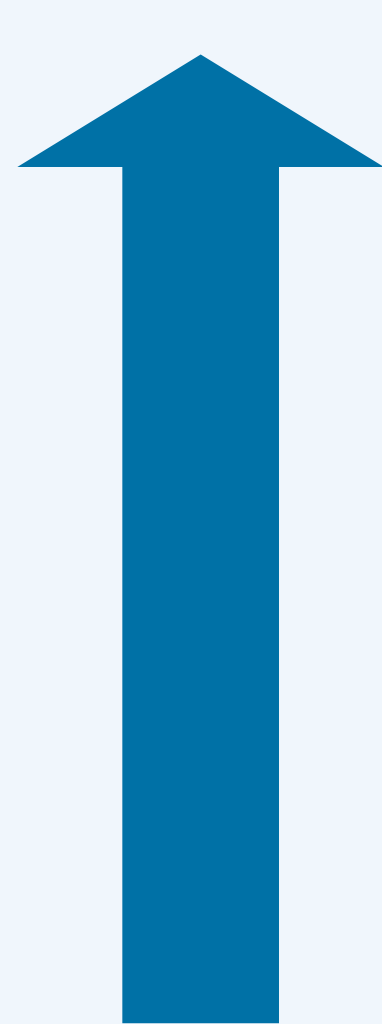
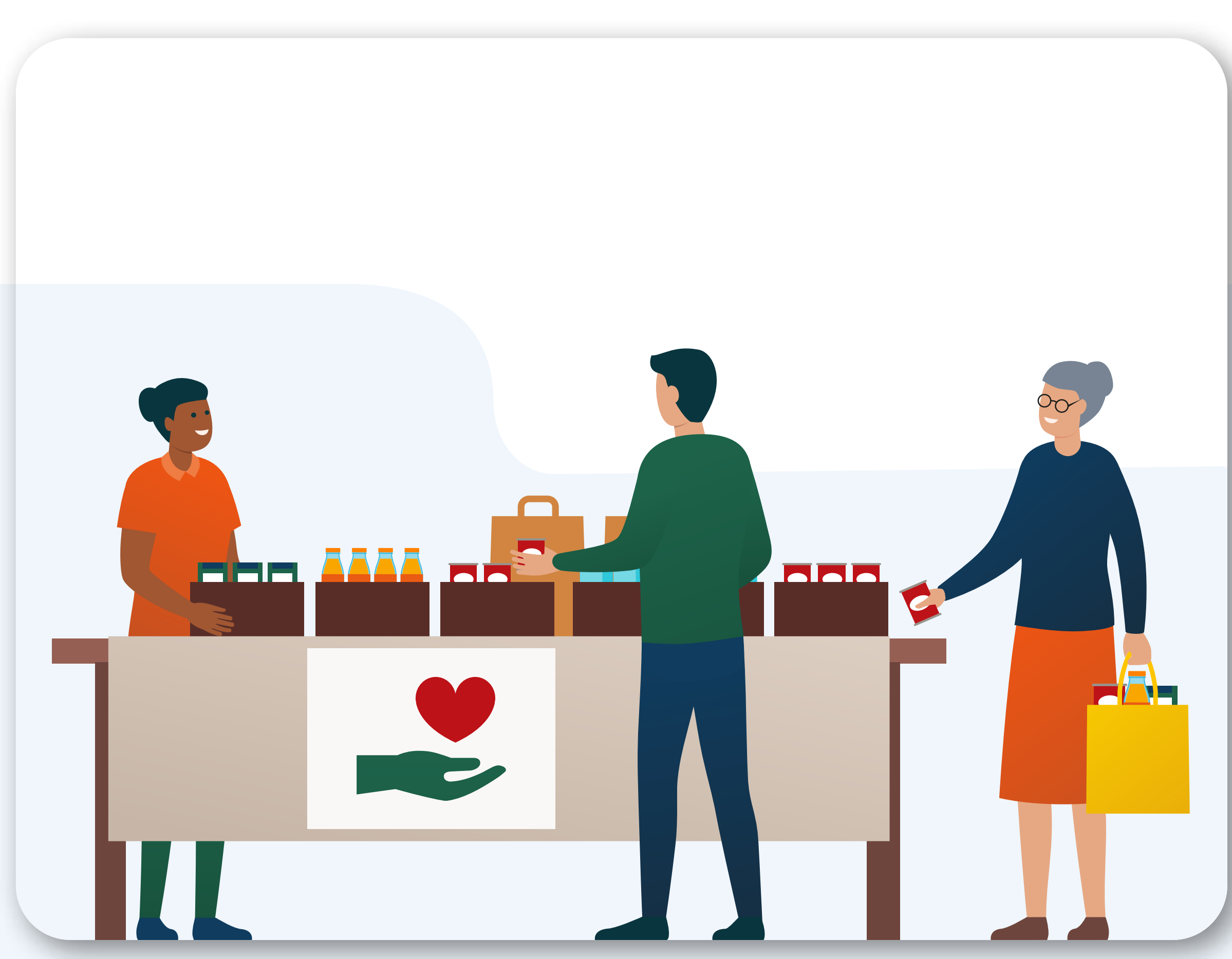


Understanding the Connection Between Access to Benefits Services & Food Insecurity

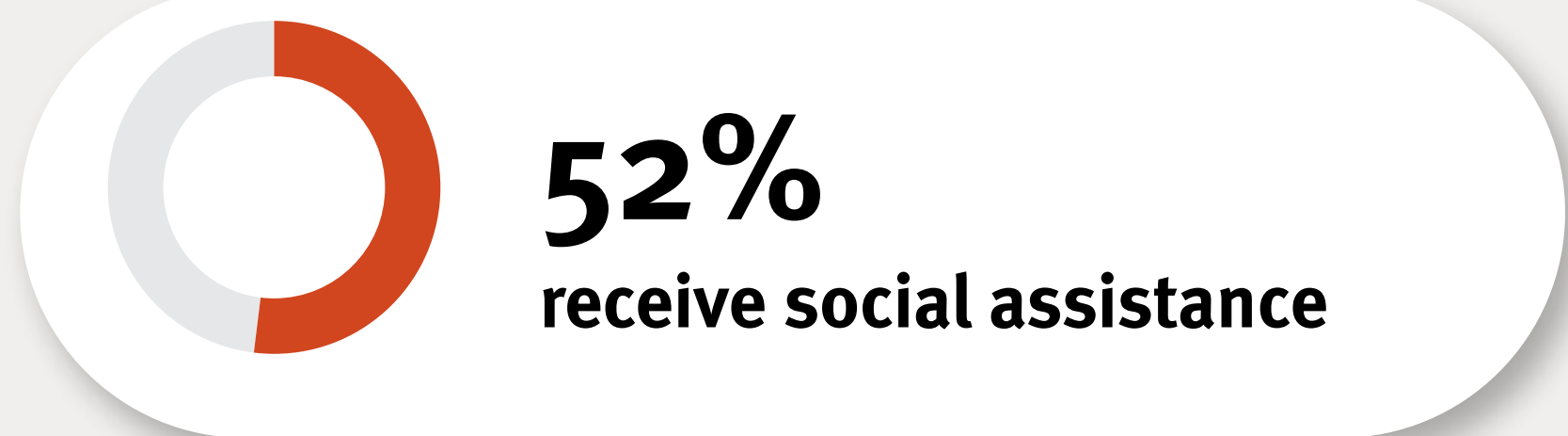
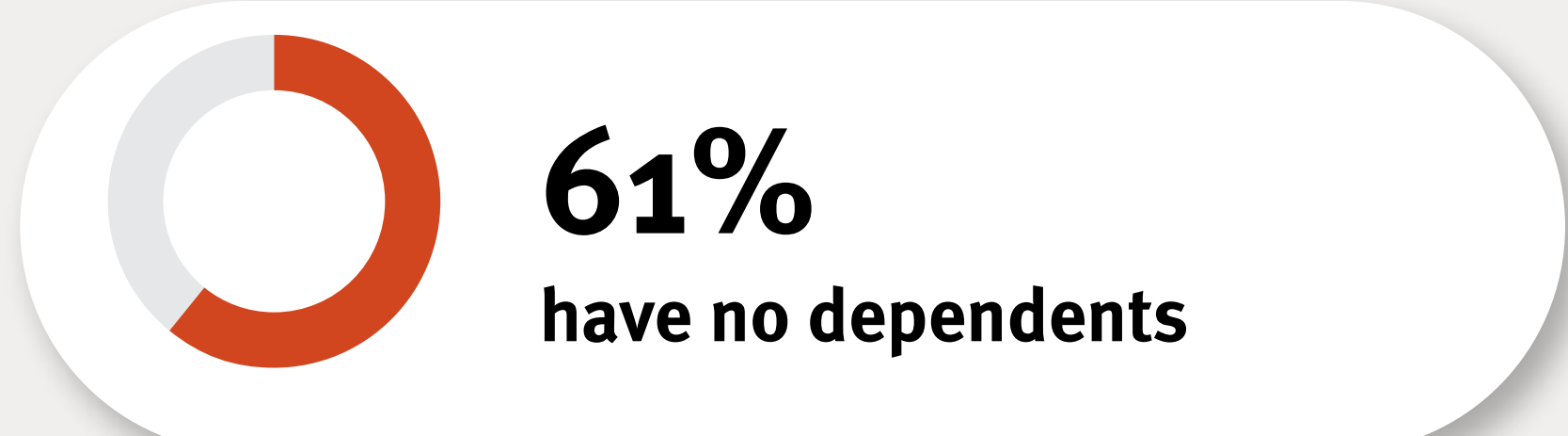
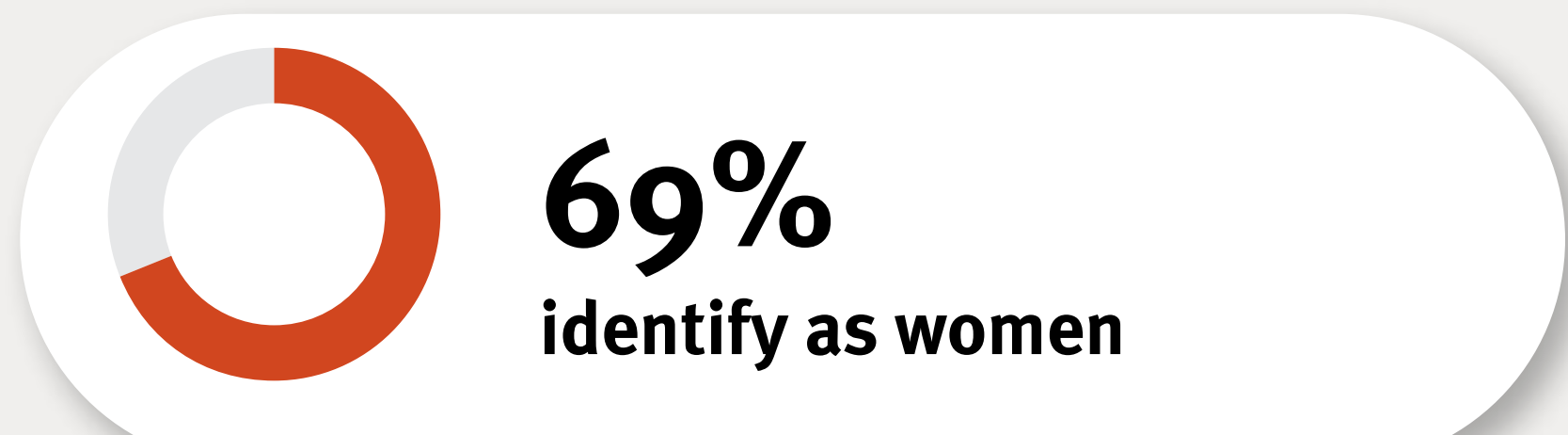
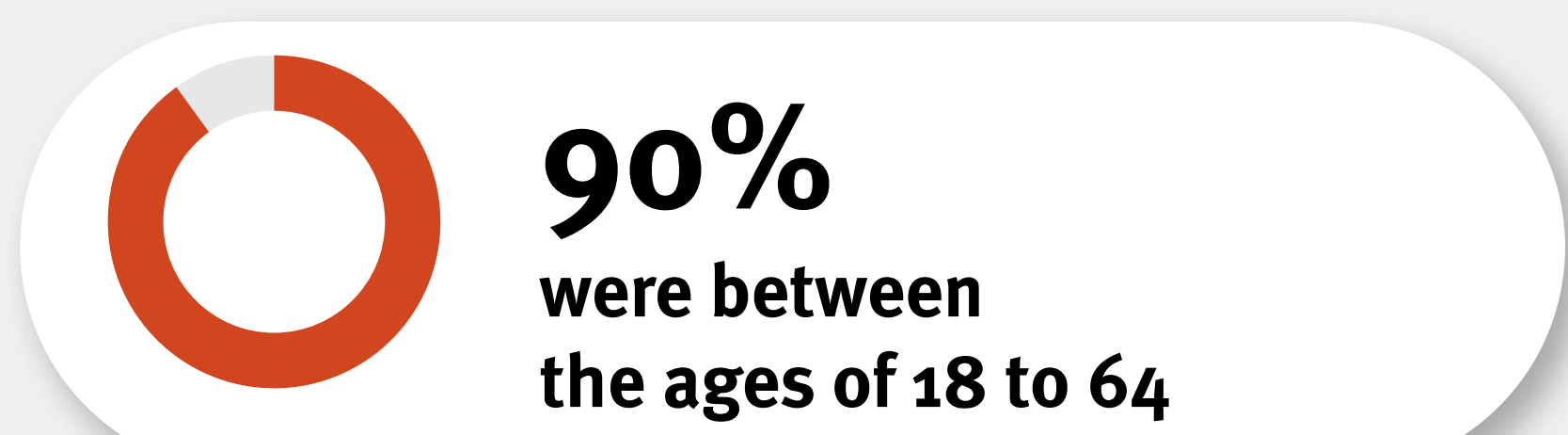


use of food banks rose by 20%

Food is fundamental to human well-being and development and although national estimates of food insecurity went down during COVID, use of food banks rose by 20%. For people on low income, making sure they are accessing all the benefits they are eligible for is an important step toward increasing their food security, the measure of having consistent, reliable access to safe, nutritious food.

With funding from the [Maple Leaf Centre for Food Security](#), Prosper Canada worked with [e4c](#) and [North York Community House](#) to evaluate to what extent access to benefits services increases income and food security. We're sharing some of what we've learned here after surveying 209 people and interviewing 10 staff and 14 clients about their experiences with food insecurity and access to benefits services.

The clients we talked to:



Access to benefits services

Access to benefits services support individuals **to obtain income benefits they're entitled to**. Clients receive support with identifying whether they are eligible for benefits, filling out benefits applications, filing their taxes, talking with CRA and provincial benefits offices, and referrals to additional services and supports.

Skills needed according to community agency staff:

- Resilience
- Cultural competence
- Language other than French/English
- Coaching
- Counseling
- Simplifying/explaining complicated information
- Knowledge of federal and provincial benefits
- Navigating bureaucracy

How we measured risk of food insecurity

We used the [Hunger Vital Sign](#) to determine if clients were at risk of food insecurity when they received tax filing services. We asked clients

“Were the following statements often true, sometimes true, or never true for your household?”

“ Within the past 12 months, we worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more. ”

“ Within the past 12 months, the food we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more. ”

Answering **“often true” or “sometimes true”** to either or both questions means someone is at risk of food insecurity.

What we learned



Income and food insecurity was high

At baseline, **80%** of evaluation participants were at risk of food insecurity

91% of participants on social assistance were at risk of food insecurity

“Like I said before, the money is not enough... Sometimes you are stranded to even pay the rent. After paying the rent, you are left with nothing.”

– Ontario Works recipient

75% of participants said they used credit, overdraft, or borrowing to afford food and monthly expenses in the previous 12 months

“I don't have anybody to turn to. I use the credit... there's no other person, I don't know if there's any other person to turn. Apart from the food bank and then if it's not enough and then you don't have money, you use credit.”

– Newcomer father



Providing tax filing and access to benefits services puts money in people's pockets

During the 2020 tax filing season, [e4c](#) and [NYCH](#) helped **4,512 people** to tax file and access

\$11.7 million

in tax refunds and benefits. This is an average of more than

\$2,600 per person

In interviews, clients discussed how they used their tax refunds and pandemic income supports (e.g., CERB) to purchase food and other basic necessities.



Clients described how access to benefits services increased their financial literacy and confidence, and reduced their financial stress

Many clients discussed how easy applying for benefits was because of the support they received or how relieved they felt after discussing their taxes or benefits application with staff members. They were more confident they had completed the forms correctly, reducing their worries that they would owe money later.

“So he gives all the instructions from all his heart. To say this, you have to know this and this and this not just fill it out because you don't speak English doesn't mean you should not understand it, you know... Another person, he wants just to fill out the taxes and bye bye.”

– Newcomer describing tax filing services

“They were both stress free because of the support. So it was documented and then I'll say quite helpful. And then I got my reviews right. There was no error. So and then the process was concluded on time because of the support.”

– Newcomer father describing process of applying for OW and CCB through two agencies



Housing is also a major concern for clients. Access to affordable housing would make a difference in people's ability to afford food

Although housing was not the focus of the evaluation, clients brought up housing affordability in all interviews.

They discussed how benefits helped them to pay their rent or how much of their social assistance payments went to rent,

leaving very little left over for food. Clients also said that where they could use additional help from community agencies was in finding affordable housing.

Where do we go from here

1

Recently expanded our access to benefits through the launch of the **Benefits wayfinder** - a simple, easy to use, plain language tool that helps people on low and modest incomes find and track benefits they could get to increase their incomes or reduce their expenses.

2

Developed the **Foundations of Access to Benefits course**, available in English and French, which helps staff gain essential knowledge and skills to provide clients with access to benefits services.

3

Begun to explore using the **Lifeworks Self-Sufficiency Matrix** adapted to the Canadian context for a more nuanced understanding of food insecurity amongst clients.

4

Recognized that **Prosper Canada's local partners provide critical supports** that enable people to increase their income and food security, but more help is still needed to help them continue providing these services.