using the search terms: *Food, Meal, Food Insecurity, and Food Access*. This was followed by searching Google Search Engine and Google News with the search terms: *[x] Public library, Food Security; [x] Public Library, Food; and [x] Public Library, Meal*. The search was then expanded based on the programs we were able to identify, and other sources that could be relevant for a specific library, such as social media or board meeting minutes. Following the online search, we reached out to libraries for phone or Zoom conversations to explore some of their programs in further detail. In February 2022, we spoke with library staff at Vancouver and Halifax Public Library and received emails from Toronto and Victoria. In March 2022, we spoke with library staff at Fredericton, Kitchener, and Saskatoon Public Library, and received email correspondence from Winnipeg Public Library.

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

[Introduce ourselves]

To summarize why we are here today, we are conducting a project with the [Community Research Platform](#) and Hamilton Public Library (HPL) to identify how HPL can contribute to tackling food insecurity in Hamilton. Through our discussion today, I hope to learn more about your insights and perceptions on food insecurity in Hamilton, areas that need improvement, and other related facets of this important topic.

I want to begin by thanking you for taking the time to participate in this interview and discussion.

Please know that participating in this interview and discussion is completely voluntary. The risks involved in this study are low, but you may feel uncomfortable sharing your thoughts and feelings with me. You can choose what you want to share with me, can decline any question you don't want to answer, and even decide that you no longer want to take part.

The information which we collect from these interviews will not likely lead back to you. I will strive to protect the confidentiality of our discussion. Keep in mind that you may be identified based on how you may phrase your answers and identify people/organizations. If we decide we want to use a quote, we will de-identify it in our report and will contact you ahead of time to see if that is alright. Are you okay with this? If not, we can aggregate and paraphrase your answers.

With your permission, I will record the interview and take notes to reduce the chance of misinterpreting what you say. Only our research team will have access to the transcripts and recordings. Are you okay with recording our conversation?

Do you give your consent to this interview?

Lastly, do you have any questions before we begin?

Record if consent is given on a separate document

Interview Questions:

1. We want to know a little bit about you. How long have you been involved in this type of work? What do you like about it?
 - o **If little is said about food insecurity in Q1*...* Can you describe your experience with food insecurity and these programs?

Organization-related

2. What are the main goals of your organization?
3. What are some aspects of your program/organization you feel help accomplish your goals? On the other hand, what are the major challenges you face?
4. Where/who in the community do you feel you make the most impact as an organization? Where would you like to make more of an impact?

Overall Food Insecurity Issues

5. [Opt.] What do you think are problems that other food organizations like yours might experience with addressing food insecurity?
6. What are the gaps you've identified that are lacking resources? Need more support?

7. What do you feel is the best way to communicate food security resources and information with the public?
8. What role might a public library play in supporting the work you're doing?
 - o What might an ideal relationship with a public library look like to you?

Connections & Network

9. Have you collaborated with or are you currently partnered with any other community groups or organizations? If yes, in what ways do you support each other?
10. Are there any other food organizations or leaders in Hamilton that you think we should know of?

Concluding

11. If anything were possible, what would be your ideal situation? What would make providing/increasing access to food easier?
 - o *[based on what they say]* → What would need to be in place to make this happen? What resources do you need? Which of these already exist?
12. Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not asked you about yet?

Thank you for your time, and for providing your insight and input on these questions. Once we are done transcribing and coding your answers, we will reach out to you again to confirm your consent to use quotes from your interview.

Even if you've already provided consent now, you can let us know if you don't want us to include them in our report when we contact you and we will not. Again, we appreciate you taking the time out of your day to let us interview you.