



A Participatory Research Process to Support Food Security

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, researchers, and the project funder. Over the year, the work group developed a community-based research process to explore how food shelves can better accommodate growing demand and support greater food security among their participants. The work group explored these issues by conducting interviews and focus groups with food shelf participants at each of the three locations: Brian Coyle Center (Brian Coyle), the Division of Indian Works (DIW), and Waite House.

Through their Health Equity in Prevention (HEiP) initiative, the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (Blue Cross) awarded contracts to 13 organizations working to implement policy, systems, and environmental changes to support health and advance health equity. This evaluation report presents the process used by Waite House to complete a redesign of their food shelf and highlights important lessons learned that can be used by other organizations to inform their work.

The group re-convened in early February with staff from Wilder Research to discuss the challenges, successes, and major lessons learned throughout the research process. This summary highlights the key findings from that discussion.

Context

In 2017, Waite House noted a growing number of people coming to their food shelf, increasing both the demand for food and financial pressures on food shelves. Multiple factors contributed to these shifts in demand, including: changes in funding available to food shelves, including from a major funder, and food shelves closing altogether. Waite House became interested in further exploring these issues and how food shelves were coping with dwindling resources. They also wanted to know how they could better support long-term food security, ensuring that their participants can choose to get their food from a wide variety of sources.

The participating food shelves have not typically engaged participants when looking at ways to improve their service delivery. Waite House staff sought to shift this model by directly engaging food shelf participants to help shape how food shelves could better support long-term food security. They hoped to develop a shared understanding of participants' needs and to examine those needs from an environmental perspective rather than focusing on why individuals use food shelves. Staff planned to use the information gathered to pilot ways to make food shelves more sustainable, more culturally responsive, as well as present other local food shelves with best practices.

Who was at the table

Waite House formed the food shelf redesign group along with two other local food shelves, the Brian Coyle and DIW. These locations were selected because of previous collaborations with Waite House in other capacities. The group also included a representative from Blue Cross, an evaluation and research specialist from Wilder Research, and a faculty member from the School of Social Work at Augsburg College. Initially, the group had plans to include food shelf participants in the planning meetings. This was not successful mainly due to difficulties in scheduling meeting times. The level of participation also varied between the other food shelf representatives. However data from all three food shelves were included in all discussions regardless of whether a representative from each food shelf was present at all meetings.

Goals

The food shelf redesign group began their work with the following research questions in mind:

- What is the experience of food shelf participants?
- How can food shelves support long-term food security and how to better serve participants?

The goals evolved somewhat over the year. Early research interests included how to support food shelf participants in growing their own food. However, the food shelf redesign group acknowledged that the organizations participating did not have the capacity to support this work and felt it was unethical to ask participants questions about activities if they would not be able to offer any support for implementation.

The first year of work for the food shelf redesign group would be to answer these questions, with the implementation of any changes occurring in a later phase.

Challenges

The work group conducted 30 interviews with food shelf participants, 10 at each of the sites. Interviews were conducted by trained interviewers and site staff in English, Spanish, Somali, and Oromo.

The work group then reviewed transcripts of the interviews and discussed key themes and emerging questions from the data.

To explore some of the themes further, the work group conducted a total of four focus groups across the three sites. 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.

Food shelf redesign group members described the following major challenges to their research process:

- Early feedback from food shelf participants would have been helpful in crafting questions that felt relevant and were worded appropriately.
- Food shelf participants were not necessarily in a position to respond to questions about systems-level food issues. Most participants were experiencing the day-to-day effects of these issues, but did not often have the luxury of thinking about these issues at the larger, macro level.
- Asking individual food shelf participants about macro and social forces that influence service use can also create the expectation that the food shelves will have the capacity to address those issues. The group needed to be very intentional about this and word questions to manage participant expectations.

Key findings and changes to the food shelves

The food shelf redesign group identified several key findings from the research that they have shared informally with participants. The findings are:

- The food shelves played a key role in helping participants be food secure, and were one of many strategies they used to procure food. Participants typically used food shelves to fill in food gaps or handle emergencies. Participants saw the food shelves as part of their long-term food security.
- The food shelves played roles in participants' lives beyond food, including accessing other resources and services and connecting to community members. Expanding healthy offerings, increasing food access, and helping people connect with other resources were ways that the food shelves could support greater food security for participants.
- Participants often weighed a number of factors when making decisions about where to go to access food, including affordability, distance, and accessibility.

Although the work conducted by the food shelf redesign group in 2017 was intended to be research and not implementation, Waite House was able to make some changes to the operation of their food shelf concurrent to the research. These changes include:

- The food shelf now carries more fresh produce in response to participants who said they want and value healthy food options. Staff are also ensuring that beans, rice, potatoes, and other healthy staples are always in stock.
- The intake process at the food shelf has changed to set participants up with more resources right away. The process is longer than it was previously, but participants are connected to a greater variety of needed services. They are also able to fill out a map of resources they are already using, thus informing Waite House about what currently exists in the neighborhood so they can refer other food shelf users. This has helped strengthen Waite House's knowledge of, and connections to, other local programs. Brian Coyle will also be implementing these changes.
- The process of the redesign has opened the door for food shelf participants to share their opinions with staff. Rather than scheduling interviews with participants at a separate time, they were being asked to share their views while they were already at the food shelf. It was a more organic way to gather feedback and has created an environment where food shelf participants feel like their input is valued.
- Members of the redesign project have built stronger, more collaborative relationships with one another. For example, Waite House and DIW now collaborate more, with DIW dropping off their extra food to Waite House on Fridays.

Lessons learned from the process

The food shelf redesign group determined the following key lessons learned that may be helpful for other organizations looking to engage their participants in research for the process of program improvement:

- **Be intentional about including many perspectives.** Food shelf redesign group members felt that a large contributor to their successful work over the past year was the intentionality with which they brought people to the table. In particular, the group benefitted by bringing together individuals with a variety of perspectives and areas of expertise.
- **Make time and space for an iterative process.** Group members noted that the food shelf redesign process was iterative. Goals and research questions changed over time based on group feedback and a closer examination of what the food shelves would be able to address in implementation phases. They noted that they could have built in more time and space for refining the process. For example, they could have conducted pilot focus groups or interviews in order to tweak the questions to ensure they were relevant and easy for participants to respond to.

- **Acknowledge that community-based research processes take time.** Related to the point above, group members emphasized that a process like this can take a lot of time and that time should be built in at the beginning of the project. Groups looking to do similar work will not be successful if they are operating under a tight or strict timeline.
- **Explore flexible funding that allows the group to learn and adapt.** In order to do work that takes time and is iterative in nature, group members felt that the funder needs to value learning and flexibility. In addition, because Blue Cross was represented in the group, the funder was embedded in the process and fully aware of the reasoning behind each decision the group made.

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