

The Good Food Box

A Handbook for British Columbia

produced by
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for the
BC Food Systems Network
January, 2004

Introduction

The Good Food Box is a community-based program designed to ensure that people on low incomes have access to high-quality fruits and vegetables. There are many models, but all of them operate on the same basic principles:

- ***no barriers to participation*** (people who get the box are customers, not clients)
- a strong commitment to ***local, in-season food***
- ***high-quality*** fruits and vegetables, not seconds
- food purchased as much as possible ***direct from farmers*** as a way of building a strong local food system.

The idea of the Good Food Box was brought to Toronto from Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and the Toronto model continues to be the main reference for the program. For more information, see Toronto Food Share website: <www.foodshare.net/goodfoodbox01.htm>. A very comprehensive manual is also available from Toronto Food Share.

The Toronto model, which uses a central warehouse and distribution points around the city, has been adapted by many communities in BC, both urban and rural, some with fewer than 25 boxes a month and some with several hundred. All the programs depend on volunteer labour to order, sort, pack and in some cases deliver the boxes; most also find that it is essential to have some paid staff to keep the program (and the volunteers) running smoothly. Some programs have partnered with food banks to help with administration and warehousing; others connect with public health or private foundations to provide staffing.

Working in the Community

The grocery business is challenging and very competitive, with small local outlets struggling to retain a share of the market in the face of competition from gigantic, transnational entities such as Wal-Mart which are able to force their suppliers to provide products at or even below the costs of production. Your local produce retailers (including farmers who sell direct to the public) need to recognize that the Good Food Box is not in competition with them, since it is designed to serve people who would not otherwise be purchasing fresh produce. However, one must be clear that while the program is targeted to low-income people, it is a universal program: anybody can buy the Good Food Box, although the vast majority of customers are low-income.

At the same time, the Good Food Box is not ‘competing’ with charitable or emergency food providers and does not solicit donations of produce. Indeed, the GFB can reduce the number of food bank users – a stated goal of most food banks. It is particularly important to develop a good relationship with the groups who provide free food if you need to do any fundraising for the Good Food Box program.

How does it work?

Payment:

The customers pay at a convenient location – there are often several, housed in social service or recreation centres – and receive a receipt. A duplicate of the receipt is kept. (These duplicates are available on box day to check against the receipts presented by customers.) Payment must be made at least a week before box day. Many programs accept payment for the next month when the customer picks up their box.

Some programs are subsidized, most are not. Prices can range from \$5 for a subsidized box to \$25 for an expanded box which includes eggs, milk, cheese, or meat. In BC most programs charge \$10.

Ordering:

A volunteer collects the duplicate receipts and the money collected from the payment location(s). The receipts are counted and checked against the amount collected, and the money is deposited in the bank. The total amount of money collected is the ‘budget’ for the month.

Ordering is usually done by a team of at least two people. They check with the local farmers and other suppliers to find out what is available and the best prices. Then they determine the order.

A typical winter box might contain:

- 4 ½ lb potatoes
- 3 lb onions
- 3 lb carrots
- 3 lb apples
- 3 lb pears
- 1 ½ lb beets
- 1 head garlic
- 1 head broccoli
- 2 lb oranges
- 2 grapefruit
- 1 head lettuce

A typical summer box might contain:

- 4 lb potatoes
- 3 lb carrots
- 3 lb onions
- 1 head lettuce
- 1 ½ lb tomatoes
- 1 head garlic
- 1 cucumber
- 1 zucchini /summer squash
- 1 bunch swiss chard
- 1 head cauliflower
- 1 ¾ lb peaches
- 3 ½ lb apples
- 1 cantaloupe

The challenge is to include enough ‘hard’ produce such as carrots and apples that will last more than a week, as much nutrition as possible – dark leafy greens, broccoli – produce that people are familiar with, and a box that looks attractive, with a mix of colour and variety from month to month.

The emphasis is always on local, in-season produce. When possible organic produce is purchased. Often farmers or wholesalers will be very helpful in reducing prices for a bulk order.

Some imported items are very popular, such as bananas, but most programs only put them in when local fruits are less available.

Many programs deduct a small amount, such as 50¢ per box, to pay an honorarium to the volunteer coordinator of the program. In any case it is wise not to commit the entire budget to the purchase of box contents, as prices, particularly for imported produce, may change between ordering and delivery time.

Communications:

Once the order has been established, the volunteer who does the newsletter is notified of the box contents so he or she can find recipes for the vegetables and fruits that are in the box. Recipes need to focus on any item which may be a little unfamiliar, such as swiss chard or zucchini; they need to be easy to read as well as easy to make, and not use too many ingredients which are not in the box or very likely to be in the customer's pantry.

The newsletter usually also has a list of box contents and sources, so customers can appreciate the local farms. It is a good idea to not print the exact amount of each item in the newsletter. With most of the items the weights are liable to be approximate, particularly when the items vary in size – beets, onions, etc. Also, you may have to reduce the amount if there is spoilage.

Prepare for box day

The volunteer coordinator contacts the volunteers to help with packing and distribution of the boxes. Often the team that receives the produce and packs the boxes is replaced later in the day by another team who oversee box pick-up and are responsible for cleaning up the distribution site. Volunteers are needed to:

- sort the duplicate receipts so that they can be quickly checked against the receipts brought by customers – it helps to have a checklist made up beforehand
- receive the produce – it helps if these people are able to lift a 50-lb. bag
- weigh and sort the produce
- check the orders for depot delivery if the program has sub-depots
- pack the boxes
- take the receipts from customers and match with duplicates
- supervise customers packing their box into shopping bags or other boxes (the sorting bins are usually kept on-site)
- take payment from customers who want to pre-order next month's box and make out receipts
- clean out the bins once they are empty
- clean up the distribution site

Quality control

It is very important that the produce in the box be of good quality. The box day coordinator should have some knowledge of produce and the authority to turn back any shipments that are not up to standard. (You won't have to do this often with a regular supplier!) Some spoilage is to be expected, particularly with stored vegetables at the end of the storage season, and the coordinator needs to be able to judge what is acceptable and what is not.

Feedback from customers is important. The newsletter can contain a feedback form, and if traffic is not too busy, the volunteers can get verbal feedback from customers. This also helps to decide which items should be ordered more frequently – and solicit more volunteers from among the customers.

Volunteers

Many programs use the time between packing and pick-up as an opportunity for a volunteer meeting, to get feedback and ideas about the program and related issues. Many also share lunch after the box is packed; some order a little extra for the box to make a soup/stew for the volunteers to share.

Financial management

One person needs to be the treasurer, responsible for keeping the books and making sure that there is enough money in the bank to cover next month's order. This person can also pick up the money from the registration centres. Some registration centres are willing to make the deposit and provide the GFB volunteer with a deposit slip along with the customers' duplicate receipts.

Suppliers can be paid when the produce is delivered (or picked up), or cheques can be mailed to them. In either case, the treasurer is responsible for this. It is a good idea to have at least two people as signing officers in case the treasurer is not available on box day.

Fundraising

Set-up costs for the program may include:

- weigh scales capable of at least 5 lb
- plastic bins to sort produce into
- thin plastic bags for items such as beans or grapes
- promotional material – posters, handouts

Regular expenses for the program may include:

- honorarium for the coordinator

- gas mileage for volunteers who pick up produce
- printing the newsletter
- replacement plastic bags
- more bins and/or another set of scales if the program expands
- volunteer appreciation or honorarium, often a ‘free’ box

The ‘margin’ on the box – the difference between the amount you pay for the produce and the amount the customer pays the program – should cover most of your day-to-day costs. However, unless your program is very large, it is unlikely that 50-75¢ per box will pay the honorarium for your coordinator, and unless she/he can do this work as part of another job, you may have to fundraise.

The Good Food Box can be an attractive project for governments, institutions, and individual donors because it addresses several different areas of concern.

- public health: it increases the amount of fresh fruit and vegetables eaten, particularly by poorer consumers
- reducing poverty: volunteer effort keeps the box affordable and a \$10 box contains about \$20 worth of food
- community development: by purchasing local produce and advertising the sources, the program supports local food production.

It is a good idea to work with other community organizations concerned with food to develop your fundraising strategy, particularly if you are planning to seek government or foundation grants. The GFB volunteers may also have good ideas for local fundraising – and the energy and ability to implement them.

Working for Food Security

When people have no control over their food supply, they are ‘food insecure’. Obviously this refers to people who go hungry, or don’t have enough food. It also refers to individuals who are unable to acquire the kind of food they need to satisfy their physical or cultural needs. When communities are unable to produce their own food, they are also food insecure, since they are dependent on others for one of the basic necessities of life. This is also the case when farmers are dependent on agri-businesses to supply their seeds or fertilizers, and when First Nations are denied access to the lands and waters that supply their traditional foods – or when these foods are too contaminated to eat.

A central goal of the Good Food Box is to increase food security. At the level of the individual, it increases people’s ability to acquire the food they need for health even if they have a very low income. At the level of the community, it increases the capacity of the local region to continue to produce food by purchasing from local food producers at a fair price. It also publicizes the local sources of food and increases public awareness of the need for a sustainable local food system.

For more information about the Good Food Box in British Columbia

contact the BC Food Systems Network, care of the Coordinator, Cathleen Kneen:
S-6, C-27, RR #1, Sorrento, BC V0E 2W0; phone/fax: 250-675-4866; cathleen@ramshorn.bc.ca

Some of the local Good Food Box contacts in B.C.:

Vancouver:

The Good Food Box: gfb@vcn.bc.ca
www.vcn.bc.ca/gfb/index.php

Surrey, Delta, Langley, White Rock:

Surrey Harvest Box: harvestbox@telus.net
Pamela Kheong: pamela.kheong@fraserhealth.ca
Barb Wong: hbp@options.bc.ca

Mission/Abbotsford: catherine.atchison@fraserhealth.ca

Merritt:

Jenn Cody: prenatal@uniserve.com

Kamloops:

Salvation Army Good Food Box: suzwork@shaw.ca
Kamloops Food Policy Council: laura.kalina@interiorhealth.ca

Quesnel: michellelessard@sd28.bc.ca

Prince George:

UNBC: pppirg@unbc.edu
Jovanka Djordjevich: jovanka@netbistro.com
Food First: Joanne.Houghton@northernhealth.ca

Dawson Creek: foodshare@peacecountry.com

Terrace: flo.sheppard@northernhealth.ca

Other northern BC locations:

HEAL (Healthy Eating Active Living in Northern BC): Cathryn Wellner:
cwellner@grassrootsgroup.com

North Okanagan:

Vernon Good Food Box (includes Lumby, Armstrong, Enderby, Cherryville)
Diane Fleming: chefdf@shaw.ca
Donna Antonishak: Donna.Antonishak@interiorhealth.ca

Salmon Arm:

Cathleen Kneen: cathleen@ramshorn.bc.ca

South Okanagan:

Penticton and Keremeos: Kristi.Estergaard@interiorhealth.ca

Nelson: dlutz@netidea.com

Cranbrook: pchisholm_bb@hotmail.com

Victoria: Areli Melendez-Duke: Areli.Melendez-Duke@caphealth.org

Status of Women Action Group: swag@pacificcoast.net

LifeCycles Project: lifecycles@coastnet.com

Ladysmith/Chemainus

Chemainus Harvest House - Allyson Wight: allyjim@islandnet.com

Ladysmith Resource Centre - Linda Hermanson: hermans@islandnet.com

Courtenay:

Lush Valley Food Action Society: lushval@yahoo.ca

Nanaimo:

Nanaimo FoodShare: foodbox@shaw.ca

Good Food Box Principles

Start with the food!

- ◇ High-quality, fresh, nutritious, local food is the basis of the Good Food Box.
- ◇ *High-quality and fresh:* the Good Food Box buys as much as possible directly from local farmers and features local food in season.
- ◇ *Nutritious and local:* the Good Food Box contains fruits and vegetables to promote health, and encourages sustainable farming practices by buying organic when possible.
- ◇ A beautiful box reflects the fact that the Good Food Box is not a charity. We handle food gently, choose contents for colour and variety and arrange carefully for maximum appeal.
- ◇ The box contents reflect the needs of the customers – people on a limited budget trust the project with their money and rely on getting food they can use.
- ◇ The box encourages people to push their limits and develop an appreciation for seasonal foods by including different vegetables and fruits and recipes for them.

Make the project work

- ◇ Get customer feedback. Regular questionnaires and conversations with customers help make sure the program is meeting their needs.
- ◇ Take care of your volunteers. Try to break up the jobs so that more people have responsibility for tasks such as: receiving customer orders, ordering the food, doing the banking, contacting the media, writing the newsletter – and coordinating the volunteers for box day. Make sure the volunteers know how much their work is appreciated.
- ◇ Develop a good relationship with suppliers. Make sure they are paid on time. Encourage farmer and community support by buying from as many different farmers as possible. Remember that the lowest price is not the only goal: the Good Food Box is also trying to increase local agricultural production.
- ◇ Maintain community support. Media stories and public displays can help keep the project in the community's mind. Develop relationships with other food security projects and programs; work together for a food-secure community!

adapted from the Good Food Box Guide by Kathryn Scharf and Mary Lou Morgan

