

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

(The full report is readily available upon request)

The Voices of People with Food Insecurity: Their Preferences for Overcoming Their Food Insecurity Problems

Long Term Hunger Relief Committee, Cabarrus County Farm and Food Council

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

During 2013, the Cabarrus County Farm and Food Council (CCFFC) recognized that the community was facing a food security crisis for thousands of its residents. The problem was mostly manifested in growing lines of people needing emergency food at several food emergency distribution centers. Local agencies and churches assisting people with food emergencies were overwhelmed with the growing demand and running out of ideas of what else to do. The Cabarrus County Farm and Food Council responded by creating a committee, the Long-Term Hunger Relief Committee, that was charged with finding “long term” solutions to this crisis. While the LTHR Committee did not have a specific charge, it’s members decided to explore ways to help people move beyond emergency food assistance to greater self-sufficiency. One overall question that the LTHR Committee had to figure out was what “more self-sufficient” might look like particularly related to food insecurity.

“Circle of Services”

During the first stage of the LTHR Committee’s deliberations, the Committee met monthly. During this stage, agencies and churches reported to us about what they and other groups were doing related to food insecurity and shared ideas about how the groups could work more closely together. Over time, we came up with several additional and largely unavailable services that could supplement emergency food service based on the wealth of ideas and experiences of the organizations represented on the Committee. We called our new proposed configuration of services a “Circle of Services” which is presented in Figure 1 below.

Food Security Survey

In stage 2, we realized that existing agencies did not have the funding to even begin to add the services that were identified in the Circle of Services so we began to document the extent of food insecurity and hunger in Cabarrus County. We wanted to potentially build a case for funding these and other services. We developed a Food Security Survey that was given out voluntarily to everyone standing in line for emergency food at the food distribution centers represented by LTHR Committee members. Based on the survey, we found substantial food insecurity at different levels: worry about not having enough food (86%), not able to afford healthy food (85%), not being able to afford enough food generally (83%), cutting the sizes of meals (58%), and skipping some meals (41%); finally, we found over 20 percent of our respondents went without eating for an entire day at different frequencies during the past year. The results of this Food Security Survey are available to readers of this report upon request.

HOW THE STUDY WAS CONDUCTED

People Interviewed

In stage 3, we decided that we needed to learn more by directly consulting people who are food insecure and hungry. We decided to focus on people living in Kannapolis. After exploring different methods of investigation, we chose brief informal interviews with people who were attending free meals at churches and at a smaller community center. Our sample was composed of 58 percent females and 42 percent males. By race, they included 58 white people and 42 percent African Americans. None were Latino. They ranged in age from 20 years to over 60. The interviews lasted for approximately 15 to 20 minutes while they were preparing to eat.

Questions Asked

The Interview introduced the “Circle of Services” which identifies seven types of services that can help people move beyond needing emergency food. These seven types of services include Nutritious Food, Employment and School Assistance, Preparing Meals, Buying Food, Government Food Subsidies, Counseling, and Community Connections. Under each of these service areas, the diagram lists four to six specific services that are possible. The participants were asked to select the three most important service areas for them and the specific services that they needed under these service areas. They were also asked why these services were important to them. Finally, they were asked what, if anything, they could do to help make services better and more available to people in our community? Informed consent and other ethical protections were provided.

FINDINGS

Most Important Service Areas

Nutritious Food was the most frequently mentioned preference of the participants, chosen by 48 percent of the sample. This was followed by preferences for Employment and School Assistance chosen by 46 percent of the participants, and Community Connections by 40 percent. Government subsidies, primarily SNAP, were selected by 36 percent. An expressed need for Counseling (34%), help with buying food (30%), and preparing meals (26%) were the final three preferences.

With almost half of the sample choosing Nutrition as their preference, half of them wanted help with finding nutritious food while over one-third wanted help in understanding what foods are and are not nutritious. Wishing for a garden and interest in organic food were less frequently chosen.

Those who selected Employment and School Assistance primarily wanted a job or assistance in obtaining a GED. Just over half of the participants who chose Community Connections assistance needed transportation to access food; they also represented 22 percent of the total sample. Others selecting Community Connections as a preference wanted someone to address missing groups of food insecure people, more neighborhood leaders, and improved

neighborhood networks to provide needed resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Organizations that provide emergency food to people in need (e.g. food pantries, free meal programs) are strongly urged to give significant attention to the quality of the food that they give out and to provide helpful information about nutritious food and why such food is so important to the recipients' health.
- 2) Agencies, churches, and other community groups are strongly urged to explore additional ways to assist people with employment and completion of their high school diploma.
- 3) We should not overlook the group of people who are food insecure for a range of new and existing positions and roles as change agents.
- 4) Addressing food insecurity should include finding innovative ways to help people improve their means of transportation to farmers' markets, supermarkets, and other healthy food sources.
- 5) More attention needs to be given to strengthening the social fabric of local neighborhoods and networks in food insecure localities.
- 6) Food insecure people need more support, assistance, and advocacy in obtaining SNAP food vouchers and other government program benefits.
- 7) More counselors are needed that are in accessible places in the community to assist with many important types of problems.

RELATED SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE FOOD SECURITY PROGRAMS

We suggest additional efforts be considered when designing and implementing programs addressing food insecurity beyond emergency food services.

- Overall, we suggest that more effort be given to providing services within the neighborhoods where the people who are food insecure conduct their daily lives, rather than at existing agencies and government offices.
- We suggest that people who are experiencing food insecurity be treated as "consultants."
- We think more can be done to encourage emergency food recipients like those we interviewed to assume some of the responsibilities for the services they receive when they are able.
- We suggest that several types of services be incorporated into programs with the long-term goal being to increase their independence. For example, an existing free meal program can

be expanded over time to incorporate several components such as informal cooking instructions for some, education about nutritious food, guidelines for special diets, sharing healthy affordable recipes, shopping tips, budgeting information, and legislative matters pertaining to food subsidies.

Figure 1: Circle of Services: Services to Combat Long Term Hunger

