

Increasing Barrier Free Access to Food Security Through Community Gardens: The Role of Niagara Region Municipalities in Advancing Policy and Reducing Barriers

Food security is a basic human right yet almost 60,000 people in Niagara are food insecure, experiencing limited access to nutritious, affordable and culturally appropriate food*.¹ The Government of Canada states “income-related food security is an important public health issue in Canada and is a key social determinant of health. Food security is essential for healthy eating - without consistent economic access to sufficient nutritious food, healthy eating cannot be achieved, increasing the risk of poor health.”² We recognize the significant effect that food insecurity can have on one's mental, physical, social and overall health and wellbeing. For Niagara residents to be food secure, as defined by the United Nations Committee on World Food Security, everyone in Niagara, at all times, has physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life.³

Community gardens act as a promising strategy to decrease food insecurity because of their ability to provide lower-income households with access to nutritious food.⁴ Community gardens are significantly improving access to healthy and affordable food at the more than 1,200 plots across Niagara, often for our most marginalized populations. Community gardens can affect an individual's skill development, employment and income, our economic landscape, the environment, and our social and community connectedness. The recent Case Study of the St. Catharines Centennial Community Garden highlights how “community gardens not only address food insecurity but also provide a safe space for all participants to form meaningful relationships; with one another, their community and the natural environment”.⁵ However, community gardens, while adding tremendous value to the community, **continue to be faced with barriers to success, including policies and protocols related to land access and use, access to water, associated fees and certificates of insurance.**

Best practices in other communities have easily addressed these barriers. Niagara's municipalities can play an important role in creating barrier free access to community gardens, thereby investing in viable solutions to food security. We are positioned well to advance community gardens best practices and policies that are in place in other regions and municipalities. Public Health Ontario's Evidence Brief *Municipal and Community-level Interventions to Promote Sustainable Food Systems* states “municipalities are positioned to intervene in their local food system, and can enact policies and programs that build a culture around local food initiatives.”⁶ We believe municipalities in the Niagara region are ready to implement best practices to strengthen our food security system through community gardens.

¹ PROOF Policy Research Study. May 2021. Retrieved from: [PROOF_FACTSHEET_Provincial-policies-052021.pdf](#)

² Government of Canada. Canadian Community Health Survey. 2004. Retrieved from [Canadian Community Health Survey Cycle 2.2, Nutrition \(2004\): Income-Related Household Food Security in Canada - Canada.ca](#)

³ United Nations Committee on World Food Security. Global Strategic Framework for Food Security & Nutrition (GSF). 2017 Edition. Retrieved from [CFS: Online GSF \(fao.org\)](#)

⁴ The Blank Page. How Community Gardens Are Tackling Food Insecurity. Published By Dhruvika Angrish. Retrieved from [How community gardens are tackling food insecurity - The Blankpage \(blankpage.org\)](#)

⁵ Tamarack Institute. Vibrant Communities. Case Study | Harvesting Local Gifts and Assets at the Centennial Community Garden. May 2021 Retrieved from: [Harvesting Local Gifts & Assets at Centennials Community Garden.pdf](#)

⁶ Public Health Ontario. Municipal and Community-level Interventions to Promote Sustainable Food Systems. July 2020. Retrieved from [Municipal and Community-level Interventions to Promote Sustainable Food Systems \(publichealthontario.ca\)](#)

The Halton Food Council's *Community Garden Policy Scan* states "The role of local governments is fundamentally a supportive and enabling one. Community gardens are successful because local gardeners are committed to making them so. When local governments open their doors and invite the community in, there is a great deal of community expertise and experience to be shared. Local governments do have a significant role to play in the process: by removing policy barriers; enacting supportive policies; providing support related to water access, land tenure, and composting; by signaling their support of community gardens in government communications; and by dedicating staff time to interact with community gardening groups." ⁷

Now is the time to act. Municipalities can create policies that empower Niagara's citizens and provide them with barrier free access to food through community gardens. **The best practices and policies we encourage and recommend Niagara's municipalities to develop specifically relate to:**

1. Land Use for community gardens, urban agriculture and food security
2. Waiving or reducing fees imposed by the municipality
3. Provide options for holding certificates of insurance
4. Commitment to the program with reasonable annual investment
5. Ongoing program evaluation and development

There is no need to reinvent the wheel in Niagara when it comes to implementing best practices for community gardens. Many cities across Ontario have recognized the critical role community gardens play and have implemented the policies and mechanisms to reduce these barriers. These municipalities include, but are not limited to:

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|-------------|------------|---------------|
| - Guelph | - Hamilton | - Kingston |
| - Kitchener | - London | - Mississauga |
| - Ottawa | - Toronto | - Windsor |
| - Waterloo | | |

Community gardens best practices and policies from across the province are readily available and can be found at sources including, but not limited to: [Sustain Ontario](#); [ChangeLab Solutions](#); [Toronto Food Policy Council](#); [Region of Waterloo](#); and local Public Health units including the [Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health](#). The Niagara Community Garden Network and United Way Niagara, in partnership with the Niagara Food Security Network, would be delighted to provide the recommended policies and work with municipalities to transition to inclusive and barrier free approaches.

We ask that Niagara government representatives, stakeholders and community partners take action to improve access to affordable, healthy and culturally appropriate food* by reducing the barriers imposed by current regional and/or municipal bylaws, policies or practices.

It is highly recommended that each of Niagara's municipalities conduct a review of current policies and practices, assigning the necessary staff and departments to assess and recommend a barrier free approach. We recommend a timely implementation of policies and practices that reduce barriers for community gardens and improve access to healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food, thereby reducing food insecurity in Niagara.

⁷ Community Garden Policy Scan. Prepared by Dillon Consulting Limited for the Halton Food Council. November 2013. Retrieved from [May 20 2014 Health and Social Services MO1214 Halton Food Council Progress 20122014 MO1214 attachment 2pdf 173641.pdf](#) Source: Barbolet, 2009, p. 6

* Culturally Appropriate Food - As defined by [Food Secure Canada](#).



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Niagara Community Garden Network Policy Recommendations - Appendix A

As part of our work with the *Increasing Barrier Free Access to Food Security Through Community Gardens: The Role of Niagara Region Municipalities in Advancing Policy and Reducing Barriers* position statement, we have outlined the policy areas and key recommendations Niagara's municipalities should be considering as part of their role in government.

[*Dig It! A Practical Toolkit - How local governments can support community gardens*](#) highlights why and how local governments would want to support community gardens. The toolkit is a significant resource for government featuring guides, tools, strategies and policies.

The position statement outlines **five key areas** the Niagara Community Garden Network recommends Niagara's municipalities should consider:

1. Land Use for community gardens, urban agriculture and food security
2. Waiving or reducing fees imposed by the municipality
3. Provide options for holding certificates of insurance
4. Commitment to the program with reasonable annual investment
5. Ongoing program evaluation and development

The Niagara Community Garden Network Policy Recommendations:

1. Land Use for community gardens, urban agriculture and food security Policy Recommendation(s)

- [**Sample Policy - Ottawa**](#)
 - Amend the City's Comprehensive Zoning By-law to permit community gardens as a permitted use in all land use zones (Responsibility: Planning and Development)
 - Incorporate community gardens as an option in the planning and redesign of City facilities such as community centres, park and leisure areas (Responsibility: Planning and Development and People Services)
 - Include community gardens in the evaluation of priority use of City surplus land (Responsibility: People Services and Corporate Services)



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- Develop and implement a process to identify City owned land that could be considered as community garden space (Responsibility: Planning and Development, People Services and Corporate Services)
- Recommend the standardised licence of occupation, presently in use, be used for community gardens on City land. Recommended that the license be for a 5-year period, with an evaluation in the 4th year for licence renewal (Responsibility: People Services and Corporate Service)
- **Sample Policy - Hamilton**
 - Create and maintain a list of City lands that are suitable for the development of a Community Garden;
 - Assist in the development of a licence agreement with a Garden Collective for the use of City land as a Community Garden

2. Waiving or reducing fees imposed by the municipality Policy Recommendation(s)

- **Sample Policy - Ottawa**
 - The Community Garden Action Plan includes a recommendation to allow water access and use where City of Ottawa infrastructure exists and to ensure maintenance of existing systems. Especially important in situations where a water source or water infrastructure exists on site, but is not readily accessible. The process to coordinate water services and access to water is technical and skills-specific and involves many City operations.
- **Sample Policy - Hamilton**
 - Dedicated Metered Water Supply: Provision of a dedicated water line for a community garden, cost dependent on length of line installed \$18,000 - \$22,000/garden. Yearly operating costs - \$180 plus water consumption charges.
 - Hardscaping: Perimeter fencing of the entire 25m x 50m garden area. Supply and Installation of 1.3m x 2.5m garden shed at each garden site \$2,500 plus installation \$900.
 - Compost: Provision of compost in first year of garden construction - To be blended 50/50 with existing top soil. Under existing leaf & yard waste processing contract, contractor(s) may be requested to deliver bulk loads of compost to designated site(s) within the City at the City's cost.



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Compost availability is dependent on the amount of leaf & yard waste compost and is to be assessed annually.

- **Raised Beds:** To be constructed for the purpose of siting gardens on lands with unknown site history and/or potential soil contamination. \$5 000 per bed per 25 metre by 50 metre site (would include items like soil and wood for framing).

3. Provide options for holding certificates of insurance Policy Recommendation(s)

○ [Sample Policy - Kitchener](#)

- Beginning with new gardens in 2018, we are piloting an insurance program that provides \$2 million in liability coverage for both the gardens and individual gardeners. With insurance, residents are empowered to take the lead on garden projects and ongoing maintenance. In 2019, we will roll out this insurance program to all community gardens on city-owned land.

○ [Sample Policy - Ottawa](#)

- Permit community garden groups to be included in the community association group liability coverage (Done and on-going as of January 2005)

4. Commitment to the program with reasonable annual investment Policy Recommendation(s)

○ [Sample Policy - Ottawa](#)

- An annual start-up fund of \$5 000, for new garden development, has been allocated each year since 2005. However, as demand increases each year for more gardens, the \$5 000 is inadequate to meet all the actual costs of garden start-up. On September 24, 2008, Council approved a motion to redirect \$75 000 of funding from the Green Partnership Pilot Program to the Community Garden Action Plan for the development of new community gardens and the enhancement of existing community gardens; to be administered by Community Funding in conjunction with the Community Garden Network, subject to 2009 Budget Council Approval. Council approved the **\$75 000** in the 2009 budget on



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December 8, 2008. The \$75 000 will provide new community gardens with start-up funds that reflect the actual costs of starting a community garden.

- **Sample Policy - Kingston**

- The City will maintain an annual fund to support the development of new community gardens and the enhancement/maintenance of existing Community Gardens. The City, or its designate, will provide information to garden members, organizations and groups on other sources of funding

5. Ongoing program evaluation and development Policy Recommendation(s)

- **Sample Policy - Ottawa**

- Security of community gardens, particularly on City land, is of critical importance to the development of sustainable community gardens. When community gardens have had no element of security or have had short term (1yr) leases, gardeners are less likely to embrace sustainable gardening principles and the contributions to building community are harder to achieve and maintain. Land security can be increased by: ensuring access to potential sites is not encumbered by a lengthy approval process; establishing leases for reasonable periods with options for renewal; and timely identification of replacement sites where a garden is required to relocate. With self sustainability as the overall objective, it is recommended that operational support be focused on initial garden start up to encourage successful garden development and community development. In most cases, sites will need some effort to develop ideal growing conditions. The needs of individual gardens will vary by size, location and how much support is provided from the community. For the smaller sites the start-up layout is modest and they are quickly able to achieve sustainability. Larger sites may require greater assistance but also support a larger number of people and result in greater overall benefit.



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● Liaisons at the City Working with Community Gardens

○ Sample Policy - Ottawa

- The Community Gardening Network (CGN) turns to the City's Community Garden Liaison for help with requests about City property. The Community Garden Liaison:
 - Receives advice from the CGN about which groups are ready to start a new garden on City-owned land.
 - Works with staff across the City to prepare for the new garden.
 - Works with CGN to ensure the new garden is built to City standards.
 - Is the liaison between CGN and various City departments for accessing City services related to community gardens.
- Relevant Departments and Branches will work collaboratively to enhance coordination of city services. A liaison person in Public Works will be identified to work with the Community Funding liaison in all matters related to their services, while another liaison will be established in Infrastructure Services and Community Sustainability for support in matters related to access to water. The Community Funding liaison function will continue. This will allow residents to have access to one contact person.

The policy recommendations included in this Appendix are a sample of best practices and policies from across Ontario. While they are not exhaustive, United Way Niagara and the Niagara Community Garden Network feel they offer valuable opportunities for Niagara's municipalities to advance the community gardens policies to ultimately improve food access and security. We highly recommend that each of Niagara's municipalities review their current policies and practices and take the necessary steps to remove the barriers imposed by these practices.

For more information, please contact Tamara Coleman-Lawrie, Director of Community Impact at tamara@unitedwayniagara.org and/or Erin Riseing, Niagara Community Garden Network Program Coordinator at erin@niagaracommunitygardens.ca.



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Additional Supporting Resources

[Dig It! A Practical Toolkit: How Local Governments Can Support Community Gardens](#), Ministry of Community Development and Union of British Columbia Municipalities

[Community Garden Policy Scan](#), Halton Food Council

[Establishing Protections for Community Gardens](#): A Fact Sheet for Advocates, ChangeLab Solutions

[Food Secure City: Toronto Food Policy Council Submission to the Toronto Official Plan](#), Toronto Food Policy Council

References

- 1 in 4 families spend 30% or more of their income on shelter/housing costs putting them in core housing need or at-risk of homelessness. (Canadian Housing Survey 2018)
- Food insecurity is closely tied to poverty. Nearly 60,000 people in Niagara are experiencing food insecurity, 22,682 individuals visited a food bank last year. (PROOF, Food Insecurity policy Research)
- Over 86 percent of food bank users were rental or social housing tenants who spent the majority of their monthly income on rent. (2020 Hunger Report)