ACCESSING EMERGENCY FOOD SERVICES: A REVIEW OF ELIGIBILITY STRATEGIES

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INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH GOALS
In a 2011 report on emergency food services in Guelph-Wellington, eligibility requirements were identified as a significant barrier to partaking in emergency food services [2]. Taking that finding as a starting point, this report investigates both the literature pertaining to eligibility strategies and the types of eligibility practices currently used in Guelph-Wellington. It was prepared as part of a community engaged project carried out by the University of Guelph’s Research Shop, working in partnership with the Guelph & Wellington Task Force for Poverty Elimination (PTF).

BACKGROUND
During the mid 1980s, a number of changes were made to Canada’s welfare system and social policy framework [4, 5]. Specifically, unemployment benefits were reduced and eligibility criteria were made stricter, and the Canada Assistance Plan was eliminated [6]. At the same time, costs for utilities and housing were rising. The combined effects of higher living costs and reductions to social assistance made it increasingly difficult for households to meet their food needs [7, 8]. As a result, emergency food programs such as food banks and pantries became a growing component of the country’s food system [8, 9]. Although these programs were initially designed to provide emergency, short-term assistance, they have now become a staple in many people’s lives [10]. Indeed, 2011 saw the second highest use of food banks in Canadian history, with more than 850,000 people accessing food banks across the country every month [11]. Given this context, many organizations have implemented or tightened eligibility requirements in order to deal with growing demand for emergency food, and limited supply [12-14]. This report will outline a range of different eligibility requirements commonly used by service providers.

METHODS
The report begins by outlining trends found in emergency food service eligibility based on a scan of grey and scholarly literature. This scan focused on the Canadian context, and more specifically on Ontario examples. The information obtained from the literature was complemented by a series of informational interviews with emergency food service organizers, staff and volunteers in Guelph-Wellington. During these interviews, participants were asked questions about the eligibility strategies used by their organizations, and the rationales behind them (see Appendix I for the full interview guide). Prior to this research project, twenty emergency food organizations had shared their eligibility criteria with the PTF for inclusion in the Guelph Wellington Food Access Guide. The data presented in this report is based on the information gathered by the PTF as well as through eight informational interviews conducted by the author. As a result, the report reflects the eligibility criteria used by 28 emergency food services in Guelph-Wellington.
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RESULTS

TYPES OF ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

This section outlines different types of eligibility requirements used by various emergency food providers across North America. The types of eligibility practices have been categorized as: 1) formal eligibility requirements; 2) informal eligibility requirements; and, 3) minor or no eligibility requirements.

1.1.1 Formal Eligibility Requirements: ID, Income, and Expenses

Emergency food providers in this category use a range of eligibility criteria, primarily related to users' income. Clients must prove that they meet these criteria by providing supporting documents such as identification, and proof of residency, income, and expenses. Generally, identification must be provided for everyone who lives within a client household, while proof of income is required from all household members over the age of 18. Clients are typically required to show proof of income, including income from Ontario Works, the Drug Benefit Card, Ontario Disability, Canada Pension Plan, Employment Insurance, Child Support, Alimony, National Child Benefit Supplement, Basic Child Tax Credit, Universal Child Benefit, and Ontario Child Care Supplement for Working Families. In terms of expenses, required documentation includes: receipts for the current month’s rent or mortgage payment; current month’s bills and payment receipts for hydro, gas and water; and, if applicable, a receipt or bank statement for any court-ordered child support or alimony payments.

While documentation of income and expenses is the most commonly required item used in formal eligibility standards, additional requirements are sometimes applied as well. These are generally managed by asking a prospective client questions regarding: use of other emergency food services; referrals to (and/or use of) credit counselling, and; patterns of violence and/or drug use. In cases where an emergency food service is operated by a
religious organization, clients must sometimes demonstrate that they belong to the particular parish or religious community [8].

The main rationale behind the kind of formal eligibility strategy described above is the issue of demand for service outstripping available food supplies [10]. Processes are designed to ensure that food is received by those who need it most, that the appropriate amount of food is distributed based on family size, and that potential abuse of service is avoided [15, 16].

The main benefit of such a formally structured system based on multiple requirements is that it helps stretch an often limited supply of food, thereby providing a greater number of clients with at least some support [9]. In other words, it can be a necessary means of dealing with high demand.

While it may be seen by some service providers as a necessity, many negative effects are recognized in the literature pertaining to this type of eligibility strategy. For example, disclosing personal information (such as details about household finances) may be seen as an invasion of privacy, and can deter potential users from seeking out a service [13, 17, 18]. In other cases, potential service users may be unwilling or unable to meet some requirements – for example those related to participation in religious services [8].

Perhaps the greatest negative impact of more formal eligibility processes is their potential to contribute to feelings of stigma on the part of emergency food users. Studies have shown that the stigma associated with living in poverty can contribute to psychological distress and damaging perceptions of self [7, 19]. In cases where eligibility requirements for emergency food access are more stringent, and especially when service providers are larger in scale, the experience tends to be depersonalized and the social detachment between clients and volunteers/workers can increase feelings of stigma [10, 12]. Although the stigma that is often associated with formal eligibility requirements is most acutely felt by service users, it has been observed that emergency food organizations can sometimes lose volunteers as eligibility standards tighten [14]. Specifically, a 2010 study found that volunteers were leaving emergency food agencies because they did not want to send away people hungry, especially when they had formed a relationship with participants and had provided them with food access in the past [14].

1.1.2 Informal Eligibility Requirements
Emergency food providers in this category have no formal eligibility criteria. Rather, eligibility is determined by those who operate the food service based on their own judgement. In these cases, potential service users are generally interviewed by service operators. Although it is not the norm, these interviews are sometimes conducted at the potential client’s home so that the interviewer can personally observe the state of their household food security. Informal eligibility requirements tend to be more common for smaller service providers. They
are particularly prevalent in rural communities, where service clients and volunteers often know each other firsthand [12].

A positive element of the more informal eligibility strategy is that it is viewed as a relatively personal process that allows clients and volunteers to interact on a one-one basis. Rather than relying on an inflexible list of structured criteria, this kind of eligibility standard also allows some flexibility regarding who receives assistance. For example, within the less formal process, service providers are able to recognize that some users may need assistance more frequently than structured policies tend to permit [9, 12].

While the subjectivity allowed within informal eligibility processes can be a benefit, it can also act as a barrier to service access, contribute to feelings of stigma, and cause confusion among clients as to who is eligible to receive services and who is not. Specifically, participants who are denied assistance based on informal criteria may feel humiliated and personally judged – particularly when the decision is made based on a home visit – and in many cases they may not know why they were deemed ineligible [20]. The lack of uniform standards and related lack of transparency regarding criteria can cause confusion and doubts about eligibility, and has therefore been identified as a significant barrier to those seeking assistance within this kind of framework [12, 13, 16, 21].

1.1.3 Minor Eligibility Requirements / No Eligibility Requirements

Emergency food providers in this category have either no or very few eligibility requirements. Perhaps the most common example of minimal eligibility criteria are cases where clients are eligible for service provided that they live within the service provider’s catchment area and provide

**A MINOR ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENT MODEL**

The Stop is a community food centre that has two locations in Toronto. The Stop provides services to their surrounding community, including a food bank, perinatal programs, community action programs, bake ovens and markets, community cooking, community advocacy, sustainable food systems education, urban agriculture, a sheltered garden, and compost demonstration centre.

Former executive director, Nick Saul, who recently left The Stop to spread the community food centre model nationally, argues that many current practices and ideas governing food banks divide people, but it doesn’t need to be this way. In his words, “Food is one of the ways we can find common ground. It is a beautiful way to organize and bring people together.” [1]

The Stop model has been widely championed for its holistic approach to food security. In particular, it has been recognized for its view of food as a basic human right, and its philosophy of promoting social justice and empowering people to make change in their lives and communities [3]. In accordance with that philosophy, the only eligibility requirement for using The Stop’s emergency food services is that people live within its geographical catchment area. Again, in the words of Saul, the central question guiding The Stop is how can a food bank “experience be fuelling self-worth and hope and a sense that things can change?” [2]
identification with proof of residency. In some cases, service providers may also ask for information regarding the number of people within a client’s household. Generally, service providers using minimal eligibility requirements will provide food for all those who seek assistance.

The main rationale behind this kind of eligibility strategy is to normalize the experience of accessing food from service providers in an effort to make clients comfortable and reduce stigma [16]. Some organizations that use this strategy believe that the likelihood of abuse of emergency food programs is minimal, and thus trying to curb it is not worth the potential damage done by strict eligibility requirements [9, 16]. In cases where minimal requirements are used, the issue of demand outstripping supply is generally dealt with only by restricting access to residents of a particular geographical area.

The main benefit of this approach is that it can reduce the feelings of stress and social stigma attached to emergency food use [19]. A reduction in these feelings in turn reduces barriers to seeking assistance [16]. Additionally, without fears of having to turn people away, there is the potential for a more positive and engaged volunteer base. The main potential challenge of this approach is the issue of how to deal with a demand that may be greater than an organization’s available food supply.

Table 1: Summary of Different Eligibility Requirements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Eligibility Requirements</th>
<th>Goals/Benefits</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formal Eligibility Requirements</strong></td>
<td>Designed to ensure that food is received by those who need it most</td>
<td>Disclosing personal information can be viewed as an invasion of privacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In order to receive food, clients must meet a set of established requirements. These focus primarily on income, though many organizations use additional criteria.</td>
<td>Designed to avoid possible service abuse</td>
<td>Clients may be unwilling or unable to meet some requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps stretch a limited supply of food among a greater number of people</td>
<td>Contributes to feelings of stigma among clients.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informal Eligibility Requirements</strong></td>
<td>A more personal process with one-on-one interaction</td>
<td>Lack of transparency regarding criteria can cause confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisions regarding</td>
<td>Flexibility on who</td>
<td>Clients denied access to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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eligibility are made by those who operate the emergency food organization. Decisions often depend on personal discretion.

receives assistance
- Circumstantial situations can be considered

service may feel personally judged because of the subjective procedure. This can result in feelings of humiliation and stigmatization.

Minor Eligibility Requirements / No Eligibility Requirements
Generally, all people who request food receive it. Sometimes there is a requirement to live within a particular geographic area.

- Helps normalize the experience of accessing food from an emergency food provider
- Reduced feelings of stress and social stigma
- Reduction in stigma reduces a barrier against seeking assistance

Demand may be greater than an organization’s available food supply

TYPES OF ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS CURRENTLY USED IN GUELPH-WELLINGTON
Of the 28 emergency food service organizations considered in this report, 11 reported using eligibility requirements that could best be categorized as formal, 4 used informal requirements, and 13 had minor or no eligibility requirements (Figure 1). In general, the use of formal requirements tended to be more common amongst larger-scale service providers, while smaller-scale food banks and pantries were more likely to use informal or minor requirements.

Within both the city and county, the most common requirement used by essentially all service providers is that clients live within a particular geographic area. This criteria was cited most frequently by organizations that fit into the minor or no eligibility requirements category; however, it was also mentioned by many organizations using formal or informal strategies. While not directly related to eligibility, most service providers also reported asking questions regarding the number of members in a client’s household and any food preferences. Answers to these questions help the providers gauge how much and the type of foods to give to clients, once they have been deemed eligible.

It is worth noting that the prevalence of different types of eligibility requirements was somewhat different between the city and the county (Figures 2 and 3).
2.1.1 Patterns within Wellington County

In Wellington County, approximately half of the service providers reported using formal eligibility requirements, 31% informal eligibility requirements, and 15% no eligibility requirements (Figure 2). The relatively frequent use of informal eligibility requirements is unique to the county, with that strategy not being reported by any of the Guelph service providers. The use of informal requirements in Wellington is consistent with the literature, which suggests that the more subjective, informal strategy tends to be more commonly applied in rural communities, where operations are generally smaller in scale and staff and volunteers are more personally familiar with clients and their circumstances.

In some cases, it was difficult to determine exactly what criteria are used to assess eligibility by service providers using an informal strategy. This is reflective of the subjective nature of the informal system. Some interviewees stated that decisions about eligibility were up to their individual discretion, and could not elaborate in any more detail, while others gave some indication of why a person may be ineligible. For example, one service provider explained that individuals who try to access service immediately after receiving a benefits cheque from Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program may be turned away, if it is believed that they should have sufficient money from their cheques to purchase food.

2.1.2 Patterns within the City of Guelph

In Guelph, the majority of service providers reported using minor or no eligibility requirements (Figure 3). In part, the prevalence of this strategy may be related to the significant number of smaller-scale operations in the city. For those services, the logistics of implementing formal criteria would be challenging and, because the number of clients served tends to be lower, the issue of excess demand may not be as pressing as it is for larger-scale operations. Notably though, some service providers indicated that the main reason for minimal criteria was a desire to ensure open access to all community members, and avoid the appearance of personal judgment. As one interviewee explained: “If you are coming to (an emergency food provider), you probably really need the help”. That perspective could be considered in keeping with the motivations behind The Stop Community Food Centre’s use of minimal eligibility criteria, which are focused on reducing stigma and increasing self-worth.
SUMMARY

Food security is a very complex issue, and thinking about different strategies for emergency food service eligibility requirements is no exception. Use of emergency food services has increased in recent years, and in many cases is no longer a form of short-term help, but rather a necessary part of many people’s lives [6, 10]. This report examined the issue of eligibility criteria, and considered how different strategies are used to cope with high levels of demand for limited supplies of food. In particular, it focused on some of the differences between formal,
informal, and minor eligibility requirement strategies, and summarized the use of these different options in Guelph-Wellington.

The use of formal eligibility requirements was most common for larger-scale service providers. This could be at least partly due to higher demand pressures faced by those organizations. It could also be reflective of service provider norms, as it is the strategy used by prominent large-scale food banks such as Toronto’s Daily Bread Food Bank. Designed to guard against potential service abuse, formal requirements address the issue of excess demand and seek to provide a fair, standardized system for determining eligibility. However, they are viewed by some as an invasion of privacy, a source of stress and social stigma for service users, and a barrier to access.

Informal eligibility criteria were not reported in Guelph, but were somewhat common in rural parts of Wellington. Like formal requirements, informal standards are designed to avoid service abuse and restrict access to limited food supplies, and they are subject to similar critiques regarding privacy, stress and social stigma, and creating a barrier to access. Service providers using the informal strategy indicated that the personalized exchange between volunteers, staff and clients, and the flexibility allowed by less rigid standards are important benefits of the model. On the other hand, because of their subjectivity, informal eligibility requirements sometimes face criticism for causing confusion regarding exact requirements. They also have the potential to be particularly stigmatizing in cases where clients may feel personally judged by service providers.

The use of minor or no eligibility requirements was the most commonly used strategy by service providers in Guelph. Based on both interviews and the literature, the main rationale for this approach is that it respects clients’ dignity, providing them with a judgment-free environment for accessing emergency food. There may be some fear that this strategy could allow for abuse of service, leaving those most in need with insufficient food supplies; however, there was no indication of this problem in either the literature consulted or the interviews conducted for this research.
APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Hello, my name is Rachel Salt and I am a graduate student at the University of Guelph, and an intern at the University’s Research Shop, which works in partnership with the Guelph & Wellington Taskforce for Poverty Elimination. I am collecting information from emergency food providers in the Guelph-Wellington area concerning eligibility requirements. Insufficient information concerning eligibility requirements has been identified as a barrier to access for emergency food services. Hopefully, with your help, this information will further improve the issue of food security and the provision of emergency food services in Guelph-Wellington. The information collected will be used in a publicly available report.

May I speak with you about eligibility requirements at your organization?
- (Yes) – Proceed to section A
- (No) – Is there better time that I can call back?
  o (Yes) – Reschedule interview time
  o (No) – Thank you for your time, have a great day.

Section A
Does your organization have eligibility requirements?
- (Yes) – What are those requirements?
  o If I feel there is not a full understanding of what those requirements are then I will ask some questions from Section B to gain a better understanding. If appropriate, I will proceed to Section C, if it is not appropriate I will move on to Section D.
- (No) – Proceed to Section B

Section B
May I ask you some questions to get a better idea of some non-formal requirements your organization may have?
- (Yes) – Proceed with questions below. Upon completion proceed to Section C if appropriate, if not Section D.
- (No) – Proceed to Section C

Section B Questions
- Is the decision of who is eligible for emergency food services made consistently by the same person or do several people determine eligibility?
  o Is this person/are these people volunteers or staff?
- Is there a limit as to how often a person can use your service?
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- What would limit be?
  - Do you keep records of who accesses your services?
  - Is the location of the person’s home a factor that influences their eligibility?
  - Does a person wishing to access your service need to have income below a certain level?
    - What income level would this be?
  - Would a client be ineligible if the possessed certain personal belongings?
    - If yes, what kind of belongings would influence your decision?
  - Does family size play a role in deciding who is eligible for your services?
    - What family structure would be eligible for your services?
  - If the person seeking your services accesses food from additional emergency food services, would this influence their eligibility?
  - If the person receives Ontario Works would this influence your decision on their eligibility to access emergency food services?
  - If this person had addiction issues that you were aware of, would this influence their eligibility?

Section C
Would you be willing to give some examples of when you felt a person was ineligible for the emergency food services you provide?

- (Yes) – If I feel that from the examples they provide some questions from Section B would be helpful to ask then I will. If not, head to Section D.
- (No) – Thank you for your time, and have a great day.

Section D
Are there suggestions or additional comments you would like to make concerning eligibility requirements for emergency food services?

- (Yes) – Upon receiving suggestions and comments, thank interview participant very much for their time.
- (No) - Thank you so much for your time, it is really appreciated. Have a great day!
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