

Open Door

Reflections on achievements and impacts (2013-17)

Over the past five years, Open Door has used multiple strategies to increase equitable food access across Dakota county, including:

- introducing a mobile food pantry
- implementing a Healthy Food policy
- expanding a gardening program
- engaging clients and surrounding communities in conversations about equitable food access
- involving clients and community members in advocacy efforts
- adding food access language in city comprehensive plans

This work was funded by the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation, as part of its Health Equity in Prevention (HEiP) initiative to implement policy, systems, and environmental changes to improve health.

In January 2018, a group of nine stakeholders attended a Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) conversation about Open Door's food access work. Stakeholders in attendance included local school and church representatives, food shelf partners, and Open Door staff, volunteers, and a client. The conversation centered on the impacts stakeholders experienced through their work to improve food access under the initiative related to changes in the community, connections with others, and how organizations and individuals are working together.

During the discussion, stakeholders were asked to reflect upon Open Door's achievements and discuss direct and indirect impacts of its work. Participants and session facilitators grouped impacts into the following types of changes that had taken place as a result of Open Door's work to increase client access to healthy foods:

- Influencing food policy through organizational changes and involvement in advocacy
- Increasing collaboration with local government, community members, and organizations
- Centering client stories and advancing food skills
- Strengthening relationships, trust, and community around food access
- Raising awareness of hunger and related equity issues in the community

A summary related to changes identified during the session is included here. The specific impacts identified by stakeholders during the session are provided in the appendix.

What is Ripple Effect Mapping?

Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) is an evaluation tool used to better understand the intended and unintended impacts of a project. It is particularly helpful when evaluating complex initiatives that both influence, and are impacted by, the community. REM is a facilitated discussion with project staff and local stakeholders that creates a visual "mind map" during the discussion, showing the linkages between program activities and resulting changes in the community.

This approach is intended to help demonstrate the project's impacts more holistically and to describe the degree to which different types of impacts are observed by project staff and community stakeholders.

Ripple Effect Mapping: Open Door

👁️ RAISING AWARENESS OF HUNGER AND RELATED EQUITY ISSUES

Community members are more aware of the prevalence of food insecurity and its connection to related upstream issues through conversations that Open Door initiated.

Attending the community conversations, the effects on city planning, land use, around hunger were made very clear. I was not aware of it before.

At our congregation, it's moving people beyond just donating food to thinking about justice and advocacy. Writing letters, contacting lawmakers, attending community conversations. It's more than just about food.



➡️ STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS, TRUST, AND COMMUNITY AROUND FOOD ACCESS

Open Door provides a dignified, dependable experience for clients accessing the food shelf or mobile pantry and strengthens relationships and community around food access.

What people have chosen to be invested in has changed and broadened as a direct result of our relationship with Open Door. Understanding what's really going on and giving back in a way that's proactive and intentional.

👤 CENTERING CLIENT STORIES AROUND FOOD ACCESS

Client engagement and their stories around food access are heard more often in the community.

Our client voice comes through when they share stories of barriers to accessing healthy food. More clients are sharing their stories. Educating clients is hugely empowering.



Open Door



👥 INCREASING COLLABORATION WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT, COMMUNITY MEMBERS, AND ORGANIZATIONS

Organizational partners are more familiar with Open Door's work and ways they may engage to advocate for food equity and access.

Faith communities, nonprofits like the Open Door, city and county government, school districts are coming together to identify solutions.

The Open Door is a great partner for us. Partners should know that the Open Door is available to provide support and partnership.



👍 INFLUENCING FOOD POLICY THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES AND INVOLVEMENT IN ADVOCACY

Open Door initiated organizational changes, such as the adoption of the Healthy Food policy and the creation of a client database, and have engaged in food access advocacy.

The emphasis moved to fresh and healthy food and less bakery goods. We revised policies about what we'd accept from donors. Unhealthy foods that don't meet our criteria go to a different organization.

We were the only organization that brought two clients to Hunger on the Hill. No one wants to hear from staff and partners. We're paid to be here. It's someone who lives in their district they want to hear from.

DISCUSSION THEMES



Influencing food policy through organizational changes and involvement in advocacy

Over five years ago, Open Door implemented a Healthy Food policy, which outlines their commitment to providing clients with access to nutritious food by changing their organizational guidelines for the food they accept and distribute. This policy has helped ground the organization's approach to treating its clients with humanity. It has been subsequently followed with additional organizational changes, such as the creation of a database that allows clients to make food shelf appointments, a change that acknowledges the value of clients' time. These changes have led to broader conversations with Open Door's partners and donors around providing clients with nutritious food in the food shelf community. Open Door's clients have also been involved in conversations about food access in community settings and at the Capitol, where they are able to provide a firsthand perspective of food access.

Open Door moved to a Healthy Food policy five years ago, when HEiP started. We used HEiP to make changes around what food we accept and distribute. How do we prioritize shelf space? It was a big shift and among the first of its kind in the area.

As a result of engagement with Open Door there's been interest from other food shelf partners in engaging in advocacy. There is reluctance with politics and uncertainty around what that means for the organization. They were a leader in engaging in that space without being overly political.



Increasing collaboration with local government, community members, and organizations

There is increased collaboration between Open Door and faith communities, nonprofit organizations, local government, and school districts. These organizations are now more familiar with Open Door's work and ways that they might work together to advocate for solutions addressing food equity and access in their communities. Over the past five years, a new relationship between Open Door and city staff emerged, allowing them to work together on food policy development. One participant said that their organization's collaboration with Open Door has brought greater understanding of issues related to food access, such as transportation and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which they have then been able to discuss with their congregation, expanding awareness of these upstream issues.

Our relationships with city staff have shifted. That's not a natural relationship a nonprofit would have, of being tuned into city government on a food policy level and programmatically. There's a bus circulator program that we may not have participated [in] without HEiP. What can we promote and advocate for in the communities where we work?

Our relationship with the Open Door has educated our staff and leaders around the real issues like transportation, SNAP cuts. What we can do is educate our congregation. With our relationship with the Open Door, we now have a whole area around hunger. We work with the school district and provide backpacks. Site where people can buy meat and produce. Expanded our ministry. We collaborate with other nonprofits with the school district. Would not have done that without that relationship.



Centering client stories around food access

Client voices are central to Open Door's work, where clients are seen as individuals with their own stories, not statistics, as they share their experiences with accessing food. Open Door has valued client engagement, viewing clients as assets and understanding their needs over the past five years. One participant noted that client experiences with food access are heard more often in the community. Another participant thought clients' food skills had improved through the gardening program, noting that the garden serves as a setting where individuals are not identified as clients or volunteers, but just as people growing their food. High school students have been able to use the mobile food market, where they can access resources and learn how to shop for food. Some students have used it to purchase food for their families.

Working at an alternative high school, the mobile food pantry empowers young adults to provide for their families. Some get food for themselves and some for their entire families. Some families send their students lists. It teaches how to shop, access resources.

It's client stories that get people engaged. To have a client sitting next to me saying, I have a voice and I feel comfortable sharing my story with you, that's huge.



Strengthening relationships, trust, and community around food access

Offering a dignified, dependable experience for clients accessing the food shelf or mobile food pantry has led to improved relationships, trust, and community with clients and among organizations working with Open Door. According to one participant, stigma or shame about accessing resources seems less apparent among high school students using the mobile food pantry. In addition, the mobile pantry provides a safe location for homeless students to access food for themselves or their host families, and it enhances community connectedness. Through organizations' improved relationships, another participant noted an increased organizational understanding of issues related to food access, which has led to additional conversations in the community.

We have a small school, and we don't hide who uses the mobile food pantry. I don't perceive any shame or stigma. We've built this community at our school where it's okay to get help and resources and connects our students.

All of the efforts we do take work. But when you frame it about dignity, we don't use equity as much as a talking point but that's what it is.



Raising awareness of hunger and related equity issues

Community members are more aware of the prevalence of hunger, along with the association of related upstream issues such as poverty, housing, and transportation, through the conversations that Open Door has initiated. In suburban communities, the prevalence of food insecurity is not always apparent to residents. Through Open Door's work, organizations and community members have had increased conversations about food access. One participant noted that through her engagement, her family is more aware of hunger within the county. Another participant noted that they are working with their congregation to move away from simply donating food and toward increasing advocacy efforts through connecting with legislators or attending Community Conversations hosted by Open Door.

Connection between hunger and housing - we were talking about this more as shared wisdom. Just when you acknowledge the intersection of poverty, affordable housing, and hunger, and then having people share their stories brings clients together in feeling a sense of community. Brings staff together in understanding there needs to be a more holistic solution.

In our separate communities, our work has increased awareness of hunger in the county. My family and kids know. Extends to both of our communities outside of the work we do.

CHALLENGES

Participants noted the difficulty in engaging in conversations and taking action to address upstream aspects of hunger, such as issues related to housing and poverty. It can be difficult to get people to engage in advocacy and policy-related work when they may be more familiar and comfortable with the direct service aspects of an organization. There is also a fear of alienating donors who may feel uncomfortable in engaging in policy conversations that address poverty or equity. Engaging in policy, systems, and environmental changes, a food shelf staff member noted, is not always seen as “central” to food shelf work with donors, staff, and volunteers. Initiative funding that allowed staff to further their organization’s capacity to engage in those changes is coming to an end.

The funding has allowed us to expand our work beyond what we can sustain. We know this funding is ending. We’ve grown our community support, but with the gap that we’re losing, we can’t make that up. The funding for that work, we don’t have it. We’ve changed the way we’ve run the food shelf, and we’ve grown to that point, but now we have to put more work in keeping it going rather than progressing it.

That’s the next step—we’ve empowered clients to have a voice, and now we need to empower supporters to take the next step beyond giving.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The following questions may be helpful for Open Door and its partners to consider as they work to address these challenges and plan their future work:

- How can Open Door incorporate the inclusion of policy, systems, and environmental change work as part of their day-to-day work across all staff and volunteers?
- How can volunteers and partner organizations take actionable steps to address food equity from a policy-oriented, upstream perspective?
- How can Open Door engage donors in conversations around equity issues that impact food access without alienating them?
- How can youth involvement at Open Door be promoted? Could there be projects for high school students to participate in where they could get credit for volunteering?

APPENDIX: Project impacts identified by discussion participants



INFLUENCING FOOD POLICY THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES AND INVOLVEMENT IN ADVOCACY

Before I worked for the Open Door, I was a volunteer. What we're known for is the healthy food focus.

That informs the donor as well. When we collect food to bring to you, we have a conversation with them about why we can't take that. It invites conversation about why, for example, you might not want to eat ramen for the rest of your life. It helps them think about what they'd like to donate.

At Hunger Solutions, the Open Door's work has given us a better idea of what the needs of the community are. A lot of times, we hear about the needs of the food shelf rather than community members. We can use that at the Capitol.

The community conversations have been really insightful for us.

A few months ago there were some funding cuts from the state/federal levels. We had a meeting at the Capitol, we could have more clients involved making the calls, not just volunteers and staff.

We're trying to figure out who to continue to involve.

With the SNAP cuts, there were 10 emails back from clients who had contact with their representatives.

If a representative gets 10 calls, they think of it as a tsunami. A little bit makes a big difference.

We had a post-card writing campaign.

I see the Open Door as a disruptor. It's not common to see food shelves as innovators. A lot of food shelves sit comfortably with the idea that we feed people. The healthy food policy disrupted things with our volunteers. We had serious conversations with Second Harvest. We've changed the way they do things and helped them understand client needs. Every time we have a donor, we give them a top five list. No other food shelf is doing that. It makes people think of things differently.

Open Door moved to a Healthy Food policy five years ago, when HEIP started. We used the HEIP grant to make changes around what food we accept and distribute. How do we prioritize shelf space? Big shift, had an impact on volunteers. It was among the first of its kind in the country, in the area.

The change to the healthy food policy was one of the most influential and rewarding policies we did. Maybe we could improve on that. The bakery items are going to a different place where other people can get it. The change to shop for your own food was a similar big change. Before we just packed cans so clients didn't know what they were getting. Before we would hear that some were allergic and couldn't use what they received. It was one of the best things that happened.

The emphasis moved to fresh and healthy food and less bakery goods. We revised policies about what we'd accept from donors. Unhealthy foods that don't meet our criteria go to a different organization.

We created a database, worked with an organization that does databases about food shelves. [We are] one of the only organizations that uses appointments. It's about dignity, balancing dignity and efficiency. What makes people feel good about helping versus actual helping.

Clients express surprise that this is how we do things.

Dignity is the key piece. It's not the givers and receivers; at this point in time, you need some assistance. It's not just giving, it's more about equal partnership. I was talking about the garden that we have, there's no employee or client, they're all people together growing.

When you care about the person receiving services, it makes a difference, rather than this is what you're getting. It's hard to quantify.

Even if 5,000 food shelves are doing things the same way, even just having one food shelf do things differently makes a difference.

Innovation spurs competition.

Client choice helps support dignity and fosters choice. When you have people lined up, it feels like a breadline. Changing it to somewhere where oh, today, I get to go to the shelf.

If you run into your neighbor at the shelf and you're not ashamed, that fosters community.

Even if they're only here for five minutes, we want it to be a beautiful experience. That's the approach we use at Open Door.

The Supershelf project at the University of Minnesota is something that other local food shelves are participating in (Open Door is not part of the project). In my conversations about people who started there, based on the toolkit Open Door built in 2015-16. It's looking to revamp food shelves to be supershelves and focus on fresh and healthy foods. There are also behavioral metrics.

One of the things that the supershelves did is that they didn't invent the wheel. They are studying what's already happening, and documenting what is good and bad.

There is varying levels of investment in expansion and innovation from employees or volunteers. One of the things that the Supershelf did is take information about what works to give people tools to do the work.

The Supershelf project spurs conversations--maybe we didn't get accepted to Supershelf this time, but here are three changes we could make for next time. It spurs competition. If someone sees that an organization with no volunteers and staff can do it, we can too.

Even if the impact isn't right away, it can be small intangible effects that are manifested over time.

When you really concentrate on clients and focus on dignity and respect, people experiencing poverty are placed under such scrutiny, that when you remove that, it just makes it easier for people to go about their day. It can break that stigma.

The project is more transformative than healthy food policy and includes funding for signage and coolers.

We were the only organization that brought two clients to Hunger on the Hill. No one wants to hear from staff and partners. We're paid to be here. It's someone who lives in their district they want to hear from.

We invited a few different hunger relief experts to talk about importance of SNAP. They did an important job bringing people together, [including the] board, elected officials, and clients to participate in this event. Nice model [that] we've replicated with other food shelves. Engaging in that work, being the first food shelf out of the gate in driving the message.

Within hunger relief space, as a result of engagement with Open Door there's been interest from other food shelf partners in engaging in advocacy. There is reluctance, uncertainty, with politics and [uncertainty about] what that means for the organization. They were a leader in engaging in that space. Leader in alleviating those concerns without being overly political.

Prioritized engaging more with directors and other staff at food shelves. There are other partners that might want to engage with that space. What we learned from working with them are some good tactics for engaging with elected officials and engaging with community around SNAP efforts.



INCREASING COLLABORATION WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT, COMMUNITY MEMBERS, AND ORGANIZATIONS

Faith communities, nonprofits like the Open Door, city and county government, school districts are coming together to identify solutions.

Community organizations are entering conversations around events (including fundraising).

Our relationships with city staff have shifted. That's not a natural relationship a nonprofit would have of being tuned into city government, on a food policy level and programmatically. There's a bus circulator program that we may not have participated without HEiP. What can we promote and advocate for in the communities where we work?

Our relationship with the Open Door has educated our staff and leaders around the real issues like transportation and SNAP cuts. What we can do is educate our congregation. With our relationship with the Open Door, we now have a whole area around hunger. We work with the school district and provide backpacks. [We have a] site where people can buy meat and produce. [We have] expanded our ministry. We collaborate with other nonprofits with the school district. Would not have done that without that relationship.

The Open Door is a great partner for us. Partners should know that the Open Door is available to provide support and partnership.

Even if it's a food truck, it can relieve some pressure for other organizations.



CENTERING CLIENT STORIES AROUND FOOD ACCESS

Working at an alternative high school, the mobile food pantry empowers young adults to provide for their families. Some get food for themselves and some for their entire families. Some families send their students lists. It teaches how to shop, access resources.

Seeing clients as assets. Most of the volunteers have interactions with clients and know their needs.

The Master Gardener program offers a lot of skill sharing. The dynamic has been more toward sharing of skills and less about giving and receiving.

It's not about giver and receiver, it's realizing that at this point in time, you need help. It's about equal partnership. I was talking about the garden, there's no client no volunteers, they're all people growing stuff. When you care for person receiving the services and you respect that it's a different dynamic.

It's clients stories that get people engaged. To have a client sitting next to me saying I have a voice and I feel comfortable sharing my story with you, that's huge.

You see that with studies of diversity, when people get out and get to know people, that's how people change. When it's one out of three, that something, but when it's Carl down the street there is more likely to be a change.

Centering clients stories, seeing them as individuals, not statistics.

Our client voice comes through when they share stories of barriers to accessing healthy food. More clients are sharing their stories. Educating clients is hugely empowering.



STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS, TRUST, AND COMMUNITY AROUND FOOD ACCESS

We have a small school, and we don't hide who uses the mobile food pantry. I don't perceive any shame or stigma. We've built this community at our school where it's okay to get help and resources and connect our students.

Indirect benefit keeps my homeless students safe. Students who are couch hopping can provide groceries for their host, especially if hosts don't know them very well. [It] keeps that relationship strong. If you provide free groceries to your host, that can help keep that relationship positive and strong. Helps keep my students off the streets.

I drove the bus for the school. One boy was very happy to get things for his mom - he was very happy to do it.

I used to drive the bus - I met a lot of the students. Some were really thoughtful about what they took and why. Some collaborated in "I'll take X, you take Y." It empowered them to take charge.

Being able to offer a reliable food shelf helps bring trust. They're usually not happy when they come to see me but I can provide an immediate resource through the mobile food pantry. It's a way to break the ice with new clients.

There is more understanding of the broader issues, which helps me have these conversations with others.

What people have chosen to be invested in has changed and broadened as a direct result of our relationship with Open Door. Understanding what's really going on and giving back in a way that's proactive and intentional.

The community builds itself in a shared sense of interest.

Even the way our mobile work has taken ownership of relationships with clients at the sites, and being willing to take on more work to have an impact.

All of the efforts we do take work. But when you frame it about dignity, we don't use equity as much as a talking point but that's what it is.

Increasing client access to healthy foods

The gardening program was expanded to apartment complexes.

We did do Garden in a Box last year. People who didn't have a way to get to a garden had something to pack away. 300 lbs once you have the soil.

Fairfield Terrace residents connected to City of Lakeville and Lakeville LOOP.

We addressed a gap and reduced the burden on surrounding communities by providing reliable service. People don't feel like they need to go somewhere else.

Existence of mobile pantry, the way we've been able to experiment with what works. We have a "captive population"--people don't need to come to us, we can go where they are.

For the first time this past summer, we did door-to-door outreach for the mobile pantry. We hired a bilingual Latino outreach coordinator to promote services in English and Spanish.



RAISING AWARENESS OF HUNGER AND RELATED EQUITY ISSUES

Empty Bowls fundraiser - the Open Door, the Art House, and a church came together to do a fundraiser. Most of the events benefit from more organizations coming together.

Have gone to the events before, and they were a lot smaller then. There's likely more growth potential.

It's a little about art, a little about hunger, and it's a fundraiser as well, which may expand awareness.

Children are getting involved as well.

In our separate communities, our work has increased awareness of hunger in the county. My family and kids know. Extends to both of our communities outside of the work we do.

We've prioritized increasing awareness of hunger beyond the need for fundraising. If we're advocating for solutions, people need to be aware of the prevalence of the problem.

Connection between hunger and housing - we were talking about this more as shared wisdom. Just when you acknowledge the intersection of poverty, affordable housing, and hunger, and then having people share their stories, and these two things went wrong and here's where I am. [It] brings clients together in feeling a sense of community. [It] brings staff together in understanding there needs to be a more holistic solution.

Educating the public about upstream solutions

At our congregation, it's moving people beyond just donating food to thinking about justice and advocacy. Writing letters, contacting lawmakers, attending community conversations. It's more than just about food.

Attending the community conversations, the effects on city planning, land use, around hunger were made very clear. I was not aware of it before.

Sometimes for people not as involved, they are not aware that mobility is a contributing factor. The mobile pantry helps a lot.

Spoke to business leaders earlier today and asked them about how many people experience poverty. Guessed and it was three times that.

Especially in the suburbs, that education piece is almost more difficult because nobody talks about it.

Second Harvest Heartland did a study that the largest number of missed meals is in first ring suburbs. There are resources there they don't apply for. It is harder to build awareness for the issue.

Can think it's happening somewhere else to someone else, and it's here.

Much of the work that we do falls under improving health equity.