

LFS 350 Final Report:  
Vancouver Food Access Map – Free and Subsidized Grocery Items

Group 9  
April 10, 2017

## Introduction

Dietitians at Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) have been working with community partners to develop a food mapping tool directed at Vancouver residents who are experiencing food insecurity. Their goal is to create an accessible and comprehensible tool that is current and easy to update. This information will also help inform further research and development of the food systems in Vancouver. As a group we contributed to the existing Vancouver food asset map (VFAM) tool by populating and updating the map with information on free and low-cost grocery stores and low-cost markets.

Food security is defined as existing when “all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (World Food Summit, 1996). Food insecurity is an issue in Vancouver, and in British Columbia in general, as 11.8% of the population was found to be food insecure (Vancouver Food Policy Council, 2013). Meanwhile, we currently do not have a reliable and comprehensive directory of available food assets for community members experiencing food insecurity. High cultural diversity means that language barriers pose a particular problem in Vancouver in terms of reaching out to people who are experiencing food insecurity. Access to free and low-cost grocery stores and low-cost markets is particularly important for food insecure populations as they provide greater freedom of food choices and a more dignified experience when compared to food banks or assets providing free or subsidized meals. Food system/asset mapping is a “new, participatory, interdisciplinary pedagogical approach to learning about our modern food systems” (Wight & Killham, 2014). Food assets are defined here as “resources, facilities, services or spaces that are available to Vancouver residents, and which are used to support the local food

system” (Vancouver Food Policy Council, 2013). We propose that food asset maps may help relieve food insecurity in Vancouver and promote food justice by guiding food insecure individuals to appropriate resources and informing future development goals of community organizations and policy-makers.

Our project objectives are to update the VFAM with information on free or subsidized grocery stores and low-cost markets in Vancouver, and to obtain feedback from community members on the perceived usability and usefulness of the map tool. As such, we will address the following research questions: How effective is the VFAM in improving people’s ability locate and access free and low-cost meals and grocery stores? How can the VFAM be improved?

## **Methods**

### *Data Collection*

We collected information about free and subsidized grocery assets and low-cost markets that had not yet been added to the VFAM by contacting community partners, organizations, and businesses by phone, email, or in person to gather accurate information about available food assets and to obtain permission for use of their information on VFAM. We obtained updated information about existing map assets based on information provided on asset websites, such as street addresses, hours of operation, and contact information. After data collection, we updated the spreadsheet provided by VCH with information gathered.

### *Map Trialling*

Map trialling of the VFAM was conducted with community members at Bridge Clinic on March 6, 2017 and at the UBC Nest on March 20, 2017, and gathered feedback in the form of evaluation surveys from 13 respondents. We obtained written consent from individuals to collect their data during the trial, in accordance with ethical standards. Translators were used to communicate with non-English speaking participants. Evaluations were anonymous, and individual results were compiled and summarized.

## **Results**

In total, we updated around 77% of the existing food assets and added 3 new assets to the map (Table 1). 14 assets will be removed due to either repetition or declined permission, leading to a current total of 41 food assets (Table 1).

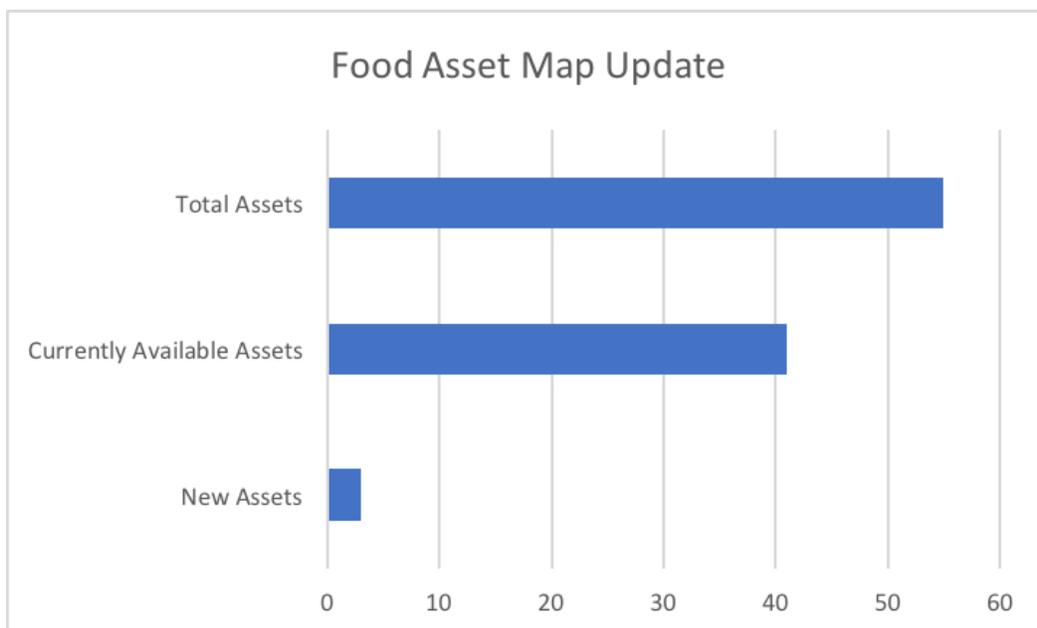


Table 1: Total assets refer to the current number of assets listed on the Google spreadsheet (n=55). Currently available assets exclude repetitive entries or assets with declined permission (n=41). New assets are the ones added during the course of the project (n=3).

Among the participants, 77% reported not knowing how to find food assets in their community prior to being introduced to the map, 46% said they will use the map in the future, and 100% of participants found the map easy to use (Charts 1 and 3; appendix).

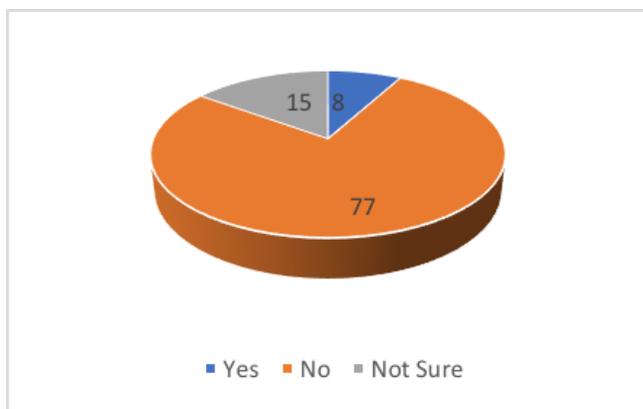


Chart 1. Participants were asked whether they knew how to find food assets in their community (Survey Question 1).

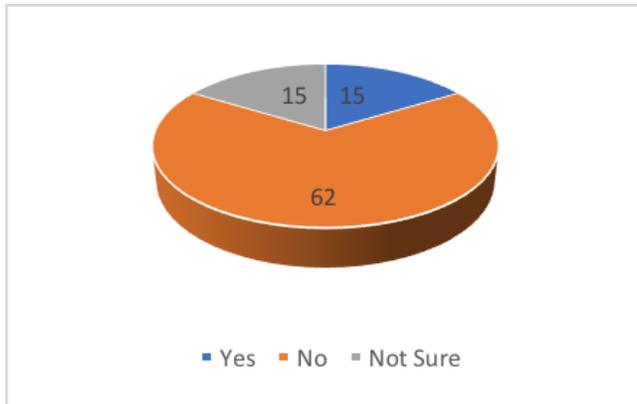


Chart 2. Participants were asked if there is anything that needs to be changed for them to locate food assets in Vancouver more easily (Survey Question 5).

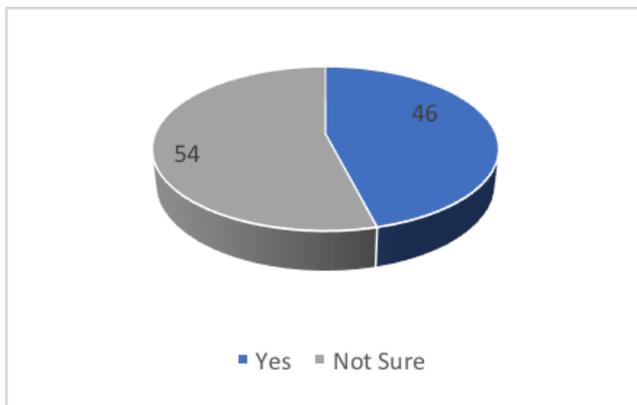


Chart 3. Participants were asked if they will use the Food Asset Map in the future (Survey Question 7).

We also obtained qualitative findings, including written and oral feedback on the usability of the map and suggestions on future improvements (Appendix). Despite instructions for the VFAM being available in other languages, the map itself is in English and we observed non-English-speaking participants having difficulty navigating the map tool. There were a number of suggestions on improving the map's user interface, such as adding cost ranges on different food assets, the ability to monitor the number of visitors to the site, and the option to print map subsections for those who do not have internet access. Community members also reported that they would like to see more food assets in their community such as cheaper meat and poultry sources, more low-cost food options, and community gardens (Appendix).

Though all participants reported the map to be easy to follow, some participants preferred the researchers' oral explanations on navigating the map over written instructions. We tried to obtain a diverse demographic of participants, including different gender, ethnicity and age groups. The map trialling process required significant amount of cooperation within our research group, including introducing the map to the

participant, providing further explanations, and preparing the map along with related documents.

## **Discussion**

Since 46% of the participants reported that they will use the VFAM in the future, their knowledge of the VFAM would likely positively influence their process of searching for low-cost or free grocery items in the future. The need for educating members community members about food assets is evident, as 77% of those surveyed did not know how to locate food assets in their neighbourhood. As the best way to aid a community is by sitting down with community members and listen to their ideas to determine their specific needs, opinions and feedback we obtained on how they view the tool is crucial for the success of the VFAM (Sirroli, 2012).

The goal of the VFAM is to decrease food insecurity through the City of Vancouver by promoting local food assets throughout the city. It shows what is available to community members, especially helping the underused food assets across Vancouver in gaining visibility and support. The map can also help policy makers strategize where and what kind of food assets are in need by the patterns of usage throughout the map. For example, the Greater Vancouver Food Bank recently asked to be removed from the VFAM due to an overflow of VFAM-related traffic. Through this information, adding another food asset in this area of similar type can be looked into based on the community's requirements. Therefore, the map can help direct future development of food assets by examining the trends of unequal distribution of food assets in the city (Toronto Food Policy Council, n.d.).

We encountered a number of limitations when collecting our data at the Bridge Clinic and the UBC Nest. Firstly, we had a very small sample size ( $n=13$ ), with three participants from the Bridge Clinic and ten from the UBC Nest, collected through

convenience sampling at these locations. This small, non-random sample likely does not represent the diversity of Vancouver and is therefore not generalizable to the population. Bias was also possibly introduced into the data due to participants asking for clarification of survey questions, and those who were interested in the subject may have been more willing to participate than those who refused. Finally, we encountered difficulty in identifying new food assets to add to the map, potentially due to the researchers' lack of knowledge about food assets in Vancouver or possibly due to saturation of assets previously populated into the map.

## **Conclusion**

This project has shown that the Vancouver Food Asset Map could be a great resource to increase food security in Vancouver. Through this work, we found that documenting the food assets that exist in Vancouver help gain a sense of what is currently available in the city and this will contribute to making informed decisions regarding future development goals (Food Secure Canada, n.d.). We found the map to be well-received by community members, who reported it to be user-friendly, easily accessible, and potentially beneficial. Despite these findings, the VFAM is still largely unknown to the Vancouver public. We suggest having more advertisement to promote this tool. Further work is also required for increasing accessibility of the map for non-English speaking groups, as these groups are a major demographic in Vancouver that are facing food insecurity. Additionally, we also recommend developing a mobile app for the community to better access the VFAM tool. Future steps may also include pairing VFAM data with neighbourhood demographic information in order to target areas and communities with high populations associated with household food insecurity, such as children, elderly, and recent immigrants (Vancouver Food Policy Council, 2013).

## Critical Reflections

### *Student 1*

In the beginning of the course, I was looking forward to this community-based project as learning from outside of class with a less academic view sounds interesting. However, I was quickly discouraged by the uncertainties and doubts raised from vague project instructions. I understand this is part of the learning experiences but I cannot stop to worry about the progress and outcomes of the project. Continuing with what the previous group has done is challenging in my opinion because there was less freedom for innovative works and we were basically replicating the same work without much insights. Inefficient communication within the group also contribute to further questioning of the project. Effective collaboration was difficult when each member was at his or her own pace without connections and updates with the whole group. Despite all that, I still found some moments of joy throughout the project. It was fulfilling to find new food assets to be added to the map. Even though it was a small contribution I still took it as an achievement in expanding the map. The flexible learning made arranging meetings, whether with community partner or group members, and planning project activities easier. We were able to do a second map trialing to make-up for the insufficient sample size because of flexible learning. Overall, LFS 350 is a decent course looking at another level of food system in community compared to LFS 250. However, students really have to shift the expectation away from seeking a definite impact on food security issue through community based project but to focus on the learning process.

### *Student 2*

I was initially quite excited to work on this project. I'm very interested in public health, and I thought this would be an excellent opportunity for learning about food asset mapping and learn skills that might help me in my future career. I found the online learning materials and readings to be very interesting and contributed to my understanding about topics around food justice and food security. However, the community project itself ended up feeling very restricted in terms of opportunity for learning. The map was already populated with many free and subsidized grocery sources, and it was difficult to find any more to add despite our best efforts. We did update many of the existing assets on the map, but was essentially a simple data-entry task rather than a project worthy of an entire course. Additionally, our community partner did not seem to value our time, as they set us up with a map trialing session explicitly involving only 3 community members to survey. As such, I found that the flexible learning sessions were not of value to my learning. Out of this experience I learned that doing a big project like putting together a food asset map for Vancouver

means completing a lot of little tasks, most of which aren't very exciting or glamorous. Despite the fact that I feel that I didn't really get anything valuable out of this experience, I hope that our efforts contributed somewhat to the Vancouver Food Asset Map project overall.

### *Student 3*

In all honesty, I did not know what to feel or think initially. I did not have any previous knowledge of what a food asset map was. Being a low-income student, I thought the idea of aiding people find free and subsidized groceries, was both relevant and useful. The idea of having a resource that the public can access freely seemed amazing. However, as we were starting the CBEL project, I became very confused. While the flexibility of the learning allowed many different approaches to the project and provided more freedom with our use of time, it also made the project seem directionless and unstructured at times. Not too much time was allocated to meeting the community partners since the map was mostly updated and expanded on our own. I did not find the tutorial meeting very helpful and some of the tutorial activities seemed unrelated towards the project, but it did bring the group together physically to update each other on our progress and how we felt about the project. The use of online platforms, such as the blog, was a way to keeping myself updated with the project but it felt very tedious at times. Although the project felt difficult and seemed as if we were wandering in the dark, it was a great experience. Going to the Bridge Clinic to trial the map was an unique experience and this was my first time working with a translator which was also a unique experience.

### *Student 4*

After taking LFS 250, I started to understand the interrelationships between food, health and environment, and issues related to food insecurity in the current society. However, I did not know how can I get involved in the community and make changes. The most important thing I learned in LFS 350 was that everyone has something to contribute and the CBEL provided me the best chance to cooperate with community members and participated in the VFAM project that help addressing food insecurity. At the very beginning of the semester, I was randomly assigned to this project and I was so confused what I actually needed to do. However, after the orientation organized by Vancouver Coastal Health, I found out that even in a developed city like Vancouver, there are still a lot of people experiencing food insecurity. Nevertheless, there are in fact sufficient resources distributed throughout the city but those who are food insecure did not know their existence. Therefore, VFAM is a very meaningful project that aim at providing a tool for users to search free/low cost food in their neighborhood. Even

though we faced a lot of difficulties, for examples, it was frustrating to find new food assets as previous groups had already updated most of the assets already, we still added 3 new assets and updated current assets with current information through organized work allocation and communication between group members. Although what I have contributed is small, it is a significant step towards addressing food insecurity and I am glad that I had a chance to participate in this project.

#### *Student 5*

I appreciate the design of this project as well as the whole course, since it focuses on equipping us with the proper attitude and transferable skills, in addition to lecture knowledge, to effectively work with our group and community partners. In particular, the well chosen articles and videos in the e-lectures are valuable resource I would still access in the future. Flexible learning was a thoughtful and considerate arrangement as the extra time allotted for us increased the quality of our findings and presentation. Without it we would not have succeeded. Through observation, I have come to notice that it is the strength of some individuals to clear up uncertainty faster than others, and I appreciate having these people in our group to propel all of us forward. What is special about this project is the engagement in a variety of tasks, such as blogging, presenting, designing and being detectives in locating clues for the next food asset, which are not common in other projects I have experienced. A moment of significant change occurred when I was personally surveyed in the CIRS by another LFS student in a different course. It was his way of initiating the conversation, short and concise way of explanation and his attitude that taught me how to effectively survey people for my own project. Though the project required much effort, it helped me grow.

#### *Student 6*

In the beginning of the term, I was excited for this assigned community-based project because I thought I would be able to gain more knowledge about the food assets around Vancouver. As the term went on, I became very confused as to what the purpose of the project was as well as my own in the project. The community partner just seemed interested in us collecting data to update the map, and soon the project just seemed like a data entry job. Furthermore, at the map trialling, we were only provided with a sample of three people, and we were forgotten for about an hour. Although the map trialling with the three newly immigrated individuals was a very rewarding experience, the project as a whole did not make me feel like we have made much of an impact in combatting food insecurity. Also, during our final presentation, the community partner had specifically asked if we had updated more ethnic food assets, but we did not know that this was what they were hoping for. I think the project would have gone a lot smoother if the community partner communicated their hopes and visions for the food asset map, or even just reached out more, so we would have been better

able to cater to their needs. I don't think I learned as much as I was hoping to in this course because the project was very to the point with little room for creativity, as finding or updating new assets was the main task of the project.

## **Appendix**

The following is a compilation raw data, including written and oral responses while trialling with the Vancouver Food Asset Map.

### Written Responses:

1. Before attending this event did you know how to find food assets in your community? e.g., free or low cost meals or groceries, food banks, community gardens, and community kitchens? (If yes, what resources do you use to find food assets?)

**"I did not know that some of these services existed."**

**"Keeping my eyes open."**

2. Was the Food Asset Map tool easy to use? If not, why wasn't it easy to use?

(All respondents report "Yes".)

**"Clear categories."**

**"Pretty much so."**

3. Were the instructions on how to use the Map easy to follow? If not, what was difficult to follow?

(All respondents report "Yes".)

**"A little less detail on the info sheet would be nice."**

**"Though I didn't really look at the instructions."**

4. Was the information provided about the assets easy to understand? If not, what information was difficult to understand? (Please include the asset(s) in your response).

(All respondents report "Yes".)

**"Clear, well laid out."**

**"On the whole, so far as I could see."**

5. Is there anything that needs to be added or changed to make it easier for you to find food assets in Vancouver?

**"More languages on the map."**

**"Maybe add a cost range?"**

**“Wasn’t obvious to click on grey ‘down arrow’.”**

6. What food assets do you want to see in your community?

**“Everything is good.”**

**“Cheaper grocery items and meat & poultry.”**

**“Cheaper groceries.”**

**“More low cost food options, considering high living cost of Vancouver.”**

**“Street that are cost friendly while providing food with sufficient nutrients.”**

**“More food banks in the UBC area.”**

**“Community gardens, independent and low cost grocery.”**

**“Community gardens, community kitchens.”**

**“Grocery stores.”**

7. Will you use the Food Asset Map in the future? (why or why not?)

**“Not sure: It would be something to keep in the back of my mind, but I wouldn’t use it regularly.”**

**“Not sure: Depends, but I will try and see if it benefits my budgeting and gives satisfaction.”**

**“Yes: To search for these services if I need them or to recommend it to others.”**

**“Yes: good for students to find affordable food options.”**

**“Yes: easy to use , very comprehensive.”**

**“Not sure: probably not – I have my habits already but it looks great.”**

**“Not sure: good for reference.”**

**“Yes: it’s helpful to find things.”**

Oral Comments:

**“The “zoom in/out” pop up box on the map is blocking the way sometimes.”**

**“Due to the long list of names, it is easy to mistake the gray arrow “v” as only representative of the 1<sup>st</sup> category under each heading.”**

**“Perhaps print out subsections or information and put at community centre etc.”**

**“Include a function on the map that tracks the number of visitors who access the map.”**

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