

Using food as a tool for settlement, integration and employment

Marian Yusuf
Rosie Mensah

The Toronto Food Strategy's *Community Food Works for Newcomer Settlement* programme was developed in 2016 to address the needs of Arabic-speaking newcomers to the City of Toronto. Through food, it creates opportunities for social inclusion and engagement, to facilitate resettlement and integration into Canadian life. This programme was adapted from the existing Community Food Works programme that addresses barriers to accessing food handler training, nutrition information, and employment support among low-income residents in Toronto. The Community Food Works for Newcomer Settlement was recognised for its innovation and impact with a Milan Urban Food Policy Pact "highest score" award in the fall of 2017.

Toronto Food Strategy

The Toronto Food Strategy, led by Toronto Public Health, was established in 2010. The vision of the Toronto Food Strategy is to champion and support a healthy and sustainable food system for all, through research, facilitation, partnership building, and incubating and implementing specific, tangible projects. It aligns with the growing international, national and regional food movements and the increasing recognition of the important role of cities in promoting healthy sustainable food systems.

Working alongside the Toronto Food Policy Council, the Toronto Food Strategy partners with City of Toronto staff, external institutions, community agencies and the private sector to facilitate effective policy change, to develop and expand initiatives that focus on access to healthy, diverse and affordable food, and to create good food jobs.

The Toronto Food Strategy uses food through programmes like Community Food Works to improve the lives of residents, to address many of the social determinants of health (see Figure 2), and while cultivating sustainable food systems (Figure 1).

Community Food Works

In 2011, Community Food Works (CFW) was initiated by the Toronto Food Strategy as a pilot project to provide an



Figure 1: City of Toronto Food Strategy Approach

innovative approach to public health service delivery. CFW integrates food handler training and certification, food skills and nutrition education, and employment support for low income residents through a learner-centred, adult education approach. Food handler training ensures safe food handling for restaurants and other food premises. Since 2011 it has been offered at no cost through CFW, and builds the skills, knowledge and confidence of residents hoping to work in the food sector, start their own catering business, or cook safe and healthier foods at home or in the community.

CFW uses a health equity lens which focuses on addressing the underlying causes of differences in the quality of **health** and **healthcare** across different populations. CFW collaborates with community agencies that work with marginalised communities, including those working with at-risk youth. As well, CFW addresses long-standing barriers that low-income individuals face, such as travelling to a course location and paying training fees, in accessing food



Peer leaders display their cooking talents during the visit of a Greek delegation. Photo by Food Strategy



Class graduation. Photo by Arlene Moscovitch

handler training and nutrition information. As a result, CFW has been delivered successfully in partnership with a wide variety of city divisions and community agencies in neighbourhoods across Toronto.

Community Food Works for Newcomers

Between November 2015 and January 2017, Toronto welcomed approximately 7,000 Syrian refugees. The influx of Arabic-speaking newcomers prompted Toronto Public Health to create Community Food Works for Newcomer Settlement (CFWN) in 2016.

Newcomers to Canada tend to arrive in better health than Canadian-born individuals; however, their health tends to deteriorate rapidly over time – a phenomenon known as the “Healthy Immigrant Effect”. Numerous changes occur with the process of migration, and newcomers often face significant challenges in regards to addressing basic needs. Settlement and integration, employment and economic inclusion, and food security all pose a potential risk to the health of newcomers (Figure 2). CFWN effectively recognises the health impacts of migration and acts as an early intervention to prevent this decline in health status among newcomers. For the first time, CFWN has utilised food as a vehicle for newcomer settlement.

CFWN adapts the original CFW curriculum and training process to meet the unique needs of this group. Adaptations include cultural tailoring and translation of the food safety and food skills training course; a peer-to-peer model of programme implementation and interpretation; and strengthening the programme’s employment component.

CFWN is unique in serving multiple purposes for newcomers. Bringing participants together in a community setting interrupts social isolation, facilitates an understanding of the Canadian and local Toronto food environment, promotes health through good nutrition and food safety, and facilitates pathways to employment by offering food handler training and employment support. Participants are referred to language programmes and other settlement supports where appropriate.

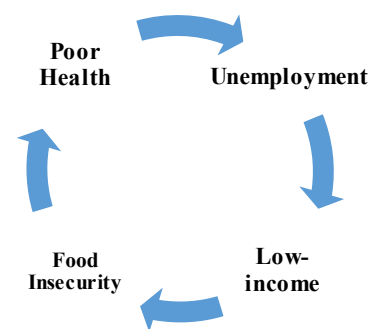


Figure 2: Unemployment among newcomers leads to low-income households; in turn, this plays a large role in household food insecurity and poor health. Poor health presents challenges for newcomers in obtaining or maintaining employment, resulting in low-income households and food insecurity (Toronto Public Health and Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services, 2011).

Social determinants of health

Settlement and integration

The term “settlement” refers to the “long-term, dynamic, two-way process through which, ideally, immigrants would achieve full equality and freedom of participation in society, and society would gain access to the full human resource potential of its immigrant communities” (OCASI, 2000). Similarly, the term “integration” is a process by which “immigrants act as fully functioning members of society” (Integration-Net, 2003).

Settlement and integration are part of a process that takes different forms depending on an individual’s unique needs and experiences (Murphy, 2010). Resettlement and integration into a new culture is a long-term process that is essential for the prosperity and health of newcomers (Munson & Atallahjan, 2016).

Employment

It is well known that employment has a powerful effect on health outcomes, and many newcomers experience prolonged challenges in entering the labour market, precarious work, or unsafe working conditions. Employment



In-class learning session with Arabic language materials.
Photo by Arlene Moscovitch

is key for addressing basic income needs and food security; all of these are important for health. As a result, addressing challenges to entering the Canadian labour market has the potential to minimise the risk of poor health among newcomers in the City of Toronto, and provide financial, social, and psychological benefits (Toronto Public Health and Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services, 2011). By providing newcomer participants with food handler training and certification, CFWN supports their employability. In the first year, 208 participants graduated from the programme, and these graduates are either employed or are ready to access employment in the food sector. CFWN is currently being evaluated. This process requires a six-month follow-up survey of participants after completion of the training. The final evaluation, which includes employment outcomes, will be available in March 2019.

Food Security

Changes in newcomer food choices can be anticipated as cultural food availability may be limited or costly, and this leads to adopting the food habits of the dominant group – often referred to as dietary acculturation (Sanou et al., 2014). Dietary acculturation poses a risk to the immigrants' health: unhealthy food choices contribute greatly to the decline in health among immigrants in Canada (Sanou et al., 2014).

Because of challenges regarding food access, availability, affordability and acceptability pose a threat to the newcomer health, CFWN offers culturally responsive nutrition education that encourages healthy consumption of cultural foods. Newcomer participants are often highly skilled, and CFWN seeks to enhance their knowledge by strengthening their food literacy and food skills.

Although the final evaluation outcomes are not yet available, programme participants, peer leaders and partners attested to the effectiveness of the CFWN model. CFWN responds to many of the barriers experienced by newcomers by integrating nutrition education, employment support, and food handler training. Through food, CFWN will continue to deepen the settlement process for newcomers arriving to the City of Toronto, and reduce health inequities among those in this group. CFWN peer leaders are recruited from the same community as the participants; they improve the



<https://vimeo.com/241990852>

Wehbe Zaidan is a newcomer from Syria. She was a pharmacist and came to Canada in December 2015. In 2016 she joined the Community Works for Newcomer Settlement, first as a participant and now as a paid peer leader. Wehbe expressed her feeling towards the programme as follows:

"I found CFWN very useful. I learned how to deal with storing food in the fridge, reading nutrition labelling, good and bad ingredients, salt, sugar and fat. We need jobs to survive. A lot of women found jobs through this programme. They work at schools, restaurants and other places."

cultural appropriateness of the programme in their teaching and provide services that support the participants. In the future, peer leaders will be further embedded into core programming, increasing capacity for meaningful engagement and strengthening collaboration with multiple stakeholders. Engagement with CFWN can also lead to employment or self-employment outcomes.

Marian Yusuf

Consultant Nutrition Promotion

Marian.Yusuf@toronto.ca

Rosie Mensah

Registered dietitian

References

- Integration-Net (2003). National Settlement Conference 2: Settlement Accord Section. Three: Defining the Settlement Sector Definition of Settlement. Calgary - October 2-5, 2003.
- Munson, J. & Atallahjan, S. (2016). Finding refuge in Canada: A Syrian resettlement story.
- Murphy, J. (2010). The settlement and integration needs of immigrants: A literature review.
- Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants. (2000). Immigrant Settlement Counselling: A Training Guide.
- Sanou, D., O'Reilly, E., Ngnie-Teta, I., Batal, M., Mondain, N., Andrew, C., Bourgeault, I. L. (2014). Acculturation and Nutritional Health of Immigrants in Canada: A Scoping Review. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 16(1), 24–34.
- Toronto Public Health and Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services. The Global City: Newcomer Health in Toronto. November 2011.
- Toronto Public Health