

CITY OF TORONTO DECLARES FOOD INSECURITY EMERGENCY

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Our Open Letter to The Mayor of Toronto

Dear Mayor Olivia Chow,

We commend your leadership in recognizing food insecurity as an emergency in Toronto. This declaration brings long-overdue attention to a crisis that has impacted families, neighborhoods, and entire communities for far too long. At Zawadi Farm, we see the consequences of this crisis every day — not just in statistics but in the lived realities of those struggling to access fresh, nutritious, and culturally relevant food.

While the City's commitment to integrating this declaration into its Poverty Reduction Strategy, Food Charter, and School Food Program is a necessary step, we urge you to prioritize a critical missing piece in this conversation: the role of small-scale, community-driven local farms in food security policy.

The Power of Local Agriculture in Combating Food Insecurity

For decades, Toronto has been overly reliant on external supply chains to feed its people — increasingly fragile chains due to climate disruptions, inflation, and global economic shifts. The COVID-19 pandemic made it clear: our local food networks sustain us when external systems fail. And yet, small-scale farms, urban agriculture initiatives, and local food cooperatives are still undervalued and underfunded in policy discussions.

As an example, Zawadi Farm and the Many Hands Collective, we have demonstrated the power of community-based, local food production:

- Through our CSA program and farmers' markets, we bring fresh, locally grown food directly to residents — keeping the local food dollar in the community instead of outsourcing it to industrial suppliers. Additionally, our CSA program creates a sense of community and shared responsibility around food, fostering relationships between farmers and consumers.
- Our Soil Stewardship Workshops and Grow Veggies Programs empower **people** — especially youth and marginalized communities — to grow their own food, strengthening self-sufficiency and reducing dependence on expensive grocery imports. These programs also provide valuable education on sustainable growing practices, soil health, and biodiversity.
- We collaborate with local food hubs, charity organizations, and food banks to connect our first harvest directly to the homes in need.
- We partner with TDSB and community organizations to integrate agriculture into education, teaching future generations the value of food sovereignty. By connecting students with the land and the origins of their food, we inspire them to become advocates for a more just and sustainable food system.

This is the foundation of proper food security — providing emergency food relief and creating long-term solutions that keep food production, investment, and economic power within Toronto's neighborhoods.

Policy Changes to Strengthen Local Food Resilience

To make meaningful progress in the fight against food insecurity, we urge the City of Toronto to prioritize small-scale, local agriculture in the following ways:

Support Local Growers in City Procurement Policies

- Ensure that Toronto's food programs, including school meal programs, prioritize local farms over industrial suppliers. This will keep food dollars in the city, reduce reliance on imported goods, and support the local economy.
- Simplify bureaucratic processes to allow small farms to sell directly to institutions like schools, hospitals, and community centers. This would reduce red tape and make it easier for institutions to access fresh, local food.
- Develop a system for aggregating and distributing produce from multiple small farms to meet the volume needs of large institutions. This would address the logistical challenges of sourcing from multiple small suppliers.

Expand Land Access for Urban and Peri-Urban Farming

- Implement land-use policies that protect and expand farmland within city limits — rather than prioritizing development that pushes growers further out. This would ensure that valuable agricultural land is preserved for food production.
- Provide incentives for unused city land to be converted into food production zones. This could include tax breaks, grants, or other forms of support for landowners who make their land available for urban farming.
- Create a land trust or other mechanism to acquire and preserve farmland for community-based agriculture. This would provide long-term security for urban farmers and ensure that land remains accessible for food production.

Increase Funding for Community-Based Food Initiatives

- Redirect a portion of food security funding toward grassroots urban farms and collectives instead of just food banks and industrial suppliers. This would support the development of a more resilient and sustainable local food system.
- Expand grants for small-scale growers, cooperatives, and food entrepreneurs working to increase access to fresh, affordable food. This would provide much-needed financial support for those working on the front lines of food insecurity.
- Establish a revolving loan fund to provide low-interest loans for capital investments in urban agriculture projects. This would help urban farmers access the funds they need to start or expand their operations.

Commented [RT1]: What food security funding?

Commented [RT2]: What grants?

Commented [RT3]: Fair Finance Fund

Strengthen Local Food Infrastructure

- Invest in cold storage, processing facilities, and distribution hubs for small farms to ensure local growers can store and distribute food efficiently. This would address the logistical challenges of getting local food from farm to table.
- Support the development of local food hubs that connect urban and rural farmers with community-based retail markets. This would create a more efficient and accessible marketplace for local food.
- Invest in food processing and value-added production facilities to help local farmers extend their products' shelf life and profitability. This would create new economic opportunities for local farmers and food businesses.

Commented [RT4]: Fund the community to do this

Commented [RT5]: Fund community to do this. Ask Eric Wood.

A Legacy of Food Resilience for Toronto

Mayor Chow, this moment presents an opportunity to create a legacy that will be remembered for generations — one where Toronto sets an example for cities across Canada and beyond. By investing in and leveraging local food systems, we can build the most resilient, sustainable, and equitable food network possible — one that ensures no one in our city goes hungry, strengthening our economy, supporting small farmers, and reducing our reliance on fragile external supply chains.

We urge you to take bold action now. Let Toronto be the city that proves food security is not just about access — it's about empowerment, resilience, and keeping resources where they matter most: within our communities.

Let's make Toronto a model for what is possible when cities prioritize local farms, community-driven solutions, and a thriving food economy that serves everyone. We look forward to working together to turn this vision into reality.

