

Food Brings Community

Richmond Community Food Access Report

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Written by Karen Giesbrecht, RD, MA. Contact churchrelations@ugm.ca for clarification or suggestions.
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Introduction

COVID-19 has turned our world upside down, exposing new vulnerabilities and putting some at risk of food insecurity who were not previously in need of food or financial aid. Prior to the pandemic, approximately [one in ten households in British Columbia were experiencing](#)



[inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints.](#) Food insecurity is difficult to measure, and different questions have been posed to assess individual and regional vulnerability. The 2013 [My Health My Community Report](#) indicated 6.3% of Richmond residents are food insecure.

Now those numbers are increasing rapidly here and around the world, as the virus impacts the economy everywhere, not least the food system itself. June 2020 estimates are that 17% of Richmond residents are food insecure since the COVID-19 pandemic began¹. The future course of the pandemic is uncertain, but every estimate shows food insecurity getting worse before it gets better, potentially [doubling in Canada by the end of 2020](#). Yet more than this, COVID-19 has also made all of us painfully aware of the hunger for connection and safety that we all experience. Community food programs address vital needs deeper than nutrition.

This report assesses the state of food access for vulnerable individuals in Richmond, within the ancestral, traditional, and unceded homelands of the s̓cəwəθənaʔl̓ təməxʷ (Tsawassen), S'ólh Téméxw (Stó:lō), Kwantlen, Stz'uminus and šxʷməθkʷəy̓əməʔl̓ təməxʷ (Musqueam) Peoples ([Map of the West Coast Territories](#)). We offer it with gratitude and humility as we continue to learn about the rich, yet often painful and inequitable history of this region.



Included is a summary of key informant interviews with staff and volunteers from church communities that have been providing community food programs for vulnerable individuals, many for more than a decade. This report is not an exhaustive list of food programs in Richmond, but instead aims to capture the overall need for *and* availability of food supports.

Recommendations are made with a particular focus on community meals and emergency programs that started or shifted in light of COVID-19. This report highlights strengths, key stakeholders, and gaps in service; and then charts ways to build on the good work being done. Statistics are placed within the bigger story – connecting back to the original inhabitants of this region – of when *the community brings food, the food brings community*.

¹ BC COVID-19 SPEAK, 2020. Prepared by: BC COVID 19 SPEAK Analysis Group, June 2020.

We cannot predict how long we will live in this unusual season or what the ripple effects will be on vulnerable communities in the coming months and years. We can, though, take this time to strengthen the existing partnerships so evident in Richmond.

The extreme challenge of COVID-19 also gives us unprecedented opportunity for collaborating to achieve the vision of Richmond’s [2018 - 2023 Wellness Strategy](#) for an “*active, caring, connected, healthy and thriving*” city. Done well and at scale, our community food programs can go a long way in enculturating its guiding principles of being inclusive, equitable, respectful, and sustainable financially, socially, and environmentally - all while celebrating the diversity that defines the city.

City of Richmond
Community
Wellness Strategy
2018-2023

A Partnership Project: City of
Richmond, Vancouver Coastal
Health – Richmond, Richmond
School District No. 38



Specifically, this report will help achieve several key actions set out in [Richmond’s 2018-2023 Wellness Strategy](#):

- (2.1) Implement a Healthy Eating Strategy that increases access to healthy and safe foods at a neighbourhood level and builds upon and aligns with the Richmond Food Charter and the Regional Food System Action Plan.
- (2.2) Implement neighbourhood food hubs in underserved areas to address the lack of fresh and local produce and establish a healthier food environment at a neighbourhood level.
- (3.1) Adopt an equity framework to assess what and where the inequities are at a neighbourhood level.
- (3.4) Enhance partner outreach to groups where barriers to access and participation in services and programs have been clearly identified.

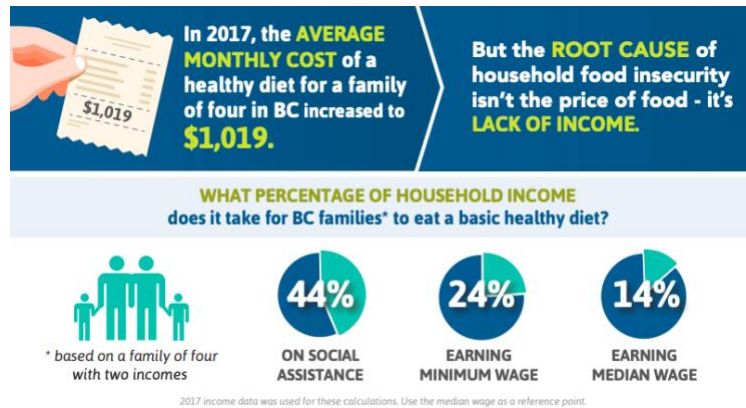
This collaboration also aims to align with the values of the [Richmond Food Charter](#), in which the community has committed to “*work continually to improve access to food for all*”, to “*ensure our food supply is safe and healthy*,” and to “*collaborate with community groups, businesses, and all levels of government to ensure a food secure future*.”



Thank-you to these individuals and organizations for their input, commitment and guidance: Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) Community Dietitians, Planted Community Food Network, Union Gospel Mission, the Richmond Food Security Society, Richmond Food Bank, the Food Aid Delivery Committee, and those who lead community meals and other supportive programs in Richmond.

Part A - Pre-COVID-19

Even before COVID-19 descended in early spring of 2020, food insecurity was already a known issue in Richmond. The [BCCDC Food Costing in BC Assessment](#) defines one food security indicator to be “the average monthly cost of a nutritionally adequate, balanced diet as a proportion of household income.” In 2017, they determined that to feed a family of four, it cost an average of \$1019 across the province or \$1056 in south-east BC (about \$45 more than 2015). Contrast that with what we know about income in Richmond. From the [2016 Census](#), almost 22% of the adults and seniors and 25% of the children and youth in Richmond live below the low-income cut-off, where it is difficult to afford food and other basic necessities.



To address this growing need, many communities and organizations offered regular food programs. The [Richmond Food Asset Map](#) (Appendix A) shows the schedule and location of established programs. Appendix B summarizes the meals and hampers each program made available.

Many programs also existed for specific vulnerable groups, including:

Families	Touchstone Family Association, Richmond Family Place, Family Services of Greater Vancouver (FSGV), Healthiest Babies Possible, BC Farmers' Market Nutrition Coupon Program
Indigenous Population	Pathways Aboriginal Centre
LGBTQ2+ Community	Unable to identify food supports specifically serving this community
New-Comers	SUCCESS, Richmond Multicultural Community Services, FSGV
People with Disabilities	Richmond Center for Disabilities; Richmond Society for Community Living
School-aged Children	Breakfast or lunch programs at schools for the estimated 250 vulnerable students - needs addressed by individual schools
Seniors	Minoru Activity Centre, FSGV Community Kitchen for Seniors, Kehila Society, Meals on Wheels, Chinese Meals on Wheels, Better Meals, Richmond Cares Richmond Gives
Street Population	The Food Aid Delivery Coalition coordinates churches and restaurants to provide 30 meals for pick up 5 days/week and St Alban's Church provides food on weekends

Program Logistics

A number of places of worship offer a sit-down meal or other programs for sharing food, inspired by their goals of doing things for the public good and caring for their neighbours. Such community meal programs come with complex logistics that require ongoing management and coordination such as:

- Food Sourcing
 - Volunteer shoppers tend to buy supplies at Costco, Save-On-Foods and other large or wholesale stores.
 - Some food is sourced at specialty stores, such as a kosher butcher for Jewish guests and a halal one for Muslim guests.
 - Some get donations from Richmond Food Bank, the Sharing Farm, FoodMesh, local bakeries, etc. But these are unpredictable and hard to plan a meal around.
 - Some meals were organized by volunteers, others hired a head cook or caterer.
- Budgets
 - Community meals are generally funded by the places of worship or organization that hosts the program and receive some donations to cover program costs (i.e. from volunteers, their workplaces, private donors, other churches); some hold occasional fundraising events.
 - Larger meals typically spend \$400 - \$600 per night to serve 180 meals onsite plus another 30 for Food Aid Delivery.
 - Most meals are offered free to guests. Some programs encourage donations or pay-what-you-can for meals, although food is shared even if guests cannot pay.
 - Since donations have decreased with all the economic uncertainty, programs are looking for grants or other funding to cover food costs. But some are hesitant about seeking/accepting outside funding if it comes with restrictions about how they enact their faith (e.g., how they welcome guests, bless the food, and generally orient their activity within a framework of Christian hospitality). Even so, they are conscious about respecting that not all guests share their faith.
- Program Leadership
 - Most community meals are run by a head volunteer who typically spends 10+ hours/week coordinating volunteers, food pick-up and running the program.
 - Some programs hire a chef or caterer to lead a team of volunteers.
 - One program has a community meal steering committee which meets regularly to make decisions related to the meal; it consists of volunteers, the paid chef, a church minister, and an administrator who coordinates volunteers.
 - Volunteers come from the churches that host the meal, friends, family, high school and college students, community members, local businesses, and sports teams.
 - There are usually enough compassionate volunteers to run the program, but they are not necessarily trained in advocacy or managing hostile interactions, cultural clashes, and other challenges that arise.

- Providing the meal and space for connection was the primary goal for most programs, but some also provided education sessions, and pastoral and other supports.
- Key Challenges
 - There is no way to know how many people will show up and thus how much food to make - the weather, welfare cycle, and recent attendance give some indication, but numbers vary weekly.
 - Seating capacity is often exceeded, so some guests and volunteers eat in the hallway or lobby of the church where the meal was hosted.

Culture and Capacity

Community meals in Richmond aim to be about more than food. Staff and volunteers intentionally create places of welcome and connection by:

- Striving to initiate relationships that enable volunteers to connect outside of the program (i.e. assisting with groceries, deliveries, providing activities and camps for kids).
- Trying not to rush guests but rather allowing time for conversation after the meal.
- Volunteers tasked with noticing and welcoming newcomers.
- Reflecting the demographics of Richmond, many guests are regular attenders and sit with their friends.
- Fostering an environment for guests and volunteers to have sense of team and belonging.
- Recognizing there is stigma in needing to accept food charity, and therefore devising ways to serve guests while upholding their dignity, and being discreet with extra supports they offered (i.e. grocery store gift cards for vulnerable families).
- Honouring the cultural diversity in Richmond through things like:
 - including cultural food preferences such as taco bowls, butter chicken, borscht, etc., even though most guests eat whatever is provided
 - Usually offering a vegetarian option
 - Cooked options because some cultures don't prefer salads or raw vegetables
 - Offering desserts only as part of a full meal (some do not provide dessert or juice to minimize sugar)
- Having advocates from CHIMO or Richmond Public Librarians attend the meal to meet guests.
- It is generally each guests' responsibility to make their way to food programs; one smaller program arranged a bus to pick up participants

Part B - During COVID-19

COVID-19 brings evolving restrictions and guidelines around engaging safely with the community. **Food provision is an essential service**, and many programs are finding ways to shift their operations to fit current recommendations. Some examples of supportive programs for vulnerable individuals include the Family Services of Greater Vancouver facilitating their community kitchens online, the Richmond Family Place adding meal delivery to their service model, and the Richmond Foodbank Society replacing their grocery store model to pre-packed food bags. The City of Richmond and VCH regularly survey supportive programs and update a publicly available [COVID Asset Map](#) (Appendix A). The [COVID Emergency Response Center](#) opened 45 beds, to which clients must be referred.

Most food programs saw a decline in the first few weeks of the pandemic (as low as one fifth of their usual guests), likely because usual guests were unaware of what was available and/or fearful of visiting the program. By early May 2020, numbers were back up to what they had been prior to COVID-19, and continued to climb through June as (1) need grew, (2) vulnerable people learned where to access food, and (3) people seemed less afraid to go out or take public transportation to get to the program.

Program Changes

Food providers reported **closing or changing their operations** because of:

- Government and health authority recommendations.
- Closure of the facility where the meal is hosted, and volunteers could not access the kitchen to make takeout meals.
- Volunteers' concerns about safety for guests and themselves.
- Finances - donations became less predictable; also, some programs take a break each summer and therefore had only budgeted to run programs until June.
- Not being able to justify the challenges of providing food if volunteers and guests cannot sit down together, since connection and socializing are primary goals for the meal.
- The kitchen had plans for renovations.

Programs that continued to operate observed some **demographic changes**:

- Most programs report seeing some familiar faces and others who had not needed to assess food support before, including more families – “pride takes a backseat as people get hungrier.”
- Programs are trying to provide more than a full meal when they know guests have others to feed back home, adding groceries provided by the Richmond Food Bank when able.

To meet changing needs, community food providers also reported **new or strengthened partnerships and engagement with other support providers**.

- Volunteers are encouraged to be receiving support and direction as needed from staff at Vancouver Coastal Health and the City.

- More food, not less, is available through Richmond Food Bank, Richmond Food Security Society and other food rescue programs.
- Richmond Food Aid Delivery is seeing more collaboration as groups support each other, especially as established groups take summer break. Some churches are collaborating to provide meals throughout the summer, when typically, they would be closed.
- Cobs Breads and other bakeries consistently provide bread and baked goods.
 - Requires a volunteer to show up consistently to the bakery and deliver to the community meal program (bags are heavy!)
 - Must maintain relationship and regular communication with the bakery (or other donor); when the relationship is strong, programs can ask for something extra when needed, i.e., for a special meal or another dinner
- Groceries, funds and other supplies are being shared between programs when one has excess or is on a break with their program.
- Some programs that are currently closed recognize there are increased needs in the community, so they are redirecting the money they would have spent on food to other churches and agencies.
- New donors were inspired to give in this season, some even donating the money they would have spent on celebrations or vacations to the programs.
- Congregation members and regular volunteers delivering meals to people who are quarantined, self-isolating, or otherwise mobility-challenged (previously, guests would have had to come to the shared meals in houses of worship).

Needs Beyond Food

The pandemic created or revealed increasing inequities and needs beyond food:

- Transportation
- Childcare (school programs pause in summer months)
- People living on the streets lost access to showers and other personal hygiene supports (this is addressed in the [Resource Guide for Individuals Experiencing Homelessness](#));
 - Outreach workers reported that finding homeless individuals was harder, as there was no epicenter for them to congregate and some of their usual spots were closed (i.e. 24-hour cafes, libraries, community centers)
 - Shelter and addictions treatment beds decreased so safe distancing could be maintained in shelters; intake took longer as staff had to quarantine or figure out new systems
- Increased anxiety as jobs and other supports were lost, which can manifest as lashing out or hoarding supplies
- Pet food and supplies (which some pet stores have been offering), because a pet provides deeply meaningful relationship for some vulnerable individuals
- Funds to cover rent shortfalls
- Groceries, especially for special diets (i.e. diabetic-friendly or gluten free foods not easily found at food programs)

- Some guests prefer cooked meals or low-prep foods (they lack kitchen access or mobility/ability)
- Water, especially on hot days
- Clothing, especially for cold, wet weather
- First aid supplies
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), including masks and gloves, a thermometer, and hand sanitizer for volunteers and guests. Most programs that remain open are able to source enough PPE, though they are concerned about potential shortages of gloves and other needed supplies.
- Access to washrooms for programs held outside
- Programs had worked hard to provide dignity and autonomy, creating welcoming spaces, eliminating line-up's, and allowing guests choice in their food - but COVID restrictions reversed many of these changes, and programs are seeking ways to bring them back.

Food Access

- Some programs are receiving fewer fresh food donations from grocery stores because that food is now picked up by FoodMesh, a local organization who has partnered with City of Richmond to help address food waste.
- As some programs shut down, the bakeries and grocers that were donating to them have more food for other programs - although this is an unreliable and variable source of food, making meal planning particularly challenging.
- Some are traveling outside of Richmond to access free or low-cost food.

Part C - COVID-19 Phase 2 and Beyond

Lifting Restrictions

Restrictions started to lift as Phase 2 commenced in mid-May 2020, requiring food providers to adjust again, including:

- Program providers that were still open started in mid-June to explore setting up tables in their parking lot on nice evenings so guests can sit-down as they eat. This will take extra volunteer time to sanitize tables between guests and clean up waste from food packaging.
- Guests ideally need washrooms and a place to wash their hands, but this is not easy if buildings are not open to guests.
- Churches typically prioritize Sunday services, but once they have figured out how to run those safely, they can apply the same principles to other programs (i.e. community meals).
- It's not possible yet to explore involving guests again in hosting roles, or allowing guests autonomy around things like serving themselves bread, coffee, etc.
- It remains a challenge to figure out how to space kitchen staff and volunteers so they can prepare food safely, without the potential of infecting each other if carrying the virus unknowingly.

Other current challenges:

- Some guests are grabbing food and eating it while waiting for the bus, anxious to get home, which goes against the hospitality ethic that is foundational to the programs.
- Some guests linger in the area, eat standing up or sitting in the grass, taking time to connect with their community, and thus volunteers must frequently remind everyone to keep a safe distance (guests do as they are able but easily forget).
- Incorrect details are sometimes circulated because programs and recommendations change so rapidly. All service providers need to work together to ensure accurate details are communicated to the public.
- Programs that require clients to register, such as meal delivery programs, are not taking new clients.

Recovery Planning for Beyond Phase 2

Food program providers were asked about preparations needed for a potential 2nd wave of COVID-19, or for recovery beyond the pandemic. No programs reported significant planning for this. Volunteers and staff are just doing what they can to respond to immediate needs, operating in survival mode.

Conclusions and Notes

It is difficult to determine who is still food insecure in Richmond and how we could get food to them, especially as needs are evolving rapidly. Support providers share information as they are able, while respecting confidentiality of guests, and are looking for ways to increase communication and fill in gaps of support.

Recommendations

Community food programs are a vital support and while we work together to sustain them, we also work together to address income inequities and other systemic challenges so vulnerable community members will not always be in a position to need food charity. With that goal in mind, recommendations that emerged from conversations include:

- Increase coordination of sharing needs and assets, especially as some programs reported having extra volunteers and supplies, and some lacked these.
 - Will likely take a network coordinator or central organization to drive this.
- Given the people who are newly vulnerable, especially those who are working low wage jobs, some programs like the food bank are open late. Explore the need for community meals to be more flexible with their service times, or have gift cards or other options for accessing food available.
- VCH and City staff can continue to proactively communicate what, when, where and how programs are operating, especially as programs change rapidly. Program coordinators should connect with their Environmental Health Officers and the [BCCDC](#) for guidance. VCH has put together these [Guidelines for Community-Based Food Programs](#). Read more about [VCH Environmental Health & Inspections](#), and Worksafe BC's [protocols for returning to operation for Faith-based organizations](#).

Current volunteer leadership are working hard, often operating at the limits of their capacity, and expressed openness for support in:

- Planning for a potential second wave of COVID-19, the need for further restrictions, and what to do if current funding and food sources wane.
- As restrictions lift, ensuring programs have up-to-date recommendations, especially around food sourcing, safe practices, moving away from high-waste, emergency models, and moving back towards the values identified in the [Richmond Food Charter](#).
- The commitment, particularly by volunteer leaders, is inspiring, but several mentioned that they would appreciate assistance with defining leadership and structures, as well as succession planning, especially as programs could look radically different in the next season, and some long-standing volunteers are nearly ready to retire.
- Exploring how their programs address the needs and cultural preference of different ethnic groups that participate in their services.
- Assist programs with finding and applying for grants and donations, which cannot be done by current program leadership because they are at capacity. Small programs look to larger programs like UGM, Salvation Army, United Way, for guidance and support.
- Arrange service providers to come to community meals and other programs where community members are already gathered, to meet needs beyond food identified above:
 - All welcome: librarians, health services, taxes, haircuts, etc.

- Richmond Homeless Connect elements could come to weekly meals
- Increased need for mental health support - some guests have lost loved ones and are increasingly isolated

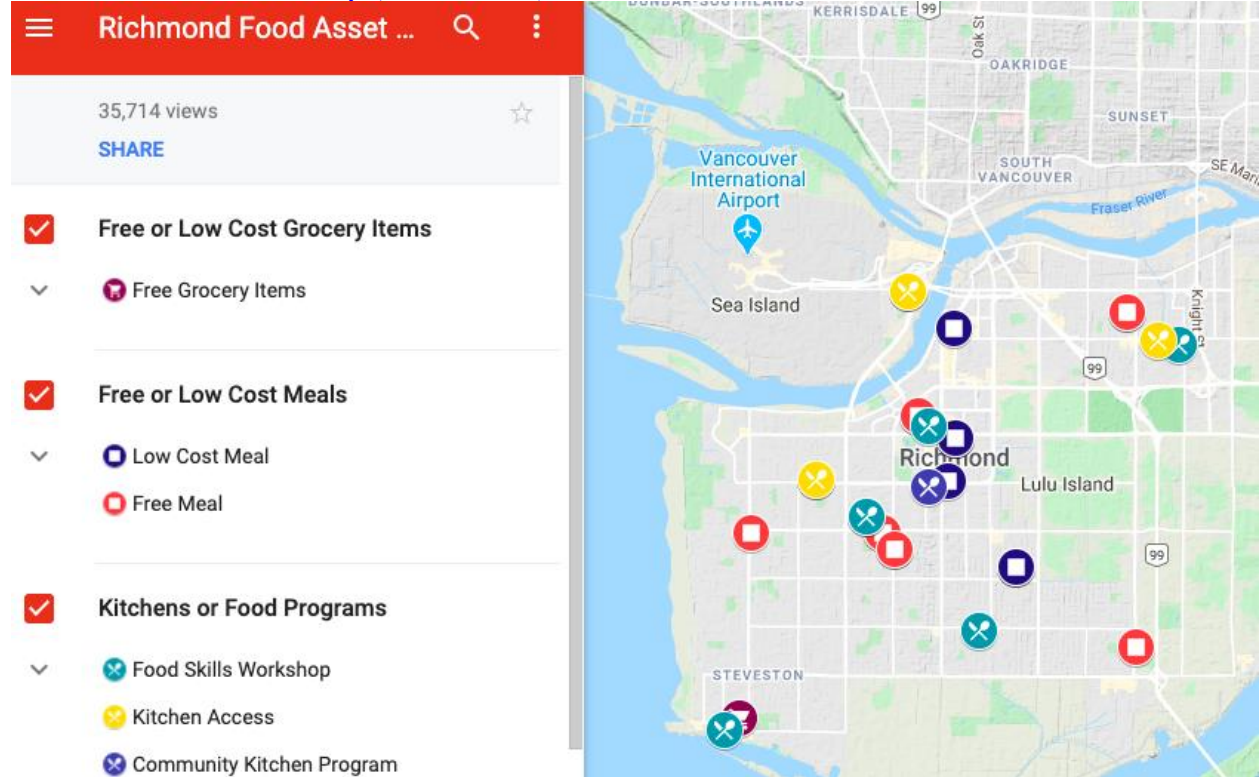
For Further Exploration:

- Include some stories and pictures in order to put a human face on the need
- Include input from program participants
- Include other Faiths and places of worship to increase understanding of their environment, culture, philosophy, needs and assets (i.e. Sikh Langar tradition)
- Several programs expressed that this season is compelling the program (and the organization or Church behind it) to look at how they function as a whole, which could impact future operations

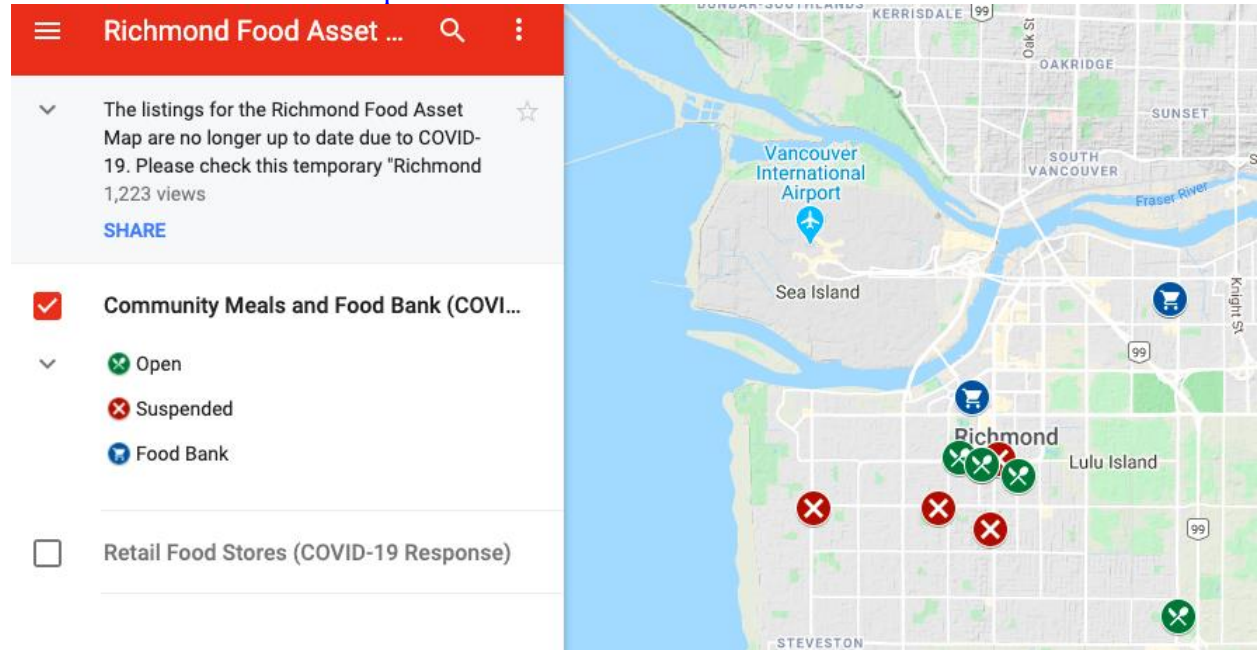
Appendixes

Appendix A – Asset Maps

[Richmond Food Asset Map \(Pre-COVID\)](#)



[Richmond COVID Asset Map](#)



Appendix B - Meals Provided by Community Programs

Meal Programs	Day	Pre COVID-19	Food Aid Delivery	Beginning of COVID-19	Phase 2 COVID-19 (June 2020)
Kehila Society	Monday		30 (from a restaurant)		
	Thursdays	30-40 biweekly			140 every week
	Monday	6 seniors only			15 seniors only
Peace Mennonite Church	Tuesday	160			Food bank hub reopened mid-June
St. Alban's Anglican Church	Tuesday	125	30	50-60	Continue as is or open for sit down depending on restrictions
Richmond Presbyterian Church	Tuesday			June 16th - mid Sept for St Alban's	
Church On Five	Wednesday	180	30	30-40	59
Gilmore Park United	Thursday	170	30	-	(Funds from weekly community meal now support Richmond Food Security Society, Food Bank, Church on Five & St. Alban's Advocacy)
Church On Five	Thursday		30		60
Salvation Army	Thursday	100	40-70	40-70 Wed & Fri	Unknown
St. Alban's Anglican Church	Friday	25-30	25-30	25-30	30-40 @ St. Alban's and 50% taking food home as well
Bayit Synagogue	Friday	50-100			
Richmond Baptist Church	Saturday	80	0	0- Stopped serving meals	They may begin food delivery in Sept - Open to resources and help
St. Joseph's the Worker Parish	5th Saturday	80			
St. Alban's Anglican	Sunday (Outreach)	100-150	100-150	100-150	Plans to continue as is
Food Hampers		Pre COVID-19		Beginning of COVID-19	Phase 2 COVID-19 (June 2020)
Richmond Foodbank		600		400	550
St. Alban's Anglican					27 families (some have up to 6 kids)
Kehila Society					12 families receiving \$150 gift cards biweekly + grocery relief program for those in need
St Vincent de Paul					~5 requests/ week for support (could do more)