

Building Knowledge: Research Summaries

Understanding Food Programs at BC Housing's Directly Managed Sites

Background

It can be a challenge for low-income households to have enough money to pay for food after covering fixed costs, such as rent. This leaves many households uncertain about how to provide affordable, nutritious food. Food security is defined as having access to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food. The Dieticians of Canada's BC Division estimated that the cost of a nutritious basket of food for a family of four was \$872 per month in 2009.

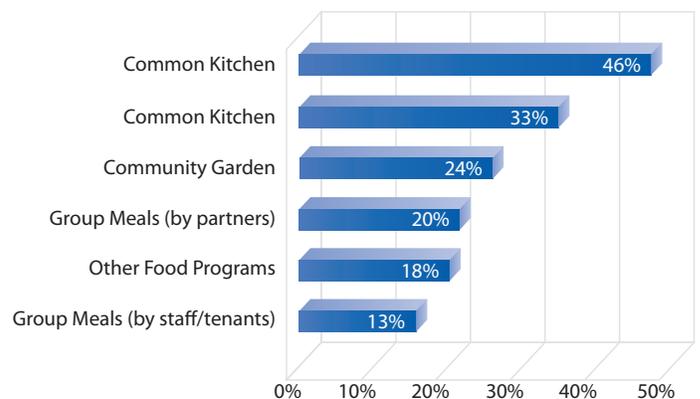
With the high cost of food, food security can be very difficult to achieve, especially for low-income households. The most significant barrier to healthy eating is inadequate income. Over one-quarter of those who accessed a food bank in Canada in 2009 lived in subsidized housing. Factors such as proximity to food sources, transportation routes, and a person's physical ability to access food sources can also influence food security.

Community kitchens, community gardens, meal programs, and low-cost grocery programs are some examples of food programs that can help households access food that is affordable and healthy. A number of BC Housing's directly managed sites offer food programs on-site. In 2009 and 2010, BC Housing's Research and Corporate Planning Department worked with property managers, building managers, and community development workers in order to build an inventory of the food programs available at BC Housing's directly managed sites. The purpose of this inventory was to determine how many of its housing developments offered on-site food programs and what types of food programs are offered. This report highlights the key findings of the research.

Food Programs at BC Housing's Directly Managed Sites

Of the 82 BC Housing directly managed sites included in the inventory, 59 per cent of the sites offered some form of food program. Community kitchens were the most common food program, with almost half of the BC Housing sites having this type of program on-site. One-third of BC Housing's directly managed sites offered an on-site community garden program for tenants. Free or low-cost group meals organized by tenants/staff and external community partners and meal delivery programs were also common food programs.

Figure 1 Proportion of BC Housing's Directly Managed Sites Offering Various Food Programs On-site, 2009/10



Most sites that offered food programs reported that up to 50 per cent of their tenants participated in at least one of the food programs they offer. The free or low-cost community meals organized by tenants, BC Housing staff, or external community partners tended to have a higher proportion of tenants participating in those programs, compared to other food programs offered. Almost one-fifth of sites reported that they have space that could



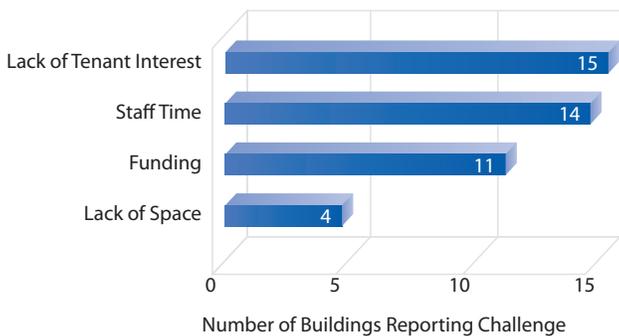
be used for a food program, but that it is not currently being used due to lack of tenant interest.

One-fifth of BC Housing’s directly managed sites have offered an on-site food program for at least five years. Another 13 per cent have had an on-site food program for one to four years. Many of the common kitchen programs, community garden programs, and group meals organized by tenants and/or staff have been running for at least five years. Many of the group meals organized by external community partners have been running between one and four years.

Challenges with On-site Food Programs

Building staff were asked to identify some of the challenges they have experienced with running on-site food programs. The most common issue identified was the lack of tenant interest in participating or leading food programs. Lack of staff time to manage food programs was also identified as a challenge. Though some programs are funded by external sources or are even self-sufficient, it can be difficult to find funding to run food programs. A small proportion of building staff reported that they did not have appropriate space to operate food programs on-site.

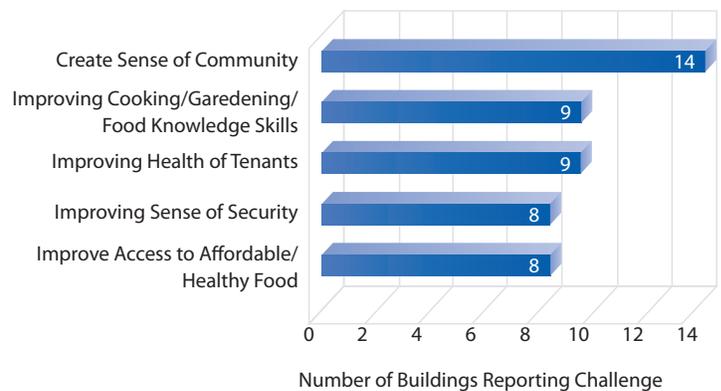
Figure 2: Number of Buildings Reporting Challenges with Running Food Programs On-site, 2009/10



Benefits of On-site Food Programs

Building staff were also asked to identify the benefits of having food programs on-site. While several respondents identified improved access to affordable, healthy food and an improved sense of safety at the site, the most commonly identified benefit of on-site food programs is that they create a sense of community. Many respondents also believe that on-site food programs provide a chance for tenants to improve their cooking, gardening, and overall food knowledge skills. Respondents also said that on-site food programs can lead to improved health outcomes for tenants who participate in these programs.

Figure 3: Number of Buildings Reporting Benefits of Food Programs On-site, 2009/10



Credits:

Author: Rebecca Siggner (Manager, Research – BC Housing), with research from Matt Davies (Student, University of Victoria), Sandra Thomas (Student, University of British Columbia), and Kasel Yamashita (Student, University of British Columbia)

Editor: Karen Hemmingson (Director, Research and Corporate Planning – BC Housing)

Full Report: Only this summary of findings has been prepared.