First Nations & Inuit Community Food Security Initiatives in Atlantic Canada

Funded by the Community-Based Food Security Fund of the Aboriginal Diabetes Initiative, First Nations & Inuit Health Branch, Health Canada, Atlantic Region
A food box from the Fresh 4 Less program offered through the Eel Ground Health & Wellness Centre
Community-Based Food Security Fund
The Community-Based Food Security Fund (“The Fund”) supports the delivery of food security initiatives, including, but not limited to, healthy food box programs, community kitchens and gardens, and healthy food skills building activities in First Nations and Inuit communities across Atlantic Canada. The Fund was established in 2007 by the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB) of Health Canada, Atlantic Region, and is now formally managed through the Aboriginal Diabetes Initiative (ADI). The Food Security Network of Newfoundland and Labrador (FSN) was contracted by ADI, FNIHB, Atlantic Region to develop this booklet showcasing community food security programs offered in First Nations and Inuit communities across Atlantic Canada with support from The Fund.

ADI, FNIHB, Atlantic Region, in collaboration with the Food Security Network of Newfoundland and Labrador (FSN), is pleased to share five unique projects addressing food security issues in the Atlantic region. The following are highlighted in this report:

- Conne River Health and Social Services: Youth Cooking Classes
- Wagmatcook Health Centre: Community Meals
- Eel Ground Health and Wellness Centre: Fresh 4 Less
- Tobique Wellness Centre: Community Learning Garden & Greenhouse
- Paq’tnkek Health Centre: Community Gardening & Preserving Classes

Aboriginal Diabetes Initiative
The Aboriginal Diabetes Initiative (ADI) was established by Health Canada’s First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB) in 1999 to improve health outcomes and reduce health inequalities faced by First Nations and Inuit peoples on-reserve in Canada. The goal of ADI is to reduce the prevalence and incidence of type 2 diabetes among First Nations and Inuit communities across Canada.

Food Security Network of Newfoundland & Labrador
The Food Security Network of Newfoundland & Labrador (FSN) is a provincial, non-profit organization founded in 1998 in response to growing concerns about hunger and poverty in Newfoundland and Labrador. FSN’s mission is to actively promote comprehensive, community based solutions to ensure access to adequate, healthy food for all. Learn more at www.foodsecuritynews.com
The Miawpukek Band of Conne River works with a Dietitian to deliver projects under the umbrella of the Community Nutrition Program through Conne River Health and Social Services. Youth cooking classes and Fun Food Days are two exciting initiatives that are underway in the community through this program. These initiatives aim to improve knowledge and skills to support healthy eating in the community.

Starting in the spring of 2007, cooking classes were offered through the Nutrition Program to students in grades 6-8 in the community. The program has grown and adapted to meet the needs of the community, and since its creation has expanded to include all youth who are interested in attending. Cooking classes have now become a regular and popular program for the Youth Centre, and are helping to address the gap in food skills building among youth in the community.

In 2012, Conne River Health and Social Services, in partnership with the local Youth Centre, piloted Fun Food Days, a cooking and nutrition camp for youth in grades 4-6 in the community. The one day camps include age appropriate, engaging, and interactive activities that teach the basics of nutrition, cooking and meal preparation, and physical activity. With guidance from staff, students prepare a healthy meal to eat for lunch. Youth Centre staff were trained by the nutrition consultant who also provided leadership on the first day of the program.

Examples of student prepared meals include cooked chicken dinner with vegetables and nutritious tacos. Students also prepare a healthy snack in the morning. Learning proper food safety practices is also an important component of the program. Based on positive feedback from students and the request of school personnel, this program was expanded to include grades 7-12 in 2012-2013. This program is now an integral part of nutrition education in the community.

Program organizers say that the community is eating healthier and is more conscious of food issues since the program began. Children who have participated in the Fun Food Days are engaged and interested, and now say they’re excited to try out new vegetables!
Wagmatcook Health Centre: Community Meals
Wagmatcook First Nation, Nova Scotia

Food security was identified by Regional Dietitians as an important issue in Wagmatcook, leading to the establishment of a range of food security programs offered by the Wagmatcook Health Centre. The Centre has developed initiatives focused on building healthy food skills, improving access to healthy foods, and raising awareness of healthy eating. The Centre has three core ongoing food security initiatives: Community Breakfasts, Cooking Classes, and Community Barbeques. Since the establishment of these programs, residents have been introduced to many new healthy foods and are trying some of them at home on their own!

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Wagmatcook Health Centre coordinates healthy breakfasts each month that are open to anyone in the community. The breakfasts are targeted towards the most food insecure individuals, those who cannot purchase food and have limited cooking skills. Staff prepare nutritious foods such as whole wheat pancakes, yogurt, and fruit. At the end of the breakfast, healthy meal bags are distributed to individuals for at-home consumption and include goodies such as oatmeal, fruit, and cheese. The breakfasts are advertised widely at other community events, and anyone is welcome to participate. An average of thirty residents attend the breakfasts regularly. Health Centre staff say the breakfasts happen in a positive atmosphere and are a good experience for everyone. Participants “leave with full bellies and food to go home with!”

Community barbeques are also hosted in partnership with the RCMP. These events have been a big success, attracting up to 120 community residents, despite some cancellations due to weather. Healthy foods are served, including veggie burgers and fruit smoothies. The most successful barbeques incorporated additional activities, such as a bicycle safety component, which helped to draw more people in.
The Eel Ground Health and Wellness Centre offers a diversity of food security and health programming aimed to improve local food security in the community. The Centre offers regular community events, such as Community BBQs and Nutrition Bingo, hosts Cooking Classes in partnership with a local chef and grocery store, and offers Gardening Resources to residents interested in starting home-based vegetable and fruit gardens.

In the summer of 2013, the Eel Ground Health and Wellness Centre, in partnership with Canadian Feed the Children, piloted a new and exciting initiative called Fresh 4 Less. Fresh 4 Less is a food purchasing club that helps to improve affordable access to healthy food in the community. The first year of the project was a great success, with up to 58 community members participating each month!

The program works in collaboration with a local food wholesaler that supplies fresh produce in bulk for half the price of grocery store goods. Participants in the program can get a ‘green box’ full of fruits and vegetables for 15$ once per month. Green boxes are brought back to the Centre and cleaned in advance of the next food pick-up date. Registration forms and payments are accepted by the Centre near the beginning of each month, and food is available for pickup at the administration building near the middle of the month.

The vegetable boxes usually contain potatoes, carrots, apples, oranges, celery, broccoli, onions, green pepper, and bananas. Sometimes strawberries, blueberries, or kiwi are included in the order. Included in the food box is a monthly newsletter and nutritious recipes showcasing vegetables and fruits included in the box. Participants are trying new healthy foods they had never eaten before, and are coming back to the program every month. Centre staff tell of a woman who tried her first sweet potato through the program and loved it!
Showcasing some radishes from the Fresh 4 Less program offered through the Eel Ground Health & Wellness Centre
Planting seeds at the Community Learning Garden offered through the Tobique Wellness Centre.
The Tobique Wellness Centre offers a range of initiatives in order to improve access to healthy food and food skills in the community. The Centre offers: a Grocery Store Transportation program that provides weekly transportation to the closest grocery stores, which are 10 km away; a variety of Healthy Breakfast, Lunch, and Snack Programs for students in elementary, middle, and high schools; and Cooking & Food Preservation Classes, among many other initiatives.

In 2008-2009, The Tobique Wellness Centre established a community garden to improve knowledge of healthy eating, healthy food skills, and access to healthy foods. Initially, the garden was intended to allow community members to claim their own small plots to grow vegetables, but the project evolved into a Community Learning Garden that offers educational gardening activities for school children, including planting and weeding.

In the summer of 2012, the Wellness Centre built a greenhouse to expand the gardening program as a result of its early success. The gardening project activities are now largely delivered through the greenhouse, and a garden path has been created between the Wellness Centre and the elementary school. Teachers and Wellness Centre staff coordinate fun activities in the greenhouse for the school children. The students grow seedlings in the classroom, transfer them to the greenhouse, and eventually help transplant them to the community garden. To maintain the garden in the summer, the Wellness Centre hires a community member to take care of the garden part-time.

The most popular vegetables to grow are tomatoes and cucumbers, but there are also pumpkins, herbs, and much more!

About 20 grade 4/5 students participate in the project each year. The majority of the gardening activities, delivered in collaboration with the school, happen whenever work is needed, based on the season, weather, and stage of growth of the vegetables. However, there are special activities coordinated throughout the year that are planned in advance, including at Halloween when the children paint and decorate pumpkins from the garden. In the past, rock painting has also been a success, with the rocks then being used to decorate the community garden.

The Wellness Centre is excited to see the impact of the gardening program in changing attitudes towards healthy foods in the community. One Wellness Centre staff shared, “I feel people are more aware of what is healthy or not, and people tend to lean more towards healthy, fresh food.”

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Building the greenhouse and garden weeding at the Community Learning Garden in Tobique First Nation, NB.
The food projects at the Paq’tnkek Health Centre were established in order to bring back healthier eating habits in the community, and to overcome the belief that healthy foods aren’t affordable. Organizers wanted to improve the daily diet of lower income families by promoting gardening and preserving.

Starting in 2012, the Paq’tnkek Health Centre promoted community gardening by initiating a project for residents to maintain small gardens at home. Wood-framed garden boxes were built for distribution to families in the community interested in growing their own vegetables. An information session was held to introduce the initiative, and explain techniques for maintaining a garden. Seedlings, peat moss, and fertilizer were provided. In the first year, residents successfully grew tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, potatoes, broccoli, cauliflower, turnips, onions, blueberries and strawberries. Centre staff were excited to see participants plant and tend to their own seedlings.

In addition, a shared community garden was established in an area of land where rows of seedlings were planted. Areas of the garden were prepared and sectioned off for use by individual families who could 'claim' a strip of the garden for themselves.

Local youth were engaged to help with maintenance and watered the garden a couple of times per week. This project has been offered for two consecutive years and interest in the project is growing. The Health Centre is looking into ways to make the maintenance easier. A promising strategy is through P3-Permaculture using what is commonly referred to as the ‘lasagna method’ is being considered for this upcoming year. This technique involves layering a variety of mulch material such as cardboard on the bottom and then another different layer of mulch such as hay and topped with a layer of manure. This method helps to reduce need for both watering and weeding – a gardeners dream!

To supplement the garden program, food preservation classes have been held at the Centre to teach proper bottling, freezing, and storage of vegetables once per week throughout the summer. Participants learned how to make pickles and jams, and how best to use their own vegetable crops in nutritious meals. This project has been offered for two consecutive years and interest in the project is growing, as well as awareness of food security in the community. The garden and food preservation classes are promoted through flyers, Facebook, and the Community Website.