



National Collaborating Centre
for Determinants of Health

Centre de collaboration nationale
des déterminants de la santé

LEARNING FROM PRACTICE: ADVOCACY FOR HEALTH EQUITY - FOOD SECURITY



BACKGROUND

Advocacy is a vital role for public health practitioners in Canada. Engaging in advocacy helps us to build and capitalize on collective action to support systemic change, and offers significant potential to foster the conditions that support greater health equity in our communities.¹

There is no single way to design and implement advocacy to address health inequities. Selecting an approach depends on the local or broader context, practitioners' own philosophies or preferences for practice, and the dominant ideology within the organization.

Despite the wide variety of approaches that can be used in advocacy, there are some essential elements:²

- Clear, specific policy goals;
- Solid research and science base;
- Values linked to fairness, equity and social justice;
- Broad-based support through coalitions;
- Mass media used to set public agenda and frame issues; and
- Use of political and legislative processes for change.

This practice example was created by the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health with a member of the Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health Food Security Work Group and staff from Food Secure Canada to demonstrate the application of advocacy in Canadian public health practice. Visit www.nccdh.ca for other documents on advocacy in the Learning from Practice series.

While advocacy is an important part of public health practice, many public health practitioners are hesitant to engage in challenging, complex and wicked issues³ associated with health equity. Practitioners need support to fully embrace advocacy as a legitimate public health strategy, and in conjunction with other sectors and organizations which might have a complementary vision. Sharing ideas and successes by providing examples from communities across Canada is an important way for public health practitioners to learn about this vital component of our professional role.^{4,5}

There are many individuals, groups, and organizations who lend their voices to the efforts to improve food security for all Canadians. This document highlights the work of two of those organizations, one at the provincial level (the Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health Food Security Work Group) and one at the national level (Food Secure Canada).

ADVOCACY ON FOOD SECURITY

Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health – Food Security Work Group

The Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health Food Security Work Group (OSNPPH FSWG) has been active in advocacy around food security issues for the past four years. An independent voice of over 200 Registered Dietitians working in Ontario’s public health system, the organization provides leadership in public health nutrition by promoting and supporting member collaboration to improve the health of Ontario residents.

The FSWG implemented a project to raise awareness that food insecurity is an urgent human rights and social justice issue which is not effectively addressed by a food charity approach. Food insecurity therefore requires an income response. The FSWG developed a set of income-related policy recommendations to address food insecurity as well as a position statement and accompanying infographic that recommend governments prioritize a Basic Income Guarantee as an effective response to food insecurity.

The FSWG has implemented the following activities, as part of their advocacy work:

- gathered **endorsements from public health organizations**, including the Association of Local Public Health Agencies and the Ontario Public Health Association;
- pursued endorsements from organizations external to public health;
- used social media (i.e. Twitter) to increase awareness;
- coordinated with related organizations to advocate to the provincial government;
- developed a PowerPoint presentation for OSNPPH members to use in their health units and communities;
- developed and presented a webinar with the Ontario Public Health Association about food insecurity as an urgent issue for public policy agendas and about charitable responses being ineffective and counterproductive;
- pursued opportunities to present at relevant food insecurity and public health-related conferences.

As of August 2016, 46 organizations and over 90 individuals⁶ have endorsed FSWG’s Position Statement on Responses to Food Insecurity. The 2016 **Ontario budget** indicated that the province will conduct a basic income pilot. That idea, “investigation into a basic income guarantee, as a policy option for reducing poverty and income insecurity and for providing opportunities for people with low income”,⁷ was the first of three key recommendations put forward by FSWG in November 2015.

Some next steps for the FSWG include working with OSNPPH’s partners to advocate for a high quality pilot of the Basic Income Guarantee in Ontario.

For more on upstream solutions instead of a food charity approach, check out [Public Health Speaks: Upstream action on food insecurity & Upstream action on food insecurity: A curated list.](#)

Food Secure Canada

Food Secure Canada, a national-level organization with a head office in Montreal, works to unite voices from across Canada to advance food policy issues, including calling for a national food policy. Food Secure Canada (FSC) was born fifteen years ago, to try to bolster the collective power and influence of the broad range of civil society organizations working to combat food insecurity. The organization's main focus is federal food policy, but it does link to networks that relate to local or provincial level policies that affect food production and distribution. Using a food systems approach, FSC's goals are zero hunger, a sustainable food system, and healthy and safe food. By helping to break down silos and bring diverse groups together, FSC's advocacy strategy involves supporting these groups to see the connections among each others' work, so that they can become a stronger voice together.

Leading up to the federal election in October 2015, FSC ran a comprehensive campaign called **Eat Think Vote**. The campaign called for:

- a comprehensive national food policy that works across silos;
- the exploration of a basic income guarantee as a means to reduce food insecurity;
- issues of sovereignty to be addressed, in order to achieve better food security in Northern regions;
- federal leadership to develop a national school food program, in conjunction with other levels of government; and,
- better supports for the next generation of farmers, especially those who farm small plots of land.

As part of Eat Think Vote, short briefing notes were prepared which described each of the above major themes or issues, and provided a rationale for the policy solutions proposed by FSC and its networks. FSC then worked to mobilize members



of its networks to hold conversations and events, to engage candidates running in the federal election. Sixty-eight events were held across the country, involving 158 candidates. Each event was organized by one or more of 192 local community groups, with FSC acting as a link among all of those groups and with the media. Eat Think Vote also involved a petition, a survey of the attitudes and ideas of candidates across the country, and a communications strategy that involved traditional, online, and social media.

The various events involved 4461 active participants across Canada, and millions more were reached through radio, television, newspapers and social media. Since the campaign's end, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has sent a **mandate letter to the federal Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food**, who has been instructed to: "develop a food policy that promotes healthy living and safe food by putting more healthy, high-quality food, produced by Canadian ranchers and farmers,

on the tables of families across the country.” Additionally, a Senate Report on Obesity in Canada⁸ recommended the immediate revision of Canada’s Food Guide. As part of this revision, FSC is calling for a definition of healthy food that goes beyond nutritional qualities and is derived from socially and environmentally sustainable food systems.

Since the federal election in October 2015, FSC’s advocacy work has continued to mobilize organizations and networks involved in the food movement in Canada to work towards policy change. Those efforts involve helping to strengthen networks and coalitions, trying to change the narrative discourse about food in the media, engaging policy makers and collectively develop new policy ideas and alternatives, and taking advantage of opportunities to be political.

Below we explore how these two organizations have engaged in three roles that public health professionals consider when building a strategy to advocate for health equity, namely: framing the issue, gathering and disseminating data, and working in collaboration and developing alliances.¹

Framing the issue

Framing the issue is vital for identifying a problem, selecting a solution, and developing a communication strategy. Members of the OSNPPH FSWG have explicitly framed food insecurity as a social justice issue related to inadequate income. They highlight research data that suggests that food banks and other charity-based food services do not reduce food insecurity. Instead the persistent support for a charity model lets the parties responsible for social wellbeing, particularly provincial and federal governments, focus on short-term approaches. The OSNPPH FSWG advocates for income-related solutions to food insecurity that would reduce poverty and hunger.

“Food insecurity is an urgent human rights and social justice issue for local, provincial and federal public policy agendas. Food charity is an ineffective and counterproductive response to food insecurity because it does not address the root cause, which is poverty. An income response is required to effectively address food insecurity.”⁶

THE LEARNING FROM PRACTICE SERIES

Learning from Practice is a series started in 2014 as easy-to-read practice examples to demonstrate the integration of health equity into public health practice. This series includes examples on targeting within universalism, influenza, organizational capacity, advocacy and more.

To download the **Learning from Practice** series, visit www.nccdh.ca



Food Secure Canada has taken an approach to framing that emphasizes the collective nature of the issues and solutions surrounding food security, especially as they relate to complex food systems.

FSC has thoughtfully considered the way it communicates about issues for each specific advocacy initiative. For instance, the goal of FSC's Eat Think Vote campaign in 2015 was framed as 'good food for all', a strategy that was deemed to be successful, following the campaign's evaluation stage.

"We knew the campaign's 'good food for all' message would resonate with Canadians."⁹

Gathering and disseminating data

Public health plays an important role in gathering and sharing data about the health of our communities and populations. However, advocacy involves moving beyond providing data, to using that information to assess needs, pull together potential partners, and identify a strategy for action. Part of the advocacy role of the OSNPPH FSWG includes supporting health units' local advocacy efforts by providing tools for applying local food costs collected in the annual Nutritious Food Basket Survey (NFB) mandated by the Ontario Public Health Standards. NFB data and local rental housing costs are compared with various individual and family incomes to get an indication of groups that are likely to be experiencing household food insecurity. The FSWG also uses data from the **Canadian Community Health Survey** from Statistics Canada, and then shares that data regularly, through social media, the OSNPPH website, and other online and in person presentations. In the past, data from food banks were used, but it was found that food bank data significantly underrepresented the extent of the food insecurity problem.

Working in collaboration and developing alliances

Advocacy is at its most powerful when it comes from an alliance of many different individuals and groups (ideally from a wide variety of sectors) working together.

Consistent with its overall goal of bringing diverse sets of organizations together, advocacy efforts work to emphasize that many actors – civil society, different levels of government, and private businesses – need to work together. "We don't have all the answers. But what we can do is to convene actors to understand these systems, where the problems are, and how we can address them together – collectively." FSC has built strong partnerships with a wide variety of networks. Those networks include public health-affiliated organizations like Dietitians of Canada, the Heart and Stroke Foundation, and some Ontario Public Health Units, including those from Sudbury and Thunder Bay. Many individual public health professionals are also actively involved with FSC advocacy efforts.

An example of how FSC works to strengthen its advocacy efforts through networks is its involvement in the **Coalition for Healthy School Food**. The Coalition is made up of over 30 organizations from across the country that are seeking an investment by the federal government in a cost-shared Universal Healthy School Food Program that will enable all students in Canada to have access to healthy meals at school every day.

SUPPORTS AND CHALLENGES

As front line dietitians, members of the OSNPPH FSWG acknowledge the support of other public health champions, including medical officers of health and academic partners, who share their message of the connections between food insecurity, income, and health at policy tables. Those champions help to “open the door” for other public health professionals to participate in advocacy. Connecting with those champions, and making sure everyone presents a consistent message, is important to support successful advocacy efforts.

The presence of professional organizations, like OSNPPH, which have an explicit advocacy and policy mandate, often makes advocacy possible especially for public health professionals who may not be able to speak out about health equity issues as part of their local health unit roles. The power of each individual is enhanced as part of a broader organization; that power is multiplied even further when organizations within and outside of public health stand together. Strong advocacy work reaffirms the roots of public health in Canada. As one representative of the OSNPPH FSWG said, “*the history of public health is about standing up to the powerful.*”

“We can have a voice, as OSNPPH.”

The extremely complex and dynamic nature of food security and food systems work has presented a challenge for these two organizations. Our food system and food cultures have changed significantly over the last 50 years, in what one of the Board members of FSC called “*corporate concentration in the face of policy fragmentation.*” The dynamic nature of this context for advocacy around food security makes it difficult to explain your goals and pinpoint particular policy changes that are needed most immediately.

Working with food organizations at all levels can be challenging. A mandate to work on advocacy can be ambiguous within public health organizations and there can be a lack of capacity to engage with researchers for effective community-academic collaboration. There are tensions within the food movement as well. For instance, following a strong evidence base, the OSNPPH FSWG unapologetically recommends against a ‘charity model’ as a response to food insecurity, a recommendation that can potentially strain relationships with food banks and other partners.

At the federal level, there is often a lack of relevant policy and FSC has been challenged by the siloed nature of policy affecting food systems. For instance, ending hunger requires working with ministries focused on agriculture, economy and industry, transportation and more. Other challenges at the federal level include the dominance of corporate influence on policy, the limited resources for food movement actors for experimentation and innovation, a lack of political will to acknowledge or address food insecurity issues, and a disenfranchisement of food movement actors/society within political and policy making processes.

FSC relies on its strategy to strengthen its networks and partnerships to overcome these challenges. The organization helps to build the capacity of key actors (e.g. food movement leaders, private sector, civil servants) to improve the coherence of policy around food systems, and it works to convene a diverse set of partners, bringing policy entrepreneurship of the food movement to the policy table. Through strategic communications and social media, both the OSNPPH FSWG and FSC are working to change the narrative about food insecurity.

LESSONS LEARNED

Leaders with the OSNPPH FSWG and FSC offer the following words of advice for public health professionals beginning to explore advocacy for health equity within their communities or regions:

- ***Be aware of your role and strengths*** - Be clear about your role and what you are in the best position to offer. As front line nutrition professionals, OSNPPH is in a good position to connect directly with community members, raise awareness of these important issues and offer evidence-based ideas for solutions, and then share that community support with policy makers:

“for elected representatives to want to take a bold move; they need to know that they have support from within their communities. So our action is to contribute to building that support, and then letting government know that there is that kind of support for these kinds of bold initiatives.”

- ***A systems approach is essential*** – Becoming more aware of how the complex social systems affecting health equity operate and applying systems thinking helps avoid unintended negative consequences of advocacy interventions.
- ***Become familiar with the evidence*** and the best solutions for the issue you would like to improve, and rely on that to help you put forward innovative ideas. The literature can provide you with courage and the confidence to present a strong message.



- ***Act while building alliances*** - Work towards a balance between supporting coalitions and building alliances and putting advocacy strategies into practice. For example, FSC has chosen to use a collective impact model to guide their advocacy efforts. As a representative of FSC notes, “you can’t succeed on your own”.

“It’s a balance of trying to build relationships and engaging stakeholders [so that] they feel they have a voice, but then also to lead and have direction, so that ... we are seeing change happen from our efforts.”

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