



Canada

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Promoting a new perspective on disability*

Food for Thought Project Wrap-up: A Summary of Consumer Views

Prepared By: Jihan Abbas

2009

Food for Thought:
Persons with Disabilities and
Healthy Eating
Summary of Research Results
By: Jihan Abbas

Produced by
Independent Living Canada
1104-170 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1P 5V5
TEL (613)563-2581
FAX (613)563-3861
TTY (613)563-4215
www.ilcanada.ca

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Introduction

The following report summarizes the results of research carried out with persons with disabilities by Independent Living Canada on its *Food for Thought* project. This summary provides feedback from persons with disabilities on the project activities and identifies the next steps to take in order to meet the healthy eating needs of persons with disabilities.

Project Overview

Through the *Food for Thought* project, Independent Living Canada created accessible tools on healthy eating, with funding provided by the Physical Activity and Healthy Eating Contribution Program, Centre for Health Promotion, Public Health Agency of Canada. These tools included program models exploring how food can be used as a vehicle to connect people, resources on physical activity and strategies to reduce social isolation, and barriers to healthy eating.

Research was an important part of this initiative as it provided a grounded understanding of the community's needs with respect to healthy eating. Using Participatory Action Research (PAR), barriers and solutions related to healthy eating and persons with disabilities were identified and new programs implemented based on community needs. Participants (referred to as "consumers" within the IL network) worked with their local Independent Living Centres throughout the course of this project to design and test various program models.

This report reflects research conducted in the final phase (wrap-up) of the *Food For Thought* project. This phase allowed consumers to reflect back on the project and outline future strategies to help facilitate healthy eating for persons with disabilities. As project activities were based on initial information gathered from consumers, this research was also an opportunity to reflect on what was designed and implemented and the degree to which it met consumer needs.

Results

General Observations

Eight Independent Living Centres (Centres) from across the country took place in this final research phase. These Centres were located in Halifax, NS; Shippagan, NB; Montreal, QC; Alfred, ON; Kingston, ON; Niagara, ON; Calgary, AB; and Duncan, BC.

Participants in the *Food for Thought* project took part in these focus groups and shared their insight on this topic, project activities, and next steps. Facilitators of these groups noted that participants were interested and engaged in the research process.

Pilot Site Activities & Related Skills and Resources

Through pilot site activities, consumers had the opportunity to take part in a range of activities related to healthy eating. These activities were diverse and took a holistic approach to supporting healthy eating goals for persons with disabilities and their local communities.

The Food for Thought activities that took place at the pilot locations all had more than one goal or outcome each; however, for the purpose of clarity can be broken down into activities that increased skills development, provided opportunities for community engagement and outreach, created resources and tools, and allowed for opportunities to engage socially.

Skills Development Activities

- The **100 Mile Potluck** , which recognized the importance of eating locally
- Activity sheets and quizzes related to healthy eating
- Workshops on stress and self-esteem for consumers
- Workshops on various aspects of *Canada's Food Guide* (for example, workshops to explore serving size)

- Group cooking classes with an emphasis on preparing healthy versions of everyday favorite foods
- Grocery shopping outings and market tours that addressed buying food on a budget and navigating a grocery store
- Workshops with professionals (i.e. dietitians and cardiologists)
- Diabetes information sessions
- Physical activity workshops
- Distribution of information brochures and recipes
- Workshops on food labeling and what it means
- Meal planning workshops, including budgeting
- Safe food handling tips
- Growing your own food

Community Engagement & Outreach Activities

- Sharing results with community partners
- Taking part in community gardening programs
- Presentations by community resources to discuss community supports for healthy eating (i.e., Meals on Wheels, groups that address food security issues)

Resource and Tool Creating Activities

- Making a cookbook
- Creating placemats with healthy eating tips
- Building Independent Living Centre resource libraries to include accessible healthy eating material
- Newsletter articles on the project and activities

Thank you so much for this wonderful program and all the wonderful gatherings. I learned a lot while having it and investing in improving health. Good job!

– Project Participant

A big thanks to the Food F Thought project for the support and opportunity to give feedback.

– Focus Group Facilitator

- Consumer assessments of community resources (i.e. Good Food Boxes, community gardening, Food Bank and Bread Van etc.).

I have started to watch my eating habits and started to exercise, these workshops have helped me understand better.
 – Project Participant

Thank you for this excellent initiative, which was a great way to learn more about healthy eating.
 – Project Participant

- Compiling website directories on local healthy eating resources.

Social Activities

- Recreational outings that included healthy eating picnics (in partnership with other disability organizations)
- Wine and cheese events
- Workshops on making healthy choices when dining out
- Integrating physical activity into aspects of healthy eating (i.e. going bowling, Wii sports night)
- Incorporating healthy eating opportunities into existing

Centre activities (i.e. community open houses, holiday parties)

These activities illustrate the ways that local Centres and their consumer bases designed and implemented healthy eating activities that met individual and collective needs. An additional measure of the success of this initiative was the degree to which healthy eating objectives were integrated with overall community inclusion and disability awareness activities. By taking a holistic approach this project reflected the need to create opportunities for both individuals and local communities to work together to better support the healthy eating needs of persons with disabilities.

Consumer Feedback

Focus groups with consumers provided an excellent opportunity to explore which activities worked best and why. Such feedback is extremely important since in addition to identifying successful models and strategies that can be enhanced and used in other communities and by other organizations, it also helps further clarify community needs.

What Works:

- Engaging consumers in meaningful ways in all aspects of project design and delivery.
- Social opportunities – getting out of the house, meeting new people, and laughing with others – were noted as some of the favorite parts of this project. Connecting with peers and building peer support networks were important factors in the project's success and its role in reducing social isolation.
- Opportunities to try new activities and learn new things were embraced by consumers. Consumers felt more confident when they tried and succeeded at new activities, and noted this project introduced them to foods and activities they would have otherwise avoided.
- Facilitating community engagement and outreach helped make many of the activities successful for consumers.
- The project activities created welcome opportunities for greater independence and choice. Learning tips like how to stock a pantry with food staples also made some consumers feel like they had more healthy eating options on hand.
- Integrating physical activity into the healthy eating project was important for many in terms of both health and social opportunities.
- Ensuring accessibility for events lead to inclusion of all participants. Accessibility of built environments, transportation, and project materials was important.
- The introduction of unique learning tools helped consumers understand and incorporate abstract concepts into their healthy

eating plans (for example, using fake foods to illustrate serving size or how much fat is in take away food).

- Providing honoraria for participants formally acknowledged individual contributions and, for many, help alleviate financial barriers (see below).
- Although barriers remained, some consumers felt the workshops helped to give skills to better navigate and address those barriers, which include buying on a budget, the importance of meal planning and in advance, and making food from scratch rather than buying prepared food.

In addition to what worked, consumers also gave feedback on barriers that remained difficult to overcome, even with project activities and support. These barriers are important to note, as they illustrate issues that we collectively need to continue to address.

Ongoing Barriers:

- Financial barriers remain a real concern, and many consumers felt that they needed support outside of individual skills development to address this. The availability of disability supports must be considered in any holistic approach to supporting Independent Living for persons with disabilities.
- Unsurprisingly, costly and inaccessible transportation was noted as an ongoing barrier to community integration, including the healthy eating activities. This speaks to the need for local communities to continue to work towards increased accessibility of public transportation.
- A lack of independence persists for individuals who do not live on their own and are supported by paid staff (i.e., in nursing homes). This is illustrative of the need for greater awareness of the principles of Independent Living and the need for those principles to be integrated into and adopted by all organizations supporting persons with disabilities.

Identifying Next Steps

Individuals

Consumers recognized that there were opportunities for them to become more involved in healthy eating. The following is a list of ways that consumers felt individuals could help promote healthy eating for persons with disabilities:

- By supporting local services related to healthy eating (local farmers, community gardens etc.);
- By cooking and eating with others (i.e., using peer support networks).
- By ensuring support for *Food for Thought* participants to continue to meet regularly and continue learning about healthy eating strategies; and,
- By continued use of what was learned (i.e., incorporating *Canada's Food Guide* into meal planning).

IL Centres

Based on the groundwork laid by project activities, consumers identified supports and services they felt local Centres should move towards providing. Some of their key suggestions include:

- Continuing to provide opportunities for healthy eating activities, including ones that address broader community concerns such as food security;
- Continuing to provide opportunities for healthy living activities, including recreational activities;
- Continued work to gather and share healthy eating resources;
- Advocacy on behalf of consumers for social policies that address poverty and isolation;
- Incorporating outreach opportunities, for example facilitating the provision of cooking lessons at home;

- Gathering ongoing feedback from consumers about specific healthy eating activities they would like to attend;
- Continuing to bring in experts and local stakeholders to support the healthy eating goals of consumers; and,
- Providing support for consumers who want to start or maintain local healthy eating groups.

Many consumers felt the *Food for Thought* initiative should not end as this project provided valuable resources, learning, and social opportunities that they looked forward to.

Local Communities

Participants noted that community involvement was key to the success of this initiative. Community partners shared resources and knowledge with consumers and IL Centres and helped make this project a success. Consumers felt their continued involvement was important, and suggested the following ways that partners could continue to support their healthy eating goals:

- Involving IL Centres and consumers in community planning around food related issues;
- Community partners and volunteers to become familiar with and volunteer at IL Centres;
- Sharing information about IL Centre activities with their networks (perhaps through radio and newspaper advertisements);
- Sharing community resources with IL Centres and consumers; and,
- Ongoing involvement from community partners even after the project ends.

Independent Living (IL) Canada

The project was very well received, and consumers appreciated the way it was designed and delivered, including their role in identifying needs. Most

consumers expressed a desire for IL Canada to continue to work in this area, and felt IL Canada could do the following:

- Share related information from the national level with the network and partners;
- Keep participants in the loop about IL Canada by adding them to their mailing list and to create a certificate for all those who participated;
- Engage in advocacy at the national level for persons with disabilities (regarding financial support, accessible recreation, poverty reduction etc.);
- Create healthy eating tools and resources that can be distributed and shared nationally;
- Create national webcasts to share resources and help consumers from across the country connect and learn together;
- Create a place within the IL Canada website to share accessible information and keep consumers updated on healthy eating information; and,
- Work to design and implement similar national initiatives.

Consumers felt the benefits were numerous and there was strong agreement that IL Canada should continue working in this area.

Summary

Food for Thought was well received by consumers; some IL Centres and their consumers referred to waiting lists for some activities as a measure of both the success of and the need for this program. There was also overwhelming support for this initiative to continue and for IL Canada to begin to address broader food-related matters facing the community, notably issues of food security.

It is clear that this initiative was successful for two key reasons. The first is that consumers were actively engaged throughout the process design and implementation, and the second is that this initiative spoke to an identified need within the community. With this in mind, we must not only work to continue to engage our consumer base in projects, but also continue to support IL Centres, consumers and persons with disabilities in accessing opportunities for healthy eating. This means IL Canada must continue to share accessible information throughout its network, increase disability awareness, continue to facilitate partnerships that provide needed resources, knowledge and tools, and most importantly, continue to advocate for persons with disabilities and their stated needs nationally.

The seed that was planted in local communities through the *Food for Thought* project has left a lasting impression on those communities and their consumers. It is our hope that the momentum, networks, and partnerships that were forged continue to flourish and that consumers receive the healthy eating support they require from all levels of government and community long after this project ends.