



# GOOD FOOD PACKS

## CASE STUDY OF A COMMUNITY COVID-19 RESPONSE

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- 1 Executive Summary**
- 2 New Dawn Meals on Wheels / A Better Bite Community Kitchen**
- 3 Context: CBRM**
- 4 Program Overview**
- 6 Program Structure: Community Partnership**
- 8 Reflections on Program Structure**
- 10 The Critical Role of Volunteers**
- 11 Revenues and Expenses**
- 12 The Importance of Supportive Funding Partners**
- 13 Funding Challenges**
- 14 Recipient Feedback**
- 15 Partner Feedback**
- 16 Program Characteristics**
- 18 Lessons Learned**
- 20 Conclusion**
- 21 APPENDIX 1: Food-Based Pandemic Responses in the CBRM**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**Over eleven weeks in the Spring of 2020, A Better Bite Community Kitchen (a division of New Dawn Enterprises) prepared and delivered 6,082 Good Food Packs free to seniors and families in need in the Cape Breton Regional Municipality (CBRM) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.**

In this time, A Better Bite hired a Good Food Packs Coordinator; raised private and public funds; worked with community organizations who serve vulnerable populations to identify individuals in need; secured food from suppliers; engaged volunteers to assemble the weekly Good Food Packs; and delivered food to families and seniors experiencing new or heightened food insecurity.

This report details the effort. It considers some of the characteristics — a human-centered approach, an impulse to act and to serve, an openness to experiment, built-in scalability, and nutrition-consciousness — that made such a substantial response possible in such a short period of time. It also reflects on the lessons learned: community-based responses work best; considerable community and organizational food capacity exists in the CBRM; and food insecurity remains an ongoing challenge. It begins by outlining the features of the Good Food Packs program.

# NEW DAWN MEALS ON WHEELS / A BETTER BITE COMMUNITY KITCHEN

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Since 1976, New Dawn has operated in the CBRM as a not-for-profit social enterprise. New Dawn is governed by a volunteer board of directors and employs more than 125 people across its ten divisions: A Better Bite Community Kitchen (including New Dawn Meals on Wheels), New Dawn Rental Properties, New Dawn Home Care, New Dawn Home Living, New Dawn Guest Home, Cape Breton Island Centre for Immigration (CBICI), New Dawn Centre for Social Innovation, The Convent Centre for the Arts, and New Dawn Community Engagement & Education.

Sydney's Meals on Wheels program began in 1972 when a group of church volunteers identified a need for the service. In 1983, New Dawn took over administration of the program and has operated it ever since. Over the last 37 years, the program has grown considerably while remaining committed to providing seniors and others in need with access to fresh, nutritious food.

For more than 30 years, New Dawn Meals on Wheels (NDMOW) relied on institutional and private-sector meal providers. NDMOW purchased prepared meals from these providers and delivered the meals to clients. In 2017, NDMOW opened A Better Bite Community Kitchen in the New Dawn Centre for Social Innovation (in the former Holy Angels High School) and for the first time had the ability to (1) plan and prepare its own meals; (2) offer regular community food programming; and (3) generate revenues through catering services.

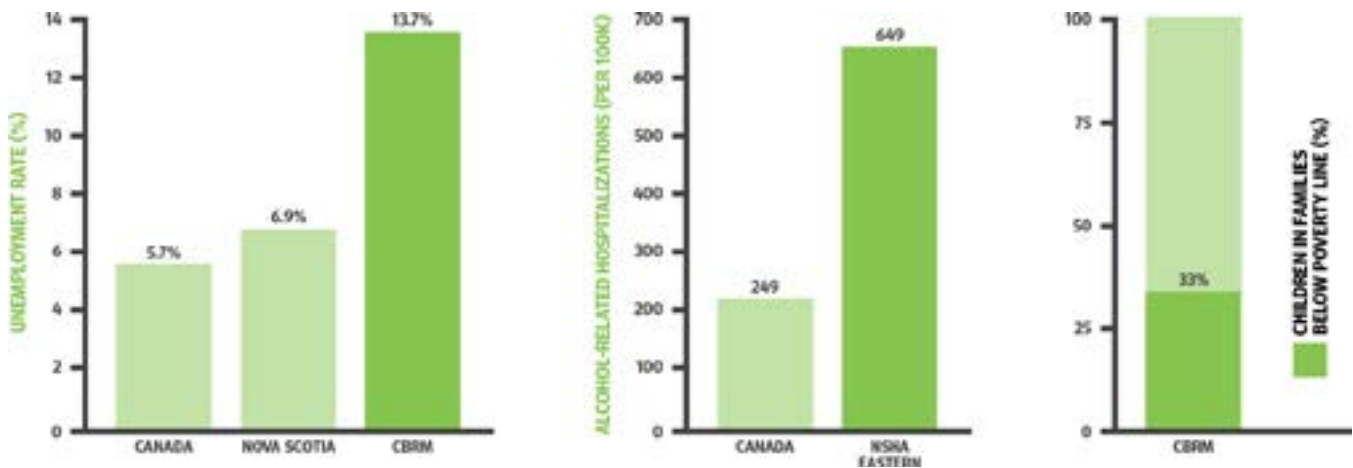
In addition to preparing meals for NDMOW, A Better Bite has continued to grow as a provider of — and an advocate for increased access to — healthy, affordable food. In 2019, in partnership with eight other community organizations, A Better Bite piloted the Good Food Bus to bring fresh, affordable fruits and vegetables to communities across the CBRM. In 2020, A Better Bite opened a social enterprise cafe in the new Convent Centre for the Arts (in the former Holy Angels Convent). Proceeds from the cafe support New Dawn Meals on Wheels and A Better Bite programming.

***Today, A Better Bite Community Kitchen has 77 volunteers and employs nine full-time staff (plus one part-time staff); delivers more than 20,000 meals annually to New Dawn Meals on Wheels clients; and offers community food programming to more than 800 participants a year.***

# CONTEXT: CBRM

**The Cape Breton Regional Municipality — an amalgamation of several smaller towns — has faced a series of post-industrial social and economic challenges since the collapse of coal and steel.**

In 2017, the unemployment rate in the CBRM was 13.7% — far higher than the provincial (6.9%) and national (5.7%) rates. In 2019, alcohol-related hospitalizations in the Nova Scotia Health Authority Eastern Zone (which includes Cape Breton Island) were recorded at 649 per 100,000 — more than twice the national average. Today in the CBRM, *one in three children live with families who fall below the poverty line.*



Not surprisingly, food insecurity is a deep and widespread challenge for the community — and one that both New Dawn Meals on Wheels (a long-standing New Dawn initiative) and A Better Bite Community Kitchen (a more recent addition to the New Dawn family) work to alleviate. And they are not alone.

In recent years, other organizations — including the Cape Breton Food Hub, Island Food Network, and Cape Breton Farmers Market — have been created, or have renewed their work, to address food insecurity. There is a growing awareness on the Island of the importance of local food capacity; of the factors that contribute to food insecurity; and of the ways in which this particular deprivation harms certain (racialized) communities more than others. And as COVID-19 disrupted traditional supply chains and residents confronted more severe food insecurity — or confronted food insecurity for the first time — the understanding of these issues deepened even further.

# PROGRAM OVERVIEW

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## DETERMINING NEW DAWN'S ROLE DURING THE PANDEMIC

In late March 2020, New Dawn began to appreciate some of the ways in which COVID-19 was going to impact the local community. Schools wouldn't reopen after March break. Nova Scotia Public Health urged people to stay home unless absolutely necessary. Businesses closed and people lost their jobs. Seniors and those with compromised immunity were especially vulnerable to the virus.

Since its founding in 1976, New Dawn has been guided by its vision of a more vibrant and self-reliant Cape Breton Island. And as Canada's first and oldest Community Development Corporation, New Dawn has built up considerable physical resources (facilities) and human resources (staff and management). In April, New Dawn staff and management met to consider how its capacity could be used to lessen COVID-19's impact on some of the CBRM's most vulnerable residents.

At the same time, a long-standing friend of the organization made a \$5,000 donation to support New Dawn's food-related work during the pandemic. It was agreed A Better Bite Kitchen would use the donation to assemble free grocery packs for families and seniors in need. No clear plan existed for how such a program would continue after the initial \$5,000 was exhausted, but it was enough to get started — and beyond financial considerations, there did exist:

- ***Shared desire to respond — as best as New Dawn could — as soon as possible.***
- ***Commitment from New Dawn to cover costs until additional funding could be secured if there was a gap.***
- ***Shared confidence that, if the program could get underway, other funding opportunities would emerge in the coming weeks and months.***

Coincidentally, A Better Bite had moved in February from its 400-square-foot kitchen in the New Dawn Centre to its larger and newly outfitted 1000-square-foot kitchen in the Convent Centre for the Arts. Additionally, with The Convent, A Better Bite had access to several large event spaces (unused because of COVID-19) to expand the Good Food Packs program as needed. By the time it ended, Good Food Packs assembly was occupying 10,000 square feet of space to receive and sort weekly food shipments and repackage those shipments into individual Good Food Packs.

## USING AVAILABLE RESOURCES & BUILDING PROGRAM FRAMEWORK

At the same time as this new food response was initiated, New Dawn Meals on Wheels was scaling up production and client intake in a related effort to keep as many seniors as possible safe, at home, and well-nourished through the pandemic.

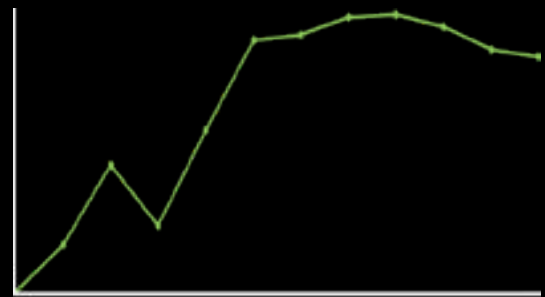
This meant that the Good Food Packs program would require its own staff position. Though new, it resembled another Better Bite program — the Good Food Bus — and so the seasonal coordinator of the Good Food Bus was contracted to coordinate the Good Food Packs program.

The Good Food Packs program additionally benefitted from access to the Good Food Bus itself which was used to pick up large orders from grocery stores around CBRM.

*On April 17, eleven days after the initial planning meeting, 131 Good Food Packs were delivered.*

Good Food Packs were delivered first as a pilot to New Dawn residential tenants, New Dawn Meals on Wheels clients, and New Dawn Homecare clients, allowing A Better Bite to develop the program framework and to test the process and outcomes. Demand for the program grew over the following 10 weeks.

## BREAKDOWN



WEEK	DATE	PACKS
1	APRIL 17	131
2	APRIL 24	350
3	MAY 1	183
4	MAY 8	446
5	MAY 15	694
6	MAY 22	709
7	MAY 29	757
8	JUNE 5	765
9	JUNE 12	731
10	JUNE 19	668
11	JUNE 26	648

The program concluded on June 26 with COVID-19 case numbers in Nova Scotia continuing to decline and the local economy beginning to reopen — making it possible for some community members to resume employment and for others to once again safely leave their homes to purchase food.

# PROGRAM STRUCTURE: COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

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**A Better Bite made the decision early on that their capacity would be best deployed by focussing on assembly and coordination rather than delivery. This meant engaging other community organizations to assume responsibility for the intake of clients and weekly deliveries of Good Food Packs to those clients.**

Given their history in the community and the breadth of their work, both New Dawn and New Dawn Meals on Wheels have forged strong relationships with community organizations throughout the CBRM who serve vulnerable populations. *The Good Food Packs program was built on these relationships.*

Known organizations were directly invited to participate and promotional materials were shared online to reach those not already connected to New Dawn or New Dawn Meals on Wheels. Once registered, community organizations would compile lists of clients and community members in need and submit a weekly order to the Good Food Packs Coordinator (monday). The Coordinator would then draft the week's grocery order; visit local grocery stores and work with food distribution and delivery companies to complete the order; secure volunteers for sorting and packing; and oversee sorting and packing days (tuesday–thursday); organize bags for pick-up and coordinate pick-up day (friday) — all while ensuring that sorting, packing, and pick-up were done in compliance with public health protocols for physical distancing and hand-washing.

Organizations would pick up the Good Food Packs they had ordered and get them to their clients and community members either through their own coordinated central pick-up location (i.e. at their building) or through home delivery.



*Good Food Packs were provided at no cost to community organizations thanks to the United Way of Cape Breton.*

Midway into the program, 211 was engaged via the United Way Cape Breton (the Good Food Packs' primary funder). Individuals wishing to register for the program could contact 211 to be connected with a participating community organization and added to their weekly order and delivery list.



## UNEXPECTED BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

- Offered community organizations serving vulnerable populations an efficient way to add food provision to their offerings without having to create and administer their own food hamper program.
- Rendered the Good Food Packs an initiative of not just one organization but of the larger community.
- Provided an opportunity for A Better Bite to deepen existing relationships and forge new ones.<sup>1</sup>
- Spurred at least one community partner to continue their own work in the area of food security.<sup>2</sup>

## PARTICIPATING COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

New Dawn Meals on Wheels  
New Dawn Homecare  
New Dawn Real Estate  
Eskasoni First Nations  
Community Cares Youth Outreach  
Cape Breton Centre for Education  
Glace Bay Seniors and Pensioners  
New Waterford Rotary  
Saint Michael's Polish Benefit Society  
Adult Learning Association of Cape Breton  
Pathways to Employment  
Reserve Mines Seniors & Pensioners Club  
Cape Breton Community Housing Association  
Ann Terry Society

## 1: The Good Food Bus in New Waterford

Like the Good Food Packs program, the Good Food Bus relies on community partners to host the bus in different areas of the CBRM during the summer and fall.

In 2019, the Good Food Bus worked to identify a community partner in New Waterford but was unsuccessful. New Waterford has been hit particularly hard by the deindustrialization of the Island and ensuing poverty, addictions, and outmigration. Many longstanding community organizations in the area have been unable to sustain operations.

Through the Good Food Packs program, A Better Bite identified a partner (New Waterford Rotary) willing to host the Good Food Bus in the upcoming season — making this mobile service available to New Waterford residents for the first time.

## 2: Meals on Wheels in Reserve Mines

The Reserve Mines Seniors and Pensioners Club — who stepped up to accept clients and make deliveries in Reserve Mines — has, since the conclusion of the Good Food Packs program, made the decision to offer a Meals on Wheels service in that community and is currently coordinating and delivering 140 meals/week. This was a service not previously available in this community.

# REFLECTIONS ON PROGRAM STRUCTURE

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## The Community Partnership model was at the same time not without its risks and limitations:

- It depended on community organizations coming forward, having the staff or volunteer capacity to serve in this way, and being able to continue to operate throughout the pandemic.
- The capacity of some organizations was limited — or diminished by COVID — which limited the number of individuals they could serve.
- One community organization exited the program midway because the growing demand for the Good Food Packs was too much for them to take on and there were no other organizations in their area with which to share the intake and delivery responsibilities.
- As designed, it was not possible for individuals to access the Good Food Packs program without being attached to a community organization. Even with funding support, volunteers, paid staff, and the resources of New Dawn, allowing an unlimited number of individuals to register for the program directly through New Dawn would be challenging to manage.
- Were the program to be offered again, a physical space would be created at The Convent Centre for Arts & Culture to allow a limited number of individuals to pick up Good Food Packs on site.
- Efforts would also be made to locate food desserts in the CBRM and to identify community organizations that could assume responsibility for intake and delivery in those areas. The communities that were served by the Good Food Packs were those where a community organization came forward to take on these tasks and serve as a conduit.



# THE CRITICAL ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS

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Assembling and delivering **6,082 Good Food Packs** to families and seniors would not have been possible without the time and effort contributed by the **78 volunteers** involved in sorting food shipments and packing food packs. To make the program run smoothly required an average of **135 volunteer hours each week**. Over the program's eleven weeks, this amounted to a **total of 1,485 volunteer hours**.

Initially, volunteers were exclusively New Dawn employees who had received COVID-19 training. This eliminated the risk of bringing new volunteers into the facility and into close proximity to New Dawn Meals on Wheels staff (and Convent staff and tenants) and the Good Food Packs themselves.

New Dawn Meals on Wheels has long relied on volunteer drivers to deliver meals to senior clients and, in more recent years, to assist with meal preparation in the Better Bite Community Kitchen. These years of experience not only helped the Good Food Packs program to engage volunteers, but also to know when it was time to *add staff* to ensure that volunteer shifts could be filled as needed. Midway through the program (weeks 5–11), A Better Bite hired a part-time staff person to oversee volunteers. With this additional paid position — and as New Dawn became more comfortable working within COVID-19 protocols — it became possible to invite in new volunteers from the community. Engaging volunteers kept program costs lower than they would otherwise have been, while offering a safe and rewarding volunteer experience to community members looking to contribute to COVID-19 relief efforts.

In addition to new individual volunteers, the program benefitted from existing New Dawn Meals on Wheels volunteers, and organizations like the **Clean Foundation, Cape Breton-Victoria Regional Centre for Education, and Keller Williams** — all of which deployed groups of volunteers to assist with the effort. Several participating community organizations likewise relied heavily on their own volunteers to pick-up and distribute Good Food Packs to clients and community members.

*Here it should be noted that while so much of the work of community organizations in Cape Breton relies on volunteers, the Island's demographic circumstances make this challenging. Often organizations find themselves relying on fewer and fewer volunteers (after years of outmigration) and that their core volunteer base is aging. COVID-19's more serious effects on the health of seniors highlighted the vulnerabilities of Cape Breton's smaller, older volunteer population.*

# REVENUE & EXPENSES

The total cost to coordinate, assemble, and distribute 6,082 Good Food Packs over eleven weeks was \$186,880 or approximately \$31/Good Food Pack (pack size/cost differed depending on whether the recipient was a senior or a family).

Given the speed with which it was deployed and the pace at which it grew, the Good Food Packs program benefitted from New Dawn's accounting and financial management infrastructure as a large sum of money quickly flowed into and then back out of A Better Bite. New Dawn's Vice President of Operations, Manager of Accounting, and Accounting Department were instrumental in receiving, receipting, tracking, and expending funds in a manner prescribed by the various funders and donors.

## FUNDING

Private Donations	\$6,800
United Way of Cape Breton <sup>1</sup>	\$124,755
Direct payments <sup>2</sup>	\$4,195
CBVRCE <sup>3</sup> School Food Program	\$42,210
Community Food Centres Canada	\$8,920

## COSTS

Food, cleaning, PPE <sup>4</sup>	\$153,000
Wages	\$16,000
New Dawn overhead <sup>5</sup>	\$15,000
Gas & mileage	\$1,000
Post-program space cleaning	\$700
Volunteer recognition	\$500



## TYPICAL PACK INCLUDED:

- Oranges
- Apples
- Carrots
- Potatoes
- Onions
- Peanut Butter
- Soup
- Bread
- Oatmeal
- Beans or Canned Meat
- Canned Milk
- Pasta and Pasta Sauce
- Granola Bars
- Fruit Cups or Apple Sauce
- Pudding
- Apple or Orange Juice
- Tea
- Instant Coffee
- Cereal (some weeks)
- One week, books donated by the Cape Breton Regional Library were included in family packs.
- One week, donated socks were included in seniors packs.

<sup>1</sup> Atlantic Compassion Fund. <sup>2</sup> From community organizations with sources of funding to offset costs. <sup>3</sup> Cape Breton-Victoria Regional Centre for Education. <sup>4</sup> Personal Protective Equipment. <sup>5</sup> Accounting and marketing services, management, rental space.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTIVE FUNDING PARTNERS

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The United Way of Cape Breton (UWCB) was the most significant funder of the Good Food Packs program. UWCB recognized early on the capacity of A Better Bite to offer an efficient emergency food response and was quick to offer support, enabling A Better Bite to scale up soon after launch. Through UWCB's Atlantic Compassion Fund — as well as the funds they received from the Government of Canada's New Horizons for Seniors program to respond to the immediate and urgent needs of seniors — the Good Food Packs program was offered free of charge to community members.

UWCB has been a funder of the New Dawn Meals on Wheels program for more than two decades and the trust established over this time contributed to its willingness to support what was, in the first few weeks, a new and experimental program for A Better Bite.

As demand for Good Food Packs grew throughout the community, UWCB provided funding to partner community organizations enabling those organizations to provide Good Food Packs to their clients and community members at no cost to recipients nor the community organizations themselves.

## FUNDING STRUCTURE

The way in which the funding for the program was structured enabled A Better Bite and New Dawn to cover all costs associated with program design and delivery. For A Better Bite and New Dawn, this is rare. Often, there are uncovered costs at the end of a program or funding limitations that don't allow for an accounting of all the organization's expenses (direct staff, administrative support, program space, program supplies). That the funding of the Good Food Packs covered all of the organization's costs left staff and management feeling seen and valued for the work that they do.

*Without the United Way of Cape Breton, the scale and sustainability of the Good Food Packs program would have been significantly compromised.*

# FUNDING CHALLENGES

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**As was undoubtedly the case for so many others responding to the crises, there were bumps along the way.**

- Over the course of the “first wave”, government relief programs would be *announced* before they were *designed*, causing funding guidelines to frequently shift in the first month and leading A Better Bite to have to adjust the way in which the program was delivered.
- UWCB, a funder of Nova Scotia’s 211 service, worked to connect the Good Food Packs program with 211. Unfortunately, because Feed Nova Scotia’s Food Box program also engaged 211 in their intake process, and because the Good Food Packs program relied on partner organizations, it took some time to perfect the flow of information between UWCB, 211, A Better Bite, and partners organizations.
- UWCB pre-screened partner organizations to ensure they met funding eligibility. Because of UWCB’s rapidly increasing workload as they managed multiple new Covid-related funding streams, this often meant delays as organizations awaited approval. Were the program to be offered again, A Better Bite would co-develop a screening tool with UWCB that would meet UWCB needs and allow A Better Bite to screen organizations in-house.
- UWCB’s finite funds (from programs flowed through UWCB) meant a cap of 50 Good Food Packs per week per organization (a few exceptions were made for those serving much larger populations). Were it not for this cap, almost all partner organizations could have served more clients.

Enabling A Better Bite to screen and approve community organizations, and to set weekly caps relative to the size of each community being served, would improve program outcomes. Despite these issues, working on this program with UWCB was a positive experience for A Better Bite, one that deepened the relationship between the two organizations.

For New Dawn, funding programs that provide community organizations — which are closest to the need in their communities — with autonomy and decision-making authority, work best. Because of the desire for rapid responses, many funding programs introduced during the first wave allowed for more organizational autonomy and decision-making than is typically the case. This is encouraging, and a direction that should be maintained and furthered under both emergency and non-emergency circumstances.

# RECIPIENT FEEDBACK

At the end of week 3, recipients were surveyed by phone to ask about their experience with the program.

*“I found I didn’t feel alone. I felt somebody had my back.”*

*“It gave me a lift to have the support and know that someone cares.”*

*“I don’t know what I would have done without it.”*



93%

***“The program reduced my/our need to leave the home to shop for food.”*** This was a key outcome for the senior population being served. A Better Bite sought, through this program and New Dawn Meals on Wheels, to keep as many seniors safe, at home, and nourished throughout the pandemic given their particular vulnerability to the virus.



51%

***“I/we couldn’t access the types of foods in the Good Food Packs without the program.”***



66%

***“I am/we are happy with the products received in the Good Food Packs.”*** Suggestions offered for additional items included: meat, dairy, diabetic-friendly items, and personal care items. Some recipients wanted more fruits and vegetables; others wanted less.



30%

***“Even with the Good Food Packs program, I am/we are still having a hard time affording food.”***



# PARTNER FEEDBACK

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**At the end of the program, partner organizations were surveyed about the program and food insecurity in their community.\***

*“It is good food that the clients are getting like fruits and veggies. They don’t often get items like this so everyone has been so grateful.”*

*“It allowed us to stay safe and keep volunteers safe because we didn’t have to go into stores to get food for clients.”*

*“It provided people with nutrition and a feeling of being loved and supported.”*

*“Without a doubt their lives were impacted in a major way. The packs had nutritional value that is hard to come by.”*

*“One of the best parts of the program was the referral process. At this time, the no-questions-asked method was what was needed. It was free of stigma.”*

*“Mix up the food more so there is a more diverse array of food.”*

## FOOD INSECURITY WITHIN THE CBRM

For all but one respondent, food insecurity was a major concern prior to COVID-19. All but one respondent saw food insecurity as a widespread issue (with one seeing it as affecting only certain populations). All respondents saw food insecurity as worsening in their communities. All but one respondent could have added additional recipients to their list if it weren’t for the cap on the number of bags they were allowed to order each week.

*“I hope this pandemic, and some of the new systems we have developed, leaves us with a lasting legacy of a concerted, coordinated community approach.”*

*“Folks receiving income assistance are left with \$25/week for food. That is not including money for hygiene products or cleaning products. After bills are paid that is all that is left. Folks who are not ESIA [Employment Support and Income Assistance] recipients (e.g. CPP recipients or those that do not qualify) are in terribly similar situations.”*

\* All eleven non-New Dawn organizations were invited to participate in a phone interview and eight were able to do so.

# PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

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With ten days planning, A Better Bite designed a program to deliver 6,082 Good Food Packs to seniors and families during a pandemic. This was the first emergency food response program offered through A Better Bite and the first time its operations were adapted to a series of provincially-mandated health and safety protocols. There were **5 CHARACTERISTICS** that allowed such a large effort to be undertaken so quickly:

## 1) A HUMAN-CENTERED APPROACH

A Better Bite, as evidenced through its New Dawn Meals on Wheels program and its community food programming, naturally and consistently sees the human being at the centre of its work. Staff and management of A Better Bite are passionate, committed, and bold in the provision of food to people in need *because they love and respect those they are serving.*

The Good Food Packs program was infused with this human-centeredness and a desire to feed people who were hungry. A Better Bite set out to do so in a way that was not burdensome to, or further stigmatizing of, those in need.

There was a confidence that the program could — or at least would try to — accommodate the need no matter how great, and so did not control the number of community organizations wanting to participate in the program.

Likewise, the program was not designed to catch or deter potential program abusers. It assumed abuse would be rare — and that it is better to design the program around human beings in need rather than around the few who might bend the rules.

## 2) AN IMPULSE TO ACT — AND TO SERVE

The Good Food Packs program arose from an impulse to act — to use A Better Bite’s expertise and capacity to serve the community in a time of crisis. This meant that while most people were sheltering at home, A Better Bite staff were working more than prior to the outbreak, spending more time in proximity to other staff and volunteers, and making more frequent trips to stores and suppliers to keep the program running smoothly. In acting upon their impulse to serve, and in showing up every day for the next eleven weeks, A Better Bite staff and management exemplified empathy, dedication, and leadership.

## 3) OPENNESS TO EXPERIMENT

New Dawn and A Better Bite have considerable experience launching new programs — in particular, programs that will be refined *in situ* as feedback is gathered, insights are gleaned, and challenges are encountered. A Better Bite initiated the Good Food Packs program quickly, without waiting to perfect the program design, knowing that it could be adjusted in real-time. This openness to experimentation was key in the program’s rapid deployment: first delivery eleven days after the initial planning meeting.

## 4) BUILT-IN SCALABILITY

In focusing on *production* — and engaging community partners in *client intake* and *pack delivery* — A Better Bite created a highly scalable emergency community food response. Drawing on decades of experience with New Dawn Meals on Wheels, A Better Bite understood the human and financial resources required to (1) attend to one-on-one client intake and (2) recruit, train, and manage delivery volunteers.

If A Better Bite had taken on *production and distribution*, the program’s efficacy would have been considerably diminished. With additional resources (funding for purchasing additional food, more physical space for sorting and packing, new community partners, drawing on third-party private delivery services if needed, and a more dependable bus) the program could have been extended outside the CBRM to communities around the Island.

## 5) HEALTH/NUTRITION CONSCIOUSNESS

Finally, the Good Food Packs program sought to provide families and seniors with a selection of food that was both healthy and shelf-stable. The packs were composed of foods and brands that a typical family would purchase as part of their weekly grocery shopping — and had a high perceived value by recipients and community organizations.

Although the program had access to a lot of physical space, it did not have access to a lot of refrigerated space, which precluded offering dairy, eggs, meat, and some fruits and vegetables because of the inability to store and sort them while refrigerated. Despite this, consistent efforts were made to identify and include fresh fruits and vegetables that did not require constant refrigeration.

# LESSONS LEARNED

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**In addition to the learnings throughout this case study, the program deepened three important understandings about the community:**

## 1) COMMUNITY-BASED RESPONSES

New Dawn's history is a history of finding, generating, and fighting for resources to create community-based solutions to community challenges. This history is informed by the understanding that the community understands both its challenges and its assets most intimately and is best positioned to design people-centered solutions that reflect textures and nuances of the community not as well understood from a distance.

A Better Bite's closeness to and relationship with its community meant that it had access to strong networks of organizations serving vulnerable community members; that it knew where to quickly draw committed volunteers from; that it could adapt the program in response to real-time feedback from recipients and organizations; and that the relationships forged through the experience would continue to serve the community in new and unexpected ways into the future.

## 2) COMMUNITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

COVID-19 has highlighted, perhaps for the first time, the food-related capacity in the CBRM. The Good Food Packs program was not the only community-based food response to the pandemic (see Appendix 1). And concurrent to the Good Food Packs program, New Dawn Meals on Wheels doubled the number of prepared meals it delivers to seniors each month, from 1,000 to 2,000. In future crises, while the municipality may lack capacity in some areas, the ability exists in the community to mount a considerable local emergency food response.

At the same time, it is difficult to imagine delivering a program of this size at this pace without New Dawn's organizational capacity. Throughout the eleven weeks, A Better Bite was able to draw on: New Dawn's VP Operations; Accounting Department for receiving and tracking program funds; Marketing and Communications Department to promote the program through social and traditional media, drawing in new community organizations; The Convent Arts & Culture Centre for the physical space; New Dawn/New Dawn Meals on Wheels' relationships with community organizations and UWCB; staff as sorting and packing volunteers, exclusively at first, and in conjunction with community volunteers in later weeks.

### 3) FOOD INSECURITY IN CBRM IS WIDESPREAD, PRE-DATES COVID-19, WAS EXACERBATED BY COVID-19, AND IS NOT GOING AWAY ANYTIME SOON

Food insecurity is growing in the CBRM and is linked to many of other socio-economic consequences of the industrial decline and the slow transition to a more modern, diverse, productive economy: unemployment, addictions, and child poverty. For many in the CBRM, the recovery from the financial outfall of COVID-19 won't be quick and the food insecurity which began as acute may, in time, become chronic.

Community organizations which participated in the end-of-program interview characterized food insecurity in their communities as growing, widespread, and a major concern.

For A Better Bite, New Dawn, UWCB, and the community organizations involved in the Good Food Packs effort, new understandings of the depth and breadth of food insecurity will inform many areas of their work, not just emergency food responses, in the future.

In the near term, UWCB is working with A Better Bite to increase the number of communities its Good Food Bus can reach this summer and fall,

## OPPORTUNITIES

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**In reflecting on the experience, the Good Food Packs Program Coordinator identified opportunities for improvements should a similar program be needed again:**

- 1) Changing the Good Food Packs contents more from week to week for repeat recipients.
- 2) Including recipes that suggest how to prepare and use the weekly items.
- 3) Moving toward a meal-kit approach (made popular by companies like Hello Fresh) that supplies ingredients and recipes for meals like vegetarian pizza, tacos, and lasagna.
- 4) Planning and purchasing several weeks' worth of food should suppliers be able to fill larger orders.
- 5) Engaging more local grocery stores at the outset, and leveraging the program's buying power (\$150,000 in food purchases in eleven weeks) when negotiating pricing.

# CONCLUSION

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**This case study has looked at the way in which the Good Food Packs program was designed; its essential features; feedback from recipients and participating community organizations; the characteristics that lead to program success; and the lessons learned along the way.**

The Better Bite team has remained committed to learning and adapting throughout the Good Food Packs experience, and to debriefing the program's strengths and weakness at its conclusion — and so is more prepared than ever to offer a situation-specific emergency food response in the future.

The Good Food Packs program shows us the ability of a long-standing community organization to, after 45 years of work in the community, devise a novel response to an unprecedented health and financial crisis — and in so doing, to continue its tradition of bold community-based solutions to community challenges.

# FOOD-BASED RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC IN CBRM

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**The Good Food Packs program was far from the only food-based response to the pandemic in the CBRM. Some of the parallel COVID-19-related food initiatives in the CBRM included:**

- A program of the **Nova Scotia provincial government** to deliver food to families who previously would have relied on school lunch programs. Meals were ordered by families, prepared by local restaurants, and delivered to homes by a local delivery company. New Dawn played a small role in this food response by coordinating and making payment to participating restaurants on behalf of the Province.
- **Undercurrent Youth Centre** in Sydney and Glace Bay coordinated and delivered 1,000 lunch bags for students in need.
- **Sydney Salvation Army** in partnership with McCain Foods made 50,000 lbs of potatoes available to people experiencing COVID-19-related food insecurity.
- Organizations like **Every Woman’s Centre** and **Whitney Pier Boys and Girls Club** in Sydney added the provision of groceries to their suite of services (or enhanced existing services), and many food banks were able to continue to serve the community throughout the first wave.
- On May 25, **Feed Nova Scotia** launched a “Food Box” program to get food to individuals in need. Originally, applicants were required to meet the program’s 4F criteria: no food, no funds, no friends, no family. Uptake in the CBRM was slow, and on June 16, two of the four Fs were eliminated. Applicants are now only required to have no food and no funds. New Dawn has played a small role in this program through the provision of space at the New Dawn Centre for receiving, storing, and sorting the food boxes.



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