



Great Plains Food Bank

2013 Bush Prize Winner

We knew that if we were going to move forward with the findings from our 2008 Creating a Hunger Free North Dakota study we would have to change the hunger relief business model in this state.

– Steve Sellent, Great Plains Food Bank executive director

What is the Bush Prize?

The Bush Prize is an annual award that honors and supports innovative organizations with a track record of making great ideas happen. Winners receive public recognition for their work and creative capital to use however they choose. The Bush Prize is part of Bush Foundation's Community Innovation initiative, which inspires and supports communities to create innovative solutions to their challenges. Each year, the Foundation selects Bush Prize winners from Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and the 23 Native nations that share the same geography. Great Plains Food Bank (GPFB) was one of nine winners of the inaugural 2013 Bush Prize.

To learn how GPFB made its community innovation happen, Wilder Research conducted interviews with Executive Director Steve Sellent and three GPFB stakeholders. Additionally, Wilder Research reviewed internal documents provided by GPFB, including strategic planning documents and a food security needs assessment of North Dakota.

What is Great Plains Food Bank?

Great Plains Food Bank is a hunger relief and food access organization based in Fargo, North Dakota that has provided services to North Dakota and Clay County, MN since 1983. To deliver its services throughout such a large geographic area, GPFB uses an expansive network of hunger relief and food distribution partners, including nearly 300 direct food assistance partners (such as food pantries, soup kitchens, or homeless shelters), other hunger relief agencies (such as food advocacy and access organizations), and for-profit food industry partners (such as local, regional, and national food companies).

What is GPFB's community innovation?

Great Plains Food Bank maintains multiple networks of state and national food relief organizations, government agencies, and food producers in order to increase food security and access in North Dakota, acting as a hub of resources and knowledge for addressing food insecurity. In 2008, GPFB worked with partners to start the Creating a Hunger Free North Dakota (CHFND) partnership to address food insecurity in North Dakota in an informed and coordinated way. The first step for the CHFND partnership was to conduct a food security needs assessment for all of North Dakota. The study results recommended eliminating gaps in the delivery of hunger relief services, capitalizing on opportunities for increased collaboration among vested hunger relief parties, and strengthening North Dakota's state-implemented food assistance programs.

In response, GPFB altered how they operated, with GPFB executive director Steve Sellent stating, "We really changed the whole dynamic of hunger relief work in North Dakota." To address the study recommendations, GPFB began offering more direct food access services like senior food programs, backpack food programs, and a mobile food pantry program. They placed a larger emphasis on partnering with other hunger relief agencies, such as local food pantries. Lastly, they worked with North Dakota's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to provide outreach to North Dakota residents.

One stakeholder described GPFB's importance for CHFND, stating, "They are the member of the CHFND with the greatest impact on reducing hunger." Additionally, another stakeholder mentioned GPFB's holistic "food systems" approach to hunger relief as a key characteristic of their work: "They've acknowledged the need to work further upstream on the situations, conditions, and environments that cause people to not have enough resources for food."

Some context for GPFB's community innovation

Understanding the context in which a community innovation happened is important to a holistic and informed understanding of that innovation. The state of North Dakota, and the perceptions of North Dakota residents, is a primary context in which GPFB operates. CHFND's 2008 food security needs assessment found that 11 percent of households in North Dakota experience food insecurity. However, according to interview respondents, there is a perception among North Dakota residents that food security is not an important issue due to the economic upswing from the oil industry. "People are patting themselves on the back and saying that we fixed unemployment," said one stakeholder. Tied to this perception is the idea that people who visit food pantries or use food assistance programs should "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" or that they "lack moral character." In other words, there is a stigma associated with seeking food assistance and a lack of awareness of the prevalence of the issue.

There's a social barrier in asking for help. This was one of the themes from the study among local food pantries. They always have to confront and manage those kinds of feelings.
–Stakeholder interview

On the other hand, interview respondents noted that increased national awareness of public health research linking food insecurity and obesity is a factor that assists GPFB's work. GPFB leadership and stakeholders mentioned that this awareness is permeating throughout North Dakota.

How did GPFB bring about its community innovation?

Bush Foundation awarded the Bush Prize to Great Plains Food Bank in recognition of the organization's demonstrated history of using community problem-solving to bring about innovative solutions. The purpose of this case study is to learn more about how GPFB facilitates problem-solving in their community. The Bush Prize celebrates organizations that use inclusive, collaborative, and resourceful problem-solving processes to bring about innovation. This section of the case study highlights these elements of GPFB's problem-solving efforts.

Bush Foundation's definition of inclusive: Meaningfully engage key stakeholders – thoughtfully identifying those needed to create the intended change and, whenever possible, including those directly affected by the problem

Of the many stakeholder groups involved in GPFB's hunger relief work, GPFB leadership place the most emphasis on involving recipients of the organization's services and the people living in North Dakota who are experiencing food insecurity. GPFB sought to meaningfully engage this group by gathering their perceptions, opinions, and needs regarding food access and hunger relief work through surveys and focus groups as part of their statewide needs assessment.

Stakeholders also noted the importance of Executive Director Steve Sellent's role in learning about community members' experiences with food insecurity, with one stakeholder stating, "When I talk to Steve, I'm most interested in the numbers he's able to give me because he is clearly on top of need." There are numerous examples of GPFB gathering insight from service recipients and the importance of remaining connected to the communities that GPFB serves. One stakeholder noted that GPFB is an externally-driven organization and that Steve regularly uses community input to guide the organization. By learning about the need of people experiencing food insecurity in North Dakota and western Minnesota, GPFB develops and delivers services that meaningfully engage service recipients.

Steve does a great job of listening. [GPFB's work] is driven by what the community says. It's not an internally-driven process; it's listening to what's going on externally, and that drives the process. –Stakeholder interview

Food donors – including individual donors, food producers, and food distributors – represent another important stakeholder group for GPFB’s food access and hunger relief work. GPFB and CHFND partners noted experimenting with new ways of engaging food donors and conducting regular donor drives as primary ways they engage this stakeholder group. One stakeholder shared, “I’m sure [GPFB] must know the warehouse manager of every store in Fargo!”

Bush Foundation’s definition of collaborative: A true joint effort, with partners willing to share ownership and decision-making as they pursue an innovation together

The Great Plain Food Bank’s mission reads, “Ending hunger through community partnerships.” GPFB fulfills that mission by partnering with nearly 300 local direct food assistance partners, hunger relief agencies, and for-profit food industry partners. Since the initial food security needs assessment, GPFB has developed its goals in conjunction with the CHFND’s goals, further showing its collaborative nature. One stakeholder noted, “GPFB is collaborative in everything they do because they work through community partner agencies and coalition members to move ideas and solutions forward.”

GPFB also seeks input from community members and CHFND members regarding their strategic direction and their development of programs and services. As one stakeholder noted, “They ask for ideas and are willing to accept them and work with them.” GPFB seeks input from partners and community members as needed, particularly in the development of new programs, but also sporadically during a program’s lifespan. Steve Sellent spoke about GPFB’s decision-making and brainstorming processes with their partners:

We bring in major partners, clients, food providers, collaborators. It isn’t us saying this is what we need to do, but a collaborative effort. It wasn’t a GPFB project; it was a community effort. We don’t operate in a vacuum for anything that we do. –Steve Sellent

GPFB leadership and stakeholders also noted the extent to which GPFB’s partners share ownership of the organization’s work. One stakeholder mentioned, “I’ve been impressed that the president of the largest food store in Fargo feels it’s just as much his work as GPFB’s.” The way in which GPFB approaches its partnerships enables partners to claim ownership of the collective efforts. Using the CHFND study as an example, Steve Sellent noted, “We wanted the CHFND study to be driven by partners and us, not just us.” A stakeholder also mentioned that GPFB values listening to the ideas of its partners, a characteristic which also allows for shared ownership between GPFB and its partners. This stakeholder noted, “They wait to hear from other partners before they chime in. They respectfully listen and even ask to chime in with their input or ideas.”

Bush Foundation’s definition of resourceful: Using existing resources and assets creatively to make the most of what a community already has

The Great Plains Food Bank publicly claims resourcefulness as an organizational value, stating, “Waste is unacceptable.” The Potato Recovery Project, which diverts edible potatoes from a commercial operation’s trash stream into the food assistance system, exemplifies Bush Foundation’s “resourceful” principle by utilizing existing resources – in this case, potatoes – creatively to address a community need. Steve Sellent explains how the project came about:

One example is the Potato Recovery Project. We had a food sourcer – that’s a position at GPFB that tries to find food donations – visit a potato wash plant, which is where potatoes are washed, packaged, and marketed for farmers. This potato wash plant did millions of pounds of potatoes per year. They said they had no product available to donate. The food sourcer asked for a tour, and she saw about 10 percent of the potatoes being tossed out. She thought that some of them didn’t look that bad, so she took a tote of them and we analyzed them. Some were either too big or too small for retail market, but about 80 percent of them were edible; they just didn’t meet the appearance standard. –Steve Sellent

Identifying and using these potatoes is an example of the GPFB’s resourceful value in action. In response to this new food source, GPFB also developed a potato sorting and distributing operation, which is innovative for the hunger relief field. According to GPFB leadership and stakeholders, most hunger relief agencies either directly distribute food or seek food donations. To their knowledge, no other hunger relief organizations have run a large-scale, semi-automated produce sorting and packaging operation. Steve Sellent described the sorting and distributing process:

We ordered equipment to help us sort and package the potatoes. We had people sorting out the unusable ones from the conveyor belt, with our automatic bagger filling 10-12 bags in a minute. No one else had a production line like that. –Steve Sellent

Additionally, GPFB further investigated the amount of potatoes discarded in North Dakota and is seeking additional partnerships to accommodate this influx of food into the hunger relief system.

We think there’s in the neighborhood of 40 million pounds of potatoes across North Dakota going to waste. Our warehouse space isn’t big enough, so we’re working with a food bank in the Twin Cities to see if they can help process them. We’re trying to pass on our learning. – Steve Sellent

The Great Plains Food Bank is also resourceful in their approach to partnering with other hunger relief or food industry organizations, with respondents noting that GPFB “tries to leverage the collective resources of their relationships” and through its partnerships ensures that they “do not duplicate [hunger relief] efforts.” In addition to its CHFND partners, GPFB has entered into partnerships with government agencies, faith-based organizations, workers’

unions, and for-profit companies as a result of connections gained through CHFND's needs assessment process.

Leadership that fosters a culture of innovation

Wilder Research asked interview respondents about how the GPFB's leadership facilitates community innovation. Stakeholders mentioned Steve Sellent's humility as a leader, saying, "Steve would shrug GPFB's success to other people, but that's what good leaders do." Steve empowers his staff and partners to take ownership of GPFB's work, a characteristic that has led to innovations like the Potato Recovery Project – a project that was developed from the insight of a GPFB staff person.

He operates in a way that allows him to take vicarious pleasure in what others are doing. It's a very empowering way for a leader to be. He doesn't have the demands of ego overstep what he's doing. He comes across as a very open, straightforward, understated guy.
–Stakeholder interview

True to observations of him, Steve Sellent offered his staff as an example of leadership that facilitates community innovation, saying, "Every one of our staff is passionate about what they do, and they are not afraid to fail. It's the right mix of people to create unreasonable possibilities." When asked how GPFB fosters this organizational culture, Steve highlighted internal processes by which GPFB measures its progress toward yearly goals, emphasizing that failure is accepted and recognized as a part of experimentation and learning.

We might have 25 things on our list for the year, and we rank where we are with them. If we're not off track on some, we're not challenging ourselves. That's the kind of people we want to be. If you want to work here you have to be a part of that. –Steve Sellent

Summary

In addition to GPFB's case study, Wilder Research produced similar case studies for all 2013 Bush Prize winners and a synthesis report of key findings. These reports can be found on Bush Foundation's website. A primary learning from the synthesis analysis is that community innovation is an iterative process and that repeated risk-taking is necessary to achieve community innovation. Despite the "unknowns" inherent in community innovation, Great Plains Food Bank forged a new and effective path for solving a problem in its community and has proven itself an innovative leader in the field of food access.

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