



SEED Wholesale – Distributing Food to Supportive Housing Evaluation Report

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Taylor Newberry Consulting is a consulting organization located in Guelph, Ontario. Across many social service and health sectors, our goal is to help organizations and communities generate the information, tools, and resources they need to improve their work and create strategic change.

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Introduction

The SEED is working toward a connected community in Guelph-Wellington where everyone has access to healthy food. As part of the movement, The SEED operates a social enterprise called SEED Wholesale. This enterprise provides purchased wholesale and free surplus food to food banks, food pantries, school snack/lunch programs, and to other community organizations. Their wholesale program aims to offer lower prices than other distributors, and surplus food that is collected through donations and food rescue efforts is offered free to partner organizations.

In 2024, The SEED partnered supportive housing operators Kindle, Stepping Stone and Wyndham House to promote access to high quality, nutritious food for tenants at supportive housing sites through wholesale and surplus food delivery. United Way Guelph Wellington Dufferin awarded the partnership a grant to pilot this collaborative work. While Kindle owns the 10 Shelldale Permanent Supportive Housing building, Stonehenge is the program operator and so has been included in this project and report.

The SEED also has a longstanding partnership with Chalmers and Hope House. Wholesale and surplus food delivery is also provided to these partners on a regular basis, in part funded by United Way Guelph Wellington Dufferin. Each of the partners listed above are part of the Poverty to Possibility food and housing network convened and funded by the United Way.

Partners use the food distributed by The SEED in the following ways:

- **Stonehenge:** The organization has created a food cupboard at the 10 Shelldale supportive housing site that is offered free of charge to tenants. Breakfast is also sometimes provided using food provided through the wholesale program.
- **Stepping Stone:** Surplus food is mainly incorporated into three programs offered to supportive housing tenants including a breakfast program, meal preparation program and a dinner program.
- **Wyndham House:** Wholesale and surplus food is incorporated into congregate meals and snacks that are provided to youth supportive housing tenants.
- **Chalmers:** Wholesale and surplus food is delivered to their food pantry where clients are provided with food boxes every two weeks.
- **Hope House:** Wholesale and surplus food is delivered to the Food Market located inside Hope House and to 8 seniors social housing locations in Guelph where it is incorporated into no-cost markets offered to tenants once a month.

The Evaluation

The SEED contracted Taylor Newberry Consulting (TNC) to support an evaluation of these partnership models focused specifically on identifying successes, challenges and lessons learned about this type of collaborative work. The evaluation also focused on exploring the benefits that the partners and their clients experienced as a result of access to the food provided by The SEED.

Evaluation Methods

The evaluation period covered June 2024 to March 2025. In November 2024, TNC spoke to representatives from Chalmers, Hope House and Wyndham House, and in March 2025 spoke to representatives from Stepping Stone and Stonehenge¹ to discuss successes, challenges and lessons learned about this collaborative work, as well as the benefits that their clients experience as a result.

TNC explored the possibility of asking staff to connect with clients/tenants to solicit stories about the impact that the wholesale and surplus food has had on their lives. Staff explained that typically, clients/tenants do not know the source of the food so it would be challenging to engage them in conversations about this topic. However, staff (who are aware of the source of the food) were able to make significant observations about the individual level impacts on clients/tenants.

TNC also spoke with staff from The SEED directly involved in the operation of SEED Wholesale (i.e., SEED Manager, Warehouse and Delivery Coordinator, Wholesale Services Coordinator) about their perceptions of the successes, challenges and lessons learned. TNC also met with The SEED's manager on a regular basis to discuss project updates and insights.

The SEED also tracked key indicators of interest related to the distribution of food provided to each partner. Specifically, through their online ordering system, they tracked:

- the dollar value of surplus food delivered to partners
- cost savings for each partner as a result of ordering food through the wholesale and surplus food delivery program
- frequency of orders for each agency

The possibility of partners providing data on the following indicators was also explored, but due to limitations of their internal systems and confidentiality concerns we

¹ Conversations with staff from Stonehenge and Stepping Stone took place at this later date to account for the fact that they were newer partners and it was important that they experience the program for a number of weeks before providing feedback for the evaluation.

collaboratively decided that this data would not be shared for the evaluation. However, during their interviews, they did provide descriptive responses that speak to these indicators:

- changes in the variety of food available at each organization
- changes in the dollar value of funds available to purchase food at each organization

Findings

The following sections document the challenges, successes and lessons learned about this type of work, and highlight important outcomes experienced by both clients and partner organizations. In many instances, challenges were addressed in real time due to the responsiveness of The SEED. However, they are presented in this report to document the evolution of the program and to provide insights about changes that could be made as new partners join. It was clear from speaking with newer partners that many had positive experiences owing to changes that The SEED had already made based on feedback from longer standing partners.

Challenges

Partners were invited to share the challenges they faced in ordering and receiving food from The SEED. Staff from The SEED were similarly asked to comment on any challenges that they experienced fulfilling and delivering orders. Several partners began their responses by acknowledging the complexity of the system they operate within, noting that systemic barriers and factors beyond The SEED's control can sometimes affect the services provided. These factors are reflected in the responses they shared below.

Communication between Partner Agencies and The SEED

During the evaluation period, staff turnover and absences occurred at The SEED² and at two partner organizations. When turnover happened at partner organizations, staff from The SEED sometimes struggled to identify the right contacts to maintain smooth operations. Additionally, Wyndham House, as a new partner, noted that turnover may have slowed the establishment of processes required to operate the program.

In November 2024, staff from Hope House said that the main challenge was deliveries not arriving during agreed-upon windows, leaving available volunteers unable to help with unloading and storing the deliveries. The SEED's delivery driver did help when volunteers were unavailable, but Hope House staff would have preferred that their own volunteers, who wanted to help, be involved. Attempts to contact The SEED about the

² These absences were short-lived and have not had a lasting impact on any partnerships or processes.

delays sometimes went unanswered. Hope House staff emphasized that timely updates about delays would have helped them inform volunteers and market customers about product arrivals.

As of November 2024 staff from Chalmers also explained that they only have volunteers available at certain times to help with deliveries, and The SEED was not always able to accommodate this schedule.

While inconsistent delivery times created challenges for the partners, they noted that improved communication about delays could have made the experience more positive. They expressed understanding of The SEED's constraints and acknowledged that similar challenges with volunteers and staffing often arise within their own organizations. Additionally, these challenges appear to have been an issue more for organizations that relied on volunteers rather than those that had staff onsite available to receive the deliveries. Since hearing this feedback, The SEED now contacts organizations to let them know if their delivery will be delayed. Newer partners noted that they have not had any challenges with receiving their deliveries.

Challenge: In Fall 2024 there were inconsistent delivery times and partners did not receive updates about when their delivery might arrive.

Adjustment made by The SEED: Staff from The SEED now contact each partner if their delivery will be delayed, and newer partners have not experienced any challenges with communication around their delivery times.

As a newer partner, a staff member from Stonehenge noted that they are unsure of the process for ordering surplus food. They suggested that it could be helpful for The SEED to create an information sheet that explains how to order both surplus food and wholesale products, as well as a description of other ways their tenants might be able to access food from The SEED. This type of information sheet could also support newer staff at organizations should there be staff turnover.

Recommendation 1: The SEED could create a short webpage of information that is shared on the Wholesale landing page of their online store that explains the process for ordering wholesale and surplus food. All partners who place orders would have access to this page, making it easily accessible for all staff, including those who might be newer to the process.

Although the partners stated that there are open lines of communication between their organization and The SEED, some felt that more consistent, formal check-ins could be

valuable. Staff from The SEED agreed and noted that they recently did a more formal check-in with Chalmers, who recently experienced some staff turnover with key members involved in ordering from The SEED's program.

Recommendation 2: Offer regular, quick and voluntary check-ins with partner organizations to discuss challenges and insights into how things could be improved within the program. The type of check-in (e.g., over the phone, video call, etc.) could accommodate what works best for each partner in order to facilitate ongoing improvements to the program.

Unpredictability of Surplus Food

The original surplus food delivery model involved staff from The SEED (a) communicating with each partner about what surplus food was available and then asking them what they would like to order or (b) making decisions about the type and quantity of surplus food that would be shared with each partner organization. This model posed some challenges for partners. In the first scenario, Hope House noted that in the early days, they often did not receive communication about what was available and therefore were not able to place a surplus food order. In the second scenario, Wyndham House noted that they would sometimes receive large quantities of perishable food (e.g., yogurt) that they did not have the capacity to store at their site. As a result, some of the food would go to waste. Staff from Hope House also shared that some of the surplus food they received in the second scenario was not as nutritious as they would have liked. However, they also emphasized that having some of this type of food (e.g., candy, chocolate, pre-made snacks) in stock at their market was valued by customers.

Although Wyndham House occasionally received perishable items beyond their storage capacity, they often found creative ways to utilize large quantities of surplus produce. For example, they made batches of salsa from surplus tomatoes and prepared apple sauce and apple muffins from surplus apples. By doing so, they transformed perishable items into storable foods, extending their ability to use them over a longer time period.

Staff from Stepping Stone said that the quantities of surplus food offered by The SEED are sometimes too large and they will not order them as a result. They explained that they would likely be unable to use that quantity of product and they would feel bad ordering it only to have a portion of it spoil.

More recently The SEED has reduced the volume of the bins of surplus food, allowing partners to order fewer units. The amount of food may still be too large for some partners, but this new model has reduced some of the challenges noted above.

Challenge: The original model of surplus food delivery, staff from The SEED would let partners know what surplus food was available to order, or would make decisions about what food would be delivered to each organization. Sometimes partners did not receive communication about what food was available and would therefore not place an order, or would receive orders that were too large for their storage capacity.

Adjustments made by The SEED: In consultation with partners, The SEED developed a method of online ordering for surplus food. This way partners are able to select as much or as little as they like/need of any available item. To ensure the products were of high quality, The SEED also established a quality control process, ensuring spoiled items are not received by partners. The SEED also began packing surplus into smaller bins so that partners can order smaller quantities that better align with their storage capacity and program needs.

Successes

Over the past few months, there have been a number of successes that demonstrate the accomplishments of the partnership.

The SEED's Responsiveness to Feedback

Partners shared that when they told The SEED about a challenge, they were generally able to address it collaboratively. Significant changes have been made to the wholesale and surplus food distribution model over the past few months, some of which were informed by feedback from the partners and observations made by staff from The SEED. There are still some outstanding challenges, but The SEED is dedicated to improving their model wherever possible and will explore additional adaptations in the future.

In part, this ability to respond to feedback is facilitated by The SEED's commitment to trying new things, with the acknowledgement that they might not get it right the first time. They are working towards positive outcomes for their community, and finding the best process can take time and adaptations. They have significant experience with building their online system (through Groceries from The SEED) too which has made tweaks to the wholesale and surplus food delivery program easier. Ultimately, they approach their work with a continuous improvement mindset and this is highly valued by their partners.

Getting Partners Up and Running

Staff from The SEED acknowledged that most organizations they partner with have limited staff capacity. Staff at partner organizations often have full work plans and setting up a partnership, learning the ins and outs of the process, and ultimately placing their first order can take time. Some organizations, like Stepping Stone were in the

process of setting up new programming where the surplus and wholesale food would be used which meant that despite being motivated to order food, orders were not immediately placed. Since a number of changes have been made to the way The SEED's program works, newer partners have stated that the process is smooth and easily incorporable into their organization's daily functioning, which has supported their staff's capacity.

Reliable Funding from United Way Guelph-Wellington-Dufferin

The funding for the current pilot was for one year, but The SEED also has a five-year funding agreement with United Way Guelph Wellington Dufferin that supports this type of work. Staff from The SEED noted that having reliable funding from United Way Guelph Wellington Dufferin has given them confidence to try new things and improve the efficiency of their operation. Without this reliability, staff explained that it would be challenging to know where to allocate resources. With the funding that they have received they have been able to hire additional staff and adapt their systems to better support their partners.

Benefits to Clients and Tenants

Because they order from other distributors, or do not always disclose the source of the food to clients and tenants, staff from partner agencies noted that they were not able to provide detailed feedback from their clients about the impact that the food from The SEED has made on their lives. However, staff were still able to provide some valuable insights.

Improved Food Skills among Youth

As a new partner, Wyndham House saw some important benefits for youth at their supportive housing sites. Specifically, through observing staff (and sometimes helping them) make bulk products out of the surplus produce (e.g., apple sauce, salsa), youth learned important food skills that will benefit them in the long-term.

Reducing Barriers to Accessing Food

Staff noted that onsite delivery and availability of food to clients/tenants removes transportation barriers to food access. For example, staff from the Hope House seniors markets said that tenants have shared that they are grateful that the food comes to their building because accessing transportation is a significant challenge for them.

Increased Food Security

While food security more broadly remains an issue, staff from all of the partner agencies noted that there have been small increases in food security for clients/tenants due to the influx of food from The SEED. For example, staff from Wyndham House explained that they have observed an increase in food security for youth at their *concurrent hub* site.

Staff created a food pantry at this site and were able to distribute the surplus food to clients. As a result, clients had a greater quantity and variety of food, and the food they received was often more nutritious than food they might have received elsewhere. Staff from Stonehenge also created a food pantry for tenants and noted that some of the fresh food they receive (e.g., bananas) is not available to tenants at other places like the food bank.

Speaking about youth at their *permanent supportive housing* site specifically, Wyndham House explained that there has not been any significant changes in the amount of food available to their youth, but youth have noticed that there is more fresh food. Prior to their partnership with The SEED, staff explained that youth often complained that there wasn't enough fresh food. With the ability to provide more fresh food, and food that they have made themselves with the surplus products, staff noted that youth feel heard. However, because the availability of fresh surplus food is inconsistent, the availability of this type of food remains unpredictable.

Supporting Other Programming

Stepping Stone has a medication program where they store tenants' medication. Some tenants do not like taking their medication but products received from the surplus food program provide an incentive. Staff shared that an unexpected benefit of the partnership with The SEED is that they have access to drinks like *Prime* or *Ensure* that they provide to tenants alongside medication which encourages them to take it.

Additionally, staff from Stepping Stone said that having extra food on hand that they can quickly provide to tenants has been useful in de-escalation. Staff shared that there have been instances where tenants are having a hard day and providing them with food can support them through it.

Improved Well-Being

Hope House staff responsible for the senior's market shared that the food offered at the markets often elicits positive emotions from tenants. This is particularly evident when familiar and meaningful foods are offered that remind them of the food they grew up eating. Staff at Chalmers also said that guests at their food pantry appreciate when culturally relevant food is available, and when foods like oranges are made available because they are not typically purchased by Chalmers.

Growing a Sense of Community

Food brings people together. A number of partners mentioned that they witnessed greater engagement among their tenants when providing food through various avenues. For example, staff from Stonehenge explained that they have observed more interaction between tenants who come and attend their breakfast offerings that includes food like

fruit and yogurt that is supplied through The SEED. Staff also said that they themselves have stronger connections with tenants as a result of engaging in conversations over the food that has been made available.

Hope House staff responsible for the seniors markets also shared that they have seen some beautiful instances of neighbours picking up food for one another when they are unable to attend the market.

Organizational Outcomes

The Wholesale program is meant to maximize the good food that organizations have to offer and to reinforce the good work already being done. This outcome was evident from conversations with partners. Most partners we spoke with said that The SEED is not the only distributor that they work with (or the only organization they purchase food from), but that The SEED plays a key role in their ability to provide fresh and desirable food to their clients.

Connecting Community-based Organizations

Although staff from Hope House appreciate the delivery service that The SEED provides, they did say that one thing they miss about picking up the food themselves from The SEED's warehouse was the sense of community and ability to connect with other organizations. On pick-up day, there were often representatives from other organizations present at the warehouse.

Staff from Chalmers said that they would appreciate building a larger network of like-minded organizations working towards similar goals and noted that The SEED could play an important role in facilitating these connections given their widespread and strong relationships.

Staff from The SEED noted that there is a regular, virtual meeting with emergency food providers in Guelph and Wellington called "Peas in the POD" (which is attended by Hope House). Due to staff turnover at Chalmers it may not be known to them, but a link and connection can be shared.

Challenge: In one iteration of The SEED's model, partners were required to attend The SEED's warehouse to shop for product, not knowing what would be in stock that day.

Adjustment made by The SEED: Based on consultations with partners, it was clear that they desired a faster and easier shopping experience, so The SEED implemented an online ordering system that allows partners to place orders ahead of time and pick them up later. This change has improved the efficiency of the shopping process, but some partners miss the sense of community that came with spending more time at the

warehouse.

Recommendation 3: If there is interest, extend an invitation to Chalmers (and other interested partners) to attend the Peas in the POD meeting. If possible, host this meeting in-person to facilitate connections and relationships, perhaps on a quarterly basis.

The Quantity of Food

In total, the Seed Wholesale program distributed food worth \$222,396 to supportive housing programs during the period of this evaluation. All partners said that the food they receive from The SEED has a positive impact on the quantity of food that they have available to their clients. For example, we have already seen that Wyndham House reported an increase in the food security of some of their tenants as a result of the food provided by The SEED, and staff from Chalmers indicated that they place a consistent order of key staples that their clients have come to expect. Overall, any quantity of food provided through The SEED is appreciated.

The Affordability of Food

Surplus food, distributed free to partners, made up more than half of the total food delivered. This represented a savings of \$112,521 for partners, compared to what they would have paid at typical wholesale rates.

Location	Surplus	Paid
Wyndham House	\$21,710.00	\$1,270.00
Stepping Stone	\$3,968.00	\$146.00
Stonehenge	\$1,500.00	\$13,000.00
Hope House	\$24,700.00	\$45,846.00
Chalmers	\$60,643.00	\$49,613.00

Staff from each partner agency reported varying perceptions of the affordability of the food distributed by The SEED. Staff from Wyndham House noted that the wholesale food offered by The SEED is not more affordable than the same food they purchase from other sources. However, as described above, they do have more food as a result of the surplus food available to them. Staff from Chalmers indicated that the wholesale food prices are affordable and for the products they purchase, often cheaper than other

sources. Hope House staff commented that the prices for wholesale items are reasonable. Stonehenge makes smaller purchases on a weekly basis but noted that ordering food from The SEED is a good way to affordably supplement other food purchases. At the time of writing this report, Stepping Stone had only ordered surplus food but was about to make a wholesale purchase so they were unable to comment on the affordability of the wholesale food.

The Quality of Food

The original surplus food delivery model sometimes resulted in partner agencies receiving produce that was not edible. In the original model surplus food was collected by The SEED from various sources and then sent to partners as is. Partners let The SEED know about this issue, and The SEED made adjustments to their model. They now convene volunteers (whose numbers have grown significantly this past year) to sort the produce, removing any pieces that have passed their prime. Since this change was made, partners explained that the quality of the food they receive has been very good.

Staff from the Hope House seniors markets explained that while some food that is past its best before date is perfectly acceptable in many circumstances, it is not for seniors who have chronic health issues. The staff member explained that as a regulated health professional themselves, they are not willing to provide food past its best before date to senior clients at the markets. This is not an issue across the board. Many organizations are able to accept these kinds of foods.

Challenge: The original model of surplus food delivery involved The SEED collecting food from various sources and then delivering the food to partners without detailed inspection. Partners sometimes received food, particularly produce, that was not edible.

Adjustment made by The SEED: The SEED now convenes volunteers to sort and inspect all of the surplus food, removing any product that is not aligned with The SEED's quality standards.

The Availability and Variety of Food

Overall, partners appreciated the availability and variety of food offered by The SEED. When certain foods were not available, staff said that they could reach out to The SEED to see if it could be supplied. A number of staff said that the availability of fresh food like fruits and vegetables is highly appreciated because these are foods that are often unaffordable to their clients/tenants.

Chalmers staff said that they place a regular order of key staples that their clients have come to expect. They appreciate that these wholesale items are always available because it ensures predictability in what they are able to offer.

As noted, the availability of surplus food items understandably varies given that they are based on donations and food picked up from other sources that do not offer consistent products. Partners still appreciate that different items are offered, but it may mean that they do not request surplus food items on a regular basis. For example, since The SEED set Hope House up to order surplus food through the online store, they have not made an order because fresh food products have been limited.

Challenge: The SEED has heard from partners that surplus fruits and vegetables remain the key items in demand at their agencies.

Adjustment made by The SEED: While 1/4 to 1/2 of what is received, sorted, and distributed each week is produce, The SEED has made two new key connections that will significantly increase the amount of free produce available to partners.

Hope House also said that the variety of food available through The SEED is similar to what they are able to get elsewhere but they also emphasized that they used to receive surplus meat through The SEED's wholesale program and this was hugely beneficial for their market customers. At the time of their interview meat was not available through The SEED's online store due to supply issues. However, since then The SEED has resolved that issue through an appeal to a supplier.

Conclusions

The SEED's Wholesale and Surplus Food Delivery program plays an important role in increasing the quantity of high quality food available to members of the Guelph-Wellington community. Food worth more than \$220,000 has been distributed to supportive housing programs. More than half of it has been surplus food, provided at no cost to partners. Staff from partner agencies spoke highly of the program and of The SEED's staff. They value their relationship and all staff said that they would recommend the program to other organizations. Since the conclusion of this evaluation, another partner that provides housing supports, Thresholds, has also signed on. It is clear that this important work continues to build.

The SEED's responsiveness to their partners' feedback has resulted in significant improvements in the program including:

- contacting partners to let them know if their deliveries will be delayed

- adding surplus food to the online ordering system to allow partners to pick and choose the type and quantity of the food they order
- reducing the volume of the surplus food bins so that partners can purchase smaller quantities that may be more aligned with their storage and usage capacity
- establishing a strong volunteer system of food sorting to offer high quality food to partners.

Partners also explained that this work has crucial benefits for their clients, such as:

- improved food skills
- reduction of barriers to food access
- increased food security
- improved well-being
- a stronger sense of community
- support to other programming that their clients attend

Very much related to these individual level outcomes are benefits that organizations receive from this partnership that help them to better support their clients. These organizational level benefits include:

- increased quantity of food available to clients
- improved quality of food
- improved affordability of food
- increased availability and variety of food

The need for this type of initiative is evident. We are currently facing an affordability crisis, with food prices increasing exponentially. Many nonprofit organizations have limited budgets for groceries, but food is such an essential component of the support that they might provide to members of the community. Over the past few months, some organizations saw an influx in clients accessing their food programming and needs are only expected to grow within the current political climate.

Strong partnership models like those held by The SEED and the agencies who participated in this evaluation play a key role in addressing community need. But with many budgets stretched thin, significant financial investments in these models is essential.