

A Hidden Community in the Migrant Capital of the World



Leadership-in-Action Report

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Nested in the quiet and artistic neighbourhood of Oakwood, Toronto is a beautifully humble home housing the FCJ Refugee Centre. **“My doors are always open”** reads the prominent yellow sign on the wooden door. Walk through, and the shift in energy is undeniable. Service, determination, empathy, passion, and love radiate from the family of humanity workers in this open working office. This centre is only one in a handful of primary healthcare settings serving arguably the most overlooked, stigmatized, and vulnerable population in the city: individuals without healthcare insurance. In early July, I was welcomed into this centre’s clinic.

“Walking with uprooted people” reads the centre’s slogan. Empowerment is the goal and I saw it happen daily as employees assisted communities of refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented people navigate systemic issues in the realms of settlement, immigration, anti-human trafficking, and education. This place is the all-in-one jackpot, truly wholesome in so many regards.

My interests lie in the intersection of healthcare and social determinants of health. In this vibrant clinic, choosing and **prioritizing a project was perhaps the most challenging part.**

Did I want to compile more mental health resources?

Examine the demographic of clients that visited the clinic?

Research the Ontario government's cut to health care threatening the lives of patients?

Create educational nutrition programming for patients?

I wanted to do it all and so much more. However, a discussion with my project advisor and clinic supervisor highlighted the complete lack of nutrition education and programming available to patients. **Food is preventive medicine, and it can make a world of a difference for chronic disease management, treatment, and prevention for people of all ages.** And so, in line with the centre’s theme of empowerment, I set out on my attempt to be of service to present and future clients through creating relevant and easy-to-understand nutrition programming.

Meeting with the food bank representative at FCJ, I learnt about the weekly food bank at the centre that supports many clients and non-clients alike. **On a Thursday afternoon, I saw it in action.** The Second Harvest truck would arrive at the centre and drop off donated nonperishable items and some days fresh produce. These items were divided into bags and distributed to individuals and families who relied on this invaluable service.



My project advisor encouraged me to sift through the donated food items to get a better idea of my audience for the nutrition programming. **A swarm of news headlines crossed my mind as I did.**

“Toronto food banks are at a breaking point ”

“Food bank use is at an all-time high”

“Post COVID-19 grocery prices continue to spike”

I remember seeing these on TV but seeing an actual food bank in operation, made me think deeply about my privileges and think critically about structural barriers impacting the clients I saw in front of me. **Admittedly, I questioned, to what extent an individual relying entirely on food banks could develop and sustain a healthy diet?** By skimming through the nutritional value tables and ingredients of these food items and remembering the patterns of chronic illness impacting clients at the clinic, the problem was evident.

Over the course of a few days, I had thought-provoking conversations with my project advisor about structural barriers:

- Food banks and the role of corporate donors. Did food banks fear losing these donors who donate in large quantities but often unhealthy products?
- Why does this gap exist? The obvious gap between the nutritional needs of clients and the actual nutritional profile of food available to them.
- I wondered about the limited fresh produce. Was this solely an urban city problem?

My first SMART goal was to engage my curiosity by learning about the food bank system by asking good questions. I did just that. The answer to every question was multifaceted because all big social issues from education to housing are very interlinked.

My second SMART goal was to develop a wholesome understanding of the population and the health barriers they face through research. **For the next few days, I scanned through dozens of publications, non-profit work, and news articles showcasing quantitative and qualitative data focused on migrant health in Canada.** The health of Canadian citizens is covered by OHIP (Ontario Health Insurance Plan). Refugee health is covered by the IFHP (Interim Federal Health Plan). Uninsured and undocumented individuals must pay medical bills and expenses in full and have access to zero sources of nutrition programming. **Undocumented families were also the population with the greatest reliance on the food bank.**

Next, health barriers confronting undocumented individuals were the heaviest topic to research. Employees at the FCJ were always on the phone assisting with patient translation, giving hope to clients denied at hospital facilities, explaining medical bills, creating payment plans, and sometimes making the difficult decision to turn away patients who could not be supported by the clinic. **Working in this open office space, I passively overheard dozens of stories of migrant struggles.** Just a month ago, living in my university student bubble with all these doors of possibility ahead of me, I could not have ever imagined that a whole community in my city was searching for just one open door that would allow them through. The barriers to healthcare for undocumented people are extensive:

- Cost can be in the thousands of dollars, which may leave individuals without insurance permanently in debt or trading off other basic necessities to pay bills.
- Language barriers can lead to adverse drug reactions, ineffective medication prescriptions, and less access to mental health services.
- Culture incompatibility, fear of being reported, perceived criminalization, harassment, racism, discrimination, and the list unfortunately goes on.

Gaining this understanding of the system and population I was working with was vital for my next SMART goal: compile my learnings to make a comprehensive nutrition program for the centre. **I broke down the topics I wanted to cover within the realm of healthy eating: the Canadian Food Guide, eating on a budget, and how to use food banks.** This was a lengthy process. I went down multiple internet rabbit holes searching for the best tips and resources I could find for individuals with limited budgets and who relied on food banks. I wanted the information to be all in one place and in my presentation, I wanted to explain everything in the clearest way possible.

“Drain the liquid out of the canned vegetable to reduce sodium intake”. **Tips like these, I was overwhelmed with happiness to find and share.** It was relevant to individuals who relied on food banks as canned and processed items were a common find. And a tip like this was one small and

easy step that could help dramatically decrease sodium intake and therefore, combat various chronic illnesses related to heart health. On the other hand, searching for healthy recipes with few ingredients available to clients, was a difficult task. With the rising prices of groceries and increased use of food banks in the city, I was surprised by the limited number of digital resources/cookbooks/articles available to guide people on how to optimize their diet while using food banks.

My final deliverables consisted of three videos accompanied by PowerPoint presentations:

Video 1: Healthy Eating Pt.1 – Canadian Food Guide: A Quick & Easy Overview

Video 2: Healthy Eating Pt. 2 – Eating Healthy on a Budget: Tips & Resources

Video 3: Healthy Eating Pt. 3 – A Helpful Guide: Calories, Nutrients, & Food Banks

These videos will be translated by my program advisor for the large Spanish-speaking community that FCJ serves. Eventually, they will be published on FCJ's website for foodbank and clinic patients to watch at the request of staff. The impact of these videos will be monitored by the viewership. The ultimate long-term goal is that the nutrition information and resources provided in the video will be used by viewers to slowly develop and sustain healthier diet choices for life.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Laidlaw Scholars Foundation for two years of transformative opportunities that have helped me develop a global perspective on health and wellbeing. The UofT Laidlaw Foundation, in particular, Shraddha has immensely supported me every step of the way and I am grateful for her beyond words can express. I want to thank the FCJ Refugee Centre for being a wonderful host. Finally, I am truly inspired and in awe of my mentors and project advisors, Elisa and Tsering, who have both trusted me with my work and have been an unwavering source of support throughout the summer. Thank you all!