



Good Cents Community Pantry: Growing skills, social connections and food.

Initiative: Good Cents Porirua.

Theme: Creating and sustaining momentum

Good Cents emerged out of conversations between women food bank clients in financial difficulty who shared their stories and found that they had some experiences in common. Alongside its flagship Good Cents course a new initiative is growing: a community pantry.

Wesley Community action has run a food bank in Porirua since 1993. The food bank from inception has been a hub of the community service centre that has developed in Porirua. All manner of related services have since developed out of needs often first identified because of relationship with people accessing the food bank. A latest example of this is the Cannons Creek Community Pantry which has just completed its first year. It aims to evolve the current food bank from only providing food into a place where people can come to grow and harvest food, share skills and learn about gardening, cooking and healthy eating, all while also building social connections and confidence. Already food is harvested from the garden by volunteers for their own use and for inclusion in food parcels. As production increases, it is intended that community meetings and Tangihanga will also be supplied.

This evolution has been generated through discussions with those in the local Porirua community, including food bank users. These discussions support data from national studies that show the links between inadequate food security and low incomes, as well as to obesity and chronic disease and they also reveal that communities who experience these situations also have aspirations and skills to share.

In Cannons Creek, these aspirations and skills include growing 'a good food community' that works collaboratively to address the reasons why some people do not consistently have enough food. A generation ago, home vegetable gardens were commonplace in Cannons Creek but these skills have slowly been lost as the pace and nature of contemporary New Zealand communities has changed. Relearning to rely on less supermarket based forms of food provision is intended to not only fill cupboards but also to grow a work ethic, a sense of community participation and reciprocity, reduce social isolation and improve education, skills and health and wellbeing.

So, with the food bank continuing to be run as an emergency food programme, the Cannons Creek Pantry project embarked on the development of non-monetary alternative ways of establishing regular food security. With some substantial planning, the north facing slope of the Porirua office was cultivated into a garden that could supply the food bank and other Wesley programmes. Now, one year on, 110 square metres is in production and people who use the food bank now have a way of contributing towards the pantry by volunteering in the garden.

This idea of offering something in return particularly resonated with those who felt embarrassed and ashamed of needing food parcels, and also with those who once had vegetable gardens of their own. It quickly became attractive to others wanting to learn about food and gardening too: food bank users are invited to pick their own produce for inclusion in their food parcel which gives them a sense of what a garden can be and the taste and quality of freshly picked food. It also creates a more 'natural' opportunity to talk about their situations including how gardening might contribute positively. It has often been the case that someone who picked for their own food parcel on one day comes back to help out on another.

Locals have also contributed to the garden by donating tools and seedlings. Over 100 tools now comprise a tool library, from which families can borrow tools on a long term basis for their home gardens. These home gardens are also supplied with seeds, plants and advice and, in less than a year, 14 households have taken these offers up directly and grown home food gardens. Anecdotal evidence suggests that they have been sharing the tools, plants and advice over their garden fences too, which is exactly what is strived for!

Achievements go beyond food production. Clients and community service workers (ordered by the Courts) increasingly describe themselves as 'wanting to help the community'. Responses from participants so far indicate that volunteering in the garden changes the kind of food they eat, grows their self esteem and sense of giving and receiving as well as their understandings of the local physical and social environments.

In some cases, these understandings have been developed by skill building sessions. Such sessions have been held in relation to composting, planting and cooking as well as gardening with kids and a tour of inspirational gardens. Such sessions have been run, where possible, with community members taking a leading role and this has really helped to build a sense of 'team' amongst the core

volunteer gardeners. Members of this team regularly tend the garden on weekends and in holidays and have provided crucial weeding and watering services at critical out of hours times.

Along with the building and managing of these volunteer relationships, the Cannons Creek Community Pantry is also building new organisational relationships, both locally and internationally. Donations of both goods and money have been received as a result and the Pantry is contributing to an international learning network run through The Stop in [Toronto](#).

This progress has not been without its stresses, however. Volunteers' interest waxes and wanes, and can be affected by who else is interested too. When new people begin to take ownership of particular patches or aspects of the garden, sometimes those who have been there for a while move on. Opening up the garden to food bank users has also added a layer of chaos to the garden and regular volunteers. Relationships between staff and clients become more blurry as individuals bring along family members to help and not only share the work but also many cups of tea with both staff and visitors. The house in general has become much busier as the garden has developed and this has required some gentle but firm management. As well, volunteer gardeners often receive more food parcels once they start volunteering than when they were not. This is an interesting dilemma yet to be resolved.

Intent: The Community Pantry aims to evolve the current food bank from only providing food into a place where people can come to grow and harvest food, share skills and learn about gardening, cooking and healthy eating, all while also building social connections and confidence

Key Learnings:

- People respond to an opportunity to give back in a meaningful way and are empowered by their own participation.
- Over time, someone's empowerment will lead them first to take more prominent roles and then to move on to other opportunities. This leaves gaps and can unsettle things for a time before new involvement and leadership emerges.
- Developing and maintaining strong relationships is a crucial in both developing and sustaining innovative developments to community services. The strong relational (rather than compliance) model on which the food bank has always run is what enabled the vision to transition to a pantry model.

Key Outcomes:

- More people are now involved and the volunteers are drawn primarily from the local community not from other suburbs.
- The garden producing good food and is providing a model for others. It's also a place where people's hidden talents can be valued and celebrated.
- With the support of the tool library, seedlings and mentoring, many new gardens are being planted in only a short time.

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