



Supporting Food Security Among Food Shelf Participants

Reflections of Participants at Three Minneapolis Food Shelves

J U N E 2 0 1 8

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Executive summary

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.³

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

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.

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>.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Project background

During the recession from 2007-2009, food shelf use in Hennepin County increased substantially from about 2 million to over 2.7 million visits annually.⁴ While unemployment rates have mostly recovered, food shelf use has continued to rise, exceeding 3 million visits annually from 2011 onward.⁵ These increases are due in part to cuts in federal food programs including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, low wages, and slow wage recovery since the recession.⁶

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.⁶

In early 2017, Waite House, an organization in the Phillips neighborhood of Minneapolis that integrates human services and civic engagement, convened a work group made up of representatives from three local food shelves (the Brian Coyle Center, and the Division of Indian Work, and Waite House), researchers, and the project funder. Over the course of a year, the work group developed a community-based research process to explore how food shelves can better accommodate the growing need and support greater food security among food shelf participants. This report summarizes key findings from this process.

About the food shelves

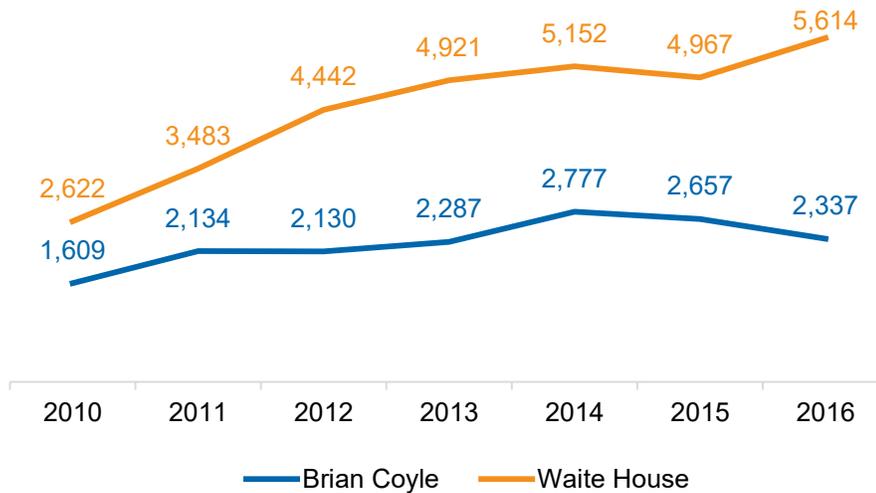
Reflecting statewide and national trends, the participating food shelves have seen marked increases in use since the recession. Between 2010 and 2016, the number of participants visiting the Waite House food shelf more than doubled, from 2,622 in 2010 to 5,614 in 2016. The Brian Coyle Center (“Brian Coyle”) likewise saw increases in participants from 1,609 in 2010 to 2,337 in 2016 (Figure 1). Overall visits at both food shelves also grew by three-fold during this period (Figure 2). Staff who manage the food shelf for the Division of Indian Work (DIW) have observed similar trends. In 2016, DIW served 2,407 participants (data from earlier years were not available at the time of reporting).

⁴ Food shelf reports to MN DHS (2002-2017). Analysis by Hunger Solutions.

⁵ 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/>.

⁶ 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>.

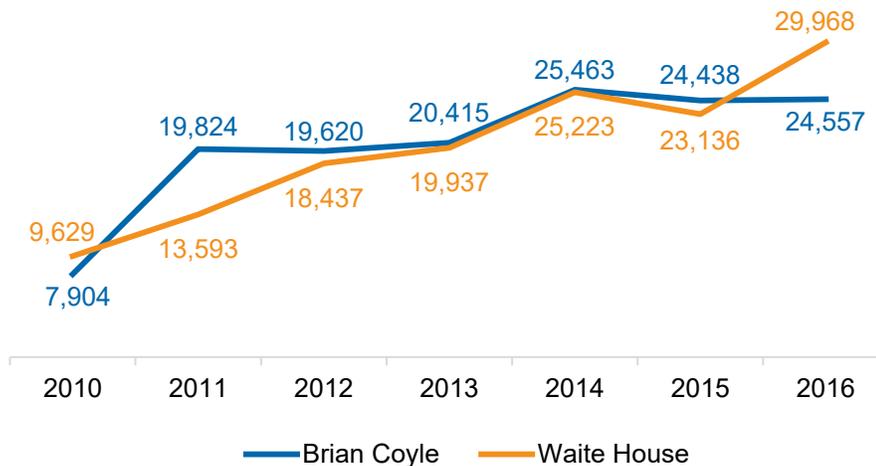
1. Number of unduplicated participants by year (2010-2016)



Source. Client Track data from Brian Coyle and Waite House

Note. DIW served 2,407 participants in 2016. Data from earlier years were not available.

2. Number of food shelf visits at Brian Coyle and Waite House by year (2010-2016)

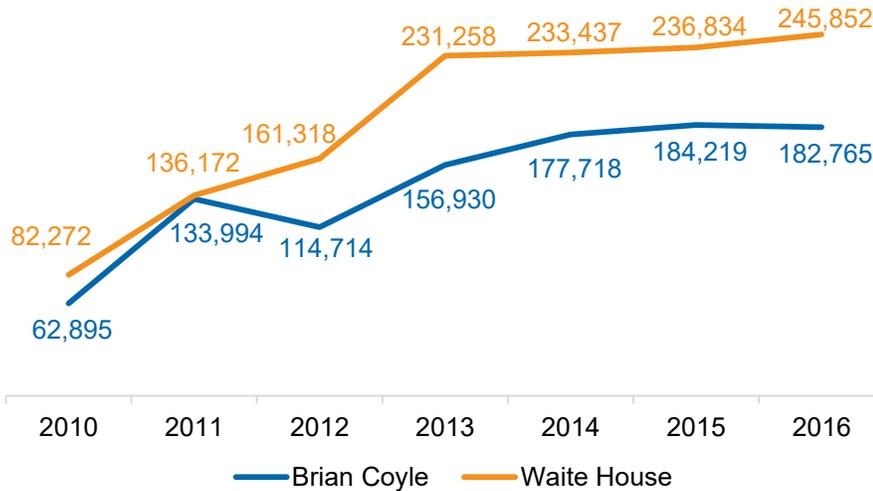


Source. Client Track data from Brian Coyle and Waite House.

Note. There were 5,440 visits to the DIW food shelf in 2016. Data from earlier years were not available.

The food shelves are also distributing more food to meet the growing need. In 2016, Waite House distributed 245,852 pounds of food, almost triple what it distributed 2010, and 167,196 units of produce, more than double 2010 totals. In 2016, Brian Coyle distributed about three times as many pounds of food (182,765, up from 62,895), and over double the amount of produce (104,378 items, up from 46,550) as it did in 2010 (Figure 3). DIW distributed 75,554 pounds of food in 2016 (the number of units of produce distributed by DIW was not available at the time of reporting).

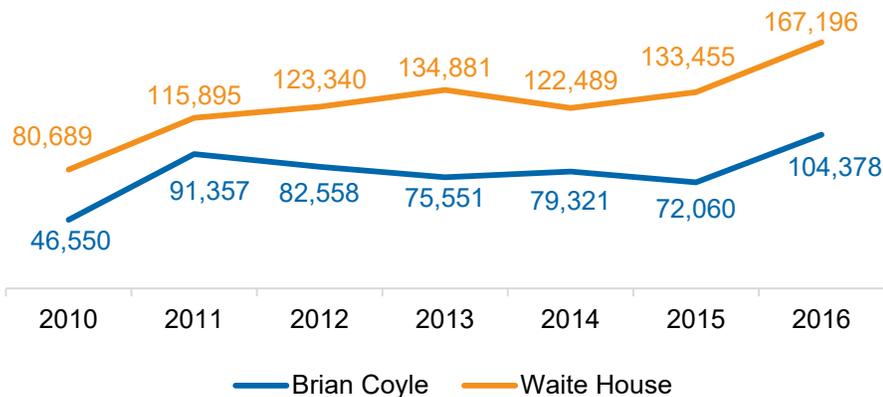
3. Pounds of food distributed (2010-2016)



Source. Client Track data from Brian Coyle and Waite House.

Note. DIW distributed 75,554 pounds of food in 2016. Data from earlier years were not available.

4. Units of produce distributed (2010-2016)



Source. Client Track data from Brian Coyle and Waite House.

Note. The number of units of produce distributed by DIW was not available at the time of reporting.

The three food shelves are in different neighborhoods of Minneapolis, serving diverse participants reflecting the makeup of the surrounding community. Each also operates using a different model of food distribution. The following sections describe each food shelf. Detailed tables that include the data highlighted in each site description and additional demographic information (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, poverty status) for participants at each site can be found in Appendix A.

Brian Coyle

Brian Coyle is the busiest site of its parent organization, Pillsbury United Communities. A variety of programs and services in the areas of education, youth and family, wellness and nutrition, and asset creation are available at the site. Located in the Cedar Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis, the center serves a large East African population. In 2016, about two-thirds (62%) of food shelf participants identified as African, and another 13 percent identify as black or African American. Brian Coyle also serves a slightly older population than the other food shelves, with 18 percent of participants over the age of 65. In addition, 90 percent of food shelf participants live below 100 percent of the federal poverty level.⁷ Any Minnesota resident can use the food shelf, unlike many food shelves where use is restricted to specific zip codes. However, almost all (88%) users are from the surrounding area.

Individuals are able to get 20 pounds of food per month, with 15 pounds per additional person in the household after that. Participants can generally select whatever items are available and come as many times throughout the month until they hit their pound limits. However, there are some restrictions on staple items. For example, participants are only allowed one container of oil a month. This strategy ensures that more participants will have access to these items.

Brian Coyle also holds a bimonthly “Produce Day” where participants can pick up fresh produce. Brian Coyle staff establish daily limits depending on the quantity and type of produce that is delivered.

Division of Indian Work

The Division of Indian Work (DIW) is located in the Powderhorn Park neighborhood of Minneapolis and serves the American Indian community through culturally based education, human services, and advocacy and leadership development. Participants must have a tribal identification card to use the food shelf, and about one-third (32%) of participants are younger than 18.

DIW operates using a grocery bag model. Participants receive a bag of pre-selected groceries based on family size that is packed by volunteers. This system allows food to be packaged and distributed fairly efficiently, with families able to stop by and pick up their bags and go. Participants can pick up bags once a month.

DIW also has “Free Food Fridays” three Fridays a month. These events are similar to Produce Day at Brian Coyle, but may include other items beyond produce. Limits are established depending on the selection available, and elders are served first.

⁷ In 2016, the federal poverty level was \$11,880 for a single adult and \$24,300 for a family of four.

Waite House

Waite House is located in the Phillips neighborhood of Minneapolis. Also part of Pillsbury United Communities, Waite House integrates civic engagement and human services in the areas of employment and training, health and nutrition, youth development, and basic needs. In addition to the food shelf, the organization also has a free community café and a number of community gardens, some of which source the food shelf.

The food shelf serves a diverse group of participants. Nearly half (45%) of participants identify as Latino, with another 19 percent identifying as African American and 14 percent identifying as American Indian (Figure A1). Waite House serves a number of families: 36 percent of people served by the food shelf are younger than 18 (Figure A2).

At the time of this project, Waite House operated using a similar system as Brian Coyle, but participants were able to come only twice a month. However, in January 2018, Waite House introduced a new system developed in partnership with the Super Shelf program, funded by the University of Minnesota-Extension, the Food Group, and SNAP-Ed. Under this system, each participant is given a “shopping list” based on household size. The shopping list includes different categories, and participants can select items within each category. Limits are based on item counts rather than pounds. This system is easier for the food shelf to manage, while still giving participants choice. In some cases, participants are also able to get more food than they would have before (for example, with higher weight food such as milk or watermelons, where they may have hit their pound limits faster under the previous system).

Waite House also holds a bimonthly Produce Day, similar to Brian Coyle.

Methods

Over the course of 2017, the work group developed a community-based research process to gather input from food shelf participants and answer the following questions:

- What are the experiences of food shelf participants at Brian Coyle, DIW, and Waite House?
 - What strategies do food shelf participants use to access food?
 - What roles does the food shelf play in participants' lives beyond food?
- What strategies can Brian Coyle, DIW, and Waite House use to enhance food security of food shelf participants?
 - What does food security mean to participants?
 - Does the current food system meet participants' needs? What unmet needs do food shelf participants report?
 - What role do participants' see the food shelf playing in their longer-term food security?

During these discussions, the work group also came up with a working definition of food security:

Having enough to eat and having access to healthy, affordable food that reflects our cultural backgrounds.

Interviews

From these guiding questions, the work group conducted 30 interviews with food shelf participants, ten at each of the sites (See Appendix C for the interview protocol). Interviews were conducted by trained interviewers and site staff in English, Spanish, Somali, and Oromo. Participants were given a \$20 gift card for their participation. The work group then reviewed transcripts of the interviews and discussed key themes and emerging questions from the data.

Focus groups

To explore some of the themes further, the work group conducted a total of four focus groups across the three sites (See Appendix D for the focus group protocol). Two focus groups were held at Waite House, one in Spanish and one in English, and one at each of the other two sites. The focus group at DIW was in English, and the discussion at Brian Coyle was conducted in English, Somali, and Oromo with the help of translators. Focus groups were led by Waite House staff and a faculty member from Augsburg College from the work group. Participants were recruited through invitations during produce distribution days at the sites, and given a \$20 gift card for their participation.

During the focus groups, facilitators presented key themes that had emerged from the interviews and participants had a chance to review, comment on, and add to the information.

In the second half of the discussion, focus group participants were led through an exercise about supports and barriers to food security. On a piece of flip chart paper in the center of the table, a circle was drawn with human figures at the center. Participants were asked to write down things that helped them to be food secure and draw a green line from these topics to human figures. In the second part, participants were asked to write down factors that made it hard for them to achieve food security and draw red lines from these items to the human figures. This exercise was intended to help capture systems-level factors that impacted participants' ability to access food. This exercise was conducted in all of the focus groups except at Brian Coyle due to time constraints.

In this report

This report summarizes findings from the interviews and focus groups. It was written in consultation with work group members and intended to help inform planning for how food shelves can support greater food security among participants.

Throughout this report, the term food shelf participants is used to reflect the fact that often, those who used the food shelves were not passive recipients of services, but actively engaged in the community at the food shelves. Quotes in the report are from interviews unless otherwise noted. It is important to recognize that perspectives and experiences of the participants who were interviewed or involved in the focus groups may not fully represent all food shelf participants.

Key findings

*[With everything] going on in the world, all the chaos and hunger and all that stuff, for a moment you can come here and you can forget all about it. This is a peaceful community... It gives you hope. That's why [I] love coming here...And it helps you get to where you are trying to get to. It gives you information. Good information. There is nothing negative about this place. Everything this place tries to do is something of good nature. That, I appreciate.
– Waite House participant*

Participants operated in food systems that included food shelves, grocery stores, food assistance programs, and other social services. The following sections describe how participants navigated these systems, and the extent to which the current food system is meeting their needs.

Strategies food shelf participants use to access food

Participants use a variety of resources to access food

Grocery stores, especially large chain stores, played an important role in participants' food security. Participants spoke at length about grocery stores during the interviews. Across all of the food shelves, participants were most likely to list Aldi and Cub Foods and wholesale retailers such as Sam's Club. Participants at DIW and Waite House also reported using Walmart. Participants at Brian Coyle were more likely to report culturally specific stores, farmers markets, and co-ops, and the Twin Cities Mobile Market.

Participants often made use of other food programs. During the mapping exercise, when asked what resources in their communities helped them to be food secure, participants listed a number of food shelves and churches (Figure 1). Participants also mentioned accessing other food shelves and churches during the interviews. Participants also used food assistance programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and the Nutrition Assistance Program for Seniors (NAPS) (also known as the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, or CSFP).

Some participants pooled resources with friends and family to meet their food needs. Respondents at DIW and Brian Coyle also reported relying on family and friends, through exchanges of food, shared meals, or help with transportation.

Participants learned about resources to access food through word-of-mouth or other social services. Participants most often reported hearing about the food shelf through friends, families, or neighbors. Others said they heard about it through other programs at the organization, social service directories, including United Way 211, or through churches and mosques. However, some commented that the directories often had outdated information. Brian Coyle participants were more likely to report that they heard about food-related resources through TV advertisements, flyers, and mailings. Similar to the interviews, participants in the mapping exercises indicated that social service agencies and resources such as United Way 211 and the internet, which they used to find other programs, played an important role in helping them be food secure.

*[I learned about the food shelf because my] mom and grandma used to use it.
– DIW participant*

*[When you move] here and everything is new and fresh and it's ok, where is this, where is that? ...I just put myself out there and start asking questions. Like hey, where's this? Do they have this? Can they do this or that thing? So [that's] how I found this place.
– Waite House participant*

*We moved into the West Bank neighborhood about nine years ago. We were starting a family at the time and we didn't have enough income. One of our neighbors told us that there is free food in the food shelf at the Brian Coyle Center.
– Brian Coyle participant*

*I learned about the [food shelf] through ESL class at Coyle Center.
– Brian Coyle participant*

*I found this one because my kids came here for Boys and Girls Club.
– Waite House participant*

The first time I was at the Minneapolis library and found a book/magazine that had a listing of resources and assistance that are available in Minneapolis. I found the page that had the listings for food shelves. They also had a number that I could call and get information about food shelves in my neighborhood, so I called and found the one that is closed to where I live. – Waite House participant

Food shelves often help participants make ends meet

Participants described how food shelves fit into their overall approach to accessing food. Oftentimes, the food shelves played a critical role in helping participants make ends meet throughout the month.

The food shelves helped participants fill in gaps, supplement other food sources, and handle emergencies. Participants suggested that they did not use the food shelves as their main source of food, but that the food shelves helped them to stretch existing resources by supplementing what they were able to get from other places.

When I'm low on food, I come over around lunch. – DIW participant

[I use it for] supplements. – DIW participant

At any given point in time you know, things happen. Emergencies happen. Like a few months ago I had to come here for emergency help because...I had to keep my daughter's children because she had an emergency. They didn't hesitate to give me that extra emergency for that month which was very helpful. So that is so important when that time comes that you can have someone to count on. – Waite House participant

It subsidizes when my food stamps runs out. – Brian Coyle participant

Food shelves aren't to take care of and babysit you 30 days out of the month, this is just to supplement. [I] use it as a supplement, but you have to go out there and you have to realize that you have to provide for yourself. – Waite House participant

Participants also used the food shelf to get food they might not be able to get or afford elsewhere. Participants described specific foods that they were able to get at the food shelves that they were not able to access or that were otherwise expensive. Accordingly, being able to access these foods free of cost helped them stretch their food budgets and have greater variety.

They have stuff that other food shelves I've been to don't have...They have like heart lettuce. That's really expensive. And they have it fresh grown here so that's pretty cool to me. – Waite House participant

One time I was really surprised. I found some...canned cherries and I had been looking in different stores all over for them and boom, there were some at the food shelf. I was totally shocked. I was really happy that I found them because I heard it's good for Alzheimer's. – Waite House participant

It is fresh and meets my family's needs. If I don't get food through the food shelf, I would only eat what I can afford to buy. – Brian Coyle participant

Participants used the food shelves for fresh produce, dairy, staples such as oil and flour, and meat. The largest number of people reported getting fresh produce, dairy (e.g., milk and eggs), staples, and meat. Other common items included canned goods, cereal, bread, grab-and-go and prepared meals, juice, food for their children, or culturally specific staples such as masa or coconut oil.

The food shelves play important roles beyond food

Participants described how the food shelves were also a hub where they built relationships and learned about new resources.

The food shelf was a place to connect with other community members. Participants described other benefits of using the food shelf beyond increased access to food. A number of participants described meeting new people at the food shelf, or reconnecting with friends and acquaintances. Others more generally enjoyed feeling part of a larger community.

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

*I have a circle group I do every Tuesday at my house [that is] mothers against heroin. I know a lot of mothers who are struggling with it so I started a group. We do that every Tuesday night. Most of [the people who attend] I got from here, from this food shelf.
– DIW participant*

I like to meet and talk to people here, I have seen people fight, some have fainted, some meet their partners here...I've seen so much in this place. – Waite House participant

Most of all it [helps] you become connected with your community...When you come to the food shelf you see people of all walks of life...You get to know them and get to know about them a little bit. It's good to be able to talk to your neighbors. – Waite House participant

Participants learned about other programs and services through the food shelf.

Participants described a wide variety of resources they learned about through the food shelf, including ELL classes, parenting resources, support groups, housing, health insurance programs, employment services, other food shelves, clothing resources, programs for children, immigration resources, and volunteer programs. Many at Brian Coyle mentioned becoming connected to the health and wellness classes the organization offers. They often learned about these resources from staff or other participants.

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

I used to live in a basement where I was getting sick from my lungs because it was a dirt floor basement. I mentioned this to this older lady and she told a [staff member] who works here and they both helped me get an apartment with an A/C, nice floors, a studio on the 2nd floor and very cheap \$240.00 per month...So that's why I keep coming to this community center because of my great experiences I have had here. The Waite House has been good to me. – Waite House participant

They told me about St. Stephens, about housing, about some clothing resources, and other places to get hot meals. – DIW participant

*[I have become connected with] ESL class, MNSure enrollment, [and] health classes.
– Brian Coyle participant*

Friendly staff helped participants feel a sense of welcoming and belonging at the food shelves. When asked if they felt comfortable using the food shelves, participants almost universally replied that they did. During the mapping exercise, participants in the Spanish language focus group listed “trust” in the food shelf among the factors that helped them be more food secure. Friendly and helpful staff played a key role in helping participants feel welcome. Several participants described specific interactions they had had with staff that had meant a lot to them and reported emotional benefits from these interactions. Others noted that the food shelf was an overall positive environment.

I was a little bit shy. That's my nature. I did not want to ask people for things I can get myself. I didn't want to ask for handouts. I was ashamed. I felt uncomfortable and [was] speaking with a very low voice...I spoke to a counselor who approached me and made me feel welcome, he explained that this program was free and they were here to help me. He made me feel welcomed. – Waite House participant

They're always welcoming you or are happy to see you...If they ain't seen you in a while, [they say] “Hey, where you been?” That's a cool thing to have aside from the food because...over the years can create a relationship, not a personal relationship, but just by name, “Hey, how you doing Mrs. Smith?” or whoever. That's pretty cool to have. – Waite House participant

This is my community and they are good people. – Brian Coyle participant

[I feel comfortable here because] they speak Spanish like I do. – Waite House participant

Participants are strategic in how they use resources

Participants often balanced a number of factors when determining where to go for food, especially affordability and accessibility. Affordability and accessibility influenced participants’ decisions about where to shop for food. They also weighed location and hours; selection of products, especially bulk items, healthier offerings, or culturally specific foods; and comfort in the environment. Sometimes these factors were at odds and participants had to weigh the different options, such as when the closest grocery store happened to be more expensive.

[I go to] Walmart mainly because you get more for your money. – DIW participant

[The food is affordable] at Walmart, yes. But I live by Cub and it's easier. – DIW participant

It's in a good location right by the bus route and it's also by Aldi and other stores. – Waite House participant

They're good hours for me. I know the hours and can plan around them. – DIW participant

[I go] to Sam's Club...I buy in bulk because my family size is 14. I like the food shelf here because they just gave me a big box of chicken and that will probably last me the rest of the summer. It's whole chickens that are already seasoned. It's common from here to get a box especially if you have a large family. – DIW participant

When we do have food stamps we go [to] Hy-Vee now. It's a new grocery store that's phenomenal. Their produce is awesome. They bake all their donuts fresh early in the morning. I mean personally for me that's priceless. – Waite House participant

I'll go to Aldi and I'll feel right at home...But those guys down the street, that co-op, man they made me mad. A little piece of steak like this, \$30...At Aldi I can come with \$30 and, [leave] with like 10 bags. You go to the co-op and [with] \$30 you don't even [get one] bag...I went [to the co-op] once and...nobody was like, "How do you do? Are you okay?" It's a whole different environment. – Waite House participant

Participants' definitions of food security

Participants were also asked what came to mind when they thought of food security. Their responses indicate the multi-faceted ways participants considered what it meant to be food secure.

Food security means enough to eat and access to healthy, culturally relevant foods

For many food shelf participants, food security meant having enough to eat for themselves and those they cared about. When asked what came to mind when they thought of food security, many participants described having enough food on a regular basis or not having to fight over resources. Others suggested that it meant having enough to share with their families and neighbors.

Having food daily. – DIW participant

Having food whenever you need. – Brian Coyle participant

Food security, wow...Just the other day we didn't have any food and my daughter was like daddy, how are we going to eat? I was like yeah, give me a second...We left and went and got some stuff from the food shelves...All of us had the snacks and different things and made dinner. And [the kids] don't realize that our whole existence is to maintain a sense of security in their head that hey, [just] because we don't have a lot of money does not mean we can't survive. – Waite House participant

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

Healthy, secure, I feel like I can help others. – Brian Coyle participant

Others stated that food security meant access to fresh, healthy, and culturally relevant foods.

Fresh food and not all expired. – DIW participant

Healthy food. Vegetables, fruits, and good stuff. – Waite House participant

Wild rice, and fixings for fry bread. – DIW participant

Increased values, trust, Halal. – Brian Coyle participant

Food security also meant self-sufficiency, peace of mind, and the good life for some food shelf participants. Participants at Brian Coyle in particular described broader, less tangible meanings of food security. For some, it meant not having to rely on others. Others reflected that food security meant relief from worry and greater peace of mind. For others, it meant greater stability, comfort, and happiness in life.

Self-sufficient family. – Brian Coyle participant

Doing your responsibilities, so I feel good and happy. – Brian Coyle participant (focus group)

With my family and for the food shelf and whoever, it feels good to wake up in the morning and have water and food on the table. Can you imagine waking up without it? It's not a good feeling at all. Then you start questioning yourself. What have I done wrong? What am I doing? It makes you feel less than a man because you're not providing. So to have that available to you and to know that like today, at least I know today that I will eat. Praise God!

– 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)

Stability, good life, no worries. – Brian Coyle participant

Happiness, security, confidence, stability. – Brian Coyle participant

Some drew connections between personal food security and the sustainability of the food shelves. Several Waite House participants recognized that their own food security depended to some degree on the ability of the food shelves to continue to provide support. One participant shared concerns about potential changes in policies and resources for food shelves. Another emphasized the importance of personal investments from participants to keep the food shelves open.

You all [at the food shelf] have to have the security that you have the food to give away... This could finish at any time, for example, Trump is the President so [I] believe that this could finish. The Republicans can do away with these programs. – Waite House participant

Security means guaranteed it will be available to you. So how do we guarantee that? We have to be willing to participate, to give back, to grow and let the community, and the outside communities and the churches and everybody know that we exist. And this is what is needed...And if we continue to do that our chances of that security would be very great. But if not, one day will come in the doors will be closed because we had ran it dry and we didn't do anything to make that happen. – Waite House participant

Participants' unmet needs from the current food system

Participants were also asked whether they were able to access enough affordable, healthy, and culturally relevant food. Their responses indicate the extent to which their needs are being met by the current food system, as well as areas where need remains.

Affordability impacts many decisions about food

Affordability impacted all other aspects of participants' decisions about food.

Participants discussed affordability in terms of the cost of food and their own resources to pay for food. Affordability influenced the amounts and types of food participants were able to get, what stores they chose to go to, and their need for the food shelves and other food assistance programs.

Participants had varying responses about whether food was affordable at local grocery stores. Participants generally felt that food was affordable at some stores, but not at others. Aldi was often described as affordable, and Cub Foods was often noted to be more expensive. All of the Waite House participants interviewed felt that food was generally affordable or was affordable at some stores, whereas most Brian Coyle participants said that food was not affordable. It is not clear whether these distinctions are reflective of broad differences across the communities or simply differences based on the experiences of the individuals interviewed.

The lack of livable wages also impacted participants' abilities to afford food. Cost of food was one side of affordability for participants; income was the other. Participants, especially at Brian Coyle and Waite House, argued that low incomes were a barrier to food security and that increasing incomes would play a significant role in helping them to be more food secure. Participants were not asked directly about employment, but some suggested that even though they worked, they were still not able to afford enough food for themselves and their families. Other participants were not able to work due to their immigration status, which significantly impacted their ability to access food.

*[If I had] more income or [a] better paying job, [I would be able to have enough food].
– Brian Coyle participant*

Lack of enough income [is a barrier to food security for me]. – Brian Coyle participant

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

*Someone like me, an asylum seeker [with] no right to work in this country still has to eat without any income. This food shelf helps me very much. I don't want to beg or steal for food.
– Waite House participant*

Participants have difficulty accessing enough food without the food shelves

Most participants were able to access enough food for themselves and their families, although often only through the use of food shelves and other resources. Many of those interviewed said that they were able to access enough food. Participants at the DIW were more likely to report that they had enough food for themselves and their families.

Both those that responded that they did and did not have enough food described that it was still sometimes a stretch. Others suggested that they were only able to have enough because of services like the food shelves and described other strategies they used to have enough to eat.

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

Well, for me... [I have enough to eat] most of the time. I end up going shopping...when I've got enough after I've paid my bills or if I borrow some money from somebody to cover the rest. – DIW participant

Yes. I have so many resources and I use so many different food shelves. – DIW participant

I feel I have food security because of the food I get from the Brian Coyle Center food shelf. Otherwise, per my income, it is impossible to realize that. – Brian Coyle participant

Although participants generally had enough to eat, they sometimes had difficulties making food last to the end of the month. SNAP and other food-related benefits are distributed monthly, and two of the food shelves placed limits on the number of visits participants could make in a month. Participants shared that the main challenges they experienced in having enough to eat was making food stretch through the end of the month.

It's okay, but it doesn't last a month. – DIW participant

[Having enough food to eat would mean having] at least enough to last a month...But most the time I'd say the food we get here is just enough for a week, maybe two weeks. – DIW participant

There's many days in the month that we don't have enough food. Like I said earlier I come once a month to pick up 75 pounds of food and that food runs out pretty quick [because] I have three children. – Waite House participant

Cost and availability impact participants' ability to access fresh, culturally relevant food

Participants generally felt they were able to get healthy food for themselves and their families, but fewer felt they were able to get culturally relevant food on a regular basis. Most of those interviewed said that they were able to have healthy food when they wanted it. Many noted that the food shelf played a key role in helping them have access to fresh produce and healthy options, and those that reported that they did have access to culturally relevant food said they were often able to get it at the food shelf.

*I get food stamps and can buy healthy food at the grocery store if I can't get it here.
– DIW participant*

To be honest with you, when I get vegetables and stuff [at the food shelf], it makes me eat them because I would never buy [them]. – Waite House participant

You can get soul food back there [in the food shelf]. [You] can get the ham and you can make that...That's the wonderful thing to go to a place knowing that... as an African American, this is what I was raised on and it's available. That's a beautiful thing to cater to everyone's needs. Our food shelves do not discriminate. – Waite House participant

[I'm able to get] wild rice and stuff like that. They do give you yeast and baking soda and a lot of the ingredients to make fry bread and stuff. That's really nice... You can [also] get wild rice at the Cub sometimes, but I usually go to the Fond du Lac office and get my items there. – DIW participant

No, [I am not always able to find] the kind of food I want... I wish I had the foods I had back home. – Waite House participant

Some of the barriers to accessing healthy and culturally relevant foods were cost and availability. Participants reported that while they could generally find fresh produce and healthy food, it was often expensive, which prevented them from buying as much of it or as frequently as they would like. Participants in the DIW focus group also expressed concerns about pesticide use on produce at stores and the food shelves. Foods that reflected participants' cultures were often only sold at specialty stores that were more expensive, and these foods were not always available at the food shelves. DIW participants noted that distance and transportation were barriers to accessing Native foods which were available on some reservations.

The food shelves may play a role in helping mitigate issues of cost and access and participants expressed interest in seeing a greater availability of fresh produce or culturally relevant food at the food shelves. When asked about what food they would like to see more of at the food shelves, many listed culturally relevant foods such as goat or camel meat, fish, wild rice, collard greens, and rhubarb.

Fruits and vegetables and non-GMO foods and organic foods are really expensive. So that's another way how the food shelf helps. – DIW participant

I think [the food shelf] should bring more fruits and vegetables. Sometimes they only bring very little so not everyone can get some [and] it runs out. – Waite House 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

[My] kids' mom is Lakota and they like bison and kidneys, and those are hard to find. [They're] not at food shelves or in the community...I have to take the bus around and there's not always good busing to places where you can get buffalo kidney. – DIW participant

I'm from Togo, I have lived there for about 28 years. I'm used to eating rice, fufu, kenkey and other foods that we cook in a cultural way and eat every day. If you see me eating like spaghetti or something like that is because I have to eat that. – Waite House participant

I don't think [people] would donate smoked turkey tails and things of that nature [to the food shelf]. So [the food shelf does] help as far as a good meal, a healthy meal, [but] as far as [what] I would love to cook, no. – Waite House participant

Participants of the Muslim religion noted that having foods that were expired or about to expire at the food shelf posed challenges because their faith prohibited throwing out food. One participant even indicated that he stopped using the food shelf for a period because of this issue.

I stopped coming for six to eight months. The reason I stopped is...the expiration dates, especially protein or eggs. Some are about to expire so then you throw them out. From a religious perspective, it's not allowed to throw out food. – Brian Coyle participant (focus group)

Participants prefer flexible food shelf models that allow them to maximize resources

Participants often used more than one food shelf, and shared their thoughts about the different models, including what worked well for them and what they did not like about each model.

Participants liked being able to choose their own items at the food shelf, but also liked the convenience of the grocery bag model. Many DIW participants also used the Waite House food shelf and were asked about their preferences between the grocery bags offered at DIW and being able to make their own selections at Waite House. Most said that they liked being able to select their own groceries, noting they were often not able to use everything in the grocery bags. When this happened, they threw items out or donated them back to the food shelf. However, several participants did report that they like the convenience of the grocery bags.

When you get a bag though, a lot of it goes to waste. – DIW participant (focus group)

I don't know how to make macaroni and cheese but most of the time that's all they give me [in the commodity bags] and they always give me canned goods but I might be already stocked up on them at home. I find myself putting all that stuff back. – DIW participant

I prefer to pick my own stuff because there's stuff I don't want to take. But the stuff that I don't take I usually bring to the food shelf where I live. So [it] goes back into the community...I just don't want any of it to go to waste. Another family may need that stuff. – DIW participant

I prefer they already pack it... [in food shelves where you select your own items, there are] too many people come through there... It's too confined and too crowded. – DIW participant

I go to a lot of food shelves but [DIW has] it set up here where you just walk in, [pick up the bag], and go right back home. – DIW participant

I like it but I kind of like to pick the stuff. It's easier when it's bagged, but I like having the selection, too. – DIW participant

Participants had mixed feedback about pound versus item limit models. At the time of this project, Waite House had a system based on pound limits, with limits on the number of staple items participants could take. They also encountered item limit models at other food shelves. Participants in the Waite House English language focus group liked the greater selection they were afforded when they shopped by pound, and noted that sometimes they ended up throwing out food through item systems. However, some also described the challenges of quickly hitting their pound limits with frozen foods and other higher density items, which forced them to make hard choices about what they could get. In the Waite House focus group, participants debated the merits of dry versus fresh milk, noting that dry milk was a more efficient use of pounds and lasted longer, but was not as fresh.

With items, if you don't want the two items, you have to take them anyway or let them go to waste. – Waite House participant (focus group)

Some of the things they shouldn't weigh, like frozen things. So you get it but you don't get it. – Waite House participant (focus group)

If you get frozen meat and a pound of sugar, your pounds are done. – Waite House participant (focus group)

Participants did not like not like intake processes that were intrusive or burdensome. Some participants expressed dislike of programs where they had to engage in an extensive intake process before being able to use the food shelf. They felt that the process was time-consuming and often asked questions that they did not feel were relevant to the use of the food shelf. During the mapping exercise, participants in the DIW focus group identified several food shelves where they felt the intake process was burdensome as barriers to food security.

Role of food shelves in participants' long-term food security

Participants saw the food shelf playing an important role in their food security moving forward. When asked if they anticipated using the food shelf regularly moving forward, all of the participants said that they would. Some suggested that the need for food shelves would always be there. Others shared that it was an essential part of the resources they used to achieve food security for themselves and their families.

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

While they allow me to come I will. – Waite House participant

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

I think food shelves are going to be needed no matter what, what with low wages and single moms. I've been going since I was a kid. – Waite House participant (focus group)

It will help me when I run out of money or food stamps. So I always feel like I'll never go hungry. I've got this place to come. – Waite House participant

Some participants shared that they would continue to be involved in the food shelf even if their financial circumstances changed. Several participants at Waite House noted that if their financial situation changed, they would continue to stay involved with the food shelf and try to give back, suggesting that the food shelf played an important role for individuals beyond food security.

[I will be involved with the food shelf] until the day I die...It's not so much [whether] I use it or not, I will be available to the food shelf if it's whether I am helping or introducing someone else. That's why I take the business cards [for the food shelf] and give [them] out to people who are in need...I will be available to the food shelf hopefully for the rest my life.

– Waite House participant

Even long after I'm rich I would probably donate and also have my kids volunteer to show them structure. – Waite House participant

Ways that food shelves can help participants achieve greater food security

Expand healthy offerings, increase access to food, and connect people to resources

Participants expressed gratitude for the food shelves, and reflected on how the food shelves could help them achieve greater food security. Many participants felt that the food shelf already did a lot for them, and were grateful for staff and the services that were offered.

They do too much already. – DIW participant (focus group)

They don't ever say no. It all depends on if they have it, but if they don't, they say sorry we don't have it. They are really good people here. – DIW participant (focus group)

Participants advocated for healthier offerings and classes at the food shelves. When asked what the food shelves could do to help them achieve longer-term food security, many participants noted the need for more fresh produce and healthy options, as well as a wider variety of products. Participants at Waite House were also interested in classes in understanding expiration dates, cooking in bulk, and strategies to make food stretch.

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

I would say if they could bring more healthy things like fruit and vegetables.
– Waite House participant

To have enough chicken, fresh meat [such as] goat. –a Brian Coyle participant

I need healthy food. I don't need expired food. You shouldn't put expired food on the shelves. – Waite House participant

Give more dinner foods. Instead of snack foods and lunch foods. Dinner is the most important. – DIW participant

Participants recommended some changes in policies and practices at the food shelves to increase food access. These included allowing more frequent visits, increasing the item or pound limits, and staying open for longer hours.

They only let you come once a month. I think people should be able to come at least twice a month. – DIW participant

Maybe give you a little more. But I know they go by the people in the household.
– DIW participant

It could be [increasing the] pounds. I get like 20 pounds in a month...So you try to find a bunch of light stuff to stretch it through the month. – Waite House participant

Increase the pounds. – Brian Coyle participant

Allow [people] to take oil, flour, [and] eggs two times [a month]. – Brian Coyle participant

The food shelves might play a role in helping people become connected to other resources. Participants often made use of a variety of social services in their communities, and noted the food shelves could be a hub for connecting them to these resources. Participants at Waite House expressed special interest in this type of support, and suggested Waite House could hold a class on where to find resources or have a walk-in social worker. (Since this process began, Waite House has implemented a voluntary program at intake to help users become connected to other services.) Several participants thought that Waite House could use its position to advocate for improvements to the United Way 211 hotline service so that information is updated on a more regular basis.

The food shelves may be well-positioned to engage broader food systems. Participants acknowledged that some of the changes they were interested in might require changes in policies or practices at the systems level. Participants were particularly interested in food-sharing practices across food shelves and vendors, as well as ways to support greater sustainability for food shelves.

If [restaurants or grocery stores] have a pallet of cucumbers, it [would be] nice [for them] to know where [they] can ship it before it goes [bad]...They need to be more educated about sharing to the food shelves instead of throwing it away.

– Waite House participant (focus group)

Reach out to more food vendors and stores to collect more foods for families.

– Brian Coyle participant

[A staff member at Waite House] was explaining to me that they run this food shelf on a budget, so if there's no one to help they will close down. We need to help grow the garden so that we can have more food. We can talk to people to have money to continue this program. We can ask for donations [from] people [that] have more than enough and can contribute. – Waite House participant

Involve participants in supporting the sustainability of the food shelves

Participants were interested in becoming more involved with the food shelves, but may need clearer channels of engagement. Participants were asked about ways they could be involved in improving the food shelves. Almost all expressed interest in becoming involved and giving back, although they had more difficulty articulating what that might look like.

Yes. I don't know. Just they've helped me a lot and I'd like to volunteer or try to give back something. – DIW participant

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)

This program needs to...tell people what is needed or what can we do. Put down all the things that are available for volunteers to do...Say hey listen can you do this? [You] would be surprised who is willing to go out and do that. – Waite House participant

Participants expressed interest in helping to build awareness of the food shelves, serving on advisory councils, and assisting with the garden programs. Some participants shared specific ideas about how they would like to become more engaged with the food shelves. Several participants suggested ways they help market the food shelves through word-of-mouth or build awareness of needs and issues related to food security in their communities. Participants at Brian Coyle were also interested in becoming more involved in community gardening and serving on the organization’s food shelf advisory committee.

*You know, I myself have been coming to this food shelf, so any way they need me. I've been telling lots of people to come to the food shelf, if that's a help.
– Brian Coyle participant (focus group)*

The food shelf should feel free to ask people such as I what can I do to help the food shelf grow. If it's door-to-door getting the information out there I mean not just within the neighborhood, outside of the neighborhood....Because there's a lot of people who don't know what's going on in the hood... [so] we take the hood to them and explain what's going on and what can they do to help...And find people, volunteers, and whoever who are willing to go out all the way and help get it done...It's a network. – Waite House participant

I like to work on gardening if there is a chance to get land. – Brian Coyle participant

I can join [the] advisory committee to provide feedback. – Brian Coyle participant

*Maybe we can vote to have more food at this location and make it better.
– Waite House participant*

Participants also acknowledged the importance of being good stewards of the food shelves to support longer-term food security in their communities. Several participants suggested ways they tried to be conscientious in their use of the food shelf so that others could benefit from it. Some also noted that they saw giving back as critical to the sustainability of the food shelf.

With every chance you get, even while you're taking stuff, just help out. When you're grabbing things too, it's not just about you, it's someone after you, so be conscious of not grabbing too much. – Brian Coyle participant (focus group)

I know someone out there needs it more than me. – Waite House participant (focus group)

Don't misuse the food shelf because you can run it out of business. Participate but use it when necessary. Food shelves are only to be used when necessary, if you can go the month without it go right ahead because that is saved for the person who really needs it most. – Waite House participant

I remember the famous speech from Kennedy said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country." It's the same with the food shelf. Ask not all the time what the food shelf can do for me, but what I can do for the food shelf. And when I come here and even upstairs where they cook at, at the end of the day I put the chairs up because I am determined to give back. Everyone needs to understand if we give back in this program this program can continue to exist. – Waite House participant

Emerging questions and opportunities

Participants in this project saw the food shelf as playing a central role in their food security. The food shelf helped them fill in gaps throughout the month. Participants often used the food shelf to access healthy or culturally relevant foods that were expensive or unavailable at stores.

Although participants reported that they were generally able to meet their basic needs through the current food system, it was not without some difficulty or strategy in bringing together a variety of resources and often only because the food shelves were available to them. Many suggested that they would not be able to meet their food needs without the help of the food shelves, and anticipated that they would continue to use the food shelves in the future.

At the same time, participants were not passive recipients of help from the food shelves. Many were actively interested in being able to give back and support the sustainability of the food shelves for themselves and other users. They described formal and informal ways they were already contributing to the food shelves, including volunteering, bringing neighbors, or simply being good stewards. Participants were also interested in opportunities to be involved in more meaningful ways moving forward.

The following recommendations, based on input from participants and work group members, are intended to help food shelf staff and other stakeholders consider ways that food shelves, and the food system as a whole, can better support residents' long-term food security.

- **Expand offerings of fresh, healthy, and culturally relevant foods.** Participants shared that the food shelves were often where they were able to get fresh produce and culturally specific foods that they could not find or afford elsewhere. The food shelves should continue to explore ways to build on their commitment to offering healthy and culturally specific foods and increase those offerings. For example, Waite House sources some of its produce from its community gardens. The food shelves may consider ways to expand partnerships with grocery stores, restaurants, or food growers to secure more healthy and culturally specific food. They may also consider drafting healthy food policies which limit unhealthy offerings they are willing to accept through donations or provide in the food shelf.

- **Focus on participant choice and flexibility when considering different models.** Participants had varied preferences when asked about the different models, from being able to choose their own items to being offered pre-selected commodity bags, or models based on pounds versus items. However, participants generally preferred models that allowed them more choice, which allowed them to maximize resources, feel more ownership, and better meet their personal food needs. Participants also liked being able to come to the food shelf when they needed it, rather than being limited to once or twice a month, even if the overall amount of food they were able to get was the same. When considering different models, food shelves, as well as policymakers and other stakeholders, should prioritize options that allow for greater participant choice and flexibility.
- **Invest in retaining and supporting staff to be able to build relationships with participants.** Participants described the importance of relationships they had built with food shelf staff in helping them feel welcome at the food shelf. These relationships also helped staff make more effective referrals to other services. Food shelves often rely on part-time staff and volunteers, but funders and other stakeholders are encouraged to invest in the ability of food shelves to hire and retain staff positioned to get to know participants and meet participants' full range of needs.
- **Continue to provide educational offerings, especially focused on maximizing resources and gardening.** Some of the food shelves already provided classes and workshops, but participants expressed special interest in classes focused on cooking in bulk or on a budget, and understanding expiration dates. Participants were also interested in gardening. Brian Coyle and Waite House currently offer community garden spaces for participants to use, and DIW had a garden space up until recently. The three organizations are encouraged to continue to offer or expand their gardening programs.
- **Continue to help participants become connected to other services and resources and evaluate current efforts.** Participants often relied on a variety of different resources to make ends meet, and suggested that the food shelves could play a key role in helping them find and access these services. At the same time, they were wary of intake processes that were time-consuming or intrusive, especially if they were a requirement for using the food shelf. Waite House recently implemented a new intake process that will help connect participants with other resources. Beyond the required demographic information that is collected to use the food shelf, the expanded intake process is voluntary and only asks for information necessary to make effective referrals. Evaluating these efforts after they have been in place for a while will help ensure that they meet participants' needs. Participants also suggested that food shelves could continue to let them know about services through word-of-mouth; flyers and newsletters; media including community radio, television, and social media; and through churches, mosques, community centers, apartment buildings, and community meetings.

- **Provide more concrete engagement opportunities for participants.** Participants were enthusiastic about becoming more involved with the food shelves, and recognized that their support could help ensure the long-term sustainability of the programs. However, participants were less clear about what that involvement could look like, and may need more clearly defined opportunities. Some ideas that emerged included: volunteering at the food shelves; participating in gardening programs; helping promote the food shelves in their communities; serving on advisory councils for the food shelves; and participating in advocacy efforts with policymakers and other stakeholders.
- **Invest in the capacity of food shelves to serve growing numbers of participants.** Findings from this assessment indicated that many participants anticipated using the food shelves longer term, suggesting that demand for services will continue. Funders and other key stakeholders are encouraged to invest in the capacity of food shelves to meet this growing need through funding, infrastructure such as refrigeration, and technical assistance.
- **Work to advance policy and systems that impact food security.** The food shelves are well-positioned to articulate community needs because of their daily contact with participants, but noted the need for more resources to be able to effectively engage in policy- and systems-level conversations. Participants in this project expressed interest in becoming involved in these efforts, especially through sharing their experiences, voicing their needs, and advocating for support of the food shelves. Funders are encouraged to support food shelves in engaging in policy and systems change work. Likewise, food shelves may consider ways to have a seat at policy tables and engage participants in these efforts.
- **Engage additional stakeholders in discussions about how to meet the growing number of residents facing food insecurity.** This assessment gathered critical input from food shelf participants about their needs, and findings indicate that the food shelves will continue to play a key role in helping people be food secure. There are opportunities to engage other stakeholders in a broader discussion about how to meet the growing need, including food shelf staff, food banks, funders, policymakers, and others.

In addition to the above recommendations, findings from this project shed light on areas for additional research and exploration.

- **How does employment status impact food security?** Participants in this project were not asked directly about their employment status in the interviews and focus groups. Some participants did mention being employed, while others discussed how not being able to work due to age, ability, or immigration status impacted their ability to access food. Brian Coyle and Waite House both collect information about employment during the intake process, and so looking at food shelf use and employment may shed further light on the extent to which current wage structures and social safety nets are sufficient in ensuring food security.
- **How does participants' ability to access food vary by season?** Some participants mentioned weather as a barrier to accessing food, especially for participants who did not have access to a car. Participants also have less access to farmers markets and community gardens during winter months. Future research may look at the extent to which food security varies by season and what supports can be put in place to ensure that people have access to fresh food throughout the year.

Appendix A. Demographics of food shelf participants

The following data was accessed through the Client Track systems at Brian Coyle and Waite House and data provided from the Division of Indian Work, when available.

A1. Race/ethnicity of food shelf participants (2016)

	Brian Coyle (N=2,337)	Waite House (N=5,614)
	N (%)	N (%)
African	1,443 (62%)	204 (4%)
American Indian or Alaskan Native	27 (1%)	811 (14%)
Asian	204 (9%)	79 (1%)
Black or African American	302 (13%)	1,085 (19%)
Hispanic/Chicano/Latino	61 (3%)	2,523 (45%)
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	2 (<1%)	29 (1%)
White	151 (6%)	533 (9%)
Multiracial	46 (1%)	220 (4%)
Other	18 (1%)	58 (1%)
Client doesn't know	60 (3%)	46 (1%)
Client refused	2 (<1%)	1 (<1%)
No data	21 (1%)	25 (<1%)

Note. All DIW participants have to have a tribal identification card to use the food shelf, but they do not formally collect race/ethnicity data. While all participants would identify themselves as American Indian, it isn't known how many would also self-identify with another race/ethnicity.

A2. Age of participants (2016)

	Brian Coyle (N=2,337)	Waite House (N=5,614)	DIW (N=2,407)
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
0-17 years	611 (26%)	2,047 (36%)	774 (32%)
0-18 months	27 (1%)	94 (2%)	—
19-35 months	26 (1%)	100 (2%)	—
36-59 months	57 (2%)	213 (4%)	—
60-71 months	41 (2%)	112 (2%)	—
6-9 years	147 (6%)	551 (10%)	—
10-14 years	190 (8%)	642 (11%)	—
15-17 years	123 (5%)	335 (6%)	—
18-64 years	1,311 (56%)	3,295 (59%)	1,482 (62%)
18-22 years	177 (8%)	385 (7%)	—
23-54 years	873 (37%)	2,479 (44%)	—
55-64 years	261 (11%)	431 (8%)	—
65 and older	414 (18%)	271 (5%)	96 (4%)
65-74 years	248 (11%)	211 (4%)	—
75-84 years	120 (5%)	49 (1%)	—
85 years and older	46 (2%)	11 (<1%)	—
No data	1 (<1%)	1 (<1%)	55 (2%)

Note. DIW only collects age data using the broad age categories included in the table (0-17, 18-64, 65 and older)

A3. Poverty status of food shelf participants (2016)

	Brian Coyle (N=2,337)	Waite House (N=5,614)
	N (%)	N (%)
Below 100%	2,103 (90%)	3,473 (62%)
Between 100% – 200%	178 (8%)	683 (12%)
Above 200%	8 (<1%)	81 (1%)
No data	222 (9%)	1,466 (26%)

Note. Participants provide income information yearly. Because participants' incomes may change over time, there are multiple entries for some participants. DIW does not currently track poverty status.

A4. Gender of participants (2016)

	Brian Coyle (N=2,337)	Waite House (N=5,614)	DIW (N=2,407)
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Female	1,410 (60%)	2,963 (53%)	1,303 (54%)
Male	923 (39%)	2,640 (47%)	1,103 (46%)
Transgender female to male	—	1 (<1%)	--
Transgender male to female	—	1 (<1%)	--
Other	1 (<1%)	2 (<1%)	--
Client doesn't know	2 (<1%)	2 (<1%)	--
Client refused	—	—	--
No data	1 (<1%)	5 (<1%)	1 (<1%)

A5. Location of participants (2016)

	Brian Coyle (N=2,337)	Waite House (N=5,614)
	N (%)	N (%)
Anoka County	26 (1%)	55 (1%)
Carver County	1 (<1%)	—
Dakota County	7 (<1%)	20 (<1%)
Hennepin County – East	2,068 (88%)	5,122 (91%)
Hennepin County – North	42 (2%)	103 (2%)
Hennepin County – South	51 (2%)	112 (2%)
Hennepin County – West	11 (<1%)	15 (<1%)
Ramsey County – St. Paul	80 (3%)	58 (1%)
Ramsey County – Other	13 (1%)	24 (<1%)
Scott County	1 (<1%)	5 (<1%)
Washington County	2 (<1%)	1 (<1%)
Other area	1 (<1%)	10 (<1%)
No data	34 (1%)	89 (2%)

Note: DIW does not currently track location of participants.

Appendix B: Food system mapping exercise responses

During three of the focus groups – at DIW and both of the Waite House focus groups – participants were led through a food systems mapping exercise. On a large piece of paper, they were asked to work together to list services, resources, or other factors that helped them be food secure, as well as factors that made it hard for them to achieve food security. The following table shows each group’s responses.

Food shelf	Supports that helped participants be food secure	Barriers that made it harder for participants to be food secure
DIW	Salvation Army Tribal Urban Offices DIW Jericho Indian Health Board Simpson Sabathani Native American Community Clinic Community University Health Care Center Churches (24 th & Park – Messiah Lutheran) Marie Sandvik Center Augustana Lutheran Church	[The following food shelves were listed as barriers because they were perceived to have more burdensome or intrusive intake processes.] Sabathani Simpson Jericho
Waite House (Spanish)	Waite House Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Aldi Churches Coupons Trust [in the food shelf and the staff] [The food shelves] give me food each month Volunteering [how participants thought they could contribute to the food shelf]	Money Transportation Prices Weather Schedules [both food shelf hours as well as work and other schedules]

Food shelf (continued)	Supports that helped participants be food secure	Barriers that made it harder for participants to be food secure
Waite House (English)	Vail Place Mary Jo's Salvation Army United Way 211 Nutrition Assistance Program for Seniors (NAPS) WIC Marie Sandvik Center House of Charity Waite House Amicus Internet Church Loaves and Fishes Hennepin County Food Stamps Library	Limited resources of food shelves Hours/days Income Bags [participants described struggles with transporting food in bags, especially when walking or using public transit] Transportation

Appendix C: Interview protocol

Food Security One-on-One Interview Protocol

Name of Interviewee:

Interviewee ID:

[Develop an ID for each person based on their initials, initial of the location (i.e. BC, WH, DIW), and the month and the day (i.e. 611 for June 11th). This is to ensure that the interviewees name is not recorded in the data.]

Date:

Location:

Name of Interviewer:

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me about your experience with the food shelf at [ORGANIZATION]. As you may already know, we live in a society that produces enough food but not everyone has enough to eat. We will be talking about food security in this interview, which means having enough to eat and having access to healthy, affordable, and food that reflects our cultural backgrounds. We will also be talking about how [ORGANIZATION NAME] can help support the long-term food security for people in our community.

This interview is part of a partnership between three food shelves in the area - Waite House, the Brian Coyle Center, and the Division of Indian Work. We will also be doing a series of listening sessions at each site that you will have the opportunity to participate in if you are interested. I can tell you more information about that after we complete the interview. The information from these interviews will help the three food shelves develop a plan to better meet the long-term food security needs of people that they serve.

Our goal is to improve the food shelves, but we didn't want to assume that we know everything and make changes on our own. We want to understand your point of view so that we can provide better services through the food shelves. We really appreciate you taking time to share your experiences.

This interview should take about an hour and is voluntary and confidential. If there are questions you don't want to answer, just let me know and I will skip them. We will be putting together the information from these interviews in a report that we will share with participants at the food shelves. We will not include any names or personal information in that report. Your answers will not be seen by anyone except the small team of people working on this project, and your responses will not impact any services you receive from [ORGANIZATION'S NAME] or anywhere else.

If you feel any distress due to your participation in this study we can refer you to Walk-In Counseling center located on 2421 Chicago Ave. S. Minneapolis. Please look at the questions below.

Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time?

Do you understand that you may skip any questions or tasks?

Do you have any questions about what you are being asked to do?

If you answered "yes" to the first two questions and no to the last question, please indicate below whether you want to be part of the study or not. Finally, please indicate whether you agree to be audiotaped or not. You can be part of the study, even if you don't agree to be audiotaped.

NAME

I would like to take part in the interview ____ Yes ____ No

I agree to be audio taped ___ Yes ___ No

SIGNATURE

DATE

Do you have any questions before we begin?

[Begin recording if you have consent to record the interview.]

[Start the recording by recording your name, the organization you are in, and repeating the interviewee ID from above. Do not record participant's name.]

Interview Questions:

USE OF FOOD SHELF

1. How did you first learn about the food shelf?
2. Do you feel comfortable using the food shelf?
 - If yes, what helps you feel comfortable here?
 - If no, what makes you uncomfortable? How could the food shelf make you feel more comfortable?
3. What role does food shelf play in your and your family's food needs? *Probe: How does food shelf fit in your daily or weekly or monthly schedule?*
4. What items from the food shelf do you use the most? *Probe: Does the food you get from the food shelf meet your family's needs? Probe: What, if any items, are you not able to get at the food shelf that you would like to have?*
5. Will you continue using the food shelf?
 - If yes, what role will the food shelf play in the future?
 - If no, why?
6. Has the food shelf helped you learn about or become connected with to other programs or resources?
 - If yes, could you give some examples of the programs and resources?
 - If no, what kinds of programs and resources would you want to be connected to?

OPPORTUNITIES

As mentioned earlier we want to improve the food shelf program to help participants have enough to eat and access to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food in the long-term, beyond meeting the immediate food needs of families.

7. What could the food shelf program do to help you and your family have enough to eat and access to healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate food in the long-term?

8. In what ways, if any, would you be interested in being involved in helping to improve the program? What other ways could food shelf participants be involved in improving the program?

MEANING OF FOOD SECURITY

Earlier we had talked about food security as having access to healthy, affordable, and food that reflects your cultural background. So now I was curious to know what that means from your perspective.

9. What comes to your mind when you hear the term food security?
10. What does being able to have enough food mean for you and your family? What does that look like?
11. Based on what you just said, do you have enough food to eat for you and your family? If no:
 - How urgent of an issue is it? Is it a daily, weekly, or a monthly issue?
 - What makes it difficult for your family to have enough food?
 - What would need to change for you to have enough food?
12. What does being able to eat food that reflects your and your family's cultural background mean to you? What would that look like?
13. Based on what you just said, do you have enough food that reflects your and your family's cultural background? If no:
 - What are some barriers to having culturally appropriate food?
 - What would need to change for you to have culturally appropriate food?
14. What does healthy food mean to you and your family?
15. Based on what you said, are you able to have healthy food for and your family? If no:
 - What are some barriers to having healthy food?
 - What would need to change for you to have healthy food?
16. Did we miss anything while talking about food security that you would like to add?

ACHIEVING FOOD SECURITY

Now we will be talking about various things that you do to ensure food security for you and your family.

17. Where do you and your family get food besides the food shelf?

{List the various places they get food at and ask questions accordingly}

- Do you think the food there is affordable?
- Are these places easily accessible? How do you get to these stores?
- Do they have food relevant to your culture?

NOTE: Above questions are close ended but can help to open up a conversation. If the participant answers with a yes or no response please follow up by asking them to share more about their experience

18. What other resources do you use to ensure food security?

19. How do you get information about these resources?

20. How could that information be more easily available?

21. Do you rely on friends and other family members for food? How do they help?

22. What other services, if any, do you or people in your household receive through [ORGANIZATION NAME]?

- If yes, could you give us few examples?

We really appreciate that you are taking this time to share your story. This will be very helpful.

Appendix D: Focus group protocol

Purpose and Outcomes of Focus Group:

- Gather insights and reflections on the first set of data from interviews
- Great understanding from participants of food shelf context

Materials:

- Markers
- Flip chart
- Agenda (flip chart)
- Purpose and outcomes (flip chart)

Time	Content
10 min	Icebreaker What's your favorite food and how often do you eat it?
10 min	Welcome Thank folks for coming Review purpose and outcomes of session Informed consent Agenda review We are wanting to both get your feedback on how the food shelf works for you and how the system of food distribution on the government and policy level affects your life. We have designed the time together to hear from you and share some of our context. After sharing where we are in the process, we want to share with you what we've heard from the interviews and get your feedback. We will start the conversation by talking more broadly about the food system.
10 min	Project and Food System Overview Why we are doing this project (there has been an increase in food shelf use and decrease in resources). Review of Food System

Time	Content
30 min	<p>Individual Interviews Deep Dive</p> <p>Explain how we collected the data</p> <p>Data presentation</p> <p>Reflection Questions</p> <p>Does this reflect your own experiences? Which ones sound familiar to you? What sounds interesting?</p> <p>If you have different experiences, could you please share them?</p> <p>Solutions Questions</p> <p>How would you feel about being connected to other programs or services when you come to the food shelf?</p> <p>Increasing the pounds of food was one of the themes. What do you think about getting rid of the pounds rule and instead having rule of number of items?</p> <p>How do you feel about hours of operation?</p>
50 min	<p>Activity</p> <p>Draw a circle on the center with people (i.e. food shelf participants)</p> <p>Ask them: What are the various governmental, private, and community organizations that affect your access to healthy food?</p> <p>Give two differently colored markers to show negative and positive relationships.</p> <p>Facilitators should help by asking questions and providing examples.</p> <p>Ask if there is anything missing.</p> <p>Solutions Questions</p> <p>How would you want these relationships to change?</p> <p>What would you want to say to these organizations?</p> <p>What role do you think [ORGANIZATION NAME] can play in making those changes?</p> <p>What should the role of city/state/federal government be in your food security?</p>
10 min	<p>Closing Reflections</p>