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More than a Meal : A resource for communities striving for food sovereignty through the charitable food system

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A resource for communities striving for food sovereignty through the charitable food system

A Master's Project

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Table of Contents

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Abstract

The 2020 pandemic and economic crisis showcased the fragility of the American food system. In the months of quarantine and lockdowns, a growing number of Americans searched for ways to feed themselves and their families. Community-based and volunteer-supported feeding programs worked to bridge the divide between the hungry and their next meal. In many cases, these programs rely on an unpaid workforce and donations – of time, food, and facilities. With limited resources, volunteer-led programs often lack centralized training options; this guidebook seeks to fill that void. This project is a streamlined, introductory-level guide for volunteers and community members working to feed their neighbors through free meal services. The final product offers as a starting point for anti-hunger networks to draw from as they empower those they serve. *More than a Meal: A resource for communities seeking food sovereignty within the charitable food system* is an educational resource that focuses on advocacy, nutrition, food and kitchen safety, and how feeding programs working within the charitable food system can and should strive for food sovereignty.

This guidebook's development unfolded with rural New England in mind, yet it is adaptable to groups outside of this region. The nutrition and food safety sections are rooted in the USDA's guidelines and apply to most people's dietary needs. Overall, the recommendations and information provided are a snapshot of what it takes for communities to reach food sovereignty through the charitable food system. Future work needs to be done to address social justice, socioeconomic disparities, and limit the impacts of climate change on society as a whole

Keywords: charitable food system, emergency food system, food insecurity, food sovereignty

Chapter One:
Introduction

This project was inspired by the growing rates of food insecurity in New England as the COVID-19 global pandemic peaked in the spring of 2020. As the shutdowns and quarantines sank in, community members sought out opportunities where they could band together to help their neighbors all the while maintaining some kind of social connection. This reaction is congruent with previous studies on volunteering in a time of crisis where volunteers seek out solidarity and a connection to a cause; the COVID-19 pandemic was no different (Dunn & Chambers 2016; Tierney & Mahtani 2020). For many, the need to help funneled into localized feeding programs from delivering Meals on Wheels or ready-to-eat meals sponsored by area churches. The rise in food insecurity placed increased pressure on the charitable food system (Shanks et. al 2020), the network of organizations who work the frontlines against hunger via charitable donations, volunteers, and occasionally, governmental assistance in the form of grants or subsidized programs. A survey conducted in March and April of 2020 by the University of Vermont and John Hopkins Center for a Livable Future found that survey "respondents reported a 33% increase in food insecurity since the coronavirus outbreak began in Vermont" (Niles et al., 2020). In response to the increase in the rates of food insecurity, demands for volunteers rose simultaneously (United States Congress Joint Economic Committee 2020). Yet not every program is equipped with the resources or staff to support volunteers in the training necessary to provide safe, nutritious, quality meals to their recipients. Additionally, volunteers and community members are often unsure of how to approach long-term solutions to hunger and

food insecurity. In developing this guidebook, I explore what role community-led anti-hunger networks have in addressing hunger in rural New England communities.

Defining Food Security and Food Sovereignty

Most of us are familiar with the concept of food insecurity but we may not recognize the nuances within the various definitions of the term. The most recent USDA definition of food insecurity is "a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life (USDA 2019). Previous USDA definitions had centered on the term "*hunger",* but it was eliminated from the assessment of food security, instead offering a distinction between the social condition (food security) and the physiological condition (hunger) (Allen 2007). Though the change was made in order to more easily collect and present data, the shift to food security "diffuses the outrage the term *hunger* elicits while disrupting the social progress that has been made over the last few decades" (Allen 2007, 19). The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) expands on the USDA definition slightly by stating that "all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO 2009). In contrast to the idea of food security, the food sovereignty movement looks beyond just creating more access to food but views food as "intertwined with political action, culture, identity, and place" (Noll & Murdock 2020). For this project, I aim to go beyond food security, focusing instead on the barriers, or root causes of hunger and poverty via the lens of the food sovereignty movement.

The guidebook focuses on the three main areas of community-supported feeding programs with an overarching theme of food sovereignty. Overall, this project offers a resource

for information regarding social justice issues, policy and advocacy resources, and nutrition and food safety information because addressing hunger in your community is more than offering a free meal when your neighbor is in need. If the goal is to truly eradicate hunger, then the root causes— social, economic, structural— need to also be addressed. The more knowledge and resources available to motivated community members, the healthier their community will be.

Organization of the Project

The master's project is organized into five chapters including this introduction. The next chapter highlights the role of advocacy, policy, and social justice, providing a brief overview of the most prominent food movements and their efforts to alleviate hunger. It touches on the politics of food, with a goal of empowering anti-hunger networks to tackle the root causes of hunger and poverty from a holistic approach. The next chapter discusses nutrition, offers an overview of the barriers and stigmas associated with the charitable food system and provides a brief synopsis of the USDA guidelines. The following chapter looks at the significance of training in food and kitchen safety, for both volunteers and food recipients, in the production of meals for the food insecure. The final chapter, the conclusion, synthesizes the main points from each section while offering suggestions for volunteer engagement, suggested books and articles relevant to the emergency food system, and an introduction to regional organizations that are working towards a just and equitable food system.

Chapter Two

Advocacy, Policy, and Resources for Systemic Change

The growing awareness of food issues like hunger and nutrition has strengthened the development of food movements aiming to create more equitable food systems. However, when it comes to the complexity of hunger and food insecurity, the solution is equally complex and requires a transdisciplinary approach. For example, issues like healthcare, education, childcare, and affordable housing all contribute to an individual's, or a household's food security. Offering food assistance in the form of free meals or food benefits, food pantries, or social programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps) are often viewed as short-term solutions to a compounding problem because they do not address the underlying issues causing hunger, namely poverty. The most successful attempts in addressing hunger and food security are rooted in advocacy, policy, and community networks. Networks committed to addressing social issues can show their strength through the power of advocacy, creating awareness, and influencing policy change. In this chapter, I ask to what extent are community-supported feeding programs engaging in advocacy and the policy process, both locally and nationally? The section begins by providing some background on the relationship between politics and the charitable food system, then explores a few of the food movements that focus specifically on justice and sovereignty and will conclude with the exploration of what role community-supported feeding programs could play in advocacy and policy, locally and beyond.

Vital Politics

The conceptual relationship of politics, power and life are defined by Strong (2019) as

vital politics, where political decisions, policies, and program gatekeepers have vital power over

the quality of life for others. Strong built their argument for vital politics on the foundation of

biopolitics, a term Michael Foucault characterized as the politicization of our natural life (Carney

2015, 16). Because food is undoubtedly vital to life, we see instances of vital politics in every

aspect of food security work; examples of this include the amount of monetary support for food

assistance programs, the quality of donated foods distributed to food pantries and food shelves,

and the lack of agency over their diet for those facing hunger. Community-supported feeding

programs have the ability to address the imbalance of power. As Strong (2019) states, "the acts

of producing, disseminating and consuming food demonstrate how acts of power become

embodied – how the quantities, qualities and types of food provisioned shape vitality and vital

capacities and capabilities" (2). In their role, community-supported feeding programs can exert

control over quantities, qualities, and the nutritional and cultural value of the meals they provide,

whether they are aware of this or not. One of the biggest hurdles, however, is addressing

corporate philanthropy because of its influence on donation-based food choices.

Corporate philanthropy is nothing new, though the rise in tax credits and other

government incentives has increased over the years. According to Andy Fisher in his book *Big*

Hunger (2018) "public policy incentivizes the participation of the agri-food industry in the

charitable food system with roughly three-quarters of a billion dollars of contracts and tax write-

offs" (66). Additionally, "over 150 companies donate either products or cash to the top 11

national anti-hunger groups" (Fisher 2018, 85-86). There is a strong argument for questioning

the complicated relationship between corporate donors and hunger-relief organizations. One

example of this is the ethical quandary of partnering with corporations like Walmart. A 2013

report by Democratic staff from the US Committee on Education and Workforce "estimate[ed]

that the low-wages Walmart pays its employees costs taxpayers $6.2 billion annually in public

benefits such as reliance on SNAP, school meals, public housing programs, and Medicaid"

(Fisher 2018, 90). Walmart is known for restricting schedules thus limiting full-time employees

from access to employer benefits and halting any unionizing efforts. In doing so they've created

an expectation that the federal government will pick up their tab while increasing their profits

and denying their employees any opportunity for upward mobility (Fisher 2018, 90). Another

example is a 2010 marketing agreement between Feeding America and Mars, Inc, the parent

company of candy such as Snickers, M&Ms and Skittles. The marketing campaign included

celebrity endorsements, consumer education on hunger via packaging, and included Feeding

America's logo in conjunction with Mars products. While Feeding America was able to increase

awareness for its work in hunger-relief, it also appeared to be endorsing the sales and

consumption of unhealthy foods (Fisher 2018). The ethical questions that stem from the

partnerships between anti-hunger networks and food manufacturers, who in turn donate money

and foods, influence policies regarding quality and nutritional values. With so much riding on

the need for large-scale donations, anti-hunger networks are limited in their ability to choose or

deny the foods they provide to the food insecure (Anderson 2013). Strong (2019) argues that we

should move "beyond conceptualizations of foodbanks as *products* of austerity, and instead

dive[s] into the changing relationship between life and power that are *produced* in and through

foodbanks," adding that foodbanks "hold power *over* life" (Strong 2019, 2). Again, considering

the lens of vital politics, it's imperative to examine the food movements that approach hunger holistically.

Food Sovereignty Framework

Since the 1970s, food movements have been on the rise in response to the increasingly monocultured, resource-heavy, centralized and colonized food system. The most widely known model for addressing hunger is by achieving food security, though it is often criticized for being ineffective and vague. Noll and Murdock (2019) state that "food security on its own and as the primary model for alleviating hunger is insufficient for creating sustainable communities and limiting harms" (2). They go on to argue that the food security movement incorporates a minimal adoption of the theories of food justice or claims that food as a human right, while "food sovereignty movements are guided by a more holistic paradigm" (Noll & Murdock 2019, 2). Community-based feeding programs can incorporate the ideals of both the food justice and food sovereignty movements in addressing injustices within the food system. By adopting a holistic approach, communities can assess the major barriers limiting participation and access such as location (politics of place), inclusivity, and community buy-in.

More than other food movements, the food justice and food sovereignty movements are regarded as holistic, transdisciplinary approaches to ending hunger. "The food justice movement combines an analysis of racial and economic injustices with practical support for environmentally sustainable alternatives that can provide economic empowerment and access to environmental benefits in marginalized communities" (Alkon & Agyeman 2011,6). Similarly, food sovereignty is rooted in "community solutions designed and enacted by community

members, but also the wedding of achieving food security to the goal of food justice" (Noll & Murdock 2019,4). Additionally, food sovereignty is "the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems" (Declaration of Nyeleni, 2006). Food sovereignty is moving towards a more equitable food system by dismantling racism within the food system, redistributing wealth and power, advocating for agency over one's diet, and empowering women by recognizing their human rights.

Community Advocacy

For community-supported feeding programs, adopting the food sovereignty framework is instrumental in creating a more equitable food system. Noll and Murdock (2019) argue "food sovereignty is importantly grounded in concepts of self-determination and self-governance and thus concerned with the idea that in many ways food and eating (and all that this entails) is an integral part of human identity, community, and self-actualization" (5). Because of its community-centric approach to food system issues, food sovereignty is best championed by community networks with participatory action from various groups within the community. Everyone should have and continuously be invited to have a seat at the table— from producers to consumers and anyone in between.

At the heart of the food sovereignty movement are rights: community rights, consumer rights, human rights. Communities can work towards achieving these rights by creating partnerships within their local food system, offering participatory action from those they serve and by adhering to higher standards and values in their procurement process. Grassroots

campaigns from food recipients and community networks can demand better from donors and policymakers. Examples of community networks in action have worked to address the lack of fresh produce in specific neighborhoods by organizing and sponsoring community gardens (Noll & Murdock 2019), or by creating mobile markets that deliver "local chemical-free produce to poor and working class inner-city residents" (Mares & Alkon 2011,75). Both cases were place-based and used input from community members to find a solution that led to multi-faceted benefits to the community with greener spaces and ecologically produced nutrition.

Chapter Three

Nutrition in the Charitable Food System

There are over half a dozen federal public assistance programs that exist to provide Americans with food assistance and ease the burden of poverty (See Figure 1.). According to Feeding America (2021), "many households that experience food insecurity do not qualify for federal nutrition programs and need to rely on their local food banks and hunger relief organizations for support" (Feeding America 2021). SNAP, in particular, has an extensive application process and restrictive eligibility – less than $2,633/month for a family of four (Feeding America 2021). Even so, the need for non-governmental assistance in the form of a private-sector charitable food system continues to grow, taking the pressure off of the American government's role in ensuring that everyone has access to adequately nutritious and culturally appropriate food (Poppendieck 1998). While some organizations approach the charitable food system from a "beggars can't be choosers" approach (Vissing et. al 2017, 475), food pantries that offer dignity are far more humane in showing their value for human life (Vissing et. al 2017).

Be that as it may, the emergency food system relies heavily on foods donated by individuals or corporations. The donated food is made up primarily of shelf-stable, highly processed boxed and canned foods. In this system the nutritional quality is often overlooked due to the nature of food banking, where success is determined by how many pounds of food are donated versus the quality of said food (Campbell et al., 2011). While some of these food products are considered nutritious, many are high in sugar, sodium, and refined grains. In a

study conducted by Campell et al. (2011) on food pantry offerings, findings suggested that there is not enough focus on nutritionally adequate foods or educating users on nutrition. Additionally, a significant percentage of users are overweight and obese and are struggling with diet-related chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and other health disparities (Campbell 2011; Robaina & Martin 2013). Keeping in mind the health of clients, and that food is vital to life, it is imperative for nutrition to be a top priority in the emergency food system.

This chapter asks to what extent community-supported feeding programs address nutrition, food security and food sovereignty in their communities? In doing so it aims elevate the voices and experiences of those utilizing the charitable food system in their own words. The chapter concludes with an overview of the USDA guidelines and suggestions on how to aid community-supported feeding programs in their menu planning and recipes.

Figure 1. Federal Food Assistance Programs

Acronym	Full Name	Brief Description	Moms & Kids	Fostering Nutrition	Senior Hunger	Supplying Foodbanks
SNAP	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program	Provides timely, targeted, and temporary benefits to low-income Americans to buy groceries.	✓	✓	✓	
TEFAP	The Emergency Food Assistance Program	Provides USDA commodities to families in need of short-term hunger relief through emergency food providers like food banks.	✓	✓	✓	✓
CSFP	The Commodity Supplemental Food Program	Provides food assistance for low-income seniors with a monthly package of healthy USDA commodities.		✓	✓	✓
CACFP	The Child and Adult Care Food Program	Provides nutritious meals and snacks to children and adults in designated child and adult care centers.	✓	✓	✓	
NSLP	The National School Lunch Program	Provides nutritionally balanced lunch to qualified children each school day.	✓	✓		
SBP	The School Breakfast Program	Provides nutritionally balanced breakfast to qualified children each school day.	✓	✓		
SFSP	The Summer Food Service Program	Provides free meals and snacks to low-income children during the summer months.	✓	✓		
WIC	Women, Infants, and Children	Provides nutritious foods and nutrition education for low-income, at risk women, infants.	✓			

Feedingamerica.org

Barriers and Stigmas

The voices of those who rely on the charitable food system are often left unheard, resulting in a greater loss of agency over their diet. In a study conducted by Dave et al. (2017) on "Perspectives on Barriers to Eating Healthy Among Food Pantry Clients," two main themes emerged from the study's participants – "participant concern over obesity and other chronic diseases" and "barriers to healthy eating." One participant mentioned a couple of the diet-related diseases they were diagnosed with as a concern while using the food pantry and another stated

"present circumstances force me to make these difficult choices, although I would have loved to help my family eat more fruits and vegetables, and milk" (Dave et al. 2017, 30). Subthemes in the study included: financial uncertainty, cost associated with 'healthy' food, rationing food, and lack of time, transportation, nutrition knowledge, cooking skills and social support.

In her book "*Feeding the Other: Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries,*" de Souza highlights the missing voices of the oppressed by noting the normalcy "to talk about the poor without consulting them" (50). De Souza goes on to establish that by minimizing the voices of those seeking help, there is an illusion of "Us" and "Them" (2019). In an "Us" versus "Them" framework, the worthiness or level of deserving of those in need comes into question. Therefore, it is imperative to dismantle discourses or assumptions that suggest one person or household is more deserving of receiving assistance for a basic human right (food, shelter, health). In a 2013 study, Dutta et al. conclude that "the negative stereotypes and beliefs about the food insecure result in the absence of adequate infrastructures as well as in the poor quality of food that is given out." (Dutta et al. 2013, 175). The stigma associated with those seeking assistance is major barrier for food insecure community members accessing the emergency food system (Dutta et al. 2013; de Souza 2019).

In a similar study, Carroll et al. (2019) determined that the providers within food pantries did their best to offer healthy, nutritious foods but were often met with unforeseen challenges such as limited storage space for fresh or frozen foods or little control over the foods donated from area businesses. Emergency food system users want healthy choices and providers want to offer healthy choices, yet the structural limitations maintain this disconnect. A delicate balance ensues where stigmas influence the directives of donors and volunteers. Addressing stigmas and amplifying the voices of the hungry are two examples of how anti-hunger networks can help

their community reach food sovereignty. To reach these goals, the charitable food system should solicit input from those they serve. This could look like offering seats on the board or positions on committees to community members who receive their services. More than that, there should be ongoing avenues for feedback, suggestions, and opportunities for clients to share their experiences while receiving services.
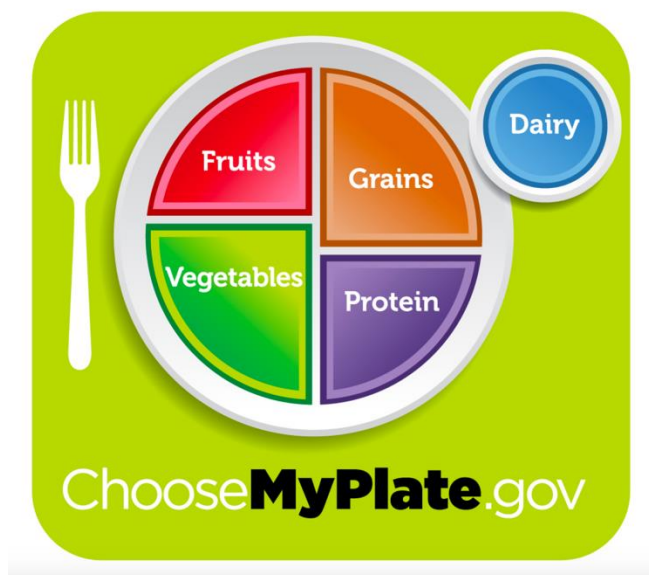
USDA Guidelines

Finding reputable information on nutrition and what is considered "healthy" is confusing for most people, including those working in or utilizing the charitable food system (Nagler 2014). Fad diets and food manufacturers make it difficult to find accurate information. In addition to this, our understanding of nutrition and the human body continues to evolve, causing increased confusion. A 2014 study by Nagler on the effects of conflicting nutrition messaging concluded that "confusion and backlash were negatively associated with intentions to engage in healthy behaviors" resulting in a general mistrust of nutrition recommendations. The study consisted of 631 adults and used cross-sectional data gathered through monthly online surveys. In the end, the study concluded that higher levels of exposure to contradictory information resulted in greater confusion over nutrition information and lowered the likelihood of adopting healthy lifestyle behaviors (Nagler 2014, 35). Though it's an uphill battle, the US government attempts to combat the contradictory messaging regarding nutrition by providing general nutrition information, commonly known as the USDA guidelines, that are updated every 5 years and serve as a guide when making dietary decisions.

The USDA guidelines were born out of growing concern over rising rates of chronic diseases and obesity with the first edition published in 1980 (USDA 1980). This edition, known as Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA), was heavily ridiculed for its ties to the food industry and potential financial influences over said recommendations, criticism that remains (Nestle 2018). Similar to the ties between corporate donors and the food provided in food banking, the DGA is heavily influenced by lobbyists from various industries, muddying the scientific process and creating a disconnect between the government's recommendations and what science has taught us about nutrition (Reinhardt 2019).

Today, the DGA's are more commonly presented as MyPlate and the associated educational materials are illustrated in the shape of a dinner plate. After decades of using 'My Food Pyramid," the Obama administration thought that using a plate would provide a visual representation of what Americans should strive for their meal plates to look like. MyPlate prominently displays fruits and vegetables- encouraging a diet where fruits and vegetables make up at least half of daily consumption and the other half comprising of grains (of which at least half should be whole), protein, and off to the side a small glass that represents the suggestion for low-fat dairy (See Figure 2). There is no one-size-fits-all solution to our dietary and nutritional needs, yet MyPlate is a great starting point for acquainting the general public towards healthy food choices.

Figure 2. MyPlate

Choosemyplate.gov

MyPlate in Practice

In their effort to feed and nourish their communities, charitable programs offering free meals and other food resources should also be incorporating the USDA guidelines. For some folks the free meal they receive is their only source of nutrition for the day, underscoring the importance of providing holistically healthy meals. It has been my experience working with volunteer groups and community members who wish to help that the urge to provide 'comfort' foods sometimes overshadows 'healthy' options. For instance, while working at GRACE Marketplace, a resource center for the area houseless community in Gainesville, Florida, I had a regular volunteer group that would offer weekly fried chicken and southern mac and cheese or hotdogs and a bag of chips but never considered offering a fruit or vegetable side. For our clients, this would be the only opportunity to eat that day and it meant that they weren't receiving adequate nutrition. It is entirely possible to have meals that are comforting, traditional and are still

considered healthy. Doing so would require an understanding of the food groups and following

the basic concepts of MyPlate. Examples include subbing in whole grains like brown rice and

whole wheat in recipes, adding vegetables whenever possible, and offering protein sources high

in fiber like beans or lentils. Making small changes to the food provided can significantly impact

the nutrient density of meals, and potentially improve the diet quality and health of those

receiving meals.

Chapter Four
Food and Kitchen Safety

The food security and food sovereignty frameworks encourage access to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate foods as well as agency and input over all that eating entails (Noll & Murdock 2019). Food and kitchen safety are essential to meeting these standards by ensuring the safe handling, preparation, and storage of food thus preventing foodborne illnesses (WHO 2015; Walls et. al 2019). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that nearly 1 in 6 Americans get sick from foodborne illnesses each year resulting in 128,000 hospitalizations and 3,000 deaths (Scallan 2011). Additionally, 20% of the US population is at high risk for the effects of foodborne illnesses to be fatal – populations such as pregnant women, the elderly, young children, and immunocompromised individuals (Smith & Neal 2014, 156; Gerber et. al 1996). These same high risks groups are also present in food insecure populations and therefore rely on the charitable food system to provide them with safe foods that won't compromise their health or life. The vital politics theory states that food is vital to life and therefore implies that food safety practices, such as proper food handling techniques, personal hygiene and sanitary conditions, are exercises of power over life (Strong 2019).

Lack of food and kitchen safety practices within a community-based feeding program have the potential to be a public health nightmare. Studies have suggested that the general population lacks education on proper food and kitchen safety practices (Alterkruse et. al 2010; Finch et. al 2005; Smith & Neal 2014). According to Finch et. al (2005), food distributed within the emergency food system is dangerous for numerous reasons; from poor food handling processes to lack of food safety knowledge among emergency food system workers and those

they serve. In order to safely feed communities, education and behavior modification are crucial elements to include throughout the charitable food system. Education on food and kitchen safety should go beyond the volunteers but should be extended onto those receiving the meals so as to ensure that all community members are meeting the food safety guidelines.

In a 2018 study on the compliance of safety and general hygiene practices within the global charitable food system, Makhunga et. al stated that the evidence suggested "workers/volunteers have no training on personal hygiene and proper food handling and protection techniques" (52). While this is a broad, generalized statement that is certainly not true for every instance within the charitable food system, it does point to larger public health concerns and highlights the importance of education and training for charitable food system workers. This chapter asks to what extent can community-supported feeding programs ensure that they are offering safe and nutritious foods to their community members? The chapter begins by demonstrating the importance for education and training on food and kitchen safety in the charitable food system, followed by a review of vital politics, food sovereignty and how they relate to food safety.

Education and Training

Education and training are widely accepted as the best defenses against foodborne illnesses and can improve the knowledge, attitude, and practice of food safety for food handlers (Insafran-Rivarola et. al 2020; Rossi et al, 2017; Young et.al 2019;). The most effective forms of food safety training combine both theory and practice, using demonstrations and real-life examples to translate theory into practice (Insafran-Rivarola et. al 2020). Finch et. al (2005) conducted a study on the effects of food safety training amongst workers in the emergency food

system and determined that "knowledge and reported behaviors significantly improved following food safety training" and suggest that there is an ongoing need for continued education. A separate study conducted by Smith & Neal (2014), found that food safety training for non-profit food service volunteers resulted in "significant improvement in knowledge" specifically "in the areas of cross contamination, temperature control and hygiene" (159). Furthermore, they suggest that since there is often inconsistences with working hours or shifts for volunteers and staff in non-profit settings that educational materials such as 'info-sheets' and training guides should be widely available to anyone handling food at any given time. In an effort to spread education regarding food safety, these educational materials and training workshops should also be made available to the populations served via the charitable food system so that these safe practices can be adopted at home as well.

Vital Politics, Food Sovereignty, and Food and Kitchen Safety

Inadequate food and kitchen safety practices are particularly concerning in the charitable food system due to the percentage of recipients who are considered higher risk to the adverse or fatal effects of foodborne illnesses (Finch et. al 2005). Adopting food and kitchen safety practices are vital and should be recognized as an act of power over life. Moreover the "quantities, qualities, and types of food provisioned" in the charitable food system are fundamental to vital politics (Strong 2019, 2). When deciding on how to define "quality," food sovereignty can be used to determine the parameters. Using the food sovereignty definition, quality foods are nutritious, culturally appropriate and produced with ecological and sustainable methods. I am aware that it may not be feasible to offer items that meet all food sovereignty

standards, but priority should be given to food products that do strive for the movement's primary principles.

In conjunction with food sovereignty standards for quality foods, special concern should be taken with donated foods that may result in higher rates of foodborne illnesses. Examples include leftover food from functions such as church events, weddings or other catered events, when it cannot be guaranteed that the leftovers were handled properly (Finch et. al, 2005; Kempson et. al 2002). While it's understandable to want to prevent food waste, the charitable food system is often feeding high risk groups and shouldn't gamble on the safety or quality of these foods. Furthermore, the community-supported feeding programs should resist being seen as the dumping site for unwanted foods. Not only does this increase the risks for unsafe foods but also feeds into the narrative that the hungry are unworthy and should be served what would otherwise be considered discarded foods. Community-supported feeding programs have the authority to limit what kinds of food they accept as donations while maintaining an air of dignity for everyone in their community.

Additional Resources

It has been my experience that the pressure to provide safe foods can feel overwhelming. Most examples of mishandling of food resulting in foodborne illnesses are due to poor hygiene practices (Altekruse et. al, 1995; Finch et. al 2005; Insfran-Rivarola et. al, 2020; Makhunga et, al 2018; Smith & Neal 2014; Young et. al 2019). The good news is that kitchen and food safety education and knowledge can help lower the chances of foodborne illness. When looking for training and workshop resources, communities can choose between fee-based training that typically comes with a certification process, such as ServSafe, or free resources, including

workshops provided by extension services or other non-profits. The New Hampshire Food Bank would offer a free USDA food safety course quarterly for agencies that used their services. The key takeaway is as that community-supported feeding programs should commit to some form of formal training on food and kitchen safety for all workers and/or volunteers.

Chapter Five

Conclusion, Recommendations and Contributions

In general, there is much work to do within the charitable food system but hopefully this master's project will provide some assistance to community-supported feeding programs in their effort to better their community. In our recovery from two global crises, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequential economic recession, food insecurity is only going to remain a major social issue. As the number of hungry Americans rise, so will those who seek to address this issue. It is for those volunteers that this guidebook is meant, and I hope it offers some assistance in the work towards food sovereignty. This final chapter will offer suggestions for new and established feeding programs and will end with contributions for further work.

Recommendations

While good-hearted in nature, the organization of community-supported feeding programs is often made from the volunteer's perspective. In a study conducted by Dave et. al (2017), focus groups and interviews of food pantry users provided an insight into some of the barriers they face when utilizing the pantry. Some of the examples of barriers included things such as access to public transportation and operation hours. Recommendations from the study suggest that several clients would benefit from mobile services and centrally located sites. In a separate study by Vissing et. al (2017) found that preserving dignity was a key factor in food pantry utilization. Their research suggested that limiting required information for participation such as addresses or citizenship status helped maintain the sense of dignity for pantry goers.

Staff and volunteers alike worked to improve their model for providing services to create a more inviting and welcoming environment.

Engaging volunteers on stigmas, policy issues, and the root causes of food insecurity is a great way to improve operations and encourage more community members to utilize the available services. Some examples of how to engage your volunteers include offering a book or reading club using some of the books and articles I have cited. Janet Poppendieck's *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement,* Andy Fisher's *Big hunger: The unholy alliance between corporate America and anti-hunger groups,* or Rebecca de Souza's *Feeding the Other: Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries* are great launching points or perhaps could be used in a book club. Either way, exposure and education are monumental tools for creating safe and inclusive sites.

Contributions

This project has great potential for further growth and engagement. UVM faculty member and chair of the Nutrition and Food Sciences Department, Amy Trubek has shown interest collaborating with her students to create recipes. I also hope that others will use this guidebook as a starting point to create more awareness around advocacy and policy changes. For me the biggest contribution is the goal to impact local food systems through awareness, advocacy and policy in an effort to improve the health of our community as a whole.

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