

Sharing Power, Building Community: Strategies for Improving Nutrition Education at Food Pantries

Research Conducted on Behalf of Northwest Harvest

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Introduction

Food insecurity is a nationwide problem that affects households' ability to meet basic nutritional needs. According to USDA, in 2019, 9.9% or about 1 in 10 Washington households were uncertain of having or unable to acquire enough food to meet the needs of all of their members because they had insufficient money or other resources for food. At the national level, 10.5% of US households were food insecure at some time in 2019¹. Since the novel coronavirus, hunger rates have projected to increase from 1 in 10 to 1 in 4². This means more and more people are hungry or at risk of being hungry and may rely on their local food pantry and other local or federal resources.

The problem of food insecurity is a complex one that requires both a long-term structural response to reduce the numbers of people who are hungry and an emergent response to serve those who are. Food pantries are at the center of that emergent response; they are tasked with meeting the needs of those who are food insecure in their respective communities. As the emergency food system in the United States has evolved, however, many food pantries have added elements to this basic mission. One such addition has been nutrition education programs. Although food insecurity cannot be solved with programs within a food pantry, the aim with nutrition education programs is to improve health by increasing access to nutrition information. Nutrition education activities run a wide gamut, including efforts designed to improve diet, health and wellbeing, increase food security by building healthy cooking and resource-management skills, and maximize utilization of emergency food. However, a study in 2020 of one U.S. urban population found that only 24% of food pantries surveyed offered nutrition education to their clients.³ Nutrition education programs have the ability to educate and provide resources for customers, but less and less people are attending classes, and there is no existing research that explains these declining rates of attendance.

The current research is designed as an initial step in filling that gap. Drawing on interviews with a small sample of food pantry customers in the Pacific Northwest and a targeted sampling of emergency food system professionals from across the country, we aim to begin the conversation about what works and what doesn't in nutrition education at food

pantries and how nutrition education programs can best fit the needs of food pantry customers.

Our approach to these issues is informed by the work of prominent food justice scholars, who point out that the food justice movement itself is a racial project, given that food insecurity disproportionality affects communities of color and the mainstream food movement has been created mainly by and for white and middle-class individuals. In recognition of these dynamics, we aim to center dynamics of race and the ideas of the food pantry customers, who are disproportionately drawn from communities of color⁴.

Studying nutrition education programs provides a unique opportunity to examine how to increase participation within food pantries, what existing aspects of this education is effective, how it can be improved, or if it should be dismantled completely. We expect this research will contribute to the scholarly conversations about food pantries, cultural awareness, accessibility needs, belongingness, and the intersection of race, class, and gender. But, most of all, we hope that it will provide information that food pantries and others can use to reformulate nutrition education programs in effective and equitable ways.

A note on terminology

In most parts of the United States a food pantry is an individual site that serves food to those in need while a food bank is a larger entity that distributes food to food pantries. Some food banks operate their own food pantries. In Washington state, where this report was written, individual sites that serve food to those in need are usually called food banks while the entities that distribute food to those sites are called distributors. Some distributors may operate their own food banks, like Northwest Harvest's Sodo Market. Within this report, food bank and food pantry may be used in ways that seem interchangeable since interviews took place with agencies from different parts of the country. While we did not change quotes, we decided to move forward with the terminology of food pantries when talking about individual sites that serve food since this is the most common vernacular.

Coronavirus Acknowledgement

The vast majority of work on this project (conception, data collection, analysis, and substantial writing) was completed before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. This public health crisis has transformed the work of food banks and food pantries in a number of ways. The need to remain physically distant to contain the viral spread has required that food be distributed in ways other than having customers gather inside food pantries. At the same time, job losses and financial uncertainty created by stay-at-home orders and business shutdowns have led to an astronomical rise in the number of people who are food insecure and seeking assistance from food banks. This same economic impact has also meant donations to most food banks have decreased, just as the need has spiked. For all these reasons, the function of food pantries that is the subject of this report—nutrition education—has been severely curtailed, if not stopped outright. Nutrition education classes and recipe sampling, which have typically been conducted in person, are simply not safe during a pandemic, and food pantries are understandably marshalling all their resources to meet communities' increased need for food.

Under these circumstances, the discussions and recommendations in this report may be less pressing than they were when we began the project, but, for a number of reasons, we still believe they are important and relevant, even as the pandemic persists. First, when the crisis subsides, it will be as important as ever that food insecure folks can access information to help them make the most of their food resources and maintain healthy diets, particularly if they suffer from some of the many health impacts associated with poverty, such as high blood pressure and diabetes. Second, the insights we gleaned from EFS professionals and, especially, food pantry customers about the importance of reducing the

stigma associated with food assistance as well as centering customers in the work and decision-making of food pantry operations are relevant under all conditions. Indeed, they are arguably now more important than ever since greater numbers of people are in need of help, and more times than not, the increase in need is among Black, immigrant, refugee, and Indigenous peoples. Our recommendations in this regard can and should inform how food pantries operate even before communities recover from the coronavirus. Finally, given that health experts expect the need for physical distancing practices to persist well into 2021, there may come a time when at least some food pantries have the ability to consider offering some nutrition education online. Our report offers insights, such as the importance of including customers in both the design and implementation of nutrition education opportunities, which can determine whether such virtual events are desired by community members and, if so, how to offer them in ways that do not exacerbate the disparities for communities with limited internet access.

In short, while we fully appreciate that nutrition education is not and should not be a significant priority for food pantries at this time in the crisis, we nevertheless see this report as timely. There is never a wrong time to hear from food insecure people about the structures ostensibly created to serve them, and there is never a wrong time to foreground the importance of moving existing dynamics of power and institutional structures in the direction of greater racial equity and food justice. It is in this spirit that we offer this report at this time.

Research Methods

This project was a joint endeavor between Northwest Harvest and the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Seattle University. It sought to address three related research questions of concern to Northwest Harvest. These questions were:

1. How can exposure to and participation in nutrition education be increased?
2. Where is nutrition education most effective?
3. What are the differences in programming between effective and ineffective nutrition education classes?

The research team consisted of Laura Titzer, Community Initiatives Manager at Northwest Harvest; Mark Cohan, Associate Professor of Sociology at Seattle University; and Jasmine Waland, a recent graduate of Seattle University. Cohan and Waland served as the study's co-principal investigators (co-PIs).

We sought answers to our research questions by conducting semi-structured interviews with EFS professionals and food pantry customers. In semi-structured interviews, each interview is guided by pre-established themes which provide organization for a wide-ranging conversation that allows interviewees to provide details and introduce topics they believe are relevant to the themes. Complete interview guides for both types of interview are included in the appendix.

For the EFS professional interviews, the interview themes were:

1. Professional Background
2. Philosophy of Nutrition Education in the EFS
3. Nutrition Education Program Experiences

For the customer interviews, the themes were:

1. Experience with Food Banks
2. Experience with Food Nutrition Programs
3. Nutrition Education Improvements

Given our specific reasons for including customers and EFS professionals in our study and the challenges unique to recruiting people from each group, we used different recruitment and sampling strategies for each, though the sampling strategies for each was a form of convenience sampling. Purposive sampling was used to recruit EFS professionals for interviews. In this form of non-random, convenience sampling, specific participants or representatives

from specific groups are chosen and actively recruited because they are believed to have unique insights to offer. This method was chosen because the number of EFS organizations with active or recently-active nutrition-education programs is relatively small and because we wanted insights from professionals representing organizations with different programs and different philosophies from different parts of the United States. Rachel Ryan, then Community Initiatives Coordinator for Northwest Harvest, provided introductions between the co-PIs and four EFS professionals in the United States. A fifth EFS professional—the director of the food bank where the customer interviews occurred—was recruited directly by the co-PIs. The total sample included five EFS professionals who worked in organizations in Spokane, WA, Seattle, WA, Bloomington, IN, Tucson, AZ, and Des Moines, WA. Four of the organizations were food pantries; one was a food distributor. All EFS professional interviewees were white women. One of the interviews was conducted in person; the other four were conducted via Zoom.

Food pantry customers were recruited to the study using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling means recruiting participants among those who are readily available to the researchers, while snowball sampling involves asking individuals who agree to participate to recommend others who might also participate. Laura Titzer, working with her networks at Northwest Harvest, was able to identify one food pantry in the organization's service area that had experience with nutrition education programs, would allow researchers to recruit and conduct interviews among their customers, and was within a reasonable driving distance of the co-PIs. Once that food pantry was identified, we secured permission for the study from the pantry's director and the owners of the physical building.

All participant recruitment and interviewing was done by Waland, who was trained in semi-structured interviewing by Cohan. The co-PIs arranged particular dates and times for recruitment and interviewing with the director of the food pantry. The director, in conjunction with the building owner, offered a classroom in the building so that all interviews could

"I'm just sharing that sometimes the people working in this system do not realize the touch that they are having in peoples' lives lasts a lifetime."

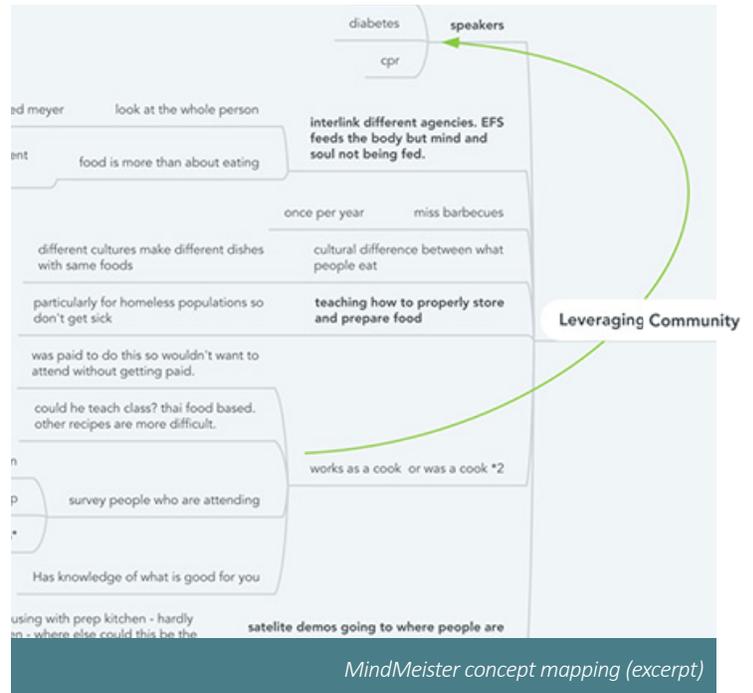
be conducted in private. The Department of Anthropology and Sociology paid the building owner a per-use fee for the use of the classroom space.

The customer base of the pantry where participant recruitment occurred includes English, Spanish, and Somali speakers. Northwest Harvest provided funds to pay a Spanish and a Somali translator to be on hand during the times when Waland was recruiting at the pantry. Northwest Harvest also offered a \$10 cash incentive for food pantry customers to participate in the study. Customers were informed that their participation was voluntary and assured that they would receive the incentive even if they chose not to answer particular questions or if they chose to end the interview early.

On the pre-arranged days, Waland and a translator approached every tenth person in line to shop at the food pantry (starting from the back of the line) and invited them to participate in the study. One of the two days of participant recruitment included the Somali translator, but no Somali speakers were present. On the second and third day of participant recruitment, the Spanish translator approached the customers with Waland and three customers agreed to be interviewed with the Spanish translator. In an effort to diversify the research sample and make effective use of the translators' expertise, Waland approached groups that appeared to be Spanish or Somali speakers before moving on to English speakers in the line. Ultimately, Waland conducted three interviews with the Spanish translator and none with the Somali translator. Finally, Waland also recruited participants from one cooking class that took place at the food pantry. If someone agreed to participate, they were asked to leave the line or cooking class so that the interview could be conducted immediately. They were assured that they would be allowed to go to the front of the line after the interview.

The final sample of food pantry customers consisted of 10 individuals: three African-American women, three Latina women, one Latino man, one white man, one white

In this project, we seek to challenge dominant narratives by foregrounding the stories of those who are food insecure. While we may not be able to retain all the nuances and details [...] the emotional impact of them stays with us forever. Stories have the power to normalize oppression, but they also have the power to heal.



woman, and one Thai man. Participants ranged in age from 40 to 70. All interviews were conducted in-person and all of the customers who agreed to participate completed the entire interview. All interviewees—customers and EFS professionals—gave their informed consent to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted and audio recorded between February and May, 2019; interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes. They were later transcribed by a staff member of Northwest Harvest.

Analysis of the interviews was a joint effort of Cohan, Titzer, and Waland. All team members listened to the audio recordings and/or read interview transcripts to identify common themes that emerged from the interviews.

MindMeister, an online mind-mapping tool, was used to facilitate concept mapping and from this concept mapping the key findings of the report were identified. Analysis of the EFS professional interviews was initially done separately from the analysis of the customer interviews, but the overlap and relatedness between comments from both groups was identified and integrated in the writing of this report.

“If we are in this position of power, which we are, we need to step away from the power and let our customers have the power. Let them make the decisions. Therefore, we are not seen as this intrusive agency who comes in and makes decisions because we can.”

The Social Context

The environment of a food pantry demonstrates that prominent features should be noted at the outset. In order to effectively explore nutrition education within food pantries it is imperative to understand the context of food pantries themselves and the experiences they have within them. In particular, we want to draw attention to stereotypes, stigmas, and efforts to advance food and racial justice.

Dismantling the stereotype

All of the customers interviewed noted the importance of having access to food. One customer even stated that access to food should be a human right. Customers were also aware of negative stereotypes present in the United States regarding people that need food pantries. People are often deemed “undeserving,” “greedy,” or “lazy” leaving many customers feeling both devalued and dehumanized. Stereotypes often allude to customers “using the system,” but on the contrary, the response across all customers was that they only came to the food pantry when it was imperative.

“It’s easy to think that it’s an individual failing and not a larger systemic or community failing.”

All of the customers had various experiences with food pantries ranging from 1 day to 10 years. In their own ways all of the customers expressed that they were not taking advantage of the food pantry’s resources. The customer that had come for the longest amount of time

stated, “I attend the food pantry when it is necessary so it’s not like an ongoing thing. However, I’ve been homeless for over ten years and this food pantry has been the largest part of helping me through that.” Another customer was asked how often they came to the food pantry. He said, “It’s been on and off. It depends on how much I really need because I don’t use [the produce] if I already have [food]. I don’t want to come and get more. Save it for other people.” Two other customers shared similar sentiments, stating they only take produce if they need it, and they are careful not to overstock their house. The reasons for attending the food pantry were different for everyone, but a common thread was having it as the only option for survival. One customer shared that he came to the food pantry because he did not have a job due to a workplace injury at his previous position. He had been visiting the food pantry for a year and a half and shared that he was “still struggling.” Another customer that came to the food pantry had not been there in 5 years because she did

not need the resources when she was financially stable, but this changed with the “new” President (Trump). All of these customer’s responses ran counter to the negative stereotypes of people who access food pantries.

To help dismantle the stigma of being poor, the customers expressed a need for Emergency Food System (EFS) professionals working or volunteering in a food pantry to resist the rhetoric of “greedy people abusing the system.” One customer explained that she disliked one of the food pantries she had attended as a volunteer because she felt they did not treat customers as humans that deserved resources. She stated:

I would just say comparatively [name] food pantry is very centered on the customers and the people who work [there] have a pleasant attitude. But the other food pantry—it seems to be more focused on the food pantry and its processes and its work. I just found it very harsh towards the people who came there...More driven by efficiency and I thought the attitude was kind of treating the people like they were trying to get over on the system... [and didn’t] even really need food.

Similarly, another customer explained that at the food pantry she went to in the past, it seemed like the staff were:

...just trying to fill out the information and whisk you through, but they’re a smaller facility... They’ve rearranged the way they handle things now. They’re getting a little bit better. I think they kind of got the idea that we’re not robots...We’re actually people.

EFS professionals must dismantle their own stereotypes of customers attending food pantries in order to make cultural shifts to create an environment where customers feel respected and cared for. One senior customer shared her experiences with public assistance over the course of her lifetime. She explained how she has observed the system evolve, stating,

I do believe that how the food is delivered is as important as the food itself because I just remember the shame associated [with]having to get help for food when I was younger...It used to be very cruel...people were treated very disrespectfully and there was so much shame associated with...people knowing you were

receiving public assistance for food. I just think, in my lifetime, it's amazing people that now realize the harm that it is even to children. I was a kid when this was going on and that stuff stays with you forever. I'm just sharing that sometimes the people working in this system do not realize the touch that they are having in peoples' lives lasts a lifetime.

There is a shared desire among all of the customers we spoke with to dismantle the stereotypes that are embedded in our society regarding people who need resources. Stigmas against seeking food assistance are perpetuated by stereotypes about poverty and the people who experience poverty. These stereotypes, in turn, emerge from broader stories told in our society about who is poor and why people are poor. These stories, or cultural narratives, divert attention from social structures that perpetuate economic inequality and instead place blame on poor people for their circumstances. In this way, these narratives support dominant power structures and the enormous disparities of wealth they have created and perpetuated. These persistent cultural stories are, therefore, quite powerful, but so, too, are the stories of real people experiencing food insecurity. In this project,

Acknowledging that poverty and food insecurity are consequences of how resources are distributed helps to combat stigma because it shifts the focus from the choices of individuals to the way inequality is built into social arrangements.

we seek to challenge dominant narratives by foregrounding the stories of those who are food insecure. While we may not be able to retain all the nuances and details of every story we've been told, the emotional impact of them stays with us forever. Stories have the power to normalize oppression, but they also have the power to heal.

Contrary to the dominant narrative that circulates in our culture, people are not hungry or poor because of lack of access to food or economic opportunities. People are poor or hungry because of the disparities around power. Given that, the solution is to change or dismantle inequitable power structures. People suffering from chronic poverty and hunger should be centered in these discussions, not as topics, but as people themselves by giving them agency around changing and dismantling those systems. There have been major shifts for EFS professionals to view customers holistically and respectfully which the customers point out as important

factors in their food pantry experience. EFS professionals are there to facilitate change and provide opportunities for their customers to take the driver's seat. This can be done by allowing space for customers to share their own stories, knowledge and skills when opportunities arise.

Those that are in a place of chronic hunger or poverty know these issues most intimately. It is important to understand that they're already working against these narratives and the systems that perpetuate them because they're struggling day to day and doing the very best that they can with the least amount of resources.

Combating stigma

All of the EFS professionals described efforts to make EFS operations more just, culturally-responsive, and efficient, but two specifically singled out the need to combat the stigma customers often feel for accessing services. Both framed their concern about stigma in terms of fostering dignity and suggested that how EFS professionals think about their role and about food pantry customers is key to minimizing stigma. For instance, one invoked a sort of "there but for the grace of God" ethic, downplaying the social distance between professional and customer:

I would say that kind of enhancing dignity is kind of front of mind like when I go out to go to work, [or] when I go to classes...These people aren't any different than me. Also thinking about how close all of us are to the same position, especially with healthcare. You get one accident and you could be using a food bank for the rest of your life.

The other EFS professional echoed the importance of EFS professionals reflecting on their attitudes about food pantry customers, but her ability to identify comes, at least in part, from personal experience. She suggested that having grown up in a food insecure home where she felt the stigma for herself serves as a check on how she operates in her role:

But I think growing up poor and on food stamps and using other services makes me aware of what it feels like to be questioned and then experiencing the idea that other people know what's best for me kind of in my own life. I think that helps give me a perspective, at least as the director of the organization, to not be paternalistic, to not be condescending, and to not think that we know better what people need, know better than themselves. I think that this is definitely the kind of work where it's easy to think that you know better. Well obviously, if people

are struggling in this way—I'm not saying this is me but as a generic person—they must be doing something wrong.

This professional, however, also spoke of something that is perhaps even more important than seeking to identify with food pantry customers—recognizing the structural origins of stigma and working to alter those structures.

It's easy to think that it's an individual failing and not a larger systemic or community failing. It's easier to think that because then it makes the solutions easier. I think we have a lot of practices and policies in place that we've done in the last few years that try to make sure that we're kind of checking our privilege and being aware of our biases and how decisions get made and who's involved.

Acknowledging that poverty and food insecurity are consequences of how resources are distributed helps to combat stigma because it shifts the focus from the choices of individuals to the way inequality is built into social arrangements.

Racial and Food Justice

Dismantling stereotypes and combating stigma can be seen as just one piece of a larger effort to promote food justice. The research team for this project—two scholars and one EFS professional—is invested in advancing food justice. We approached our work with a clear sense of what food justice means to us, an understanding rooted in combating systemic inequalities and fostering community self-determination with regard to food. However, we made the mistake of not making our definition of food justice explicit and comparing it with those of the customers and EFS professionals, so when we raised the issue, we got widely divergent responses. It is clear to us now that the customers and EFS professionals we talked to were operating from definitions of food justice that were mostly different from ours and often different from each other. We found that customers had opinions about food justice targeted on ending food insecurity as a whole, while EFS professionals envisioned a different concept entirely, one that focused on equitable food distribution.

From our conversations with a few customers we learned that they shared similar dreams for what a food pantry could do differently and some even shared an alternative to food pantries altogether. One customer shared the importance of food pantries as being “the best option because it's kind of sad when stores throw away food. This way it's being used instead of being dumped.” Similarly, another customer shared his thought on food justice,

I think we've come a long way toward better food justice. Whereas before food was an elitist concept—those who had, got and those who didn't, didn't eat. That's kind of a reverse concept. The one without are the ones with need and the ones that have already have so why would you give to the haves and not give to the have nots. Facilities like this [food pantry] are rising up and they're actually making a stand for people who don't have the voice to say, 'Hey, what about me?' It's a wonderful concept and they need to be supported more than the restaurant down the street.

In addition to support, another customer offered an idea on adding to food pantries:

“I wish somewhere around here we could have a neighborhood garden where you could get some really true fresh vegetables.”



Copyright Mother Hubbard's Cupboard

I wish somewhere around here we could have a neighborhood garden where you could get some really true fresh vegetables. I think that wouldn't be in place of the food bank, but I think that would be in addition.

Another customer shared their dream for an alternative to food pantries:

If I had to dream of a solution, one is, in a perfect world, food would just be a right. A human right that people just have a right to food. You would go to regular stores with a card that looks just like a debit card; that there would be no way that people observing from the outside [to] distinguish you're receiving the food differently than them so that it would be completely blended into how everybody else receives food...I think about this a lot in terms of living in a wealthy country where food is not [viewed] as a human right. [It] is really a tragedy to me. I just don't accept the fact that even with all of the progress in my lifetime of where people were really treated poorly, the fact that we haven't conquered even that in the minds of people in our society that no one should be without food and the logistics of that should always be subordinate. That people have a right to eat and the fact that we waste so much food in this country. I don't know where that energy is going to come from. It might actually come from the people who are in this line out here...I think a lot of things about human rights, but food in particular to be without question, especially where it impacts young people and elders. The fact that you have people with these jobs that are not—that don't sustain a decent living. Food is a human right to me.

While all four of these customers had different opinions on food pantries and pushed for more change, they also expressed gratitude for them.

Highlighting our error of language is a reminder that conversations about food and justice are evolving, and they don't all begin with the same assumptions or vocabulary. But for that very reason, it is useful to note the things that came up for the EFS professionals when we asked them what role nutrition education can play in advancing the cause of food justice. For one EFS professional, the question prompted reflection about the value of listening to customers:

It gives another touch point to customers. It gives another opportunity for us to speak to customers,

to ask questions, to understand what's happening more. Why are people in food insecurity, why are they not shopping for certain ingredients, why they are not cooking at home, things like that. So I think more information could help. I think it could help inform the supply chain needs of food banks. More awareness on who these people are. What donations we need.

For this person, food justice seemed to be primarily about communicating with customers to learn their needs and allowing those to inform resource management at food pantries.

Two other professionals associated food justice with recognizing the systemic roots of food insecurity and the need to do more than just provide emergency food. For one of these professionals, this recognition was the inspiration for the multiple teams her organization

"If I had to dream of a solution, one is, in a perfect world, food would just be a right. A human right that people just have a right to food."

has assembled to address four core concerns they identified among their customer base—social isolation, diet-related disease, lack of access to food, and lack of economic opportunity. With their garden team, advocacy team, green team, and community organizing team, they support local farmers, teach customers to apply for grants and pursue change through policy, and help customers bolster the resilience of their communities. All of this is done with an eye towards transforming systems, as much or more than individuals, in the belief that doing so will reduce customers' reliance on emergency food.

The other EFS professional who saw food justice in systemic terms highlighted how economic systems shape people's experiences with food insecurity. She drew an implicit distinction between access, understood as the presence of food, and access, understood as the ability to buy food:

I think that again we believe that food is a basic human right and that then obligates communities to certain actions and those include making sure that all people have access to food. That isn't necessarily solved through the idea of grocery stores in food deserts. That access ties to money. People don't not have food because there isn't food to be had. It's about income...I think for us that's where the idea of justice comes in. You can't just think about making sure there's food

available in a neighborhood through a grocery store or corner store, whatever. There are other systems in play.

For her, the focus on access as the presence of food is the main issue tied to discussions of food deserts. Just ensuring that there is a place to buy food in a neighborhood does little if the folks in that neighborhood can't afford the food that's there. Food justice, she insists, requires attending to economic systems.

A focus on systems also informs our approach to these issues and is reflected in the questions we asked. One assumption we brought to the work—informed by our reading of previous research—is that race, as a social classification system, and the systemic racism associated with it, play a key role in the emergency food system, as they do in so many other aspects of social life. In the emergency food system, one manifestation of the centrality of race is the fact that, while food pantry customers are disproportionately people of color, the ranks of EFS professional staff are dominated by white people, especially white women. Given this arrangement, it is notable that none of the EFS professionals mentioned race in the context of food justice. Still, we wanted to know how race might figure into their understanding of their work. We asked them to reflect on their social positionality, and we specifically asked them how they and their organizations navigate the “white savior complex”—the tendency for well-meaning white people to impose “solutions” to problems on less-powerful people of color, not considering that they may have skills and solutions of their own to offer.

Just ensuring that there is a place to buy food in a neighborhood does little if the folks in that neighborhood can't afford the food that's there. Food justice, she insists, requires attending to economic systems.

A common thread in their responses was that engaging with food pantry customers and low-income communities requires sensitivity to difference, but they varied in what factors they identified as consequential differences. Several highlighted the relationship between race and decision-making power. For instance, one EFS professional noted that her organization's board is all white, with few women and few customers. The result

is a stark difference in who has the power to make decisions. She suggested that it is incumbent upon EFS staff to remain cognizant of this power differential and actively disrupt it by

including customers in decision-making wherever possible:

We have to understand the privilege that we have as people who are empowered, as people who are on staff, as people who are making decisions on the part of our customers and we have to consciously remain cognizant of that in every decision we make. So whether that be advocating for getting a client group in to make decisions on where our food bank is going in the next 5 years, whether it be getting our customers together to talk about the curriculum that we're developing, or just making sure we're conscious of all of the pieces of the community that we are missing if we're working behind the scenes, behind the desk, making decisions for them. If the decisions are for them, I think they should be with them.

In a similar vein, another of the EFS professionals spoke eloquently about how easy it is to fall into the white savior mentality when one has decision-making power and the vigilance white people in the EFS need to have to combat it:

I think my whiteness and this feeling of “I work for Public Health and I have decision making power and I have funding decision making power” that what I do is going to be helpful and wonderful. And that's where I catch myself... “Well here's what I would do. I would create this career path program.” There you go. That is a perfect example of this white savior mentality. I think what white people need to do is to question, to sort of catch yourselves hopefully like I did and do we actually? No. That's not taking a pro-equity lens. I think it's going to be a constant issue and what I've seen within the food banking world is that it's really a lot of white women, similar to nutrition education, and nutrition in general.... I think it's going to have to be constantly brought up and challenged throughout the process.

These two professionals see the importance of social position (or “positionality”) in terms of who has the power to make decisions, and they note that the predominance of white people in powerful positions creates the conditions under which it is all too easy for white professionals to make decisions for customers—many of whom are people of color—as if they, the professionals, know best.

Another of the professionals we talked to also noted the high proportion of white folks serving in the EFS and the challenging dynamics of power that can foster, but she added some important context and complexity. First, she traced the

whiteness of those who work in the EFS to the early history of food pantries when white church congregations would offer food support:

Largely, you'll see food banks have come out of churches and they are many times predominantly white congregations. We didn't place food banks anywhere near where people were...So the food banks aren't well placed to reach the populations that are necessarily in need. That complex is complex because it feeds into our religious identity and what we feel are directives. People feel our directives to help others and I think that it's true in actually most religions the concept of generosity of helping those in need, etc. So sometimes religious identity can get caught up in those power relationships I guess you could say.

More than simply noting the history, this professional suggests it has two important legacies. One legacy is that many food pantries have not been located strategically to serve the areas of greatest need. Indeed, in cases where communities of color face the greatest need, food pantries linked (historically or otherwise) to white churches may be particularly problematic. They may create the appearance of offering support to all but pose disproportionate access problems for people of color. The other legacy is that the values that motivate white people to work in the EFS may be rooted in a religious ideology in ways that complicate power dynamics. While the impulses to help and to be generous are admirable, they can be framed in ways that position the EFS worker as the “rescuer” of the person experiencing food insecurity. The professional made this explicit when she talked about what she calls the “Superhero Complex,” something she is putting on the agenda of a conference she is planning:

This year we've chosen as our theme Superheroes. I've said that one of the things I want to make sure we talk about, in the process of talking about the superheroes, is the Superhero Complex. How can we be like heroes? Everybody wants to be heros. Everybody wants to do good and help others and save others. But how can we also confront the attitudes that can come with that of “I'm the one that's great. I'm the one that's saving you poor people out there.” How can we help to turn that into empowering people rather than us being the power?

This professional’s “Superhero Complex,” when it operates in a context of predominantly white staff “serving” communities of color, is exactly what is meant by the white savior complex.

The comments of this EFS professional also point to the challenges that can arise from the language EFS workers use. She implies that when workers in the EFS see themselves as “superheroes” or define their work as “saving” others, the tendency is to use one’s power rather than seeking ways to empower others. Another EFS professional also raised the issue of language and power and indicated that language use and who speaks for customers is an explicit focus of their training of staff, collaborations with community partners, and promotion of their work:

As a volunteer, or as a donor, or as a board member, you're not the expert in what people need in their own lives and that it's just not how we do things. It shows up in different ways, but I think it's still something that we have to navigate especially with partners, other organizations, or our local United Way. They kind of have a lot of their framing and messaging is—it's like battle-focused like “United we fight. United we win.” So like there's a knight coming in somewhere to save everyone. We try to stay away from language that paints us as heroes and other people as victims. We try really, really hard to not tell other people's stories which I think is important. Because when we tell other people's stories, kind of the general “we” in social services, when you're telling someone else's story you're painting yourself as the hero. We try to avoid that.

Like the previous professional, this person is critical of framing EFS work in heroic language, and she speaks directly to issues of positionality and power when she raises concerns about telling other people’s stories. When powerful people speak for the less powerful,

The predominance of white people in powerful positions creates the conditions under which it is all too easy for white professionals to make decisions for customers—many of whom are people of color.

They all seem to agree that failing to acknowledge and address the power differential between EFS workers and food pantry customers can lead to a “white savior” dynamic, regardless of the good intentions of the workers.

that, too, is a way of assuming the “hero” position—the one who assumes they know what is important about someone else’s experience and they have the wisdom to decide how it should be used and shared.

“I think that again we believe that food is a basic human right and that then obligates communities to certain actions and those include making sure that all people have access to food. That isn’t necessarily solved through the idea of grocery stores in food deserts. That access ties to money...”

Although these EFS professionals might not regularly use the term “white savior complex,” it is clear that they are attune to the challenging dynamics of race and power that are endemic to the emergency food system. Several of them admitted that their organizations are only just beginning to wrestle with these issues, but they see the gravity of them. They all seem to agree that failing to acknowledge

and address the power differential between EFS workers and food pantry customers can lead to a “white savior” dynamic, regardless of the good intentions of the workers.

A slightly different perspective on positionality came from an EFS professional whose organization serves a population that is almost exclusively white. She indicated that she had been brought up not to recognize differences of race or social class, so her awareness of systemic inequality is relatively new. She was candid about having room to grow in terms of bringing that lens to her work:

I wasn’t really taught that people are different. People are all the same regardless of color, regardless of how much money they make. But also that doesn’t really open the door to going out and intentionally learning other cultures either. ‘Cause we’re not, now I know because I’m old enough, that we’re not all equal and the system has been set up in that fashion. So that I could be better in those areas. Like we could go out and seek more information to be equitable



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to other cultures like in our programming. Me personally— I would say that kind of enhancing dignity is kind of front of mind like when I go out to go to work, when I go to classes, or whatever.

Although her insight about creating more equitable programming does not include a specific mention of power differentials, her commitment to enhancing dignity could be seen as resonant with this idea. The other EFS professionals’ comments certainly suggest that treating customers with dignity includes empowering them to speak and make decisions for themselves.

Guiding Philosophies and Themes

Before examining specific nutrition education programs, we think it is constructive to consider some beliefs and ideals that appear to define EFS professionals' orientation to their work, as well as evidence from customers that these approaches resonate with them. In the sections that follow, EFS professionals and customers talk about a shift in food pantry philosophy from delivering calories to nourishing bodies, the importance of nutrition education, strategies for leveraging community assets, and the need to redistribute power to customers.

Shift from delivering calories to nourishing bodies

There was widespread agreement among the EFS professionals that standard practice at food pantries has been shifting (and needs to continue to shift) from simply delivering customers abundant amounts of food (i.e., lots of calories) to attending to the nutritional value of what is being offered to them. One EFS professional described the shift by contrasting what she called progressive food pantries with more traditional ones:

Some food banks—the more progressive ones—are the food banks that have adopted nutrition policies and have gotten past the traditional view of: “Let’s just pump out calories to our customers because they need calories. They need food. They need energy.” A lot of times food banks are still in that world where they say: “Let’s just get food out. Doesn’t matter what kind...” You see a lot of people at food banks that still have that. That belief is not supportive of people’s overall health...But in the more progressive ones, they have nutrition policies. They’re working on sourcing healthier food in order to feed, in order to provide nourishment for the holistic body so it’s not just providing food for physical health, but it’s providing food for mental health.

The shift, as described by this EFS professional, is a change in what food pantries see as their fundamental goal. While it has been—and for some food pantries still is—the distribution of food, regardless of quality, some food pantries are now pursuing a more holistic mission. They are aiming to support the healthy nourishment of customers, recognizing that the provision of large amounts of low quality food can exacerbate the diet-related diseases (e.g., diabetes, high blood pressure) common among low-income eaters.

Another respondent articulated this shift by highlighting the importance of teaching people how to use food, rather than just giving them food. She also noted that nutrition education is a win-win, in the sense that it supports a growing desire among people—food pantry customers and others—to learn more about food, while simultaneously satisfying grantors, who want to see that food pantries are doing more than just giving out food.

“You can’t just think about making sure there’s food available in a neighborhood through a grocery store or corner store, whatever. There are other systems in play.”

Two of the other professionals spoke about specific policies and practices they have pursued to advance this shift. One worked with a nutrition professor at a local university to revise their standard of service to be consistent with contemporary MyPlate standards. As a result, all of the food pantries in their coalition now have a shared goal of ensuring customers get more fresh vegetables and more dairy. They have also committed themselves to nutrition education that combats the nutrition-related health issues with which low-income individuals often struggle.

Another EFS professional, who works with food pantry directors to develop policies to meet nutrition standards, advocates for the “shopping” or “choice” model for food pantries as a way to ensure that food on the shelves is high quality, culturally relevant, diverse, fresh, and addresses multiple food groups. Customers seem to appreciate this change in food pantry structure. Two customers expressed appreciation for one food pantry that was set up like a grocery store with a “shopping” model. They both explained that this food pantry model made the food more appealing. One customer shared:

I thought they had an interesting model ‘cause it was trying to make the food pantry have the same feel as a grocery store and I thought that was very progressive and very helpful... It felt like you were just going to a regular store... you just walked through and took stuff and checked out like a regular store. I thought it was wonderful.

This change to food pantry operations is one concrete way food pantries can put into practice a philosophy that promotes healthy eating, not just calorie consumption.

An alternate perspective on what change is needed in the EFS to promote more healthy eating came from an EFS professional working in an organization that more consciously asserts food justice as its guiding philosophy. She noted that the rationale for the nutrition education programs at her organization is community building, not knowledge acquisition or behavior change. An argument can be made that all the organizations represented here are pursuing food justice, and the shift to nourishing bodies rather than maximizing calories is part of that pursuit. But this particular organization draws attention to more fundamental questions, asking us to consider whether it is enough to simply offer healthier food, or if the bigger shift that is necessary is from seeking to educate customers to, first and foremost, seeking to build communities.

One specific example of seeking to nourish bodies, rather than just giving out food was highlighted by a customer with psoriasis that is dependent on organic food who stated,

I just discovered my psoriasis had gotten worse here in Washington. The weather is not doing me any good here. I have to kind of watch everything I eat. Basically, the doctor just got me on this diet. There's a lot of white breads and pastas I can't have. When I come here I kind of have to watch what my fingers touch. One of the girls that works here has been very helpful as far as trying to help me with everything that's organic...I'm very grateful that they have that because without it I don't know what I'd do. I don't know what I'd be eating at this point. They've been very helpful...in my case, I can only eat turkey, chicken, and fish... That's what I like about this place. They've been very, very helpful with my psoriasis...[However, the] majority of the food I walk out with is not for me. It's more for my husband or my son but... [name of EFS professional], on the floor, 'She goes, 'I have fish. I have turkey.'...They already know me. So when I come, I already told them, 'Get me what I can eat because I have psoriasis really bad'...I feel pretty much comfortable'... Sometimes they'll ask if I need anything or if there's something specific that I'm looking for.

This form of personalized support was very important to this customer suffering from psoriasis.

She shared that when she went to her food pantry, the staff recognized her and noticed her skin was improving due to her new diet. Both the individualized help and the genuine care from EFS professionals are what made her feel “welcomed” and “comfortable saying hi to everybody” at the food pantry.

Another customer that is anemic and has a history of being obese and pre-diabetic also depends on organic food for both her and her family. She was happy to see that there was a lot of organic food at her food pantry. The customers felt the environment of the food pantry and the EFS professionals themselves played a vital role in developing a sense of community. In addition to individualized help, another customer requested toiletries and more food for people experiencing homelessness:

You're serving all type[s] of people here. People who have place to stay. People who are homeless and wish they could help it. Some addicted to drug[s], but they're still homeless. The point is no matter what they have to eat...you should have toiletries for them, soap—something like that...I never degrade the homeless or anybody in that situation because I know they didn't ask for it. A lot of people out there didn't ask for it... the people who really don't have any financial, no digit [cash] at all, then those people should be allowed to have a little bit extra.

Similarly, a couple customers asked for more food or food stamps. One customer stated, “An increase in the amount of food stamps they are giving us. \$190 a month...I don't know anyone that would feed fully.” Multiple customers shared that by the end of the month their food stamps and social assistance were all used up.

In addition to more financial resources, two customers asked for informational sessions. One customer asked for information that would teach both how to save money, and how to spend wisely, while another customer asked for additional resources on “how to get along better in your family...[and] how to have a good family relationship and share.” Customers had specific needs for the food pantry that would feed their body, mind, and soul.

The preceding discussion reveals that professionals in the emergency food system now recognize that food pantries need to focus on more than the distribution of high calorie foods; they need to aim to nourish their customers. But customers of the food pantries have a far more developed and expansive sense of what it will require to do this. For customers, being nourished means not just having access to healthy foods. It also means there are relevant foods and

The rationale for the nutrition education programs is community building, not knowledge acquisition or behavior change.

information to help customers eat diets appropriate to their health conditions and that customers receive support with things that relate to or are aggravated by food insecurity, like financial concerns, housing instability, and interpersonal struggles.

Importance of nutrition education

A number of the professionals we talked to made a point of articulating the role they believe nutrition education plays in the struggle against food insecurity and poverty. There seemed to be broad consensus that nutrition education is important for two reasons—one social and one practical. The social value of nutrition education is that, if done right, it can build community, both among food pantry customers and with the broader community. Every EFS professional we spoke to mentioned this benefit of nutrition education in some way. One of the professionals described this value while reflecting on the career path that led her to becoming a nutrition educator:

Really what I think I took away from being a nutrition educator and teaching in groups was that teaching cooking in groups has this added benefit, as well, around community building. It's something that every single person—no matter who you are in the world—we all need to eat. We all relate to food and bringing a bunch of strangers together in a room around cooking and food immediately brings people together.

For her, the universality of cooking and eating helps foster social bonds.

As we noted in the previous section, one organization sees community building as so important that they treat it not as a consequence of nutrition education, but as the focus of all engagements with food insecure people, whether that be nutrition education, food services, or advocacy. The EFS professional from this organization put it this way:

Poverty can be really isolating.... I think that the community building that happens and relationships that are formed happen when people are coming together to learn how to make bread or how to make pie or whatever.... So whether someone goes on to make bread from scratch at home all the time or retains anything they learned in the class is kind of not the point. It's the sense of community that is captured there and the networks that they are able to build. It's a preventative approach I think and building up supportive networks and building community.

From her perspective, it's not so much what customers learn or do as a result of nutrition education that matters, it's the relationships they form and the antidote to isolation they provide.

Other EFS professionals, however, see important practical benefits to nutrition education. Chief among these is that it promotes more effective use of food resources.

When you teach people how to use food, rather than just give them food, their resources go farther. One EFS professional put it this way:

People are getting ideas for how to cook with foods that are less familiar to them. It's encouraging healthy food consumption—more fruits and vegetable consumption. It's hopefully leveraging their food dollars so that when they take these foods home, they're using them and eating more and then having more money to spend on their groceries.

By extension, when customers are educated about the foods in a food pantry's donation stream, they use them better, and the food pantry's resources go farther. One of the customers we spoke to affirmed this perspective. She said:

I think there's a lot of stuff the people get here. That's what impressed me the first time I came which made me want to come back. There was things that they have here that maybe you can get in abundance and so they were giving you different ways [of] how to cook those things or how to use them and I thought that was really interesting 'cause a lot of times there's stuff that you're like, I'm not going to get that. I don't know what to do with that.' That was really good information...They did some different things with the pizza dough. That was really interesting. Or how to add extra vegetables in your food...It was really good to see or get a different take on how they would use this vegetable...That was one of the reasons why I come so that I can get some different ideas on how to use different stuff that you get here.

"We have to understand the privilege that we have as people who are empowered, as people who are on staff, as people who are making decisions on the part of our customers and we have to consciously remain cognizant of that in every decision we make."

This customer made a direct connection between learning about food, both new foods and new ways to use familiar foods, and using a more diverse array of food pantry items. Her comments thus support the most fundamental and practical value espoused for nutrition education: making more effective uses of limited resources.

Finally, one EFS professional echoed this perspective on the efficient use of resources, but she also saw other benefits of nutrition education. She indicated that the programs are valuable because they satisfy a desire among many customers to learn more about food and a desire among funders to see that agencies are doing more than just giving out food.

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, both customers and EFS professionals see a multitude of reasons why nutrition education is important. Some people might emphasize practical benefits, like a customer learning to make their food dollars go further or a food pantry ensuring that more food in its donation stream is consumed, while others may be focused on more social benefits, like community building and broadening the mission of food pantries. Taken together, however, they make a strong case for the importance of nutrition education.

Leveraging community assets

Another philosophy shared by the EFS professionals is the importance of developing and effectively deploying resources beyond their paid staff and grant funding. These efforts span a wide range from partnering with other community groups and enlisting customers and other community members as volunteers to relying on medical and other experts for some programming. Adopting this approach is undeniably a practical matter, since organizations in the emergency food

system are chronically under-funded and are therefore always pressed to do more with less. However, the professionals also see it as conveying other benefits as well. One such benefit is providing the most appropriate resources for customers. For instance, one EFS professional and her organization determined that being committed to combating the food-

For customers, being nourished means not just having access to healthy foods. It also means there are relevant foods and information to help customers eat diets appropriate to their health conditions and that customers receive support with things... aggravated by food insecurity.

related illnesses that plague food pantry customers did not mean they themselves needed to provide programs on healthy eating with these diseases. Instead, they partnered with Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), entities which serve primarily low-income customers, to put the work in the hands of true experts. The EFS professional describes one such arrangement this way:

We have one here in [town]. We have partnerships there. We have a dietician we work with there. She provides cooking classes, healthy living classes, diabetes prevention, yoga, exercise, all those things for customers who have either been diagnosed or referred by their doctor. So instead of us trying to keep pushing, pushing, pushing to get the food bank for nutritional education, we decided that let's let the professionals do it on their end and let's do what we can do on our end.

The partnerships free the EFS organization's resources for other needs, while also ensuring that customers are getting support and information from appropriate sources. This same EFS professional, along with one of the others, also talked



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about collaborating with a local university so that students get educated and food pantry customers get nutrition education.

Another innovative partnership involves local farms. One EFS professional working on the West Coast told us that her coalition of food pantries received a couple of acres of land by donation years ago and now serves 12 area food pantries with fresh produce. In addition to the farm, they also benefit from another partnership which increases the capacity of area food pantries to provide fresh produce, while also establishing relationships between food pantries and local farmers and helps farmers through the shoulder season.

An even more common, and perhaps more important, way that EFS professionals talked about building their capacity was by recognizing, employing, and rewarding the expertise of customers themselves. In organizations served by two of our EFS professionals, this commitment takes the form of a Training of Trainers model. Volunteers, who are usually also food pantry customers, are mentored by staff on some aspect of nutrition education (e.g., reading nutrition labels, shopping healthy, cooking healthy), then they are able to share that knowledge with other customers in a peer-to-peer fashion (for instance, in a community cooking demonstration). In some cases, these volunteer educators receive financial stipends for their efforts.

For their part, customers seem eager and willing to be acknowledged as people with perspectives and expertise that can make nutrition education work better for everyone. The customers we talked to shared many of the things that worked best or were most compelling to them about nutrition education classes. For instance, customers appreciated having speakers come to the classes. These speakers did CPR training, provided diabetes information, and gave customers plants to grow their own vegetables. One customer explained what her instructor did: “She has speakers that come in that talk about diabetes or your heart. It makes it interesting when she has speakers come in. She had that mannequin where we did the ‘Save People’s Lives’ [CPR training]...during the cooking class. That makes it fun, too. Then she had the plant lady come in

One organization sees community building as so important that they treat it not as a consequence of nutrition education, but as the focus of all engagements with food insecure people, whether that be nutrition education, food services, or advocacy.

and talk about plants.” Offering speakers provided holistic resources that made the class lively and connected them with outside resources.

But leveraging the insights and expertise of customers means more than listening to customers. It also needs to include appropriate compensation. For instance, one of the chefs offered his skills and said he could teach a class on Thai or American cuisine; it was his paid job to conduct cooking shows prior to his injury. However, he needs the money, so right now he wouldn’t want to attend without getting paid. He said:

If they had like some kind of cooking show or [demo] and maybe [if] they’re going to hand me a little bit of funds just for doing the show, just so I earn some kind of income, I wouldn’t mind doing it. Other than that, just running out of time, it’s tough to get around. [It is] even hard for me to come here...mechanical issues...I don’t mind helping—volunteer and all that— but right now [in] my life [I] need the money to survive.

Similarly, a few other customers said they would be willing to work at the food pantry distributing food, teaching a cooking class, or doing dishes. Our interviews with customers make it clear that many are willing to offer their insights, time, and even labor to support nutrition education at food pantries, but the pantries must be able and willing to compensate customers for their contributions.

Redistributing power

For a couple of the EFS professionals, it is not enough for a few customers to participate and be rewarded as knowledge providers; they advocate a more fundamental shift in emergency food system practice such that decision-making power moves more and more from food pantry staff to customers. In one organization, the staff see their roles more as advocates than as service providers. Staff work to address community members’ immediate food needs, but they also empower customers to conduct community organizing around issues of concern to them:

...we have an advocacy program that is made up of volunteers and patrons and general community members and they each year, or legislative session, they choose issues that they want to organize around and those tend to be housing, healthcare, food access, and sometimes wages. So they’ll do organizing around those issues largely at a state level. One time they focused on federal things like SNAP.

The result, according to the EFS professional associated with the organization, is that customers are recognized as most knowledgeable about their needs, and “supportive networks” are built up that address the broader social and economic context in which food insecurity occurs.

Another professional who advocates this redistribution of power used the example of two women who run one of their school pantry nutrition education sites. She suggested that the women could be mentored in how to communicate with civic leaders and in grant writing so that they could advocate for the resources and policy support that they believe their program needs. In this way, she says the organization can avoid being what she calls an “intrusive agency”:

...we don't ever want to seem to our customers like we are making decisions for them. We want them to help us make decisions. If we are in this position of power, which we are, we need to step away from the power and let our customers have the power. Let them make the decisions. Therefore, we are not seen as this intrusive agency who comes in and makes decisions because we can.

For these EFS professionals, it is not enough for customers and volunteers to be recruited to leadership or teaching positions in nutrition education programs. The model of EFS work needs to be fundamentally reimagined so that decision-making power is in the hands of those most affected by decisions: customers.

This brief examination of EFS professionals' guiding philosophies shows that there is a diversity of opinions on a number of fronts. For instance, some professionals seek to empower customers by including them as teachers or community mentors in programs, while others are pursuing more fundamental changes meant to put decision-making power in the hands of customers. Similarly, while most of the EFS professionals see nutrition education as a means to help customers eat more healthfully and get more out of their

“We didn't place food banks anywhere near where people were... So the food banks aren't well placed to reach the populations that are necessarily in need.”



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limited resources, one professional argues that community building should be seen as the primary goal of EFS work. Customers recognize and appreciate these shifts towards more healthful foods and stronger communities being advanced by EFS professionals, but they urge them to embrace an even broader vision of what food pantries can do. This more holistic vision includes assisting customers with other health and social needs, as well as compensating customers for work with the pantry.

There are significant points of agreement on philosophy, as well. Customers and EFS professionals agree that food pantries should continue shifting their mission from providing calories to supporting healthy eating. And although each EFS professional manages resources according to their particular community context, each recognizes the importance of making creative and strategic use of community assets, from healthcare agencies, schools, and local farms to customers and other volunteers, to extend the work of their organizations beyond what their own expertise and financial resources can accomplish. Customers and EFS professionals also recognize the value of nutrition education. This value takes many forms, including the power of nutrition education to make foods in the donation stream more appealing to customers, its importance in helping customers address poverty-related health issues through healthier eating, and its potential to build community.

Barriers to Nutrition Programs

Customers and EFS professionals identified many barriers to accessing nutrition education opportunities. In this section, we discuss these barriers and forms of inaccessibility that customers and EFS professionals feel are preventing the success of the programs. We discuss a food pantry's physical location and their policies, customer interest and awareness of programs, customers' other commitments, transportation, and childcare issues.

Physical locations and policies

The most fundamental question of access for customers is: Can I get food from this food pantry? The main challenge the customers shared was the fact that most food pantries were physically inaccessible. Two customers commented on their difficulty holding heavy items. One customer points out his inability to hold heavy items without help or strain:

"I usually come alone or sometimes I bring [a] friend or whoever who could help me. Like I said, I have [a] back problem. I couldn't lift too much. I can only do so slowly, a little bit at a time."

Additionally, another customer that uses an assistive device illustrates the ablest set-up of a food pantry:

Both [my partner and my mom's] disabilities are too challenging for either [of] them to come. My mom uses a wheelchair and my partner uses a scooter. That is one thing I will say that the logistics here are very tight for people that have to use assistive devices. I brought my mom once just so she could see it. Also my partner came once just so they could see it. Basically, I'm the representative.

Since the site is not big enough for her family this customer is forced to take responsibility for her whole family's needs. Another customer that has psoriasis and fibromyalgia shared,

Right now I'm waiting for a walker to be sent to me 'cause it kind of helps me sometimes when I get out of the car. I'm having issues with my knee and my hip and my foot due to the psoriasis. It's giving me a lot of psoriatic arthritis. I go through a lot of pain. I just found out from my doctor that I have fibromyalgia which [means] I'm going to have chronic pain everyday. I have to deal with it. It's either my back and if it's not my back, it's my knee. If it's not my knee, it's my leg. It's doing my whole body. Sometimes all the bones in my body

ache and sometimes I can't deal with it, but I try to deal with it.

This customer's medical needs make it difficult for her to visit food pantries. Later, she explained that her walker would fit in her particular food pantry because it was flat and the hallways were big enough, but not all pantries are wide enough to accommodate it. Physical barriers like these resulted in a few customers answering "no" to the question on accessibility. On this point, there appears to be a substantial and important disconnect between the experiences of customers and the perspective of EFS professionals. When we asked EFS professionals about access to their facilities, none of them indicated that customers with disabilities faced significant barriers to accessing services. The comments of the customers we spoke to suggest that EFS professionals have not adequately reviewed their facilities for accessibility or talked to customers about their experiences of accessibility.

Another aspect of accessibility relates to the policies of food pantries that determine who is and is not eligible to receive food there. At the most basic level, if customers cannot get to a food pantry or their use of services is limited because they are considered outside the pantry's service region, they will have little or no access to any of the

An even more common, and perhaps more important, way that EFS professionals talked about building their capacity was by recognizing, employing, and rewarding the expertise of customers themselves... But leveraging the insights and expertise of customers means more than listening to customers. It also needs to include appropriate compensation.



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nutrition education services a pantry might provide, whether that be classes, in-line demonstrations, or educational signage. In addition, all in-person classes have capacity constraints. Courses in which customers cook along with an instructor are limited by the number of cooktops available, while demonstration-only classes are affected by the capacity of the rooms in which they're held. Most EFS professionals we talked to were not having to turn people away; their struggle was attracting customers to the classes, or, in the case of educational series that run multiple weeks (e.g., the six-week "Cooking Matters" curriculum), getting attendees to show up consistently.

"Some food banks—the more progressive ones—are the food banks that have adopted nutrition policies... They're working on sourcing healthier food in order to feed, in order to provide nourishment for the holistic body so it's not just providing food for physical health, but it's providing food for mental health."

Nevertheless, one agency has policies to manage facilities use that may impact customer access. The organization hosts cooking classes where up to 24 customers can cook along with the instructor on mobile cooktops. Customers are expected to register online and then they receive a call and reminder email the day before the event. If a customer is a no-show from three classes, they are banned from future participation. To ensure that a variety

of customers can experience the classes, individuals are limited to two per month. The customers that we interviewed expressed their dislike for the no-show policy or punitive measures for being late. One customer shared that after she had set aside time for a cooking class, when she was a little late she was frustrated that she did not receive the same privileges as her peers. She explained:

Once I got here a little late and they wouldn't let me take a number...We get our numbers in the class [and] then we can go to the food bank. They let me be in the class, but they wouldn't let me take a number...They wouldn't let me go to the food bank...They told me because I was late.

Multiple customers expressed that people should not be punished for being late or not showing up because the customers had a lot of other responsibilities.

Similarly, the majority of the EFS professionals we talked to

suggested that their preference was to be able to provide food to almost everyone in almost every situation, advocating what is known as a "low barrier" approach, but there are organizations that approach food access differently. One EFS professional whose organization, in fact, operates with a low-barrier approach, explained the other perspective. Some food pantries, she said, are motivated to manage customer access to services, for instance, by zip code, in order to satisfy funders' insistence that resources go to "their" people. EFS professionals at these organizations sometimes also argue that managing access is a way to ensure that better-situated poor folks don't exacerbate access issues for those in even graver circumstances by taking resources from the one food pantry the poorer folks can reach.

By and large, however, the EFS professionals we spoke to championed the low-barrier approach. This comment by one of the EFS professionals provides an example of the rationale for and implementation of such a policy:

My opinion and the food bank's [policy]'s [policy] are the same. My opinion is we need no strings attached. Let's ask them the minimum amount of questions needed to get food and let them get food. That's what we do. They have to self declare their income. They don't have to provide proof of it. We have a list downstairs in the check-in area where it says family size and then it has income level. We point to that and say, "Are you under that?" If they say yes they get food. If they say no, which they hardly ever do, we still give them food but it's not the USDA food because they have to be under it in order to get that and they can only get that once a month. They never leave empty handed, but we never make them prove income at all. It's self-declared. They also need to show proof of ID which they do. If they're homeless, they can give the cross streets of where they sleep. So very, very little information [is] needed.

Another EFS professional said her organization advocates for the low barrier approach because asking customers to prove their eligibility for food, for instance, through proof of address or income, robs customers of their dignity. It is also, in her estimation, inefficient for the organization:

[It] didn't feel like it was respectful. There's a lot of the idea of respect and dignity on one side but then efficiency on the other. If we had to check everyone's income and do all this paperwork, I'd need to hire 3 more people just to do that and that wouldn't necessarily ensure that our services

were better or anything like that. It would just make people who were up into other people's business feel better.

From this perspective, there is no good reason to manage people's access to food since it is both disrespectful to customers and dysfunctional for the organization. The two professionals quoted above reflect the view that any bureaucratic process that impacts customers access to food is unnecessary and unjust.

Another consideration regarding policy is when the content of a nutrition education program can be affected by food pantry donors, who may impose rules on the programs they believe will be beneficial to customers. For instance, one EFS professional indicated that her funders mandate that all cooking demonstrations in classes need to use ingredients of a certain quality and availability and require no special equipment to cook.

While all of these policies have the admirable intentions of maximizing the use of the organization's resources and ensuring that a wide range of people can receive nutrition education, they do raise some questions of access. Customers without reliable opportunities to use computers or go online, including customers experiencing homelessness, may be effectively barred from receiving nutrition education. Since, as the EFS professional notes, there is, "No other ideal way," to recruit and register participants, a certain limitation to access is built into the process. Even if customers can, as a last resort, call to register, such special accommodation relies on a high degree of initiative from the customer. Similarly, the "no-show" policy, which encourages customers to treat

their commitments to attend classes responsibly, may nevertheless be experienced as punitive by customers, particularly given how unpredictable life can be for people experiencing poverty. The sense that one is going to be marked down as "delinquent" for missing a class may itself become a barrier to access, despite the positive intentions of the policy. Finally, the funder-imposed mandates can hinder nutrition educators' ability to tailor class meals and

"There was things that they have here that maybe you can get in abundance and so they were giving you different ways [of] how to cook those things or how to use them and I thought that was really interesting 'cause a lot of times there's stuff that you're like, I'm not going to get that. I don't know what to do with that."



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lessons to their audience or make the best use of the items they have available.

Customers' awareness of programs

The three main mediums used to share nutrition education are posters that are on the walls of a food pantry, cooking classes, and demonstration/sampling carts. Customers learned about these nutrition education programs in different ways. Two of the customers learned about the cooking classes held at their food pantry from a neighbor while two others learned about them from a family member who brought them along. The rest of the customers learned about these classes from EFS professionals or from informational posters in their food pantry. Similar to posters in a classroom, these posters work to ensure knowledge is being passed around the food pantry regarding resources, medical needs, and changes to nutrition. These posters are sometimes in different languages, which the customers say they appreciate. One customer expressed appreciation for the posters stating,

They're interesting and they pull you in enough to keep the information. It's not just 'Oh yah, it's another flyer about food. Yah, whatever.' They actually give you information that reaches out and touches you and teaches you at the same time. Instead of just do this, do this, do this. Instead of dry bare bones. I've noticed in the last few years the flyers have gotten a lot better. They used to be 'Keep your food clean. Keep your food cold.'...Now it's like you can try these different ideas that will keep your food longer and also help make it a more enjoyable experience to eat it..."

In addition, another customer suggested there be more information on the posters regarding what the cooking class entails. She said, "I personally wish there were more schedules—from what hour to what hour, open times..."

for the cooking classes.” On a more positive note, another customer shared that the signage helped him see the federal nutrition education guidance change from pyramid to plate model. He said,

I didn't realize there had been a change so it was good to see that. The plate kind of shifted. Instead of the pyramid, they went to the plate I think. So it was good to see that change and to know, 'Oh, so people are thinking about it,' or doing different things. That was interesting and helpful.

In addition to the shift from the pyramid to the plate model, another customer said that she learned about nutritional food groups:

I did learn some new stuff today. Those posters are great for young mothers or people from another country. They wouldn't be very helpful to me. I know most of the stuff that are on those posters...[However, I learned] tomatoes are considered to be vegetables, but they're not. They're fruits. I was also surprised [because] some things I thought were grains were proteins.

Similarly, another customer explained the benefits of the posters and said, “I’ve learned some things—eat more vegetables, how to combine grains and vegetables, protein.” And another customer shared, “There’s a lot of information. I always read the boards while I’m sitting there. I can see lots of signage about things that you can take advantage of. I really appreciate that. That’s really helpful.”

All of the customers were cognizant of the posters and overall, they appreciated signage that helped them diversify how to use vegetables, learn new food models, and maintain their health.

In addition to cooking classes and posters, a third avenue for nutrition education is in-line demonstration carts, where EFS professionals talk about food nutrition while demonstrating a recipe from a mobile table or “demo cart” while customers stand in line. Most customers were not familiar with these demo carts; only three people had actually seen the cart at a food pantry before. Although the customers believe there should be changes to all nutrition education programs, there is an overall high rate of customer awareness of programs with the combination of word of mouth from friends and family, and knowledge passed through EFS Professionals and posters.

Customers’ interest in programs

Even after customers find out about the classes, there is a lot of resistance to going. One customer shared, “I heard about it,

the Nutrition Program. I’m not really into that thing. I know about nutrition but I’m not very nutritional myself. Right now I try to eat a little more on the healthy side. I try not to eat too much bread.” Another customer stated, “I’m not very nutrition [focused] so I don’t attend.”

However, there were a few pull factors that convinced six people to want to go to a cooking class. One customer was drawn first simply for the extra resources. She shared that she was a good cook and had a lot of knowledge about nutrition, but she was also drawn to both the community aspect of classes and trying foods that she would not traditionally try to eat. Three people also said that they were drawn to learn something new like different ways of making the same dish. Another customer who was an ex chef explained,

I do have the experience of handling the food and cooking and being able to know, okay, this is good for you and this is just something to fill your stomach. I think the classes would be a great idea. There’s always new discoveries and new experiences in the ways [that] people cook their food and sort [it]. It’s always helpful [to have nutrition education classes].

Another customer that has attended a food pantries’ cooking classes since they started said that she is drawn to them because she found the different types of food they cook interesting. She shared,

I believe you can always learn something new. I would go back. I’m not the type of individual that thinks I know it all. I learned something new today. Besides I just like being out with other women, most of them [are] in my age group.

In addition to a desire for knowledge in nutrition education, there are also social pull factors that draw customers to come to the classes. These factors, which include a desire to spend time with friends and having a reason to get out of the house, will be discussed further in the section “Emphasize Community.”

At the most basic level, if customers cannot get to a food pantry or their use of services is limited because they are considered outside the pantry’s service region, they will have little or no access to any of the nutrition education services a pantry might provide.

Customers' other commitments

Many customers had difficulty getting to cooking classes because of other commitments. It was a common trend for a few customers to state three hours is “a lot of time to come for a class,” especially in terms of sitting during a cooking class. Additionally, two customers shared that classes run over sometimes by up to 30 minutes. One customer said that when this occurs, people start having side conversations which makes it hard to listen. The customer also noted that these side conversations tend to get louder over time and recommended reducing the time. In contrast, the other customer shared,

Sometimes they run over a little bit on their cooking, but I don't have anything to do. So it doesn't make a difference. They'll run over a little bit on their time but not too much, maybe half an hour at the most sometimes.

These customers had a difference of opinion on the same occurrence. However, the second customer later noted that she especially liked it when they ended class early so she could “chat” more with the other participants. She went on to state,

A lot of the things take a lot of time to prepare and the cooking classes don't have the time. I don't think people could stand sitting that long 'cause a lot of them are time consuming and they take a lot of time in the oven. But they're doing good what they've got the time to do...I think the [three hour] time is good.

Another customer who was an ex-chef agreed, saying that a three hour cooking class “is not that long of a period especially with something you're interested in, something you're wanting to get involved with.” This customer had experience teaching his own cooking classes so he held a different perspective on what the EFS professionals were going through with time constraints.

In addition to the length of time, one customer asked specifically for more options with “more hours and times for the classes” because that specific time slot did not work for her. Similarly, two other customers had difficulties attending due to the time the class was held. They explained that they would be interested in attending, but only if it was at a different time in the late afternoon or evening after 6pm because they both work. Another customer shared she could not go to the cooking classes, but would try to make it work with her busy life:

Basically, it would be another commitment for me. I have a lot of doctors' appointments for

myself...for my mom...[and] for my partner. So it is a really big time commitment for me to add that on...The only thing that would change it for me is... If I could make it one trip coming to the food bank, I probably would do it and just say, 'Okay. Today I'm going to go to the class, then I'm going to go to the food bank,' and do it in one sweep. That might attract me. It seems like a lot of hours but I would probably commit to doing it in that way.

Many customers that came to the food pantry had families to take care of, jobs, medical needs, and responsibilities that made it difficult to attend classes. Nevertheless, some customers really worked hard to make it fit into their schedule and route.

Transportation

One of the other obstacles in getting to the food pantry is transportation, an issue that relates not only to mode of transportation, but also distance and cost. The main mode of transportation for customers was a car. However, one customer shared that he had mechanical issues and another customer said “gas is expensive.”

This customer also shared that they would also be willing to volunteer, but they did not want to spend the gas money and it was a far distance. She shared, “I'm kind of on a budget, a strict budget.” Similarly, one customer explained the food pantry she was assigned is far from her house so she does not normally go to that neighborhood and would not want to just for the cooking class.

On top of distance and cost, there are also issues with transportation in getting to a food pantry. One customer explained her experience with transportation companies for seniors and people with disabilities. She shared:

It's a little bit difficult for me. ...You don't ever know when you're gonna be done so your ride home is difficult or getting here because we have some mobility issues. So if we have to stand and wait a long time, come too early, or we tell them we're going to be done in an hour and we're an hour and a half, sometimes we miss our ride... We're trying to utilize the [particular shuttle company] more because they're a little bit more lenient in that they'll come back and get us... We call them and said we're not going to be ready and they're like, 'Okay. We'll send her in 30 minutes.'



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For seniors that have difficulty standing or sitting for long periods of time or who have to depend on others for transportation, there needs to be efficient options for getting to and from food pantries.

In addition to cars and shuttles, some customers walk up hills to take the bus. One customer that is experiencing homelessness spoke about the importance of having a suitcase:

I have a suitcase now with wheels and that makes it much easier. When either I don't have that with me or before I had that, yah, it was difficult to get out of here...The largest complication of getting here are the hills obviously. Other than that, they do what they can to help out. Some of the workers are even nice enough that toward the end of the day when they're packing up, some of them will run you back up the hill if you need to.

It can be a difficult journey home for some customers of food pantries. Suitcases are an important resource to share with people experiencing homelessness. Additionally, helping a customer go up a hill with their groceries can go a long way in making a customer feel cared for.

Child care

A majority of customers had concerns about what they would do with their children when they attended nutrition education classes. One customer shared she needed to take her kids, help them with their homework, and work so she did not have time for a class. Other customers with children also elaborated on the challenge of having to take care of children. One customer explained that his sister stopped

going to the cooking classes because it was “Too much time and commitment. She takes care of her grandchildren. I’m not sure if kids can come or not.” In fact, one customer who did not even have kids explained,

I know there are a lot people who have to bring their kids here. You know how the store[s] sometimes have a little spot where kids can go and sit and have healthy treats and the parents can come back and get them. I don't bring kids but I feel very—a lot of compassion for women come in with these little kids and having to be in the tight cramped environment and then getting through the line with kids. If there was a way to create a space where those kids—you know how Fred Meyer has a little play area—where the parents could get through and come back and get the kids. That might be nice for them.

The suggestion of day care came up more with another customer who stated,

I wish they had a daycare center for them but they do not have one. I did have to bring my granddaughter. It's really difficult with your kids here. It'd be nice if they had a daycare upstairs but I'm sure the government's not going to pay for a daycare for our grandkids while the cooking class went on. I think that would help, too. It would probably bring in more people, too. They could bring their kids. They do bring their kids but it's difficult for them to sit there and be quiet...I don't see how they could really help much. Most of them are little, too small.

Other customers shared similar stories. Some had older kids that would enjoy and get a lot out of participating in nutrition education classes and some younger kids that would need daycare. In regards to serving families that attend the food pantry, one customer appreciated that at one food pantry she went to there were resources for children, like children's books. In addition, four of the five EFS professionals talked about the challenges customers face regarding children, but there was a good deal of variety in the ways their organizations handle the situation. The most

“So instead of us trying to keep pushing, pushing, pushing to get the food bank for nutritional education, we decided that let's let the professionals do it on their end and let's do what we can do on our end.”



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accommodating organization welcomes children to cooking classes with no minimum age requirement, has a designated kids' space in the classroom, and has daycare services available as needed.

The other EFS professionals indicated that their spaces did not provide childcare, but they tried to accommodate children in other ways. In one case, kids are welcome in class, but

there are also free children's books available to occupy kids while their parents or guardians are in cooking classes or the food pantry line. Another agency addresses the issue by inviting children age 13 to 18 to adult cooking classes if they are accompanied by an adult, and offering separate classes for younger youth. Finally, one organization actively encourages parents and children to share in the classes, even in the case of very young children. The EFS professional at this organization talked about their staff's enthusiasm for families learning to cook together:

We never turn families away and actually encourage people to bring families so that they could attend. We also took this approach of having young children and parents cooking together. It's just amazing and so we absolutely encourage that.

This customer's and EFS professional's comments suggest both parents and children benefit when they learn together.

It is clear that all of the EFS professionals want adults and kids alike to benefit from their programs, but they go about it in different ways. Some emphasize collaboration and some favor an age-specific approach. No doubt, the specific context of their pantry space, funding, and staffing levels also impact their choices. All of the professionals seemed open to offering childcare at their facilities, but for most, it appears, this possibility has not been a topic of sustained planning or a funding priority. If customers see the presence of their children as a barrier to participation in nutrition education classes, even when pantries welcome children to those classes, two things may be occurring. The pantry may not be effectively communicating that welcoming message to parents and parents may be making a personal choice not to bring their children to class, even though it may be open to them. In this context, the absence of childcare at the pantry may be a barrier to customers' participation, despite the best intentions of the organization.

Overcoming Barriers

As the previous section shows, the customers and EFS professionals have good reason for wanting effective nutrition education. How best to make that happen is an open question, however. With limited funds to support programs and, often, limited space, limited kitchen facilities, and health codes that can limit how space and facilities are used, the best-intentioned initiatives can prove impractical or ineffective. Although there are many barriers that prohibit customers from getting adequate nutrition education, customers and EFS professionals have shared ideas on ways to improve nutrition education programming. In this section, we discuss these features and supplement that discussion with examples from specific programs. Based on our conversations, we believe the hallmarks of successful nutrition education programs are those that meet customers where they are, emphasize community, build partnerships with a holistic approach, and build in feedback mechanisms. Every program did not exhibit all of these features, but these elements stood out as qualities of the best work being done in nutrition education.

Meet customers where they are

Our discussions with EFS professionals revealed that one of the most prominent and important transformations occurring in the emergency food system is a move from a charity model to a food justice model. The charity model treats customers as helpless victims of poverty to be rescued, while the food justice model seeks to affirm customers' dignity and power to help themselves and their communities. This model also understands food insecurity as part of a larger systemic social problem, rather than a problem of individual circumstances. When the context of food insecurity is seen in this new way, it calls EFS professionals to develop programs that move towards customers, rather than simply waiting for them to jump through the right hoops to receive food aid. In other words, the programs should meet customers where they are. Importantly, this notion needs to be understood broadly to include meeting them where they are physically, medically, and culturally. Meeting customers where they are refers to the physical shift to move resources to an accessible location, providing adequate nutrition-based medical information for customers with medical problems and dietary restrictions, and creating culturally relevant programming to best serve the diverse range of customers.

Location Matters. The most obvious part of meeting customers where they are physically is providing nutrition education opportunities wherever food insecure people can

be fruitfully engaged. Sometimes this is in food pantries. All of the EFS professionals and their organizations currently offer or have offered some sort of nutrition education at their food pantry site, whether that be in line at the pantry, an on-site teaching kitchen, or cooking classes for adults or kids. But often, meeting customers where they are physically means off-site educational opportunities.

Three of the five EFS professionals we interviewed highlighted off-site programs that their organizations offer. In some cases, these are cooking classes done at diverse locations such as schools, community centers, libraries, and youth centers. One organization that serves rural counties offers classes like this. Attendees are taught how to make a dish with ingredients that are in the food pantry donation stream, and then they get to eat what they prepared. Customers agreed on the importance for food pantries to be more accessible physically. One customer shared that she wanted to have satellite cooking demonstrations in customer's buildings and specifically in her senior house:

I'm sure a lot of people in my building qualify for food pantry or could need stuff—but if there was a way to connect the food pantry itself to more satellite type situations where it's coming to the people...In my building I might agree to be the liaison between the food pantry. We have a resident group...So maybe the food pantry comes—maybe not even every month, maybe every two months. I could alert people [that] the food pantry is coming. Maybe the food bank even knows the kind of stuff they might have. I really think home-based, but not in an individual thing, in a big building type thing...There are a lot of community living spaces that could really benefit from a relationship with the food pantry and there are people who are on disability or retired who might volunteer to do most of the work to get the food too...We have a lot [of] older elders who really cannot come out to the food pantry.

There are also more innovative off-site programs, as well. Two organizations offer a form of nutrition education on wheels. One of these is a mobile market in the form of an old beer truck that can hold up to 8,000 pounds of food. In a single trip, the mobile market can distribute food to as many as 250 families and staff can offer nutrition education in the process. The EFS professional who works with this organization describes how the mobile market works:



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We'll know what's on the truck that day. So let's say it's potatoes, apples—there's nine palettes total so quite a bit of food—but we can create a sample, like apple-potato salad. While customers are in line we give them that sample, give them a recipe, give them some type of nutrition demo so they would be able to understand or have an idea of how to use the food. We're giving it to them and then a recipe.

As this description shows, the mobile market accomplishes a number of activities simultaneously. It brings food to those who need it, feeds customers, provides recipes, and teaches customers how to use the foods they are receiving.

An even more unique form of mobile nutrition education is the garden truck developed by EFS professionals who serve a largely urban and suburban customer base. A garden truck, as we were told, is exactly what it sounds like: “We got a Ford F250 and we planted a garden in the back of it.” What the mobile market does for foods in the donation stream, namely, allow for the broad distribution and demonstration of them, the garden truck does for the growing of food. The folks that created this truck believe its greatest value is in teaching children and getting them excited to try a diverse array of foods:

This was kind of meant to be nutrition education geared especially toward our summer meals children sites. We'd take the garden truck out and we'd teach kids about number one how to grow food, how to plant it, how to take care of it, how to combine different plants so that it will minimize pests, so kind of pest control, organic pest control so to speak. They can try foods right off the truck.

Kids that won't try things that you give them on a plate are fearless to try it off the truck even if they don't like it.

By essentially bringing a farm to children who might never get to visit one, the garden truck powerfully combines nutrition education with environmental and agricultural education in a hands-on way that helps children understand where their food comes from and how much time and care is invested in it.

Medical information. Another way to meet customers where they are is by acknowledging that many customers come to food pantries with diet-related diseases associated with poverty and to develop programs accordingly. The majority of customers interviewed shared their desire to have nutrition education on the specific medical problems they were facing. Additionally, there was a common appreciation among customers when EFS professionals catered to and remembered individual's health needs. The health concerns that the customer's face included psoriasis, anemia, obesity, diabetes, fatty liver, kidney problems, high blood pressure, and gout.

Many customers expressed a desire for medical information regarding their specific health condition so that they could make better choices when taking home ingredients from the food pantry. One customer with psoriasis shared her medical needs and said that the posters around the food pantry were “satisfying.” However, she explained,

I would want [the food pantry] to put in more for people who are suffering psoriasis. Learn more about what we can do, the nutrition, what we should stay away from, and what your body can have when it comes to psoriasis because I know a lot of people have psoriasis...They have nutrition for people who are diabetic but I don't hear much for people who have psoriasis. They could come up with an idea—‘Here's a list of foods that you can't have and here a list of foods that you can have that won't trigger the psoriasis.’

Similarly, another customer with concerns regarding obesity shared her desire to know more about good nutrition. She shared, “I knew that salads were good but I wish I had information on what has a lot of iron, what has protein.” Her doctor gave her a sheet with healthy food for the overweight kids in English. She said it was something she would want the food pantry to provide classes on in Spanish because she liked attending classes. Another customer with gout wanted to know what foods help reduce inflammation or foods that have less sugar than others. She said,

I think for me right now because of where I am healthwise, maybe some information on like, “‘These are vegetables that help reduce inflammation’ or something to that effect might be interesting... Like even in the cooking class, if maybe they could have a little bit of time where they kind of talk about some things like that. Things that have—like natural fruit and vegetables that have lower sugar content that are good for reducing swelling and inflammation. I didn’t even realize I just learned that there are things that you should avoid if you have gout or suffer with gout. I know that they’re not doctors but those are nutritional things that they could just pass along. Maybe have some flyers every now and then—‘If you’re suffering with this, you may want to avoid these vegetables while you’re in that state.’ Or something to that effect. I think that would be good.

In addition to food restrictions, another customer with anemia wants advice on what to eat, specifically, knowledge about iron and vitamins. Similarly, one customer that used to be pre-diabetic shared her decision to make big changes in her diet not only for herself, but for her family as well. She said that her and her husband are working together as a team to change the whole family’s diet so she needs to know what foods are restricted based on their dietary needs. Another customer shared that she appreciated that in the cooking class, “Some have charts and they show us and they talk about nutrition.” Many customers are looking for nutrition resources and help regarding what’s a balanced meal, what to eat with their symptoms, or what food to stay away from.

On a similar note, one customer who was formerly a chef, but now experiencing homelessness, expressed that he knew how to store food, but realized that the people in his community did not share the same knowledge and would often get sick from eating rotten non-preserved foods left out in the sun. He believed the food pantry should give more resources regarding how to properly store and prepare food especially for people experiencing homelessness that often did not have access to a fridge or stove. He stated,

Definitely one of the things they would need to have is something to teach them how to properly store the food so they’re not getting sick. The situation is rough enough that they feel they need to reach out for help. The last thing they need to do is walk away from here worse off than when they came...First they were hungry. Now they are hungry and sick. That would be a totally bad

thing...The meats are frozen already so all you have to do is maintain that. Now again, in the summertime that’s not going to help. However, they [food pantry staff] are willing to work with you to help you out. They had the flyers around and I talked to some of the personnel and they’re pretty good about it, too. ‘Hey, what am I going to do with this?’ They give some suggestions... The fact that [nutrition education classes] are available I think is a wonderful thing because people that want those things now have an opportunity versus without the classes now I don’t have a place to cook and I don’t know what I’m doing anyway so it doesn’t really matter. I learn more about the food, I learn more about the preparation of the food and the storage of the food, so that when I do go try to do it, I am not getting myself sick or the people that are eating with me.

This customer used his experiences experiencing homelessness to suggest ways the food bank could improve to meet the customer’s medical needs.

EFS professionals described multiple ways that their organizations “met customer’s where they are” to address their medical needs. One EFS site’s staff partnered with faculty and students at a local university to conduct a survey that revealed that diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol were the most common conditions. The organization has since leveraged additional partnerships to help customers prevent these diseases or mitigate their effects. Working with local college students, staff of the organization have conducted nutrition education programs focused on sugar (diabetes prevention) and sodium (high-blood pressure prevention) at their off-site school pantry locations. Additionally, the organization has partnered with a local Federally Qualified Healthcare Center (FQHC)—a medical center that primarily serves low-income patients—to help customers cope with diet-related diseases. The EFS professional familiar with this program says it is a case of deliberately seeking to: meet customers where they are; ensure that they are receiving professional guidance; and

By essentially bringing a farm to children who might never get to visit one, the garden truck powerfully combines nutrition education with environmental and agricultural education in a hands-on way.

teach them about better eating at a time when, due to a medical concern or recent diagnosis, they may be motivated to learn and to change their eating habits.

In cases like this, meeting customers where they are physically actually means less direct outreach by EFS personnel. The work is in the establishment of the partnership, but it results in customers being offered nutrition education (and more) when, and where, they need it most. Several other EFS professionals also spoke about the importance of partnerships with health care organizations, like hospitals and the public health department, when seeking to meet customers where they are physically. One EFS professional said it can be tricky to ensure that partner organizations operate their programs according to the social justice values that she and her organization insist on for their customers. Still, such partnerships seem helpful in ensuring that food pantry customers can access nutrition education that is responsive to diet-related health challenges.

Cultural Relevance. In order to meet people where they are, customers and EFS professionals all acknowledged the importance of recognizing, respecting, and shaping programming to be culturally relevant. To quote a customer, “there’s a cultural difference between what people eat.” Therefore, programming at food pantries should reflect their respective customer’s cultures. Every EFS professional spoke about culturally relevant programming as a best practice for organizations, but they all also noted that their organization currently falls short in some respect. Despite these failings, customers and EFS professionals were clear on two particular features of culturally relevant programming that they believed should be emphasized: language and culturally relevant food.

Language. Customers and EFS professionals agreed that all nutrition education programming should be accessible in the common languages spoken by their customers at their pantry. The concern with language begins with making sure that recipes and passive forms of nutrition education, like signage, are available in the languages most common among food pantry customers. In many cases, this means translating materials to Spanish, but the EFS professionals we spoke to work in areas where, depending on the community, Somali, Ukrainian, Russian, or varieties of Chinese might also be common. The availability of translators, the time it takes to complete translations, especially cost, are formidable barriers to communicating

All nutrition education programming should be accessible in the common languages spoken by their customers at their pantry.

with customers in their native languages. These barriers only become more formidable when, as is often the case, there are multiple cultural traditions and languages represented among a food pantry’s customers. An even greater challenge is offering nutrition education classes in ways that accommodate multiple languages.

Due to language barriers, customers claim there are currently many inaccessible nutrition education programs. Multiple customers said they wanted an interpreter or a Spanish speaker in charge of the cooking class. One of them added, “More Latino people and a little more speaking Spanish. Maybe there would be an interpreter at the class.” Additionally, another one said, “classes [in English] were not accessible.” She said that even though she did understand most of it, an instructor who spoke Spanish would be more helpful.

Many customers are looking for nutrition resources and help regarding what’s a balanced meal, what to eat with their symptoms, or what food to stay away from.

Customers’ experiences at the cooking classes were not uniform, and it appears that accessibility based on language was an important determiner of that experience. For instance, a native English-speaking customer found the classes welcoming and felt a sense of community. The customer said the class “was a group thing. No cliques. Not that I can see anyway.” On the other hand, another customer at the same class who spoke Spanish said, “We don’t mix that much, very little.” Classes that aim to promote community need to adjust for customers that speak a different language. Another customer revealed that he would not come to the food pantry if his sister wasn’t there to translate because he did not know anyone else at the food pantry that spoke Spanish. Similarly, a customer shared, “I speak English. My husband does not speak or read any English so that’s a problem.” She explained that she would still come to the class, but would leave her husband at home. In contrast to the other customers, one customer shared, “What I really like is that the ladies—they don’t speak Spanish—that learned a little Spanish. They try to use what little Spanish they have.” Showing a little effort went a long way in making this customer feel cared for in her identity.

Although all the EFS professionals recognized that their organizations are falling short with regard to language accessibility, some have clear strategies for improvement. For

one professional, this involves building accountability into programming. At her organization, where a significant portion of the population is Spanish speakers, they regularly review and rate all of their programs on a Spanish-English index, where 1 means the program or material is only available in English and 3 means the program or material is available fully in both languages. This practice keeps the goal of having all programs rated “3” front and center for the organization. As with many other aspects of food pantry operations, partnerships can also be used strategically to advance this kind of cultural responsiveness. One EFS professional mentioned that her organization relies heavily on a local university to get materials translated.



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Culturally Relevant Food. In our discussion with customers there were some differences in opinion when it came to culturally relevant food. Two customers said culturally relevant food did not matter because they said they “did not care.” One of these customers said it was “not important” and he would be fine with “anything.” Two other customers said they wanted more culturally relevant food. One customer said they would specifically like to prepare something similar to what they would normally eat outside of the food pantry. Another customer stated the food pantry more or less offered cultural foods. The customers shared that they would like to know how to cook Thai food and another person said cooking Thai food for a crowd is difficult due to spice level. Despite the differences of opinion, one customer suggested drawing recipes from the diversity of people who attend the food pantry:

I would think that the food pantry could do more to bring out the beauty and quality of the people who come here. People from over the world who come in here. Maybe somebody would choose to

showcase something they made that was really good from the food pantry.

Multiple other customers shared this perspective of wanting to learn to cook foods they grew up having. One customer said that she would like to specifically learn how to cook “traditional” recipes like coleslaw and banana bread. Another customer shared that she would like to learn how to cook typical Mexican food even though she already knew how to prepare some dishes because there are different ways of preparing these foods. She even said that other people in the class would want it because she had heard that other people like Mexican.

The customers felt the classes they had attended were culturally relevant. One customer said, “She seems to do a good job of varieties for different cultures.” Another customer shared, “It’s appropriate... I’m satisfied with it whenever I see it.” Both of these customers insinuated that not only were the classes culturally relevant, but they enjoyed the fact that they were embracing multiple cuisines. Embracing one’s family culture can develop a sense of community that often allows people to see one another as a whole person, dismantling their previously held stereotype. One customer suggested using culture and storytelling to connect people in nutrition education classes and help them form deeper, meaningful relationships:

One thing I love about life in general... the diversity of people coming to this food pantry. Maybe using culture to communicate how—different ways that food can be used. The same way they have the little counter, maybe someone would tell a story or something about their grandmother used to cook this.

Echoing the customers, four out of five EFS professionals mentioned the importance of providing culturally relevant foods. EFS professionals described tailoring recipes and menus to the food traditions of customers and choosing appropriate items to grow in their garden program as ways to achieve this. As with language accessibility, however, the consensus seemed to be that organizations could be better at meeting their customers in this way. One EFS professional noted that her organization does not tailor recipes for the Russian and Ukrainian demographic that dominates in her food pantries. Another made a similar admission about the menus developed for cooking classes, and she suggested that the race and cultural background of teachers and their impact on menus warrants more scrutiny:

We have not gone out of our way to utilize foods that other ethnic groups might be more interested

in, for example. It's probably been very dependent upon the teachers who are largely Caucasian probably thinking from the traditional American cooking methodologies and style of food.

While the teachers may be creating excellent recipes that teach customers to use foods in the donation stream, their choices reflect their background, and these may be alienating to customers from different backgrounds.

An interesting contrast to this situation is provided by another EFS professional who seeks recipes from parents in her nutrition education programs. She notes that a certain amount of negotiation and adjustment is sometimes needed to ensure that the recipe shared with customers is healthy, but starting from a recipe given by customers advances her goal of offering culturally relevant foods:

...if there's too much of like unhealthy fat or too much sodium or sugar then we go back to the drawing board and talk about it. We change it together. That has helped us a lot to get culturally appropriate recipes.

In this instance, the customers are being met where they are in multiple ways. The program is drawing on customer expertise, empowering customers to make decisions about what recipes are taught, and promoting culturally relevant foods.

This latter example could be seen as the ideal of embedding cultural relevance into broader practices for building community, but organizations can make progress in this regard, even with small steps. One EFS professional made that clear when she described responding to feedback she received from customers at one of the food pantries she serves:

I think it was what we were doing, serving raw vegetables and the feedback was the people who come to this food pantry typically don't eat raw vegetables. The vegetables are cooked. We took that feedback and changed the type of recipes that we would bring to that food pantry.

With this simple adjustment to the kinds of recipes she brings to this food pantry, she made engagement with these customers more culturally relevant. This EFS professional was quick to note, however, that changes like this can involve a difficult tradeoff. When organizations serve many food pantries in different geographic areas, as her site does, the efficient thing to do, in terms of time and resources, is to teach the same recipe at many locations. The challenge is that a change that accommodates one community may make a recipe less appropriate for another. In the absence of

more resources, EFS professionals can only make their best judgments in cases like this. However, as we noted earlier, the professionals we talked to suggest that consulting with customers when making such decisions would be most consistent with best practices.

Emphasize Community

A theme that pervaded all of our interviews with customers and EFS professionals, even when the professionals did not raise it explicitly, was the importance of community. "A sense of community" in a food pantry is defined by customers as a friendly environment with volunteer staff and EFS professionals that genuinely care about their wellbeing and reject negative stereotypes about people needing food assistance. Some customers said that it was the very reason they returned to the food pantry's cooking classes. Similarly, all of the EFS professional comments, taken together, suggest that the link between nutrition education, especially cooking classes and other ways that people learn about and share food together, and building community cannot be underestimated and needs to be emphasized and leveraged for the benefit of customers.

Our conversations with customers and professionals made clear that emphasizing community begins with making sure that customers feel like they are being treated with dignity and respect, not condescended to or looked down upon. Customers and EFS professionals acknowledge the importance that customers feel respected and treated with dignity. EFS professionals must work to: build in social gatherings, establish a welcoming and respectful environment for people of all backgrounds; and offer customers the platform to build community themselves.

The majority of customers discussed their enjoyment of building community by attending social gatherings and learning from others at food pantries. One customer suggested drawing recipes from the diversity of people who attend the food pantry:

I would think that the food pantry could do more

"A sense of community" in a food pantry is defined by customers as a friendly environment with volunteer staff and EFS professionals that genuinely care about their wellbeing and reject negative stereotypes about people needing food assistance.

to bring out the beauty and quality of the people who come here. People from over the world who come in here. Maybe somebody would choose to showcase something they made that was really good from food pantry food.

Another customer stated she appreciated having a BBQ at her food pantry once a year because it provided a space where customers could be together, in community, sharing food outside. Another four customers appreciated a sense of community specifically in nutrition education classes. One said, “I’ve talked to a lot of people here coming to the cooking classes. It’s been fun associating with the other people.” Another customer shared that she appreciated when in class the customers walked around to talk to one another. A different customer explained she did feel like she’d grown in her relationships with everyone she met because she talked to a lot of people during the classes and it was a lot of fun. Similarly, another customer stated,

I’ve made a lot of friends here...[the workers are] respectful, but I haven’t made a friendship with [them]. The other people that come to the food pantry I’ve made friends with. They come at the same time and the same day and we get to know each other.

All of these customers appreciated making connections and developing a community with others at food pantries.

Matching the responses of the customers, EFS professionals uplifted the importance of community. We have noted several times already that one EFS professional works in an environment where community building is the organizing principle of everything they do. But the community was clearly salient for all of the other professionals, as well, and several of them specifically noted that teaching cooking in groups builds community. One of them talked passionately about discovering this when she first taught the Cooking Matters curriculum:

Really what I think I took away from being a nutrition educator and teaching in groups was that teaching cooking in groups has this added benefit, as well, around community building. It’s something that every single person no matter who you are in the world, we all need to eat. We all relate to food and bringing a bunch of strangers together in a room around cooking and food immediately brings people together. It was just an absolute joy to do. I think I’ve sort of been hooked on nutrition and healthy eating and how important it is in community and in population health ever since then.



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Others expressed surprise at how much socializing seemed to be an emphasis for customers attending nutrition education classes, sometimes seeming to eclipse learning cooking techniques or recipes:

It’s been interesting to see how many people use the community classes as a social tool. They’re coming not just to learn how to cook, but they’re coming to spend time with other people. Sometimes it can be an outlet for folks that are more inclined to stay at home. So get them out of their house and have more of a sense of community.

Another EFS professional says her organization sees social isolation as one of four core challenges faced by her customers, and the chance to socialize can be a motivator that brings customers to nutrition education classes. This social “pull” factor was evident in the responses of two customers who said they appreciated having a reason to leave the house. One of the two said, “My friend Brenda was telling me about it...She asked. ‘Yeah, I’ll go.’ I’m retired. I don’t have anything else to do but what I want to do when I want to do it.” When these social pull factors are engaged, customers feel a deep-rooted sense of community which contributes directly to them wanting to attend classes.

“Food is more than about eating.”

Additionally, all ten customers described positive food pantries as those in which the EFS professionals are friendly, helpful, and centered on the customers well-being. One customer said, “The people are nice. They smile. [Their] personalities are great.” Another customer stated,

Well this food pantry, in particular, the people who work here generally are very friendly and kind and they create a nice atmosphere...this food

pantry is very centered on the customers and the people who work here have a pleasant attitude...I like this food pantry. I like the people here.

In addition to centering the customer's needs, EFS professionals and customers also recognized that a welcoming environment is imperative for social community building to take place. One customer explained what establishing community looks like to her:

I feel a sense of community because, for some reason, I find the people who work at this food pantry—most of them, a vast majority, 99% of the people—are just very calm people and that sets a tone in here that translates to people in this line who are stressed. I appreciate that much of a community...We can look around and see that the people in here look like the world. That feels like community to me, too.

In order to build a sense of community, it is not only important to center the customer and create a welcoming environment, it is also important to treat people respectfully, regardless of what brings them to the food pantry. A customer experiencing homelessness remarked,

This is one of the better facilities and they have a wide variety...This facility actually, especially with [food pantry director], she encourages the people to stop and look at it and talk about it instead of trying to whisk them through the door and out the door. She actually cares. You can tell by the way she talks to you that she actually cares...They actually seem to care about the person walking in the door not the number...I've been homeless for awhile. You get these people that look at you and they can tell you're homeless because you have a backpack on your back. Obviously, you're an enigma. You're something to be kept to the side in the shadows so they don't have to worry about you too much. But people have come a long way especially since the numbers are increasing of homeless, especially here. You walk in the door and you don't feel like you're a homeless person trying to find food. You're coming up to a friend's house and they're like, 'Hey, this is what we got. What would you like?'

Similarly, another customer stated,

I haven't had any problems, any issues. They're all friendly and nice. They greet you really friendly when you come in through the door. I can't say anything bad about this place. Never seen them

treat another person in front of me bad. They treat you the same..

Food pantries and EFS Professionals should continue to work to dismantle the negative stereotypes regarding people who attend food pantries by treating people respectfully and without biases.

In tandem, the EFS professional whose organization foregrounds community building insists that effective community building starts with making people feel respected and valued. She made the point when we asked her how workshops and other forms of nutrition education build community:

I think it brings people together that might not otherwise come together in a space. The physical space and the resources that we offer are offered in a way to intentionally communicate respect. Our place is bright and it's clean and it's easy to move through. We have new tools that people get to use and good ingredients and things like that. The tone of the programs are not condescending. They're not kind of the typical tone of teacher to pupil kind of thing. There's opportunities for other people to share their expertise, or their thoughts, to ask questions.

Her comments demonstrate how the simplest things, like the cleanliness of a space or the quality of cooking tools, send a message to customers about how they are perceived. And she suggests that when the implicit messages customers receive communicate they are valued, they are more open to collaborating and bonding with others. Given resource constraints, not all food pantries are able to provide the clean, well-stocked spaces that this EFS professional touts, but her point remains valuable. Professionals in the EFS can pay attention to the messages communicated by their surroundings, pantry ingredients, and teaching equipment and work to make them more inviting. It may even make sense to include improvements in these areas in grant requests on the grounds that they are essential to community building.

Customers and EFS professionals acknowledge the importance that customers feel respected and treated with dignity... it is not only important to center the customer and create a welcoming environment, but also to treat people respectfully, regardless of what brings them to the food pantry.

In addition to a culture and environment of care, five customers also shared ideas on how to build community by sharing recipes among customers and EFS professionals both in line at the food pantry and in classes. One customer stated, “Food is more than about eating,” and their advice shows how recipes can build community. Another customer explained,

You know how you go in a regular grocery store and sometimes in certain areas they have these small recipe sheets. Maybe if they have something that is not that known, they could put a little recipe up there and tell you that this can be used like that. Then maybe people would take it and then maybe they could set those things up in the food pantry that has the other ingredients for it.

Similarly, another customer shared an idea for EFS professionals:

They could come up with ideas of how to intermix the foods that they’re offering. I’m not saying that they need to have five star restaurant menus or anything. I’m sure when they go home they make their own meals. Bring in some of their own recipes that aren’t family secrets. ‘These are suggestions. This is what we have for this week. This is the food that we’ve received. Here’s some ideas. You can take this and mix it with that and make yourself a pleasant meal that’s actually healthy instead of just grabbing a greasy burger that’s wrapped up that’s been sitting underneath a heat lamp for three hours.’

By bringing in their own recipes these EFS professionals could create a non-hierarchical sharing space allowing the customers to get to know them on a deeper level. One customer explained that they could also “share stories from customers or staff or volunteers.”

In addition to learning new recipes, a couple of customers suggested getting “recipe cards” with recommendations on how to prepare foods. It was proposed that these could be handed out in line or during cooking classes. If they were handed out in line, one customer suggested there could then be an area highlighting the ingredients needed for the recipe all in one space, along with a sheet with cooking instructions. In addition, two customers asked specifically for healthy recipes on how to prepare vegetable dishes. There was also an ask to have a multi-generational influence on the recipes and another request for a “little recipe book” to be provided “on how to prepare food” given out in Spanish as well as English.



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Parallel to our conversations with customers, our conversations with EFS professionals revealed that this social component was best addressed by: (1) ensuring that programs recognize customers as people who have something to offer; and (2) empowering them to do so. Customer expertise is acknowledged in a number of ways, but perhaps the most common is through programs that include peer-based nutrition education. For instance, one EFS professional told us about her organization’s School Pantry Nutrition Education Leaders Project.

The work is in the establishment of the partnership, but it results in customers being offered nutrition education (and more) when, and where, they need it most.

This program capitalizes on 15 community locations where school-age children’s food needs are met to educate parents about food and how to encourage kids to eat well. Staff at the sites (e.g., schools, community resource centers) recruit parents to become community nutrition leaders. These individuals work with EFS professionals to develop healthy versions of recipes they choose, teach these recipes to other parents, and receive a stipend for their efforts. In this way, customers learn culturally relevant recipes from their peers, parents who teach are valued for their expertise, and EFS professionals can stay in the background. The EFS professional who works in this program emphasized this last point:

All we’re doing is providing the space, and they do it all. They tell me what they need and because we have budgeted money set aside from the food pantry, we can give them the things they need.

Drawing on a Training of Trainers model that deemphasizes EFS professionals as the source of information and guidance, peer nutrition education programs like this one not only send the message that customers have valuable knowledge and skills, they encourage customers and community members to take ownership of nutrition education in their communities.

Other programs that build and rely on customer expertise include an all-volunteer gardening program and “nutrition ambassadors.” Nutrition ambassador is a volunteer position developed by a northwest food pantry that can involve a wide range of nutrition education activities. Teaching peer-to-peer cooking classes, similar to the parents in the School Pantry Nutrition Education Leaders Project at the other organization, are part of an ambassador’s duties, but they can also include teaching MyPlate nutrition guidelines, reading nutrition labels, and advocating reduced consumption of sugary foods and increased physical activity. In all of these instances, EFS Professionals and customers are emphasizing community because they see others like them sharing information, rather than having it given to or imposed upon them by an “outside” expert.

An even more powerful way that community can be built is by empowering customers to be decision-makers. This approach is, in many ways, a natural outgrowth of recognizing customer expertise. If customers are encouraged to contribute to existing nutrition education programs (e.g., by sharing recipes), the next logical step is for them to provide insights at the level of program design and program policies. Ensuring that customers are involved in decisions like what programs to pursue and how programs are structured builds a sense that the emergency food system is for them and by them, rather than about them. A small number of organizations in the EFS have this sort of power-sharing with customers in their DNA. One of the professionals we talked to noted that her organization was started by women who were themselves experiencing food insecurity, rather than well-meaning, mostly white, church folks, who started many food pantries across the country. These origins have perhaps helped the organization maintain a commitment to customer

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self-determination; a key component of their programming is advocacy in which customers take the initiative to decide what issues are important to them and what should be done about them. Other organizations are starting to recognize the importance of sharing power with customers, even if the structures to do so are not yet in place. For instance, one EFS professional talked about challenging the historical sidelining of customers by involving customers in the formation of the organization’s five-year plan and including customers in the creation of nutrition education curricula. Although her organization has not yet taken these steps, she advocates for them. As she put it: “If the decisions are for [customers], I think they should be with them.”

Build partnerships with a holistic approach

Another way to overcome the barriers hindering the effectiveness of nutrition education programs is to build sustainable partnerships between food pantries and the community. These partnerships are shown to be most successful when they address customers’ needs holistically. A holistic approach refers to the fact that food pantries should aim to address multiple customer needs and collaborate with other agencies doing similar work.

EFS professionals have noted previously that establishing partnerships is a conscious goal as they seek to leverage community assets to advance the mission of their organization. Partnerships help limited resources go farther; ensure that customers get assistance from the most appropriate sources; build community capacity; and, in the case of partnerships with customers, move the organization past seeing customers as passive recipients of assistance. The array of entities with which EFS organizations can and do develop partnerships is remarkably broad and diverse. The professionals we talked to discussed partnerships with customers and their families, community groups, volunteers, volunteer corps (e.g., Vista, AmeriCorp, Jesuit Volunteer Corp), local agencies that serve immigrant and refugee populations, grant agencies, retail partners that donate food, churches (that often house food pantries), healthcare institutions (including FQHCs), colleges and universities, local farmers, and public health agencies. The partnerships variously serve to bring more and healthier food into the donation stream, provide translation services, distribute resources to geographically- or socially-isolated populations, augment the finances that support programs, improve the health of food insecure folks, and extend the research and effectiveness of nutrition education programs.

Beyond this impressive list of partnerships and their benefits, however, we also heard some unique comments about

partnerships from two EFS professionals that warrant highlighting. In the first case, the professional mentioned a critical form of partnership that might be easily overlooked. While we tend to think of partnerships in terms of a food pantry or EFS organization collaborating with an outside group or agency, this professional noted the importance of partnerships across food pantries. She herself is the executive director of a coalition of area food pantries and she sees the coalition as a partnership that might help transform the provision of services in her area. Presently, she says services are “siloeed”—that is, customers are limited to accessing services at their local food pantry and other service agencies, as defined by their home community. She envisions great benefits for customers if the food pantries could operate as a true coalition and customers weren’t trapped by the territorialism of the current system:

But my dream is that as a coalition we would have a united database and people could come to any one of our members. Maybe they’d have 100 points a month that wherever they were they could go to any food [pantry]. “I’m at the DSHS at Lincoln⁵ today. Oh, wouldn’t [it] be great to go 2 blocks over to the Lincoln Food Bank while I’m here.” Or, “I’ve gotten a ride. I’m with my buddy and we’re in Kennedy. Can I get something, too?” Transportation is such a huge issue for people. We’re so siloeed. All of our services are so siloeed. You have to go here and here and here and here. It would be nice if while people were here or here or here, people could also go to that local community to get food.

If the food pantries in her area could form a partnership that transcended geographic boundaries, service provision would likely be more efficient and convenient over all. But, perhaps most importantly, customers with transportation limitations would have an easier time getting food. Easier access would likely mean a reduction in food insecurity. Unfortunately, there are a number of barriers that, according to this EFS professional, have thus far prevented the coalition from breaking through the siloeing. While this EFS professional had not yet been able to surmount these barriers, we think her commitment to strong partnerships across food pantries is admirable. It is worth considering whether stronger food pantry-to-food pantry partnerships could be valuable across the EFS.

Many customers also expressed their desire for food pantries to build partnerships. One customer explained that food pantries should collaborate with different agencies providing resources because as of now the EFS “feeds the body, but

not the mind and soul.” Many customers asked for more resources. One stated,

I would like to know where I can get some eye glasses and get to a dentist and get some eyeglasses, low cost, free, whatever glasses. But I haven’t had an eye exam in about 6 or 7 year and I’m having problems with vision. If I could get some help with vision. That’s what I need. I’m low income. I don’t have the money.

Similarly, another customer mentioned she liked that the food pantry had a booth on how to get a free phone and health insurance. In addition to building partnerships revolving around material needs, two customers asked for informational sessions highlighting the need for different types of classes, not just food-based. One customer asked for information that would teach both how to save money and how to spend wisely. While another customer asked for additional resources on “how to get along better in your family...[and] how to have a good family relationship and share.” Customers had specific needs for the food pantry that would feed their body, mind, and soul.

The other EFS professional who offered something unique on this topic spoke to what makes partnerships successful. From her perspective as a professional in an organization that focuses first and foremost on community building, it is critical that an organization not abandon its own values for the sake of a partnership. She suggested that EFS may have to be prepared to have some difficult negotiations with their prospective organizational partners, as she did when she sought a relationship for the benefit of her customers with diabetes:

We have recently been working with a healthcare organization that wants to teach cooking classes for people with diabetes. That’s taken some back and forth at least between the two organizations in terms of getting them to understand the way that we do things. That sometimes the content and the lesson plan and all of those things are sometimes not as important as the relationships that get developed. Making sure that’s built into their curriculum.

The healthcare professionals were, understandably, focused on what they could teach customers about diabetes and healthy eating; the EFS professional had to convince them to privilege relationships over outcomes, the way her EFS organization does. The implication of her advice is that it’s not enough to seek to build partnerships. Rather, EFS professionals should seek to build partnerships consistent

with their approach to emergency food service and their efforts to advance food justice.

Build in feedback mechanisms

A final element that emerged as a hallmark of successful nutrition education programs was knowing the customers' perspectives on things. Like meeting people where they are culturally, this valued capacity seemed one in which there was room for improvement. Despite these failings, feedback mechanisms are a way to monitor the progress of a food pantry and make sure that customers have access to nutrition education classes.

Another way to overcome the barriers hindering the effectiveness of nutrition education programs is to build sustainable partnerships between food pantries and the community.

One customer had an idea for a feedback mechanism to help customer's gain awareness of classes. He thought it was important specifically to survey people who are attending. He came up with multiple questions on what to ask:

Well, have a survey for people who are going to come. And have them write down: Do they need an interpreter?... Are you coming to the cooking class for sure?; Leave your phone number and everything; If anything, please call us if you're not going to come. Something like that. We want to set up and make sure you come here. Want to make sure that people come.

This feedback mechanism has the potential of bridging the gap between the EFS professionals and the customers to specifically address needs and help continue attendance.

It seemed clear from our interviews that customers and EFS professionals recognized the importance of feedback, but that didn't always translate into systematic approaches to gathering it. It appears that it is not standard practice to build feedback mechanisms into nutrition education programs or systematically solicit customer impressions of food pantry facilities and procedures. For instance, one professional talked about having constant interest in customers' perspectives on classes, but staff seemed to seek it just by talking with folks somewhat randomly after the fact:

But for nutrition education, [feedback is] something that's constant[ly] on our radar. Like I said in the beginning, it's something we go back

to our clients and ask all the time—How are we doing in this area? Come and help us. Come and give feedback on this. What do you think of this curriculum? What do you think of this lesson? What do you think about this piece in the lesson?— to give us that feedback. Because if it's not working, then why even do it.

A similar, unsystematic approach to customer feedback was described by another EFS professional, even as she noted the importance of gathering evaluation data to satisfy federal grantors:

Mostly just verbally. I'm trying to think of any of our paper surveys or feedback forms. Because we are a federal grant, we have to constantly collect evaluation data. But mostly, when you start doing cooking demonstrations you kind of get a feel for when people don't like what it is you're serving. People are sometimes not very shy about telling you when something is really gross.

This lack of systematic feedback is all the more striking, given that this same EFS professional indicated that if her organization had more resources, she'd want guidance from the community regarding how to use them.

[We want] to work more collaboratively with the community to come up with the solutions. Maybe it's even an assumption to say that, for you and me to say that nutrition education is something that the food pantry clients even want. Maybe it's sort of starting there and saying like, "What is it that you want to see in this food pantry?" They might say, "We don't want to come here at all." "Ok. Well, what is it that you need? What is it that you want to learn?"

Even in the absence of additional resources, it would seem that EFS professionals would want to have a sense of what programs are desired by customers in their area. Finding out requires building in feedback mechanisms. Plus, this small shift in focus, such that customer feedback is gathered systematically and valued equally with the data required of grantors, might go a long way to fostering a greater community and sense of customer "ownership" in some food pantries.

The one exception to this trend of minimal or irregular feedback mechanisms is one organization that has multiple, varied, and consistent avenues for receiving input, criticism, and suggestions from customers. The EFS professional associated with that organization detailed their efforts:

We do an annual survey in our pantry. We're doing it right now actually. That takes anywhere from 4-6 weeks. We have a target number of households we would like to have respond to the survey. It asks questions about some of their behaviors, or changes in behavior, as it relates to their use of the programs. It asks satisfaction questions with programs. Then all of our education programs have evaluations at the end. All of our workshop sessions have a quick evaluation that's done at the end. We have monthly lunches in our classroom and kitchen that are open to patrons so kind of a drop-in lunch for about an hour and a half. People will often share questions, concerns, or ideas there. Any time we are considering making a change in programs or doing something new or different, we do surveys of our patrons then as well. We have an ongoing feedback box that's kept in our pantry.

The approach to feedback at this pantry is notable—and, we think, preferable—because it is deliberate, systematic, and proactive. Customers at this food pantry regularly get the message that their impressions and experience are important, as the organization goes out of its way to solicit feedback. Many of the EFS professionals we talked to spoke about the importance of getting customer feedback and learning from it; this pantry offers a model of how a rigorous feedback structure can operate.

Professionals working in the emergency food system do their work in a variety of settings where unique customer demographics, resource constraints, and cultural values shape what is feasible. For this reason, it is not possible to provide a template or slate of programs that can be effective for all. What we can do, however, is look for common denominators in what EFS professionals themselves say works, what they deem best practices, and what customers say would improve their access to and experience with nutrition education. This is what we have tried to do in this section. Based on our conversations with both EFS professionals and food pantry customers, we identified four major qualities that characterize effective or ideal approaches to nutrition education: meeting customers where they are, emphasizing community, building partnerships, and building in feedback mechanisms. Meeting customers where they are highlights the importance of making programming that is respectful



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of customers' knowledge and abilities, easy for customers to access, and attentive to their cultural needs. Emphasizing community means recognizing the power of bringing people together through nutrition education programs, regardless of how much measurable behavior change occurs. Building partnerships is the best practice of drawing on customer and community expertise to expand the reach and effectiveness of an EFS organization. And, finally, it is important that food pantries build feedback mechanisms into their operations so that customer and community perspectives can be central to creating, implementing, assessing, and reforming programs. These qualities can be adapted to any specific service context, and we believe they will improve the effectiveness of the organization and the experience of its customers.

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Conclusion

Food insecurity has been a persistent problem in the United States, and food pantries are at the heart of the emergency food system that has developed to respond to the need. As pantries have evolved, many have changed how they distribute food and added nutrition education programs for customers. The latter development is designed to improve health by increasing access to nutrition information, promoting more efficient use of food resources, and creating a sense of belonging among customers. Customer attendance at nutrition education programs has been poor, however. This project, using data from interviews with ten food bank customers and five EFS professionals, seeks to understand why and to offer strategies for fostering more effective, attractive, and accessible programs.

Food pantry customers reported to us that they are conscious of stereotypes many people have of food bank customers as “undeserving,” “greedy,” or “lazy,” and they took pains to indicate that they only took as much food as they needed when they needed it. They stressed the importance of dismantling the stereotypes of people who are poor. EFS professionals noted that they could combat the stigmas people experience when they shop at food pantries by assessing their own attitudes about those who seek assistance and recognizing that food insecurity results from broken societal structures, not individual failures. Customers expressed gratitude that pantries exist and that there is an effort to feed hungry people, and they also offered a broader vision of food justice for the future. Neighborhood gardens, the assertion that food is a human right, and the importance of sharing food rather than wasting it were all aspects of food justice voiced by customers. For EFS professionals, the meaning of food justice varied from the importance of listening from customers to the assertion that food justice cannot be separated from racial justice.

For EFS professionals, a starting point to providing the effective, welcoming, and healthful food pantry experience that customers seek is the philosophies that guide their work. The professionals described four beliefs that orient them in their work: a focus on nourishing bodies rather than just delivering calories, the importance of nutrition education, the value of leveraging community assets, and the need to redistribute power to customers. The professionals agreed that the field is shifting from seeing their mandate as the provision of calories to the promotion of nourishment. Nutrition education and nutrition policies reflect this shift, and, for some, it also manifests as a focus on community-building. Customers, for their part, encourage food pantries to understand nourishment holistically as

the promotion of health, adding services like cell phone provision and dental and vision care to pantry services. Nutrition education, according to the EFS professionals, is important because it helps foster effective use of resources by both the food pantries and customers, as customers are taught new ways to use food. Some EFS professionals also specifically tout the community-building potential of nutrition education. Leveraging community assets, which can entail everything from partnerships with medical providers and community groups to drawing on customers’ expertise (and compensating them for it), is another way of increasing the impact of limited resources. The EFS professionals identified power redistribution as critical to ensuring that more of customers’ personal experience, needs, and expertise are brought to bear on food pantry operations. For some, this meant EFS professionals redefining their role to be advocates rather than service providers; for others it meant broader structural efforts, such as advocacy and mentoring programs, that would eventually bring customers into leadership positions.

Although the philosophies that guide the work of EFS professionals suggest a promising future for food pantries and the nutrition education they offer, customers still report significant barriers that block them from receiving effective nutrition education. Customers noted that the physical locations of the pantries they have encountered are hard to access for those with disabilities, cannot accommodate large families, and are not equipped to accommodate customers who cannot carry heavy items or cannot sit or stand for long periods. Pantries and their programs can also be rendered inaccessible to some by policies that use zip codes or needs tests to determine who is eligible to be in that pantry. EFS professionals overwhelmingly advocate for a low-barrier approach that allows all who need resources to get them, but customers are clearly familiar with and sensitive to eligibility assessments that may impede their access to pantries or to nutrition education programs. Customer access to nutrition education can also be affected by capacity constraints of classes, pre-registration requirements, and funder-mandated restrictions on the ingredients and cooking techniques.

Customers reported learning about nutrition education programs, especially cooking classes, from posters and other signage in the pantry and, less often, by word of mouth. Although customers appreciate the information about classes, healthy eating, and cooking tips they get from posters, at least one individual suggested that calendars should be part of the signage. Once aware of cooking classes, some customers decide they are not of interest, but others are

drawn by the possibility of learning about foods and cooking techniques that are new to them. The potential classes offer for customers to be with friends and build community is also a significant draw.

Unfortunately, customers' other commitments can create significant barriers to their attendance. Since many customers have other responsibilities, including jobs, family members to care for, and medical needs to attend to, they are hesitant to dedicate as much as three hours in a week to attending a cooking class. An added disincentive for some is their experience of classes that go over time by as much as a half hour and pantries that penalize customers who arrive late by not allowing them to secure their place in the food pantry line.

Transportation issues and child care needs can create still more barriers. The high cost of gas, long distances to travel, and inefficient transportation services for seniors can all affect customers who try to get to classes by car or carpool. For those who walk or take the bus, a critical question can be how they will transport their food and belongings after a class. In this context, having a rolling suitcase can mean the difference between attending or not. Would-be participants who have children face the uncertainty of what they will do with their kids while in class. Customers want pantries to offer daycare, but, at present, the pantries discussed in this study address the question of children in a variety of idiosyncratic ways, but not by providing childcare. Some welcome children of all ages to adult classes, some include children age 13 and older, and some provide youth-specific classes. In one case, the pantry provides ways that children can be kept occupied during classes (e.g., books and toys), but there is no one designated to watch them. To a person, the EFS professionals recognize the value of parents and children cooking together, but current systems, by and large, do not support it.

The insights provided by customers and EFS professionals suggest a number of strategies that can help overcome the barriers to nutrition education. Pantries and their staff can meet clients where they are with innovative arrangements that bring food and food services into the community, programs that provide information about and dietary approaches to the diet-related illnesses that affect so many customers, and a commitment to providing programming focused on culturally relevant foods in customers' native languages. Customers want pantries to be communal spaces where all are welcomed with dignity and respect; nutrition education programs can be central to the creation of this kind of environment. Cooking classes can be essential social

gatherings where opportunities for peer-to-peer teaching and recipe sharing help build community by bringing people together and acknowledging customer expertise. Classes can also provide a springboard for customers to build community on their own. Customers believe nutrition education should be part of a more holistic mission for food pantries, where medical concerns are addressed in conjunction with basic food needs and cooperation among groups simplifies customers' efforts to get help. Partnerships with outside organizations (e.g., volunteer agencies, groups supporting marginalized populations, FQHCs) and partnerships across food pantries can help realize this vision. Finally, recognizing and overcoming barriers to nutrition education is an ongoing process that is specific to each community, so establishing a robust and recurrent means of receiving and responding to individual customer and broader community concerns is essential.

Endnotes

- 1 Coleman-Jensen, A., M.P. Rabbitt, C.A. Gregory & A. Singh. 2020. "Household Food Security in the United States in 2019." Economic Research Report No. (ERR-275). USDA Economic Research Service, Department of Agriculture. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=99281> Last visited: 4/5/21.
- 2 Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. 2021. "Tracking the COVID-19 Recession's Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships." <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and> Last visited: 4/5/21.
- 3 Barone, A., D.A. Krummel, & S. Lee. 2020. "Availability of Food Options and Nutrition Education in Local Food Pantries." *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 52(5): 492-502.
- 4 Alkon, A.H. & J. Agyeman, eds. 2011. *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- 5 Neighborhood name is a pseudonym.

Interview Guide for EFS Professionals:

Theme #1: Professional Background

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? How did you end up working on nutrition education in the emergency food system?
 - a. What initially drew you to work on nutrition education in the EFS?
 - b. What is your educational history and how did it influence your work?
 - c. Have you had other jobs in the EFS? How did this work prepare you for your work with nutrition education?
 - d. Have you done any other work outside the EFS that was or in retrospect seems relevant to your work on nutrition education with food bank customers?
 - e. Is there anything else I should know about how you came to this work?

Theme #2: Philosophy of Nutrition Education in the EFS

1. What's the rationale for these programs? Why is it important and necessary to have these programs at food banks?
2. In your opinion, what works or has worked and what doesn't work or didn't work in the past?
3. To what extent can nutrition education advance the cause of food justice? What would that look like?
4. Are these programs culturally responsive? Are they accessible to everyone?
5. As you know, some food banks have specific requirements about who can and cannot access services. What are your thoughts on those kinds of requirements?
6. Is there anything else I should know about your thoughts on Nutrition Education and Food Justice?

Theme #3: Nutrition Education Program Experiences

1. Can you tell me anything about the history of these programs?
 - a. What is the story of their development within the EFS?
 - b. What about the history of the programs of which you've been a part?
2. Tell me about your experiences organizing and conducting nutrition education programs.
3. What would you say are the goals of the program?
4. Have there been times when you did not have all the resources you needed? If you had more resources (and if the program were still active) what would you do differently?
5. How many people generally attend? What are their demographics?
6. What have been the successes and failures? Tell me about a particularly powerful experience.
7. What do you believe is the fate of the program? Has it grown, diminished? Is it still offered?
8. How do you work to be culturally inclusive?
9. Do you have any additional thoughts about your experiences conducting nutrition education programs?
10. How do you see your identity and/or positionality playing a role in your work?
 - a. Are you familiar with the notion of the white savior complex? If so, how do you navigate it in your work?
 - i. *White savior complex: privileged white folks coming in to "save" people of color and in the process the marginalized voices that are being "served" often are silenced and feel as though systemically there is no chance of upward mobility. Is this something that you try to combat?*

Interview Guide for EFS Customers:

Theme #1: Experience with Food Banks

2. How long have you been getting food from food banks?
3. What has been your experience with them?
4. What would be a better alternative to a food bank?

Theme #2: Experience with Food Nutrition Programs

1. Do you know what food nutrition programs at food banks entail?
2. Are you aware that this food bank Des Moines provides cooking classes?
3. Does that interest you (why/why not?) Have you been to any? If no, why not? If yes, what was your experience like?
4. In your experience do the classes and/or recipes have culturally-appropriate food featured?
5. Do the classes foster a sense of community? What's missing?
6. Is there anything else you would like to comment on regarding food nutrition programs?

Theme #3: Nutrition Education Improvements

1. What could your food bank do that would make it easier to make nutritious, appealing meals from the items you get at the food bank?
2. How would you change the food bank and its nutrition education programs if you could? What changes would make you want to attend?)
3. Is there anything else I should know about your thoughts on Nutrition Education and Food Justice?



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