



Supporting Food Security Among Food Shelf Participants

Key Takeaways from a Needs Assessment at Three Minneapolis Food Shelves

During the recession at the end of the last decade, food shelf use in Minnesota increased substantially from about 2 million visits annually in 2007 to over 2.7 million visits in 2009.¹ While unemployment rates have mostly recovered, food shelf use has continued to rise, exceeding 3 million visits annually from 2011 onward.² These increases are due in part to cuts in federal food programs including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), low wages, and slow earnings recovery since the recession.³

Minnesota food shelves have struggled to meet the needs of a growing number of users. In addition to the growing need, food shelves have faced declines in donations, pressures to increase healthy offerings with limited resources to upgrade storage and distribution systems, and an aging workforce of staff and volunteers.

¹ Food shelf reports to MN DHS (2002-2017). Analysis by Hunger Solutions.

² Food shelf reports to MN DHS (2002-2017). Analysis by Hunger Solutions. Hunger Solutions (2017). Food shelf visits on pace to top 3 million for seventh year. Retrieved from <http://www.hungersolutions.org/data-posts/food-shelf-visits-pace-top-3-million-seventh-year/>.

³ Hunger Solutions. (2015). 2014 Food shelf report: A snapshot of hunger in Minnesota: 9,000 visits a day and rising. Retrieved from <http://www.hungersolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/fsreport.pdf>.

In early 2017, Waite House, a human services organization in the Phillips neighborhood of Minneapolis, convened a work group to explore how food shelves can better accommodate this growing need. The work group included the project funder, researchers, and representatives from three local food shelves (Waite House, the Brian Coyle Center, and the Division of Indian Work). Over the course of a year, the group developed a community-based research process, conducting interviews and focus groups with participants at each of the three food shelves to better understand participants' needs and the role food shelves might play in advancing longer-term food security.

This summary highlights key findings from the project that can inform the work of food shelves and other organizations focused on improving food security.

Key takeaways

Food shelves play a key role in ensuring food access

Participants used a variety of strategies to meet their food needs, weighing different factors to maximize their resources. Participants secured food through grocery stores (including corner stores and big chain stores), friends and families, food shelves, and food assistance programs. Participants were thoughtful in how they fit different resources together, weighing factors such as affordability, distance and accessibility, location and hours, selection of foods, or welcoming environments when deciding where to go.

Affordability impacted many participants' decisions about food. Two factors contributed to whether participants were able to afford the food that they wanted: their current financial resources and the cost of food. Participants reported that low wages, or the inability to work due to age or immigration status, impacted their ability to be food secure. Affordability, along with access and other factors, affected which stores participants shopped at. Participants also indicated that fresh produce and culturally relevant food were often more expensive, leading to hard decisions about what they could buy.

There are 10 of us. And with our four grandbabies there's 14 of us. We all work but [the food shelf] still helps out. Every little bit helps. – DIW participant

I sometimes want to go to supermarkets like Sun Foods, Dragon Star and other stores that carry some African products but they cost money and are more expensive because they come from far away. – Waite House participant

The food shelves played a key role in participants' food security. While participants reported that they generally had enough to eat, food shelves helped ensure they had enough during difficult periods. The food shelves helped them stretch existing resources, handle emergencies, or get items that they could not find or afford elsewhere. Many also noted that the food shelf played a key role in helping them have access to healthy or culturally relevant foods that they would not be able to afford otherwise.

It's not easy sometimes. We just don't have enough money to buy food and we have to look for places where they give food away and make do with that. These programs are very important to us.
– Waite House participant

The food shelves were community hubs where participants built social connections and learned about other resources. The food shelves played important roles beyond food. Participants reported meeting new people or connecting with friends and acquaintances at the food shelves. Many also developed meaningful connections with food shelf staff. Through these relationships, participants learned about other resources and services.

You meet people you haven't seen in a while. It's a pleasant environment.
– DIW participant (focus group)

I get to talk to my neighbor [at the food shelf] and we compare notes [about] the other resources available around here. The network starts right here. You get all the information you need right here.
– Waite House participant

Food shelves can promote longer-term food security

For participants, food security meant having enough to eat and access to healthy, culturally relevant food. Many participants described food security as having enough to eat for themselves, or enough to share with their families and neighbors. Others stated that it meant access to fresh, healthy, and culturally relevant food. Some described broader, less tangible meanings, including self-sufficiency, peace of mind, and the good life.

[Food security means that] there's something on my fridge for my kids and my granddaughter when they come through. – DIW participant

[Food security means] healthy food. Vegetables, fruits, and good stuff. – Waite House participant
Having enough food is mentally just a relief, you feel okay. There is a peace in your mind. ... It's a mental and emotional lift. – Brian Coyle participant (focus group)

Participants liked food shelf models where they could select their own foods. The three food shelves used different models of distribution from participants selecting their own foods to receiving pre-selected groceries. Participants liked being able to select their own groceries, noting they were often not able to use all pre-selected groceries and then either threw items out or donated them back to the food shelf. Other participants reported liking the convenience of the grocery bags. Participants also had varied opinions on models based on pound versus item limits, noting the benefits and disadvantages of each in how they impacted their ability to maximize resources.

Participants saw the food shelves as part of their longer-term food security. Participants generally anticipated that they would continue to use the food shelf on a regular basis. Some suggested that the need for food shelves would always be there and that it was an essential part of the resources they used to achieve food security for themselves and their families. Participants also drew connections between their personal food security and the sustainability of the food shelves. When asked what food security meant to them, some suggested that their own food security depended to some degree on the ability of the food shelves to continue to provide support.

It is an essential part of my family needs. – Brian Coyle participant

While they exist, I'll keep coming. – Waite House participant

Expanding healthy offerings, increasing access to food, and connecting people to additional resources are some ways that the food shelves can support greater food security among participants. Many participants felt that the food shelf already did a lot for them, but participants advocated for more fresh produce and healthy options, and a wider variety of products. Participants also suggested allowing more frequent visits, increasing the item or pound limits, and staying open for longer hours. Some were interested in classes in understanding expiration dates, cooking in bulk, and strategies to make food stretch. Others noted that the food shelves could play a role in helping them become connected to other services, either through a class on where to find resources or having a social worker on staff.

*This food shelf would serve us better with a lot of fruits, veggies, beans, tomatoes.
– Brian Coyle participant (focus group)*

Participants were interested in becoming more involved in supporting the sustainability of the food shelves and engaging broader food systems. Almost all participants expressed interest in becoming more engaged with the food shelves. At the same time, many had difficulty in articulating what that might look like, suggesting the need for more concrete opportunities for engagement. They recognized that some of the changes they were interested in might require shifts in policies or practices at the systems level. Some ideas they offered for how they could become more involved included marketing the food shelves through word of mouth, building awareness of needs and issues related to food security, participating in community gardening, or serving on advisory committees. Participants also mentioned the importance of being good stewards of the food shelves so that their neighbors could benefit from the program.

*We do not have funds to [donate to] the food shelf, so not money, but if we were asked to... donate our time, we are very happy and very interested to help in any ways that could help this food shelf.
– Brian Coyle participant (focus group)*

We have to be willing to participate to give back, [to] let the community [and] the churches and everybody know that we exist... If we do that and we go all out and get everybody involved, then food security will be available to us because we are putting in work and we are letting everyone know that this is what we need. – Waite House participant

Recommendations

Participants in this project saw the food shelves as playing a central role in their food security and were interested in becoming more actively engaged in supporting the long-term sustainability of the food shelves. The following recommendations, based on input from participants and the work group, are intended to help food shelves and other stakeholders consider ways that food shelves, and the food system as a whole, can better support residents' long-term food security.

- Continue to expand offerings of fresh, healthy, and culturally relevant foods at food shelves. Examples include offering community garden programs, expanding partnerships with grocery stores, restaurants, or food growers, or implementing healthy food policies that limit unhealthy donations.
- Prioritize participant choice and flexibility when considering different food shelf models, such as systems based on pound or item limits that allow people to select their own foods within a set limit.
- Invest in retaining and supporting staff to be able to build relationships with participants.
- Help participants become connected to other services and resources, and offer educational programs, such as classes on understanding expiration dates, cooking in bulk, strategies to make food stretch, and gardening.
- Provide more concrete engagement opportunities for participants, such as through volunteering at the food shelves; participating in gardening programs; helping promote the food shelves in their communities; serving on advisory councils; and participating in advocacy efforts with policymakers and other stakeholders.
- Invest in the capacity of food shelves to serve growing numbers of participants through funding, infrastructure such as refrigeration, and technical assistance.
- Work to advance policies and systems that affect food security, and continue to provide platforms for community members to share their experiences, voice their needs, and advocate for support of the food shelves with decision-makers and other stakeholders.
- Engage additional stakeholders, including food shelf staff, food banks, funders, and policymakers, in discussions about how to meet the growing number of residents facing food insecurity.
- Explore additional areas of research on factors that impact food security, such as how employment status affects food security and how ability to access food varies by season.

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