

# The Hunger Game:

*Alberta organizations fighting food insecurity and waste*

BY LYNDA SEA



**T**HIS 2020 HOLIDAY SEASON inevitably looks different for everyone, no matter who or where you are.

While food insecurity in Alberta has always been an issue, it has sharpened ever more into focus this year for many, amplified by the pandemic and struggling economy. Here are some community-led organizations addressing food access, nutrition, and sustainable food systems in Edmonton and Calgary so that no one goes hungry.

## Grow Calgary

Nicholas Rowley was a young chef at Sheraton Suites Eau Claire in Calgary who found himself laid off in March at the height of the COVID-19 shutdown. After taking some odd jobs, he started volunteering at Grow Calgary, a community farm near Balzac in Rockyview County - something he always wanted to do but couldn't due to

working restaurant hours.

"For me, it has been great to take stock, learn new skills and maybe even do a farm-to-table concept of my own, down the line," he says. "I've been so used to having food brought to me to do cool things with, but haven't been as involved with growing and making food."

Rowley is one of many Grow Calgary volunteers building beds, weeding and harvesting at this 11-acre community farm that donates 100 percent of its locally grown produce to more than 50 local social agencies.

"We don't sell anything, we give it all away," says founder Paul Hughes. "The best food in Calgary is going to those that can least afford it. It's for the poor, the vulnerable, the traumatized, low-income and homeless."

After seven growing seasons at its original location by Canada Olympic Park, Grow Calgary had to relocate and start over to make way for

construction of the ring road. Since May 2020, Hughes and company have been rebuilding Grow Calgary, literally from the ground up again.

All its fresh vegetables are given to charitable organizations like the Calgary Emergency Women's Shelter, Veterans Association Food Bank, Inn from the Cold, The Drop In Centre and Dream House. "We're big on issue, solution and action. We're not commercial. We're passionate agriculture," says Hughes. "We believe in the right to food and the right to shelter. We call it 'the snack and the shack.'"

In addition to facilitating food access and food security for vulnerable Calgarians, Grow Calgary is also currently offering a small scale agricultural farm management certificate program that's entirely free and open to anyone who wants to learn about urban agriculture.

### How to help:

Visit the Grow Calgary farm in person, volunteer your time or donate funds at [growcalgary.ca](http://growcalgary.ca).

## Fresh Routes

Fresh Routes is a social enterprise that provides mobile grocery stops so there are less barriers for people to affordable fresh fruits and vegetables. It has been providing dignified and sustainable food access in both Calgary and Edmonton since October 2019.



“It’s about making the healthy choice, the easy choice,” says co-founder Rob Ironside. Purchasing food from their partner H&W Produce, Fresh Routes is able to sell their fresh produce at 25 to 45 per cent cheaper prices than typical grocery stores. Ironside says that translates to customers getting between \$4.50 to \$10 in price savings alone.

Fresh Routes is a community-led model where it partners with local hubs and organizations already in place in their respective areas, from campuses to community associations and health centres. The aim is to increase fresh food accessibility in food deserts across the city, “areas that don’t have access to fresh and healthy produce and other grocery items, or only access to ultra-processed foods.”

When COVID hit in the spring, Fresh Routes had to temporarily put their stops on hold and shifted to doing emergency food delivery, where anyone could go online and request free produce delivered to their door. Mobile stops have since reopened in both cities, but the emergency food box deliveries have continued and nearly 4,000 COVID emergency food boxes were delivered to 2,166 households in both cities since March.

Morgan Allen, Fresh Routes’ city manager for Edmonton says they’re operating in about a dozen neighbourhoods across Edmonton currently. “We underestimate how much people struggle with food security,” she

says. “COVID or non-COVID times, people deal with a lot of barriers to accessing food, and there is such a need to bring food directly to people.”

#### *How to help:*

The easiest way to support is to shop with Fresh Routes - find the Edmonton and Calgary schedules at [freshroutes.ca](http://freshroutes.ca) to find mobile grocery stops near you.

#### **Banff Food Rescue**

Off Banff Avenue, in the lower level of Sundance Mall, volunteers with Banff Food Rescue sort through a carload of produce and groceries just picked up from the Canmore Safeway. It’s all food that would otherwise have been thrown out. Items like romaine lettuce, peppers, fruit and bread are quickly sorted into boxes and several fridges which will later be assembled into food bags for pickup that same day.

“In Banff, I get friends often saying to me, ‘do we really have food insecurity? Do we really need to be doing this?’” says founder Alanna Pettigrew. “And the answer is yes.”

Having worked in the grocery and hotel industry for years, Pettigrew says, “I’d see all this perfectly good food getting thrown out.” In 2016, she started Banff Food Rescue to divert food waste from the landfills and to help feed those in her community, all out of her home basement. It has since grown into a full-blown non-profit operating out of a

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[evolvecellars.com](http://evolvecellars.com)



## Waste Not: The Food UpCyclers

### coRise

Partnering with Calgary microbreweries and distilleries, coRise CEO and founder Sophie Tang rescues and repurposes spent grains from the beer production process and transforms them into prebiotic high fibre food products. It reduces food waste and up-cycles grains that would otherwise be discarded into flours, baking mixes, granola, cookies and energy bars. [spentgrain.square.site](http://spentgrain.square.site)

### Anew UpCycling

As a sister organization to Leftovers Foundation, Anew works with food growers, producers and manufacturers to upcycle them into new culinary creations. Leftovers provide donated food to Anew members who sign up, and they collaborate to create new products. In turn, a percentage of sales from the up-cycled product is given back to Leftovers. Local Alberta businesses like CoRise, Ollia Macarons & Tea, Sweet Relief Pastries, Bent Stick Brewing and Hello Mochi are currently members. [anewupcycling.ca](http://anewupcycling.ca)

1,100 square-foot commercial space that she now leases.

Pre-COVID, Pettigrew says she typically saw 50 or people lining up for food. “At the height of the lockdown, we were open every night,” says Pettigrew. “We had times where we had 230 to 250 people lined up down this hall, up the stairs, out the back, across the street and over by the theatre.”

Daily, upwards of 10 or so volunteers pick up and sort food donated by grocers, food suppliers and local businesses. Family boxes and individual boxes are also delivered for those in self-isolation in Banff and Canmore.

“We operate seven days a week picking up food, and we distribute food three times a week in the evenings to people that come and line up, no questions asked,” says Pettigrew, who wants to eventually expand to Lake Louise too. “We hope to be feeding the entire Bow Valley.”

### How to help:

Banff Food Rescue is a non-profit and 100 percent reliant on donations. Volunteer or donate food or money by visiting [banffcollective.com/food-rescue](http://banffcollective.com/food-rescue).

### Calgary Community Fridge

Operating under the philosophy of ‘take what you need, give what you can,’ Calgary Community Fridge is a recent project that offers Calgarians 24/7 access to free food.

Tucked in between buildings on the Tigerstedt Block in Crescent Heights, a weatherproof shed shelters a black Whirlpool fridge that houses perishables, a deep freezer that sees frozen meals, bread and more rotating through, while dry goods and cans line pantry shelves. It’s all entirely maintained by volunteers and stocked by the community.

“Food access is such a basic human right,” says Alice Lam, one of the organizers. “It’s so important for physical and mental health but often the thing that people compromise on if they’re stretched on other fronts.”

The pilot project started in the summer after organizers were inspired by the community fridge networks they saw popping up all over Toronto and New York. They wanted to address food access and dignity in Calgary, especially during the pandemic and lockdown, when more people were requiring extra support.

Lam says it’s not uncommon to see the fridge emptied out every few hours, but that it also usually gets filled up every few hours, too. “With a fridge, it’s mutual aid - anyone can come and take or give food, regardless of income,” says Lam, “It crosses political boundaries and across the demographic boundaries - it’s food and people need it.” 🍌

### How to help:

Drop off food donations at 902 Centre Street N, donate to the GoFundMe campaign and spread the word online - follow @calgarycommunityfridge on Instagram.

Lynda Sea is a freelance writer/editor based in Calgary. Her writing has appeared in Avenue, Westjet Magazine, enRoute, and Flare. You can often find her hiking in the Canadian Rockies and eating her way through Alberta.