



Food for Thought

The Future of Social Services at TNDF

Community Insights Report 2025

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- Allan's Place
- Blue Door, Beaverton Heights
- Brock Community Health Centre
- Brock Township Public Library
- Canadian Mental Health Association Durham
- Community Living Durham North, Housing and Homelessness Support Program
- Durham College Community Employment Services
- Durham Community Health Centre
- Durham Farm and Rural Family Resources
- Durham Region Income, Employment, and Homelessness Supports Division
- Durham Region Non-Profit Housing Corporation
- Family and Community Action Program
- Family Services Durham
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- Lakeridge Health, Durham Mental Health Services
- Literacy Network of Durham Region
- Maple Glen Apartments
- McCaskill's Mills Public School
- North House
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- YWCA Durham
- And to everyone who took the time to fill out our survey

Executive Summary

Between February and April 2025, The Nourish and Develop Foundation (TNDF) conducted an in-depth community engagement process to inform the future direction of our Social Services branch. Through a combination of partner organization questionnaires, one-on-one consultations, focus groups with priority populations, and a community-wide survey, the initiative sought to better understand local needs, service gaps, and opportunities for collaborative growth in Brock Township and rural North Durham.

Key findings from this engagement confirm that TNDF is widely regarded as a trusted community hub, valued not only for food security programs but also for fostering social connection, inclusion, and well-being. Stakeholders and residents alike described TNDF as a welcoming, accessible space that helps reduce social isolation while connecting people with meaningful supports.

The consultations revealed significant community strengths, including the power of local relationships, the availability of grassroots programs, and the presence of strong institutional partners. However, residents and service providers also identified **persistent barriers** to well-being, including:

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Lack of transportation & accessibility	Digital & communication barriers	Access to mental health & primary care	Program participation & delivery	Community infrastructure gaps

Throughout the consultations, food emerged as both a basic need and a powerful engagement tool—seen as a trusted and non-stigmatizing entry point into community programming and broader support systems.

Community members also shared concrete solutions to address these gaps, including more drop-in programming, outreach in schools and housing buildings, mental health supports, hands-on workshops, food literacy, and improved service navigation. A strong desire for dignified, community-based responses that reflect the realities of rural life was a unifying theme across all forms of input.

As a result of this process, TNDF has identified three strategic priorities for the growth of our Social Services work:

Navigation Support – Helping residents and partner organizations better access and coordinate the complex systems of care.

Food-Based Outreach – Expanding in-community food programming as a foundation for connection, engagement, and wraparound support.

Cross-Sector Collaboration – Continuing to build a hub model where services are co-located, coordinated, and community-driven.

This report represents both a reflection and a roadmap. It honors the insights shared by over 40 community members, 17 organizations, and key local institutions. Their voices will continue to guide TNDF's work as we build a more connected, inclusive, and responsive social service landscape—where everyone in Brock has the support they need to thrive.

Background

What is The Nourish and Develop Foundation?

The Nourish and Develop Foundation (TNDF) is a multi-service agency with a mission to connect people to nourishing food and supportive resources. Through our two core branches — Food Services and Social Services — we deliver programs that strengthen individual, household, and community wellbeing and food security. As a community hub, we also provide access to essential services that are often harder to reach in rural North Durham.



Our Community: Brock Township and North Durham

TNDF is located in Brock Township, the most northern and one of the most rural parts of Durham Region, Ontario, Canada. With a population of 12,567 according to the 2021 Census, Brock is significantly less populated than the more urban areas in South Durham (Statistics Canada, 2021). This geography presents unique challenges for residents, including limited access to transportation, fewer local amenities, and longer travel times to reach essential services such as healthcare, education, and employment resources (Ontario Ministry of Health, 2022). Despite these challenges, Brock is home to a strong sense of community, where many residents value the close-knit, supportive environment that rural living can offer. This community spirit is a vital strength that TNDF seeks to honor and build upon in our work.

Stakeholder Engagement

Purpose

Between February and April 2025, we conducted a comprehensive stakeholder consultation to gather diverse perspectives and inform our planning and service development for our Social Services branch.

Methodology

This process included four key methods.

1. **An online questionnaire to community partner organizations**, allowing them to provide structured feedback at their convenience.
2. **One-on-one in-person and virtual consultations with select community partner organizations** to engage in more in-depth conversations, gain a clearer understanding of the specific needs they are observing in their communities and with their clients, and learn more about their experiences.
3. **Focus groups with key populations** to gain insights into how we can better serve these priority groups (seniors and children).
4. **A community-wide survey** to gather input from the broader public.

Groups of Concern

Seniors

Youth (13-19)

People with Disabilities

Children (0-12)

Respondents expressed the most concern for seniors (62%), followed by youth (ages 13–19) (52%), people with disabilities (48%), and children (ages 0–12) (45%).

This multi-pronged engagement approach was designed not only to better understand TNDF’s current role in the local service landscape, but also to inform what comes next. As we look to expand our Social Services program, the insights gathered from community members and partners will help guide the development of future programming. By listening deeply to those who live and work in North Durham, we aim to ensure our next steps are rooted in real needs, meaningful collaboration, and sustainable impact.

Community Partner Organization Questionnaire

In early 2025, the Social Services team invited 22 community partner organizations to complete an online questionnaire exploring their organizational strengths and their work with TNDF. 17 organizations operating in North Durham responded, including 11 that also serve South Durham. Respondents shared their impressions of TNDF, highlighted key community needs, and described how they adapt their services to effectively support their clients.

Community Partner Organization Consultations

Following the questionnaire, we conducted one-on-one consultations with 11 organizations through a mix of in-person and virtual meetings, each approximately an hour in length. Of these, 8 agencies had reach across both North and South Durham, while 3 focused exclusively on North Durham.

Focus Groups

In addition to these conversations, we held 4 focus groups to gather community-based insights: 3 with residents from Durham Region Non-Profit Housing Corporation (DRNPHC) buildings from each of the main hamlets in Brock Township—Sunderland, Cannington, and Beaverton—and one with teachers from McCaskill’s Mills Public School in Cannington. These sessions provided valuable perspectives on local service access, lived experiences in rural North Durham, and impressions of TNDF’s role in the community. Participants were asked to share which supports they rely on and are working well, what is missing in their communities, and to brainstorm possible solutions to the identified gaps and barriers.

Community Member Survey

To hear from a broader range of voices, we also conducted a community-wide survey. This allowed us to gather input from individuals who may not have participated in focus groups or community partner interviews, but who still interact with local services or have insights into community needs. The survey, consisting of 13 questions, was distributed through a Google Form and accessed online. Additionally, to make the survey more accessible, we provided an iPad in our food bank for clients to complete the survey in-person, ensuring that their input was also captured. The survey was completed by 42 people across Durham Region, providing valuable perspectives on local issues, service access, and TNDF’s role in the community.



TNDF staff preparing for our first mailing campaign

Our Findings

The following sections highlight what we heard through this engagement process. We’ve organized the data into key themes that emerged across partner interviews, focus groups, and survey responses. These themes reflect shared strengths, ongoing challenges, and opportunities for growth—both within our organization and across the broader community service landscape.

What comes to mind when people think of TNDF, according to our questionnaire:

food access

mental health & well-being

innovation

education growth community & connection

food security

education

social services social supports

accessibility & inclusivity

TNDF in the Community

Many community partner organizations described TNDF not only as a place to access food and resources, but as a central, welcoming hub that fosters connection and belonging. TNDF was frequently highlighted for our approachable, community-minded atmosphere, where people feel comfortable and supported regardless of their circumstances.

Partners emphasized TNDF's central role in advancing food security, highlighting initiatives such as the shopping-style food bank, Mobile Food Market, and nutritious prepared meals. It's no surprise that TNDF is best known for our food supports, given our roots — when TNDF opened its doors in Cannington in 2008, our primary focus was on community food systems and food security in Brock Township and nearby areas. In 2023, TNDF expanded our scope by formally establishing two branches: Food Services and Social Services. It was encouraging to hear that, despite Social Services being a relatively new addition, introduced just over two years ago, many partners and community members already recognized TNDF's broader impact — including wraparound supports like mental health services, employment assistance, and youth programming.

In a rural setting where gathering spaces are limited, TNDF was seen as uniquely positioned to reduce social isolation and build community cohesion. Through both structured programs and informal connections, we offer people a space to be included.

This perspective was reflected in our community survey. Food access was the most frequently mentioned theme, with many participants recognizing TNDF first and foremost for our efforts to make nutritious, fresh food more accessible. Still, respondents clearly viewed TNDF as much more than a food bank. Alongside food support, people spoke warmly about our inclusive environment, welcoming staff, and vibrant community spirit.



[TNDF is an] inclusive space, smiling people who genuinely care, great food, great workshops, [and an] amazing feeling of community."

This sentiment was repeated throughout the survey, painting a picture of an organization that is not only trusted, but deeply valued as part of the social fabric of Brock Township.



Food bank basket



Mobile Food Market setup



Community Lunch meal

Key Values in Successful Partnerships

Successful partnerships are the cornerstone of effective service delivery, particularly in rural communities like ours. For organizations like TNDF, nurturing strong relationships with community partner organizations is essential to ensuring services are complementary, resources are used wisely, and community needs are met holistically.

In our consultations with community partner organizations, collaboration stood out as a key theme when we asked, “Tell us about a partnership with another group, organization, or agency that works well.” Every organization offers something unique, and no single agency can address all needs alone. This is especially true in rural settings, where limited resources and geographic barriers make coordinated efforts even more critical. Strong partnerships enable organizations to focus on their strengths, avoid duplication, and build a more connected, responsive support system. Partners spoke to the importance of trust, clarity, and ongoing dialogue in making this possible — laying the groundwork for shared programs, smooth referrals, and more sustainable impact.

A standout example of successful collaboration shared during the consultations was the work of Brock Township Public Libraries. They were frequently recognized for their ability to build and maintain strong partnerships with a wide range of community organizations, including Brock Community Health Centre, the Township of Brock, EarlyON, the Durham District School Board, the local employment centre, and North House. These collaborations demonstrate how a central, trusted community space like the library can serve as a hub



Community partner organization booths at TNDF

for integrated service delivery. By working together, these organizations can offer programs, resources, and support that none of them could deliver as effectively on their own.

Looking ahead, TNDF remains committed to supporting strong inter-agency collaboration by continuing to offer our space as a shared hub for partners — especially those without a permanent home base in the North. We recognize that rural service delivery comes with unique logistical challenges, and we’re proud to help bridge those gaps by welcoming community partner organizations into our space to meet with clients, run programming, or connect with the community. In 2024 alone, we offered 567.5 hours of on-site access to community partner organizations, reaching 290 individuals. In 2025 we’ve seen a 16% increase in hours of service, and a 20% increase in access by community members. To date, we host 15 partner organizations, each contributing their own expertise to better serve our shared community. By continuing to share administrative space and resources in this way, we help ensure that rural residents can access a wide range of supports, all in one familiar and trusted location.

Community Gaps

While the community of Brock is rich with strengths and resources, there are also notable gaps in services and support that have been identified by Brock residents through our focus groups. These gaps highlight areas

where additional resources or programming would enhance the overall well-being of the community. Through focus groups, participants shared their perspectives on unmet needs and the challenges they face in accessing vital services. As we explore these gaps, it's important to recognize that the evolving needs of Brock's residents call for a collective effort to address these challenges, ensuring that everyone has the support they need to thrive.

Transportation emerged as the most frequently cited issue during the focus group discussions, with residents expressing frustration over the lack of local transit options, unreliable Durham Region Transit OnDemand service, costly ride alternatives, and mobility limitations for those without vehicles. This reflects Brock's rural setting, where distances between services are often long and options are limited. However, as of May 2025, a new bus route has been introduced to better connect Brock with the rest of Durham Region. This development may help reduce the transportation gap over time — particularly for residents without access to a personal vehicle or those facing mobility challenges — though continued monitoring will be important to assess its impact.

Access to and comfort with technology also stood out as a major barrier, particularly among older adults who struggle with phones, internet access, or navigating online systems. This may reflect the demographics of our focus groups — particularly the senior participants who often face challenges with digital literacy, device access, and internet connectivity.



Access to healthcare emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned concerns throughout our consultation process, including access to primary care, mental health services, and addictions support. It was the third most cited issue in focus groups and ranked second in our broader Community Survey, reflecting a widespread need for improved health services across Brock. This strong response highlights how deeply healthcare access impacts daily life in the community. The 2025 opening of the Brock Community Health Centre (BCHC) building in Cannington offers a hopeful step forward. While challenges remain in recruiting and retaining healthcare professionals, we hope the new health centre will help improve access to care and attract essential providers to the region.

Key Challenges Faced by the Community

Food Access

Healthcare

Housing

Transportation

The most significant issue reported was access to affordable, fresh, and local food (57%). Other notable challenges included access to healthcare (38%), cost of housing and rent (29%), transportation (26%), and feelings of isolation (24%).



Residents also pointed to financial strain, food insecurity, mental health struggles, school-related barriers, and bureaucratic issues that make accessing support more difficult.

Collectively, these insights paint a picture of a community that is resilient and engaged, yet in need of targeted support to bridge these service gaps and foster greater inclusivity and accessibility for all.

In addition to the gaps identified during our focus groups, we want to take a moment to reflect on some recurring challenges we've seen and heard across many of our conversations with Brock residents and local organizations.

Navigating Systems Can Be Overwhelming

One of the most common struggles we've observed is how complicated and confusing it can be to navigate support systems—whether you're a staff member trying to help an individual access services or trying to find services for yourself or a loved one, people often don't know what help exists or how to reach it (United Way Centraide Canada, 2022). Even when services are available, inconsistent information, disconnected agencies, and confusing referral processes can make things frustrating. Across all groups, there's a clear call for more human-centered, empathetic support to help people access the services they need—especially when it comes to healthcare, legal aid, and financial assistance.

211, developed by United Way, is a free, confidential helpline available 24/7 by phone, text, or online chat. It connects people across Canada to local community, social, health, and government services and can be a helpful first step when someone doesn't know where to start.

However, many people are unaware of the service, face barriers like language or trust, or find the support too generic. In these cases, more personal, hands-on help from a trusted community worker can be essential for navigating complex systems and following through on referrals. TNDF's social service hub helps bridge this gap, offering a warm, accessible point of connection between community members and the support they need.

Barriers in Employment, Housing, and Childcare

Residents also spoke to the broader structural barriers they face in daily life. We continue to hear how hard it is to find inclusive job opportunities—particularly for youth, newcomers, and women. In some cases, women are unable to take jobs or leave difficult situations because of the severe lack of childcare options and long waitlists. The need for more flexible, affordable childcare came up repeatedly. In 2023, 26% of parents of children aged 0 to 5 years old who were not using child care reported that their child was on a waitlist, up from 19% in 2022, the year this information was first collected (Statistics Canada, 2023). Difficulties finding child care are also reflected in the proportion of child care centres that have active waitlists.

Meanwhile, housing shortages—especially in rural areas—remain one of the most urgent issues in our region and throughout the rest of Canada (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2023). With the rising cost of living, basic necessities like rent, food, and transportation are simply out of reach for many. The housing gap is even more urgent for those who are considered to be low-income individuals or families. These realities are not new, but they're becoming more pressing, and they require collective, long-term solutions (Commissioner

of Social Services, 2023).

In Durham Region, the number of people waiting for rent-geared-to-income (RGI) housing has more than doubled since 2006. As of late 2022, there were 8,284 low-income applicants on the waitlist (Commissioner of Social Services, 2023). Even though demand keeps rising, the number of available RGI units hasn't kept pace. With few affordable rentals available

and very low vacancy rates in the private market, many people have little choice but to rely on RGI as their only real option.



Solutions

In response to the gaps identified by the community, several solutions were proposed during the focus group discussions. These ideas reflect the community's proactive approach to improving life in Brock. Food-based engagement stood out as the most frequently mentioned strategy—likely because food is a central part of what we do as an organization. It's also one of the most tangible, trusted ways we connect with residents, and it continues to be a natural entry point for broader conversations about wellbeing, access, and support. Food access was brought up 7 separate times during the DRNPHC focus groups, emphasizing the importance of free meals, potlucks, and community food events as essential tools for engagement and support.

Participants were in agreement that food is a great way to bring people together.

At McCaskill's Mills Public School (MMPS), food was also central to many of the ideas shared. Teachers spoke about the challenges students face when they come to school hungry, and the need for consistent access to healthy snacks and lunches. But it's not just about access—families struggle with planning meals, preparing food in bulk, and storing it safely. In response, practical solutions like offering healthy snack and meal prep workshops or providing meal kits could go a long way in supporting families.

There was a lot of conversation about stigma with teachers noting that families often have a hard time asking for help, and food insecurity is rarely talked about openly between parents and staff—it's more often heard indirectly, through what children share. This highlights the importance of reducing stigma around food access and creating safe, supportive environments where families feel comfortable seeking support when they need it.

Participants highlighted the value of drop-in groups, information sessions, and creative or skill-building programs, each receiving 6 mentions. These solutions emphasize the desire for spaces where people can connect, learn, and engage in meaningful activities. Transportation support was also frequently mentioned, with 4 respondents noting the need for better access to buses and services that could help address mobility challenges. Additionally, participants suggested a range of practical solutions, including handyman services, tech access, and mental health support, which reflect the community's desire for both immediate and long-term resources to meet their needs.

The solutions identified by our community are valuable insights that guide our ongoing work and can also serve as a useful resource for other organizations looking to address the gaps in Brock. The suggestion of a steering committee is particularly interesting for us as it aligns with how we see ourselves as a community-based organization. We deeply value the input and opinions of community members, and this type of collaboration will only strengthen our work.



Communication and promotion, however, remain challenging in a rural setting like ours. While we strive to keep residents informed and engaged, getting the word out effectively and encouraging participation continues to be an area of focus. Drop-in and casual supports are always well-received, providing a welcoming, low-stakes environment, but the challenge remains in drawing people out and ensuring they know about these opportunities. Moving forward, we are committed to continuing our partnerships with other organizations to offer vital resources such as information sessions, mental health, employment and wellness supports, as well as food-based engagement.

Preferred Communication Channels

Social Media

Email/Newsletters

Posters

Word of Mouth

The majority prefer to learn about community events through social media (81%), followed by email or newsletters (55%), posters in community spaces (24%), and word of mouth (21%).

Our Direction

As we look ahead, The Nourish and Develop Foundation is committed to growing our work in ways that are directly informed by the voices of our community. Through surveys, consultations, and focus groups, residents of Brock have generously shared their lived experiences, challenges, and ideas—and this feedback is shaping our next steps.

Critical Need for Navigation Support

One of the clearest takeaways was the ongoing difficulty residents face in navigating complex systems, whether related to health, housing, legal support, or financial aid. Not only are individuals struggling to access what they need, but community partners also expressed challenges connecting clients to the right services. Moving forward, TNDF will prioritize being a bridge—helping both individuals and agencies find their way through confusing systems with human-centered, clear, and compassionate navigation support.

Expanding Our Food Outreach

Food has consistently emerged as a trusted and powerful entry point for engagement, connection, and well-being. As we continue our food security work, we see tremendous potential in expanding on-location programming—bringing food-based outreach and activities directly into community spaces, housing buildings, and schools. By pairing these efforts with the presence of Social Services staff or through collaboration with social service organizations, we can create opportunities to not only reduce isolation and improve access to nutritious food, but also to share information about available supports, build trust, and connect individuals with broader wraparound services. This integrated approach helps ensure that people are nourished in more ways than one—through food, connection, and access to care.

Cross-Sector Collaboration

We know that lasting change happens when organizations work together. The hub model—where services are co-located, coordinated, and community-driven—continues to guide our approach. By strengthening cross-sector collaboration, we aim to build a network of support that is seamless, welcoming, and responsive to the evolving needs of Brock residents.

As we continue to expand our Social Services branch, these three directions—navigation, food outreach, and collaboration—stand out as the most community-informed and impactful. We're excited to move forward with our community.



8 Meaningful Ways to Support Our Work

There are many ways to make a difference. Whether you have time, resources, connections, or a passion for community, here's how you can help support our mission:



Give Funds

Your donations help us do what we do—plain and simple. One-time gifts or monthly contributions directly support our programs and the people who count on them.



Give Food & Household Essentials

We accept donations of food and other much-needed items like toiletries and cleaning supplies. These essentials go a long way in supporting local households and keeping our shelves stocked.



Give Time

Volunteers are at the heart of our work. Whether it's helping in the kitchen, at events, in the garden, or behind the scenes, your time and skills are deeply valued.



Attend Our Events or Programs

By showing up, you're showing support. Join us for community meals, workshops, or special events. It's a great way to stay connected, learn, and build community.



Keep in Touch

Sign up for our newsletter, follow us on social media, and stay up to date on what we're doing. Being informed is a powerful way to stay involved.

Scan Me



Help Spread the Word

Talk about our work with your friends, family, or coworkers. Share our posts online. Invite someone to an event. You never know who might be looking for a way to get involved.



Advocate for Change

The work we do is part of a bigger picture. Use your voice to support policies and systems that make life better for everyone in our community.



Practice Mutual Aid

Community members caring for one another outside of services like ours contributes to our vision of a thriving community where everyone is food secure, safely housed, and well supported.

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Glossary

Community Partner Organization: Organizations serving community members in Brock Township that partner with TNDF to provide direct, in-person support on site at TNDF.

Food insecurity: A condition in which individuals or households do not have reliable access to enough affordable, nutritious food to meet their basic needs. It can range from worrying about running out of food to skipping meals or going without food for an entire day.

Food literacy: Refers to the knowledge and skills people hold regarding food, including understanding where food comes from, how to prepare it, and its impact on health, the environment, and the economy.

Service/system navigation: The process of helping individuals find, access, and use health, social, or community services. It often includes identifying appropriate resources, understanding eligibility, and providing support to overcome barriers like language, transportation, access to technology, or complex application processes.

Stigma: Negative attitudes, beliefs, or stereotypes that lead to discrimination or social exclusion of individuals or groups, often based on characteristics such as poverty, mental health, or the need for social assistance.

Low barrier: Describes programs or services that are designed to be easily accessible to everyone, especially those who may face challenges such as lack of identification, housing, or transportation. Low-barrier services aim to reduce or eliminate common obstacles like strict eligibility criteria, cost, or complicated intake processes.

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