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Including Emergency Food in Our Vision of Community Food  
Security: The Values of Feeding Chittenden and the  
Community Kitchen Academy on the Burlington Community

College Honors Thesis

Adrianna Grinder

Including Emergency Food in Our Vision of Community Food Security: The Values of Feeding Chittenden and the Community Kitchen Academy on the Burlington Community

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## **Acknowledgments**

This research would not have been possible without the staff and clients of Feeding Chittenden. To Hannah Harrington, for introducing me to the Community Kitchen Academy, and for guiding and supporting me throughout the interview process; your hard-work and dedication to this work will forever be an inspiration to me. To the CKA students, I am so grateful you shared your stories with me; your voices are what made this project so meaningful. I would also like to thank my committee, Amy Trubek and Jeanne Shea, for being a part of this process and for teaching and encouraging me throughout my undergraduate journey; your lessons will stay with me as I move on to the next stages of my life. To my advisor, Teresa Mares, you have been an inspiration to me since my first day at UVM when I stepped into your Food and Culture anthropology course. You have nurtured my passions and goals, and your guidance has meant the world to me; to you I owe my success. Thank you for shaping who I am as a student, as a researcher, and as a friend. To my friends, thank you for your constant support and joy. To my family, I will forever be grateful for your love and support; you each inspire me everyday. This project would not have been possible without you.

## **Abstract**

Although intended for acute food insecurity, the usage of emergency food shelves has become chronic due to insufficient wages, and the insufficiency of federal programs. This chronic use of emergency food is not helping to solve the systematic issue of hunger, but instead is providing alternative benefits to communities. The purpose of this study is to examine how emergency food shelves have shifted from their traditional role of solely providing food to the food insecure to now promoting community food security in more meaningful ways through the employment of unique community health programs. Using community- based research methods with the food shelf Feeding Chittenden in Burlington, Vermont, this study specifically highlights the Community Kitchen Academy program, analyzing the multi-faceted positive impacts this program provides to the Burlington community. It explains the importance of recognizing emergency food shelves and pantries and their value in our communities through these unique community- centered programs. This thesis argues for the inclusion of emergency food in our mission, vision, and discourse surrounding community food security.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

It was 9:45 a.m. on a Sunday morning, and the dining room was loud. The volunteers around me hustled throughout the kitchen, opening up the oven to check the egg frittatas, flipping the final chocolate chip pancakes, and chopping veggies to throw in the salad. The clients were lively that morning as we finished breakfast. It was one of the first warm days after a long winter, and the sun shined into the dining room through the windows of the food shelf in a way that seemed to radiate throughout the clients. We served breakfast at 10 a.m. and the clients seemed pleased with what we had cooked. As I began to clean the kitchen I overheard clients chatting loudly, sharing breakfast with one another. I have learned how a warm meal brings people together.

It is through Sunday mornings like this that I was introduced to Feeding Chittenden, the emergency food shelf in Burlington, Vermont. A student-led University of Vermont club, the Food Recovery Network at UVM (formerly the Campus Kitchens Project at UVM), brings students to the food shelf every Sunday morning. Recovered food from the community that would have otherwise been thrown out or wasted is used to cook and serve brunch to the clients of Feeding Chittenden. It is through these experiences that I was introduced to the realm of emergency food and first interacted with individuals in the Burlington community who are food insecure.

When I began this project, although I had volunteered with the UVM club at Feeding Chittenden, I had fairly limited knowledge regarding the history of emergency food and the role of emergency food within our communities. I had assumptions regarding how these spaces operated based on my few observations from Sunday morning breakfasts, but as I



began conducting research I realized how little I truly understood about the value of these spaces in our communities.

When I decided to focus on emergency food and Feeding Chittenden specifically for my thesis, I reached out to staff members at Feeding Chittenden regarding my ideas for the project. It was suggested that I first begin volunteering during the week, conducting participant observation, to learn more about the space. These experiences I had volunteering and conducting participant observation for the first time throughout the Summer of 2019 were invaluable. This time allowed me to form deeper connections and relationships with staff members and with clients, and allowed me the time to observe and interact within the space. This deepened my understanding of Feeding Chittenden and its role within the Burlington community, and opened my eyes to new perspectives that I had not previously considered. The community values of this space became apparent and I realized the importance of this project in identifying and highlighting these specific values.

Everyone has the right to sufficient, culturally appropriate, nutritionally adequate food, but not everyone in the Burlington community has the privilege of this apparent 'right' existing in their lives. Individuals from all walks of life are struggling to make ends meet and are relying consistently on Feeding Chittenden to secure enough food for themselves and for their families. These individuals are diverse and complex, as all humans are. Many of them, in particular the students in the Community Kitchen Academy (CKA) program, have generously opened up to me about their varying experiences with food and with the CKA program specifically. I have observed clients' interactions with one another, and watched as community has been built or experienced within this space.

As I began a review of the literature and of the existing research on food insecurity and the sector of emergency food specifically, I consistently discovered critiques and negative perspectives of these spaces. Emergency food is often labeled as a space only functioning due to the failure of the food system. It is discussed as a last resort option for individuals who are struggling and can not rely on public provisions due to their inadequacy and insecurity in fully meeting needs. In this thesis, while I acknowledge and agree with some critiques relating to a reliance on emergency food, I will argue that emergency food centers are transitioning from their traditional roles, and are meeting the complex needs of people in multi-faceted ways that branch off from solely providing food to people due to a failed system.

Through this research and through the analysis of the Community Kitchen Academy program, key concepts such as food agency and food citizenship emerged. Both food agency and food citizenship are not terms that I frequently came across in the discourse surrounding emergency food. As I began to connect my research data to concepts from the literature and form my central findings though, the importance of these concepts became apparent, and their inclusion in this discourse surrounding both emergency food as well as job training and community development as a branch of emergency food, is necessary. The idea of obtaining food citizenship, and perhaps gaining food citizenship through a new found food agency, will be discussed and explored throughout the following sections.

This thesis is my attempt to contribute to a conversation around emergency food shelves and food pantries, and the role they play within our food system and within our community. Too often these spaces have been pushed aside by scholars when discussing visions and missions of community food security. Emergency food is often excluded from

the discourse and is thought of as an alternative option. It is time to include these spaces in our discourse surrounding the topic of community food security, and I am hopeful that this thesis will contribute to the conversation and add to the discourse in a meaningful way, through the inclusion of concepts such as food citizenship and food agency. It raises a multiplicity of questions such as: How is community experienced in the space of emergency food? What values do emergency food shelves and pantries provide in our communities? How do emergency food shelves employ programs resulting in meaningful impacts for community members as well as the promotion of community food security?

This thesis addresses the complexities of Feeding Chittenden and the CKA and discusses the multi-dimensional positive impacts that the Burlington community experiences as a result. I argue that a vision and mission of community food security that does not include the role of emergency food is problematic due to the exclusion of a crucial aspect of the food system. This exclusion occurs when emergency food is viewed as the result of a failed system, and a substitute for an adequate solution. There has been a shift from the traditional role that emergency food shelves play in our communities, to now promoting community and food security in more meaningful ways. Through the employment of unique programs such as the Community Kitchen Academy, which support and nurture food agency and food citizens, emergency food shelves are contributing to community development and community food security in multi-faceted ways, leading to positive impacts for both clients of Feeding Chittenden and for the Burlington community. It is crucial that we include emergency food in our vision and discourse surrounding community food security in order to achieve our goal of long-term, sustainable food security for all.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Food Insecurity in the U.S.**

The terms hunger, food security, and food insecurity are highly contested terms that have shifted and transitioned in their meaning and usage over time. It is important to define these terms, understanding the discourse around each. In 2007, the USDA eliminated the usage of the term hunger from their assessment of food security. In an article following this change by the USDA, Patricia Allen specifies that food insecurity encompasses the condition of having limited access to adequate food, whereas hunger refers to the individual physiological condition (Allen 2007). As I am focusing on individuals who utilize emergency food pantries and shelves due to limited access to adequate food, I will specifically use the term food insecurity.

The USDA has been consistently tracking household food insecurity since the mid 1980s, and since 1995 has released an annual report on Household Food Security in the United States, based on a food security questionnaire (Norwood, Wunderlich 2006). The Household Food Security report defines food security as, "...access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life..." (Coleman- Jensen, et al. 2009). The data collected provides a general overview regarding food security, tracking progress that has been made over the years. This monitoring of food security contributes to the operation of both federal and private food assistance programs, and other government initiatives focused on reducing food insecurity. As of 2018, 11.1 percent of U.S. households were considered food insecure based on the survey conducted by the USDA's Economic Research

Service. The 2018 report summary describes households experiencing food insecurity as lacking access to adequate food due to lack of money and other resources (Coleman-Jensen, et al. 2019).

Similarly, Feeding America conducts research looking at food insecurity within the United States. Feeding America defines food security as the USDA does, also specifying a limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate foods. The main study that Feeding America conducts is the Hunger in America study which is released every four years. The Hunger in America report provides insight to charitable food distribution, as well as information regarding individuals seeking food assistance through the charitable sector (Feeding America 2014). Data from these studies inform program development related to improving food security. These studies also provide data in regard to Vermont specifically. The 2019 Map the Meal Gap study conducted by Feeding America found that one in eight people in Vermont struggle with food insecurity. This study also reported that government assistance programs alone are not sufficient in fully supporting those struggling with food insecurity. A combination of charitable programs along with government assistance programs are necessary to bridge this gap (Feeding America 2019).

This requirement of food insecure individuals to rely on not only government assistance programs but on charitable food as well, has led to the widespread use and persistence of emergency food banks and emergency food shelves in communities across the country. Due to the widespread and continuous use of these spaces, it is important to analyze and identify their role within local communities and food systems. Identifying the local emergency food shelves role within a community, such as the Feeding Chittenden food shelf in Burlington, Vermont, allows for a better understanding of the value of the space

and how it is being utilized by the food insecure and by the community. This is important, as it has become clear through the data above that food insecurity and obtaining food through charitable sectors remains prevalent.

### **A Chronic Reliance on Emergency Food**

Food shelves and soup kitchens began reemerging for the first time since the Great Depression in the early 1980s. At this time, national unemployment rates were the highest they had been since the Great Depression, leading to this rapid expansion of emergency food. To many, this reemergence of emergency food looked like a step backwards from the progress that had been made with food stamps, which provided individuals with the freedom of choice and helped to promote social integration (Poppendieck 1998).

Sociologist Janet Poppendieck describes how the emergence of emergency food spaces was a retreat from the effort at inclusion to exclusion, from convenience and consumer choice to a predetermined menu of provisions, from national standards to local ones, and from rights to gifts (Poppendieck 1998).

Since the 1980s, emergency food has continued to grow in usage and popularity despite its negative aspects, and inability to provide a long-term solution to hunger. In 2010, research conducted by Feeding America analyzed the shift from the acute use to the chronic use of food shelves and other emergency food sources. This research describes how, “...for the majority of people seeking food assistance, pantries are now a part of households’ long-term strategies to supplement monthly shortfalls in food.” (Feeding America 2010). Using clients surveyed for the *Hunger in America 2010* project, a comprehensive study of emergency food assistance drawing on data from more than

61,000 client interviews, it was determined that 54% of clients had visited a food pantry for at least 6 months or more in 2008, and that 36% of clients had visited a food pantry at least every month in the year prior to data collection (Feeding America 2010). This data confirms the chronic use of emergency food by individuals in the United States. This data also clarifies the notion that hunger continues to persist throughout the country, despite federal food assistance programs, as well as the estimated 60,000 food pantries that continue to run (Feeding America 2018).

Scholars in various disciplines from anthropology to public health amongst others, have pointed to this phenomenon in their research as well. Some focus on anecdotal evidence from pantry directors, finding that people who do not qualify for SNAP benefits are seeking food pantry aid with increasing frequency (Paynter, Berner et al. 2011). In order to meet their individual and family needs, there is a reliance on both government and non-profit charitable food sources. Many suggest that this proliferation and institutionalization of emergency food has become an accepted reality (Paynter, Berner et al. 2011; Feeding America 2010; Daponte, Bade 2006).

### **Sweet Charity: The Concerns with Traditional Emergency Food Centers**

A prominent piece of existing literature on emergency food is the book, *Sweet Charity* written by sociologist Janet Poppendieck. In her book Poppendieck provides a history of emergency food in the United States, as well as an assessment of the then-current state of emergency food based on her participant observation and interviews from clients across the country. She criticizes various aspects of a food system reliant on emergency food and argues that the focus on charitable efforts are distracting and replacing consistent

public policy as poverty continues to grow. She claims that, "...because food programs are logistically demanding, their maintenance absorbs the attention and energy of many of the people most concerned about the poor, distracting them from larger issues of distributional politics." (Poppendieck 13). She believes that charity food is substituting for adequate public provisions, causing more harm than good within our communities.

In the introduction of her book, Poppendieck provides a caveat explaining how if emergency food functioned as an add-on to adequate and secure safety public provisions, she would have no problem with them. She includes the example that if they did not need to be relied upon due to the failure within our system they would have the ability and freedom to function as, "...an invitation or inducement to people to seek the help of programs designed to meet more complex needs- to provide education, job training, health care screening..." (Poppendieck 6). In this thesis I will argue that although Poppendieck is correct in many of her critiques relating to a chronic reliance on emergency food, emergency food centers are transitioning from their traditional roles, and are in fact meeting the complex needs of people in multi-faceted ways that branch off from solely providing food to people due to a failed system.

Other scholars have critiqued the role of emergency food as well. Anthropologist Megan Carney focuses on women's experience with food insecurity who have migrated from Mexico and Central America in her ethnography, *The Unending Hunger*, based in Santa Barbara, California. She discusses the unsustainability of food assistance programs and how they often reshape immigrant women's subjectivities (Carney 2015). Similar to Poppendieck, Carney critiques emergency food with the argument that the larger structural issues leading to food insecurity are not being addressed, and thus emergency food is being



relied upon in an unsustainable way. Throughout her ethnography Carney heavily criticizes a neoliberal food assistance paradigm. This neoliberal food assistance paradigm means that emergency food is filling in for, and being utilized, in place of public systems of social security from the state. It takes the obligation to provide food off of the state, as the realm of charity and emergency food is already filling the gap and providing food to the food insecure. This system relies upon citizens functioning as volunteers, which anthropologist Andrea Muehlebach, describes as moral neoliberals or ethical citizens. These moral neoliberals are not providing productive work in terms of economic capital, but in terms of the accumulation of valued relations among compassionate individuals resulting in social solidarity (Muehlebach 2012). They are performing crucial work in the social arena in place of the state, and in this case specifically, in spaces of emergency food. It is important to remember though, despite these critiques, the vitality and centrality of these emergency food spaces for food insecure individuals. This thesis will highlight these spaces' importance in our communities providing productive and concrete examples regarding how many spaces of emergency food are providing meaningful benefits and resources to community members and the community food system.

### **Defining Community and Community Food Security**

The goal of building community is often mentioned in discourse surrounding food security and alternative food systems. Depending on who is using the term and how the term is being defined, it can mean very different things. In order to discuss development and progress in the realm of food security, community must be defined. The concept of community for my research will stem from Frankenberg's definition that community "...is

common interests in achievable things (economic, religious, or whatever) that give members of a community a common interest in one another.” (Rapport 79) as cited in *Key Concepts in Social and Cultural Anthropology*. This common interest often leads to a sense of belonging. This sense of community that is defined here is exemplified through the relationships that individuals at Feeding Chittenden and through the CKA experience with one another; a common interest in an achievable thing- food security. Although extremely simplified, at the basic level this is what each individual going to the food shelf is hoping to achieve.

Along with being experienced by individuals, community is a tool that is employed to promote food security. An important alternative food movement, Community Food Security, centers around and champions this convoluted term, community, and stems out of the decrease in public sector support, as has been mentioned previously. The Community Food Security Coalition is a prominent organization promoting this alternative food movement, and a number of scholars have sparked the discourse surrounding this movement. This movement builds upon the local food movement, moving away from a focus on the individual to a focus on the community, including a connection to emergency food programs (Mares, Alkon 2011). Mares and Alkon describe community food security as a movement that, “...combines the local food discourse with an anti hunger approach, arguing that all communities should have access to safe, culturally appropriate, nutritionally adequate, and sustainably produced diets.” (Mares, Alkon 1 ). This movement's main goal is to simultaneously meet the food needs of low income people while developing local food systems (Allen 1999). This goal is in line with the goal of the

Community Kitchen Academy, which I will discuss in much more depth in the findings section.

An important element included in the Community Food security Movement that other alternative food movements often exclude, is an emphasis on community development. Gottlieb and FitzSimmons specify that, "...it should be seen as a form of community development which complements and extends the traditional approach of addressing food and hunger issues at the individual level." (Gottlieb and FitzSimmons 117). This is a community based framework that focuses on both immediate and long term food security. Although this movement is rooted in a community based framework an important distinction is that it also emphasizes food self-reliance (Allen 1999).

Some have critiqued this alternative food movement, pointing out that although it addresses issues of inequality, it relies on change in individual consumption, rather than on broader and more collective efforts (Mares, Alkon 2011). Although this can be seen as unproductive in terms of mitigating structural issues, in the realm of emergency food programs, a change in individual consumption and a focus on food self-reliance is an important aspect that will lead to better health outcomes for the individual and the community.

The Community Food Security movement is an important alternative food movement that includes a community based framework, combining a local food discourse with an anti-hunger approach. I argue that this is an impactful movement that can be made more productive and meaningful with the inclusion of emergency food programs in its discourse and mission. The programs that many emergency food shelves are employing such as the Community Kitchen Academy at Feeding Chittenden, are already working to

promote this movement in meaningful ways, contributing to both community development and food security while emphasizing an importance on local food.

### **The Transition from Emergency Center to Community Center**

The traditional role of the emergency food shelf, pantry, or soup kitchen was solely to provide food to individuals experiencing short term food insecurity. As mentioned previously, it is clear that there is now a chronic use of these emergency food spaces. This chronic reliance has resulted in a shift and transition in how these spaces are used, and the programs that they employ. Emergency food shelves no longer have the sole purpose of providing food to individuals, but now employ meaningful and impactful programs that impact not only food insecure individuals, but the community as a whole. This transition in purpose is important to assess and comprehend, in order to better understand how these emergency food spaces and programs fit into our larger food systems and movements, and will help to achieve community food security.

These spaces have often been ignored in our discourse around food security, and are often pushed aside. Many such as Poppendieck have condemned emergency food banks and shelves for the role that they play in the food system, critiquing and exposing the insufficiency and inadequacy of these spaces (Poppendieck 1999). Although not all scholars have had such extreme views as Poppendieck, it is rare that emergency food spaces are at the center of the discourse surrounding food security and it is uncommon that they are characterized as promoting community food security and justice (Vitiell et al 2015). I agree with Vitiell and argue that it is vital to begin to include emergency food banks and shelves

in our discussions and our mission of community food security due to the transition in purpose they have had and for their meaningful impacts on communities.

Scholars have discussed various aspects relating to this change in emergency food. In a study conducted by Vitiello, Grisso, Whiteside, and Fischman, a national survey and fifteen in-depth case studies were conducted documenting practices of gleaning, gardening, and farming by and for food banks. One of the findings discussed was that:

...some food banks are playing new and expanded roles in building community food security and promoting food justice, especially through programs that invest in building poor people's capacity to garden and farm (and cook) themselves. This represents a significant departure from most food banks' traditional missions, operations, and politics (Vitiello, et al 420).

This study concludes with the statement that, "...no longer should we exclude food banks from our visions of community food security." (Vitiello, et al 2015). This is an important finding related to the departure from the traditional role of emergency food banks. An important piece of this, which I will return to in the following section, is the idea of building an individual's capacity through the learning of skills to participate in practices such as gardening and cooking. This capacity building works to promote community food security in new ways. Based on my own research and findings, I agree with this sentiment. It is time to include emergency food spaces and programs in our discourse and vision around community food security, based on the unique community centered programs they are employing.

## **Food Citizenship and Food Agency**

Food citizenship is a concept discussed by various scholars surrounding food movements. It is the idea that all power in the food system should be in the hands of the consumer and the citizen. It is defined specifically as, “the practice of engaging in food-related behaviours (defined narrowly and broadly) that support, rather than threaten, the development of democratic, socially and economically just, and environmentally sustainable food systems.” (Wilkins 271). One of the key elements of food citizenship is the idea that, although public health professionals and policy makers set healthy guidelines and standards, it is up to individuals and communities to make healthy and sustainable choices regarding their food, which will then foster a sustainable food system. In order for citizens to become food citizens they must be supported and empowered (O’Kane 2016). In this way, being a food citizen refers to an individual's capability and obligation to make educated choices regarding food that will have positive impacts on the greater good of the community, through promoting a sustainable and resilient food system. Citizen in this definition, is not referring to the right to food from the government, but rather the right to make impactful food choices. I will argue in the findings section of this thesis that one of the impacts of the CKA program is that it turns citizens of the Burlington community into food citizens.

One of the central ways the CKA program turns its students into educated food citizens is through providing them with the skills they need to possess food agency. Food agency highlights the individual and their acquired capacity to actively employ skills related to food and meal preparation while navigating societal structures such as finances or mobility. Amy Trubek 2017, et al. describes how, “ Thus, to have ‘food agency’ is to be

*empowered to act* throughout the course of planning and preparing meals within a particular food environment” (Trubek et al. 298). CKA provides students with the education of practical skills relating to food and food preparation. The food agency they possess after completing the program allows them to have a higher capacity in relation to food. Not only does this result in an acquired capacity but also turns them into active food citizens- community members who have the agency and capacity to make educated, skilled choices regarding their food preparation and consumption.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The fieldsite for this research was Feeding Chittenden in Burlington, Vermont. Feeding Chittenden was initially launched as the Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf, and is an organization that works to alleviate food insecurity in the community through various programs such as the food shelf, the hot meals program, and the homebound delivery program. I initially was introduced to Feeding Chittenden through a UVM student club titled the Food Recovery Network at UVM (formerly the Campus Kitchens Project). Through this club, student volunteers have the opportunity to participate in food recovery in the community. These students take the recovered food and then transform it into a hot breakfast on Sunday mornings at Feeding Chittenden, where they serve it to clients of the food shelf. My experience with this club introduced me to the space, to the staff members, and to the clients of Feeding Chittenden.

As I began to think through potential research topic ideas in the fall of 2018 with my thesis advisor, Dr. Teresa Mares, Feeding Chittenden seemed like the perfect fieldsite to further explore my interests in food insecurity and emergency food programs. I submitted my thesis proposal for review by the College Honors committee in the spring of 2019. After my proposal was approved I applied for IRB approval in order to ensure I could begin conducting research in the summer of 2019. My plan was to conduct participant observation and interviews with clients of Feeding Chittenden. With these methods determined, I submitted an IRB protocol that was determined to be exempt. I completed all changes recommended to me by the IRB, until my protocol was approved.



After my research was approved by the IRB I began conducting research in the summer of 2019. I initially reached out to the Volunteer Coordinator at Feeding Chittenden, explaining my research project and questions. She suggested the best way to conduct participant observation would be to volunteer throughout the summer. The idea was that through this volunteer work I would have the opportunity to get to know more staff and clients, identifying potential clients to interview. Throughout the summer I conducted participant observation for an average of 5 hours per week. This participant observation consisted of volunteering in an aspect of the food shelf called receiving. In receiving I assisted with weighing and organizing food donations, and distributing them out into the pantry. This distribution of food into the pantry allowed me to get to know the space as well as get to know some of the clients. I interacted with various clients through this process, answering any questions they had or chatting with them about their day. This also allowed me to observe the interaction of clients with one another and with the staff members. Along with receiving, I assisted with food recovery, going out into the Burlington community with the Food Rescue Coordinator, picking up food from various grocery stores that would have otherwise been wasted. I continued this participant observation into the fall of 2019 and have conducted approximately 110 hours of participant observation.

I initially struggled to identify clients to interview. Over the summer of 2019 my research questions remained broad, making it challenging to find individuals to interview and to answer my original research questions. After expressing my challenges and concerns to the Food Rescue Coordinator, she introduced me to another staff member who she thought would be helpful, Hannah. I discussed my research project with Hannah and we thought through potential options and avenues to focus my research in a meaningful

way that could be of use to Feeding Chittenden. She introduced me to a program that Feeding Chittenden runs called the Community Kitchen Academy (CKA), which is a culinary job training program. We decided that this would be the perfect group of individuals to interview. Hannah expressed that it would be extremely beneficial to Feeding Chittenden to have qualitative data regarding the CKA students' experiences with the program. This data could help highlight the impact of the program on the students' lives as well as in the community, as a branch of the food shelf. This conversation with Hannah inspired me to shift my research focus slightly in order to highlight the Community Kitchen Academy, and to learn more about how traditional emergency food shelves are shifting from spaces that solely provide food to spaces that promote community food security in meaningful ways.

### **About Feeding Chittenden and the Community Kitchen Academy**

Feeding Chittenden was originally launched as the Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf in 1974, in Burlington, Vermont. The goal of this organization and space was to fight hunger and food insecurity in households throughout Chittenden County. When the Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf first opened it was a small pantry that provided a few days of groceries to a few dozen families, once a month (Feeding Chittenden 2019). As food insecurity in the community grew, the Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf relocated twice, moving to its current location on North Winooski Avenue in Burlington, Vermont, in 1994. After this move the food shelf began employing more programs aside from the pantry, such as the hot meal program (Feeding Chittenden 2019). The programming offered has been expanding over the years. The most recent change that this space has seen is a name change to the space, going from the Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf to Feeding

Chittenden in September 2019. This name change will be discussed further in the Findings section.

The Community Kitchen Academy is a culinary job training program that Feeding Chittenden offers. I interviewed a group of students from this program to gain insight regarding their experience and the impact that this program has had on their lives. The CKA program began in 2009 and is a statewide program of the Vermont Foodbank. Along with its operations at Feeding Chittenden, this program also has been operating in partnership with an organization called Capstone Community Action, in Barre, Vermont since 2013 (Vermont Foodbank). This program is intended for unemployed and underemployed Vermonters to gain culinary skills required to secure jobs in the food service industry. When describing the program Feeding Chittenden states:

The combination of this specialized culinary skills training and the work readiness training provided through the integrated life skills program ensure that upon graduation, students will be certified professionals who are ready and qualified to gain employment in the food service industry. In addition to job training, Community Kitchen Academy performs another function, rescuing produce, meat and other foods that would otherwise be wasted from restaurants, farms and food service companies (Feeding Chittenden).

In addition to rescuing food that would have otherwise been wasted, the meals that the CKA students prepare are distributed back out into the food pantry, helping to combat food insecurity as well.

## **Background with Feeding Chittenden and Emergency Food**

Throughout my life I have had a passion and fascination with all things related to food and nutrition. I was lucky to grow up surrounded by supportive parents that too had a passion for food, championing healthy eating, and always encouraging my foodie interests and tendencies. This passion for food grew into an academic interest in food and nutrition when I moved to Burlington, Vermont and began my undergraduate studies at UVM. I was exposed to courses in both food anthropology and anthropology related to global health, as well as in nutrition. These courses opened my eyes to various food and nutrition related issues such as food insecurity.

In the fall of 2016, in my first year as a student at UVM I joined a club that at the time was called the Campus Kitchens Project (now titled the Food Recovery Network). This club focuses on simultaneously fighting food waste and food insecurity in the Burlington community. We recover food from various producers and farmers of the Burlington community, and use the recovered food to prepare brunch at Feeding Chittenden on Sunday mornings. My experiences with this club have exposed me to the realm of emergency food, and how it fits within our larger food system. It has given me the opportunity to interact and connect with peers, professors, and professionals doing work and research related to food insecurity. More importantly though it has allowed me to connect with community members who are experiencing food insecurity and relying on emergency food and Feeding Chittenden specifically, to meet their needs. These experiences and bonds created have been vital in informing my research and remaining dedicated to my research.

Although I have not personally struggled with food insecurity and have never had to rely on emergency food to meet my needs, over the past four years I have had the opportunity to observe first-hand the challenges of individuals who consistently have struggled with food insecurity and rely on emergency food. I have connected with these individuals and each time I go to Feeding Chittenden I see familiar faces. It is important for me to acknowledge my identity as a researcher in this space, as it informs how I observe and react to what I learn. As I said previously, I have never experienced food insecurity or a need to rely on emergency food, but through interacting with individuals who have, I have gained some insight regarding these experiences. I understand the importance of community food security and feel strongly that emergency food pantries and shelves are capable of being extremely impactful in the community through the programs that they employ.

### **Gaps in the Methodology**

An important acknowledgement in regard to this research is that I did not have as much time to conduct participant observation and interviews as I would have wished I had. Throughout the summer of 2019 while I was conducting participant observation I also was required to work in order to afford to live in Burlington, VT. The hours I spent working are hours I wish I would have been able to spend more time at Feeding Chittenden, interacting with clients.

I did not begin interviewing students from the Community Kitchen Academy until the fall of 2019. At this time I was still working part time, along with being a full time student. These activities took away from hours I would have liked to spend conducting

interviews. My required courses on campus at UVM also made it so it was challenging to conduct participant observation with the CKA program specifically. The CKA course was held Monday through Thursday beginning in the morning and ending around 4:00 p.m. each day. I typically was required to be on campus for class during these times, making participant observation with CKA specifically challenging.

In terms of interviews, there were minor setbacks along the way. At times students were not in class when I was conducting interviews, or were busy and had to be pulled away and back into the kitchen. At the end of the session when I planned to conduct final interviews there was a snowstorm in Vermont resulting in the students not being able to come in for the course that day. Unfortunately this set back made the final set of interviews that I was hoping to conduct challenging to obtain from each student. Despite these minor challenges and setbacks in data collection I am confident that I still collected an adequate amount of rich data from the participant observation and interviews that I conducted, that was able to inform my findings and conclusions.

### **The Study Sample**

This research draws upon various interactions with staff members and clients of Feeding Chittenden. The findings presented are drawn from a culmination of participant observation focusing on clients' interactions and experiences with Feeding Chittenden, as well as a group of semi-structured interviews conducted with Community Kitchen Academy students both at the beginning and the end of the CKA session. I interviewed six of the CKA students at the beginning and the end of the session, for a total of 12 interviews. I also conducted an interview with the assistant chef of the CKA program at the time, who

had completed the CKA program during its previous session. Lastly, an interview was conducted with a staff member at Feeding Chittenden who works closely with the students of the CKA program. Everyone enrolled in this program are adults, and in keeping with IRB protocol, all names have been changed and all information has been de-identified.

Sadly, at the end of January of 2020, one of the participants I had conducted two interviews with passed away unexpectedly of natural causes. I have fond memories of my conversations and short time spent with her. When we were not talking about her experiences in the kitchen, she was telling me about her experiences being an artist, and her most recent art show. She was kind, and always happy to share with me, which I will forever appreciate. I have chosen to include quotes from my interviews with her in this thesis, as they are powerful and help to tell an important story. Like all other participants, any information has been de-identified.

### **Goals of the Research**

With this thesis I am contributing to the conversation surrounding emergency food and the Community Food Security movement. I am hopeful that my findings will add a meaningful contribution to the discourse surrounding these topics, and that my argument for an inclusion of emergency food in our mission and vision of community food security will be impactful. It is my main hope that the findings of this thesis will have tangible impacts on the Burlington community and for Feeding Chittenden. Prior to beginning interviews, Hannah expressed to me that there was no qualitative data on the Community Kitchen Academy and the student's experiences with this program. My goal is that the qualitative data I have provided from interviews with the students will be of use to Feeding

Chittenden, as well as to other emergency food pantries and shelves looking for examples of how they too can contribute to community food security in meaningful and impactful ways. I will do my best to make sure my research is distributed to participants and to Feeding Chittenden, in accessible ways. It is my hope that this research continues and inspires future research and collaboration between student researchers and Feeding Chittenden.



## **Chapter 4: Findings**

### **The Traditional Role of Emergency Food**

Before I began conducting research at Feeding Chittenden, I had a very narrow and straight forward vision regarding what an emergency food shelf or food pantry looked like, and what types of things went on in these spaces. This idea was gathered from the small amount of time I had spent in food shelves when I was younger, perhaps volunteering on a school trip or with my mom, or from what I had read about in articles about these spaces very briefly in my nutrition or food anthropology courses.

I imagined a small room, with shelves stacked with pantry items and canned goods. I pictured a small number of community members quietly walking around and slowly choosing a few items to place in their bags, because they were struggling to find enough work, and their federal assistance programs had failed them. I assumed that this was the extent of what took place in these spaces- that these community members would have few interactions with any staff and volunteers, and that they would take what they needed from the small room and leave quietly. Perhaps some emergency food shelves look like this and operate in this way, but when I began research at Feeding Chittenden I quickly realized that they did not fall into this traditional role of emergency food that I had envisioned.

My intent for this research was not necessarily to unpack how emergency food shelves have shifted away from their traditional roles, because this is not what I expected to observe or discover so deeply. I began to realize through my time spent at Feeding Chittenden, that the spaces of emergency food that I read about being critiqued by scholars such as Poppendieck or Carney were not the same spaces that I was experiencing or interacting in or with at Feeding Chittenden. The programs and experiences at Feeding

Chittenden broke through traditional mold and expectation of emergency food offering more to clients and the community, then just food alone. This section of the findings aims to rebuild the concept of emergency food shelves and pantries, providing an example through Feeding Chittenden of how these spaces have been reconstructed to operate in positive and complex ways resulting in meaningful impacts for community food security.

### **A Transition from Emergency Food Center to Community Center**

When I first began research at Feeding Chittenden, I soon realized all of my initial assumptions regarding the space and the purpose of the space were wrong. Although I had spent some time in the kitchen with the UVM student club that I volunteer with, I had not spent any time thinking about or experiencing other aspects of the space. When I first walked in to meet with the Volunteer Coordinator to discuss my research plans, I realized how much bigger the building is than I initially thought.

When you walk in Feeding Chittenden, just past the front door to the left is an office space with various desks for staff members. Walking further in you see the dining room that is often set up with lines of plastic folding tables and chairs. Making a right from the dining room is the kitchen, stocked with various kitchen utensils and tools. This is where the morning breakfasts are prepared, and where the Community Kitchen Academy students train every day throughout their session. On the other side of all of this is the food pantry. Clients check in at the front desk sitting right outside of the pantry entrance. They are then able to enter the space, choosing various items in set quantities. In the pantry items are categorized- the bread sits on one shelf organized by criteria such as sliced, baguette, etc. Coolers and freezers contain other items such as frozen meats, dairy

products, or packaged fruits and vegetables. On another shelf, typical canned and pantry items such as beans or pasta, line the shelves, ready for clients to grab. Sitting outside of all of this is a clear client favorite, the produce rack. This cart is rolled out and filled with fresh produce as it is received through donations and food rescue drop-offs, and is often what clients are seen waiting around for and asking about. Through two large swinging doors at the end of the pantry is a room for receiving. In this room volunteers work constantly, weighing and organizing food that has been rescued or donated, categorizing it into bread, cooler, or produce, and then distributing it out into the pantry.

Each of these rooms of Feeding Chittenden is dedicated to its own complex task that results in some aspect or program of the food shelf functioning, and is kept running through the dedication and hands of volunteers and staff members. The space of Feeding Chittenden has proven the extended capabilities of emergency food, widening the possibilities that exist in terms of contributing to community food security, and providing much more to clients than solely food from a pantry.

As I recognized this shift for myself over my months of participant observation, I realized that the food shelf did as well, re-labeling and identifying themselves in a very important and distinct way. When I first began volunteering in this space and then conducting research in June of 2019, the food shelf was named the Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf. This is a very traditional name for an emergency food shelf and makes it extremely clear what the purpose of the space is- to provide food as a last resort option for 'emergency' circumstances. In September of 2019 though, a distinct transition occurred. The food shelf renamed itself from the Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf to Feeding Chittenden. Not only was this a change in name, but a change in branding. Like I had, staff

and community members realized that this space had moved away from functioning as a traditional emergency food shelf, and was providing many more community benefits and programs, aside from solely food to individual clients.

In an article in VT Digger, Kelly Saunders, the Feeding Chittenden Development Director, was quoted as saying, “We’ve heard for years from our supporters and partners that we’re ‘more than just a food shelf,’ and that our name didn’t reflect all of the work that we do.” (Saunders 2019). The Feeding Chittenden Executive Director also commented on this name change in the article saying that, “...the new logo reflects the diversity of Feeding Chittenden and characterizes the brand as community and service-oriented.” (Meehan 2019). By renaming and rebranding themselves and the space, Feeding Chittenden gave themselves a new identity that has moved away from a focus on emergency food to a focus on community development and education through the promotion of food security and the creation of opportunity for clients.

This transformation of the space and the distinct acknowledgment of a transition by the food shelf itself is extremely important when thinking about the new role that these spaces play in our communities. Through the employment of various programs that have been developed over the years including, the food shelf, the hot meals program, the Community Kitchen Academy, and the homebound grocery delivery, amongst others, community food security has been promoted in unique ways. These programs have not only provided food assistance to clients, but have provided opportunities for education and job training. Through my participant observation it has become clear that this space is much more than a pantry with food available for individuals. It is diverse, it is loud, it is vibrant. Community is experienced here, and it is developed here. In the following section I

will discuss in depth the complexity of the space, bringing in examples from participant observation data regarding how clients experience and interact with various aspects of Feeding Chittenden. Although this space is complex and multi-faceted, one thing remains starkly clear- it must be included in our vision and mission of community food security. Emergency food shelves such as Feeding Chittenden are evolving and transforming, meeting community needs and providing opportunity in unique ways that have more meaningful impacts on the community than a traditional emergency food shelf ever did. It is for this reason that these spaces must be included in our discourse surrounding community food security, and can no longer be excluded in our discussions and missions.

### **Feeding Chittenden: A Community Hub**

Throughout my hours conducting participant observation at Feeding Chittenden in both the pantry and the dining room during Sunday breakfast I observed countless examples of community being experienced by clients of the space. A part of me had hoped and imagined I would walk in the door and see a clear, idealistic image of community, where everyone always knew each other and always helped each other, but this is not what I experienced. Instead I experienced a version of community that is complicated and nuanced, and that at times contradicts itself, but one that is rich with meaning and connection.

One of the first things I noted and have countless memories of are friendly interactions amongst clients with one another, volunteers, and staff members. Although the pantry space is often chaotic with volunteers quickly putting food on the shelves, and

clients rummaging around for the items they want, I am confident that every time I walked in Feeding Chittenden I observed some friendly interaction amongst community members.

Occasionally these friendly encounters among clients turned into new friendships or acquaintances. I recently was putting out sliced bread that had been donated, into its spot on the shelf in the pantry, when I overheard one older male client talking about, “the good ole days...” to the other clients around him. One woman in particular was laughing at his stories, and joking around with him, as he discussed his travels and past romantic flings he experienced back in the day as a young man. When his story concluded everyone had a good laugh, and the two clients shook hands and introduced themselves. Although it was a quick interaction, the man's friendly storytelling led to a potential friendship or connection being formed. It is moments like these that happen all the time in Feeding Chittenden, that are important to take note of and remember. Individuals are not just receiving food from this space, but hopefully happiness, laughter, and maybe a new friend in the community.

On Sunday mornings when I show up around 8 a.m. to begin preparing breakfast with the other UVM student volunteers, clients are often waiting in groups outside in the parking lot. Although it is early, and everyone is ready for a warm meal, they are often still loud and joking around with one another. On one particular Sunday I heard rap music coming from a small portable speaker, and friendly banter between a group of men waiting for breakfast to be served. “Yeah, he’s a riot,” one client said, referring to the rapper Eminem and the live version of his music. Their conversation quickly shifted from rap music to the universe and aliens, and I provided my opinion as I walked by stating that there is no way aliens exist.

I recognize these men, and have gotten to know them over the years through their joking and banter out in the parking lot, and in the dining room of Feeding Chittenden. Though our relationship is not personal, it is fun and it is natural. Through these men and through clients like them and who are friends with them, I have observed community through humor and through mutual interest. Although these clients may not have known each other outside of this space they have connected through shared interests and fun conversations ranging from the existence of aliens to favorite actors and movies. They each arrive at Feeding Chittenden with the motivation of acquiring pantry items or a warm meal, but while they are there they find connection and community through humor and friendly banter.

In other moments I have observed how food is deeply connected to personal experience and symbolizes various different things for different people. One Wednesday morning a woman and a boy, maybe around the age of 8, came in together. They were looking for a birthday cake for the boy's mom. Boxes of desserts are often donated from large grocery stores so I was able to find a birthday cake in the back and bring it out to them. They thanked me, clearly joyful that they now had a cake to celebrate the special day with. At this moment I was reminded that food is not just sustenance or nutrients. Food symbolizes joy, it symbolizes celebration, it symbolizes family. It is often much more than the calories and nutrients that it is made up of. The pantry at Feeding Chittenden not only allows people to acquire food that they need for their caloric intake needs, but for a greater purpose, that feeds their soul as well.

Another important aspect of Feeding Chittenden that I have observed is how conducive the space is for sharing and exchange to occur, surrounding food and education

regarding food. Clients are often sharing what they know with those around them.

Sometimes it is the sharing of recipes that occurs. On a warm summer day one woman grabbed the blackberries I had just put in the cooler, explaining to me how excited she was to make a berry cobbler. She happily described the steps in the recipe, after I had told her I had never made a cobbler before, and encouraged me to try it out this summer. I learned something new from this exchange and was inspired by her and her recipe idea.

Other times clients may not share entire recipes, but are often heard sharing tips and advice regarding the food around them. “Can I freeze this ham?” a man asked those around him- a woman next to him responded, “Yes, I’ve done it before.” There is a consistent exchange of knowledge and advice in this space- clients are often seen giving and taking this knowledge throughout their time spent in Feeding Chittenden. This sharing and exchange of knowledge surrounding food, contributes to this idea of food citizenship, discussed in the literature review. Through this exchange of knowledge, citizens, who are in this case clients of Feeding Chittenden, are gaining information from those around them. This helps them to make more informed and educated choices regarding food. With more educated choices being made by the individual, a more sustainable food system will be fostered and supported.

Aside from knowledge, the food itself is often the thing being shared between clients, and is something I observed many times when in the pantry. One day I had put out blocks of various cheeses in the cooler. One older woman took a few, and then noticed another client who was sitting in a wheelchair and had not yet gotten to the cooler. The woman offered her some of the cheese that she had taken. She was saying things like, “...don’t worry about it, I want to share with you. We’re all in the same boat.” This saying,



“We’re all in the same boat,” stuck with me. Regardless of circumstance or experience, every individual that walks into Feeding Chittenden is there for the same reason and with the same goal, to meet their basic need of having enough food for themselves and their family. This common goal and this shared experience allows clients to relate to one another and understand one another on a basic level, that I do not think can be fully understood if you have not shared the experience of food insecurity and a need to rely on an emergency food source.

Despite the new friendships and the sharing of food and knowledge though, it is important to understand that the space of Feeding Chittenden is not constantly a positive and happy environment where everyone is sharing their food and making friends. This sense of community that is experience based on all of these things does occur, but it is not stagnant and it is constantly changing. There is not one cohesive community here like I had initially imagined, but a version of community that is fluid. The sense of community that clients experience ebbs and flows. The space is often tense and competitive, and clients are not always friendly or wanting to talk to anybody else. Oftentimes people want to get their food as fast as they can and get out. Sometimes clients take more food than they should, refusing to share with others, angering those around them. When the produce cart is rolled out filled with fresh fruits and vegetables, clients can be rude, grabbing as much as they can before others get their chance. Although these moments are not positive, and are not what we like to think of when describing this space, they are important nonetheless. They point to the reality of hunger as it is experienced and lived by these individuals. There is a duality here that is necessary to recognize in order to better understand the complexities of the space and of clients’ experiences in the space. This environment can be traumatizing, tense,

competitive, and angry, while simultaneously being collaborative, welcoming, and a place for people to connect and bond. Community here is complicated and nuanced, but it exists, despite the competitiveness and tension that exists as well.

At the end of the day, clients come to Feeding Chittenden because they need to acquire more food. Perhaps their income is better served for other needs or their SNAP benefits are not enough to provide enough food for their family. Regardless of circumstance, there is a need for food that must be met. This can lead to a competitive environment where individuals are only thinking of themselves. On the contrary though, this shared experience and shared goal when coming to Feeding Chittenden can lead to meaningful bonds and connections being formed, and a sense of community being experienced. Clients have the potential to make friends in this space, or to have their day brightened through laughter and storytelling. Knowledge is shared and exchanged here. It is not just a place to acquire food but to acquire knowledge and education surrounding food. Although there is not one cohesive community that can be easily observed in this space, it is a version of community that is nuanced and meaningful. People are gaining something more from this space, than just food alone. It is for these reasons that it is vital we begin thinking about the role of emergency food in our communities, including these spaces in our vision of community food security.

### **The Community Kitchen Academy**

On a chilly Saturday morning in February I walked from my house in downtown Burlington through the snow to Feeding Chittenden. After a snowstorm had cancelled the last few days of the Community Kitchen Academy session, postponing the students

graduation, the day had finally come to celebrate their commencement. As I walked into the dining room I noticed the chairs had been repositioned to face a table that was set up with yellow flowers and a microphone. The graduating students were happily in the kitchen finalizing the food they had prepared for the guests, and laughing as they took selfies. Their friends and families filed in talking amongst themselves, and finding their seats. Everyone was in good spirits and seemed excited to celebrate the accomplishments of the graduates. Up until this point I had observed these students throughout their session, interviewing them at the beginning and at the end of the program. The positive impact that this program has had on both these students and on the community, which I will discuss in great detail in this section and the following sections, is tremendous. It is through employing unique programming such as the CKA that community food security is supported, leading to multi-dimensional community benefits.

I first was introduced to the CKA students during the first week of their session in November of 2019. I waited to conduct an initial round of interviews while they were finishing up the lunch that they were preparing that day. The kitchen seemed busy as everyone cooked and finished their dishes. I sat with them after lunch was finished and they had joined together to eat. That day they had cooked a variety of veggie dishes such as pot pies, potatoes, and rice and vegetables. A lot of the discussion during lunch that I overheard centered around the food that they were eating and had prepared. They made comments about the dishes, describing ingredients and textures. Everyone was friendly and welcoming towards me as I sat and listened and shared lunch with them. These shared lunches and experiences in the kitchen are something that the students of this program

took part in full- time for three months of their lives, beginning in November and ending in February.

I gained a deep level of insight regarding the overall importance and impact of the CKA program from my discussions with the Service Coordinator at Feeding Chittenden, Hannah. Hannah is who first introduced me to this program when I came to her with my initial research ideas. She described to me that one of her main roles with the program is to work with the students one on one to identify needs and help alleviate those needs in whatever ways she can. Interacting with the students every day, Hannah also explained her role as serving, "...as an advisor...someone who's a friend, who's an advocate." Part of her position is also to work with the enrollment process. "I am often the first person that the students meet from here, and that has helped us develop really strong friendships. So I'm lucky that they come, they say hi to me, we chat..." An important aspect of the CKA program that I identified early on is that it is so much more than just a job training program. The students and their needs are supported from the moment they walk into Feeding Chittenden, and they are guided not only in the kitchen but in their personal lives as well. Some of the additional things that Hannah supports and assists the students with are 3SquaresVT applications, child care needs, working with a program called ICAN to ensure that costs a student might incur while doing this training are covered, as well as questions about jobs. In the past students have received support in finding new housing. Hannah explained, "So we've had students go through the course, start as homeless, living in a shelter, and end in their own apartment, which is very cool."

When asked about her favorite part of working with the CKA students she explained the following.

“I love working one on one with people. It’s so inspiring to me to see people working hard to achieve that next step. That’s something that really resonates with me and connects with me, I love that, I get such an adrenaline rush from that kind of goal oriented work. This is not easy, I mean the day and the life of CKA is not a breeze. You’re on your feet, you’re hustling, you’re cleaning up...so it’s really cool to me to see so many people defying the odds really against challenging life situations, working really hard, for no pay, they’re really doing it just to take that next step in their lives, so I find it very inspiring and I love how much I get to know people.”

The students that enter the CKA program are doing it because they want to take that next step in their lives. This is a full-time program and each session is three months long, so it is a big step to take, and often a very challenging step to take. Although I only observed one session of the CKA program, I share this sentiment with Hannah and understand the passion she feels towards this program.

An important aspect of this program is that any community member, with any skill level or experience in the kitchen, can enter this program and make it work for them and their needs. Each session is filled with a wide range of students all from different backgrounds, who are at different points of their lives. “So we’re talking a group of people that have never met before, from many different backgrounds, they speak many different languages, they are all different ages, and are dealing with very different things in their personal lives.” This range of students allows for a collaborative environment, where each individual is bringing a new set of skills and experiences to the kitchen. Although many may not have much in common, they regardless are able to work together and support one another through this shared experience. When describing her personal observations of this

Hannah describes how, “it's so cool to see them support each other, because some things are harder for others and it really is a compassionate group of people, who some of them have stronger skills in certain areas, but... everyone's like we're working together to do this.” Each student enters into the program hoping to improve upon different things. Depending on their skill level, and what they hope to accomplish and get out of the program, their goals vary. The special thing about this program is though, that each student is provided with the support they need to achieve their specific goals, both in the kitchen as well as in their personal lives. When talking more in depth about this Hannah provides her perspective.

“... a big step for them is simply perfecting or working towards perfecting knife skills, and that is pretty elementary but for some, that's a big step for them to get that down, and for others, it's to be able to put together a four course meal or something. So improvement depends on who you're talking to, which I think is a great thing because we're able to..because we don't define it as achieving x y and z, we're able to support many different people who are in many different places in their lives, and help them take that next step, whatever it is for them”

This ability to tailor the program to what a student needs is important and impactful.

Having the CKA situated within the Feeding Chittenden food shelf is another important aspect of this program. When I first began participant observation over the summer, and before I knew what the CKA program was, I would see CKA students moving throughout the foodshelf- cooking meals in the kitchen, looking for fresh produce back in receiving, or distributing meals out into the pantry. Although they are a part of a separate program, they are completely integrated within the space of Feeding Chittenden. The

program centers around skill training and education, but it is very different from a typical classroom setting that most students are used to. The students might sit for one hour a day, but the other six they are up on their feet, working in the kitchen. This type of learning through active cooking and participation inspires a strong and solid foundation of education as well as promotes community amongst the group. In this setting they are forced to constantly work together and communicate with one another. When commenting on whether or not she thought a sense of community was experienced through this program Hannah explained the following, after mentioning how a speaker at one of the last CKA graduation ceremonies spoke about the power of food to inspire community.

“...the power of food to inspire community and to strengthen community, and I would add food and cooking food in with that because, when you think about it, you take ingredients, you work together, you create something...everyone is making one piece of this, and you sit down and you enjoy it together...this is a pretty gratifying experience I think, I think being in a kitchen, especially in a class setting has the power to create strong team dynamics, strong community bonds, and honestly lasting friendships really...”

The kitchen for education is conducive for learning and community building. It prepares students with the skills they are required to learn in order to have a job in the culinary industry, and allows them to gain a sense of confidence in these skills and in their place in the kitchen.

Based on this overview of the elements of the CKA and the remarks from Hannah, it would appear that this program is entirely a positive one. Although I wish that were to be true, it is important to recognize and acknowledge the shortcomings and downfalls that

exist as well. Like other community development or job training programs, there are always nuances and complexities revealing moments of conflict or negativity within. Each student experiences aspects of this program differently, based on their own assumptions or expectations meaning that it is impossible for the session to be a completely positive one at all times, for each student involved. These moments and experiences will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

Addressing my own positionality for the purpose of transparency, my experiences and time spent at Feeding Chittenden prior to this research beginning resulted in a connection and bond to be formed with the space, and inevitably a slightly biased perspective. My relationship with Feeding Chittenden is a positive one. I believe in the work that they are doing, and the programs they are employing, such as the CKA. This is where my positive outlook and tone that is present throughout this thesis stemmed from. When discussing the CKA and student experiences specifically, I focus heavily on the positive impacts of this program on their lives. This is because these are community members who have been marginalized, and who have likely had many negative experiences surrounding food due to their personal experiences with food insecurity. The CKA program is such a distinct experience from this marginalization, and an experience that brings a lot of positivity to food for the students. This has influenced my own discussion of these experiences, focusing on this positivity as it is so distinct from the students' previous experiences and marginalization in the community. Although I argue that this program results in positive impacts for the students and the community, it is important to acknowledge that not all experiences throughout are always positive ones.



In the following section, I present and discuss specific experiences and thoughts from the Community Kitchen Academy students from the November 2019-February 2020 session. Based on the general remarks from Hannah regarding her observations of CKA, it is clear that this is a program that provides more to students than solely job training. It is a holistic approach to ensure that students are fully supported in all aspects of their lives, and results in positive impacts not only for the students but for the community as well. The employment of the CKA contributes to community development and food security in Burlington, VT. It is because of programs like these that are branches of emergency food pantries and food shelves, that it is vital we begin including emergency food in our discourse and mission surrounding community food security.

### **The Students**

The students who partake in the Community Kitchen Academy are extremely diverse. They range in age, job experience, kitchen experience, they speak different languages, and they come from very different backgrounds. When asking Hannah who should sign up for the CKA program, although first stating that having the time and energy is important due to the rigor of the course, she replied with the following: “...anyone who doesn’t like their job. Anyone who can’t get a job or can’t get enough hours or is unsatisfied and uninspired by the job they’re in and loves to cook, should come take the course.” Although the students have many differences, they share a love for cooking, and are each taking an important step to better their lives and their potential in our community.

I conducted two sets of interviews with six of the CKA students. My initial interview with each student was conducted at the beginning of the session, in mid-November of 2019.

My second interview with each student was conducted towards the end of the session, at the end of January of 2020. I chose to conduct interviews at both the beginning and the end of the session in order to gain insight regarding the impact of the program on the students and to better understand how and in what ways this experience has influenced their lives. The first set of interviews I conducted was when the students were almost done with their day, and had sat down to eat the food that they had prepared in class. It is important to note that elements such as time of day, may influence interview responses. When students are happy that they have successfully finished their dish, and have finally had a warm meal, their responses to my questions may have been more optimistic and positive. My interview questions focused on various topics related to the program such as, what inspired them to join the program, what they hoped to get out of the program, what goals they have for themselves, are there any challenges they are facing, and what are their hopes for the future. These same questions were asked in the initial interview as well as in the final interview, and were tailored based on when they were being asked. For example, when conducting the final round of interviews I asked students what inspires them to keep coming back every day, rather than what inspired them to join the program. The responses from each student were insightful, and I am grateful that they took time out of their busy days in the kitchen to discuss their personal experiences with me.

When asking students what inspired them to join the CKA, most of the answers revolved around loving to cook, having some experience cooking, and needing to find a job. Past experience ranged from some having worked in restaurants before, while others had just enjoyed cooking at home with family or friends. One woman, Sarah, responded with, "...I just love cooking...I mean that's the first place I make myself comfortable in anyone's

home is the kitchen.” On a similar note another woman, Danielle, discussed how although she did not have work experience in a restaurant, “I have a lot of fun cooking food with my family mostly.” A younger student who had some previous cooking education at a technical school described how he did not think college was for him, and he wanted to get more knowledge around food and cooking to build upon what he had already learned. One woman, Jessica, who did have some experience working in restaurants explained why she thought doing this program would be a good idea.

“I’ve been working in fast food, quick service restaurants for 8 years or so, and a couple bakeries and I’ve learned some skills along the way but I wanted to get sort of a concrete education on how to do fine dining skills in the kitchen...to have a formal cooking education that isn’t too expensive...and yeah like I was saying it’s nice to be busy because I’ve been sort of slowing down work, where I work now, which is a pizza restaurant and there isn’t that much opportunity to learn new things so I wanted to see what new skills I could learn and try and go elsewhere.”

Although each student comes from a different background and level of experience, the CKA program is able to teach them the skills that they in particular want to learn and improve upon. For Jessica who had more experience, she wanted to learn fine dining skills, but for others who had less experience working in a kitchen, they were just inspired to learn the basics. Either way, the CKA program works for all of them and their varying hopes and needs.

When discussing what they want to get out of the CKA program, most were hoping that this program would result in better job opportunities. Many had goals of finding jobs in kitchens, and some discussed wanting to improve their culinary skills. “...well I definitely,

to be more efficient when I cook in the kitchen, and also hopefully to lead to you know a job maybe in a bakery, catering, you know, or maybe a small restaurant.” The opportunity to gain skills in order to get a better job, I observed, is one of the most appealing aspects of the program to the students. Although additional benefits are gained that have positive impacts on other aspects of the students’ lives, the appeal of a good job is a huge pull for why students are inspired to join this program.

Many of the students came into the program with hopes and dreams that extended beyond just learning how to cook, or getting a job in the kitchen. They expressed hope for better lives for themselves and their families- getting out of bad living situations, or finally being able to say they finished something. When I asked Sarah what her hopes for the future were she responded with the following, “Happy, comfortable, and fulfilled. Content. That’s all...I’ve had enough hustle and bustle and chaos. It’s time for calm, cool and collected.” Due to unsteady careers or financial situations many of the students have been dealing with chaotic and tense situations, and many discussed a desire to just be happy, secure, and settled. Some were hoping to achieve personal growth, and Julia, who was fairly quiet and shy when she began the program said, “Mostly bettering myself, being more outspoken I guess,” was her main goal. About half of the students commented on a desire to move to a new living situation. Danielle mentioned her dream of moving somewhere quieter, maybe on farmlands, away from the loudness of the city.

“Getting out of the apartment complex I’m in...and into a better place...Also to better myself for my kids mostly. And get them out of, and myself and them out of the apartment complex that we’re in. My mom included.”

Although each student entered the CKA program with varying goals and dreams, regardless, this program functions as a stepping stone for all. It allows the students to gain the skills in the kitchen that will translate to skills that can be utilized in both their future career and personal lives. These skills allow the students to gain a sense of control over their lives, knowing that they have the ability and capability to achieve their goals and desires both in and out of the kitchen. These new capabilities empower students to become food citizens, making educated choices surrounding food and the food system.

In one fascinating discussion I had with Jessica, she described how her overall goals and hopes for the future extend beyond her personal life, and are aimed at the larger community. She explained the importance of change in the food system, going back to growing more of our own food and eating local.

“Well I mean we were just talking this morning about where we think the food industry is going to go in the next 2, 5, 10 years and I’m hopeful that consumers will start voting with their dollars in a way that we move away from fast food and away from factory farming and more towards local produce and even just growing stuff on our own again would be nice...if we’re eating the right food we won’t have as high of medical bills so it’s like the whole system is a cycle. Food is medicine. That’s what I hope will shift in our mentality.”

For a student like Jessica who has goals that extend beyond her own personal needs and desires, the CKA program is providing her with skills that will allow her a larger capacity to do the work she wants in our community, to help promote this larger goal. With her new capabilities she is empowered in being a food citizen in the community, and will make educated choices to support a sustainable local food system. O’Kane describes the

importance of food citizens saying we need, "...people who are prepared and able to make food-related decisions that help to improve the sustainability of our modern food system." (O'Kane 674). Having a position in a restaurant or a food systems job through Jessica's credentials gained at CKA, she will be able to influence change, in a meaningful way. It is important to note that although many students have goals for themselves that will lead to positive impacts on their personal lives, they also share larger goals for the community that will extend beyond them and their personal circle, in positive ways, and will be far reaching in the greater community.

After getting the students initial thoughts on the program and their goals and hopes for the future, I had the opportunity to interview them again towards the end of the session to follow up on how the program has been impacting their lives thus far. They discussed with me what inspired them to keep coming back to Feeding Chittenden and the CKA program every day. Many expressed that the prospect of finally finishing something, and now being so close to that goal, was extremely exciting. "It helps to be out and working with people. The prospect of completing the program is exciting. I have to take each week at a time... I can't believe how much I've learned and I'm hoping after I graduate, the cooking skills will stick with me." It is clear that many of the students were confident in the fact that they now knew they could finish the program, which at the start had been a daunting task for many. "I wanted to start something and actually finish something, and I have started it, and I'm about to finish it, so I've completed the goal I've really wanted." This confidence in knowing they can complete such a rigorous course is something of great importance, the students will be able to hold with them as they leave the program and enter into the workforce.

When reflecting on the program, some individuals expressed challenges that they faced throughout. Often these challenges were unrelated to the kitchen, but impacted their everyday life. Some struggled with various house or car problems, while others struggled with mental health challenges. "...just personal things. Challenge of getting up every morning...my personal life and social connections in Burlington are fine, I just have to make sure that after graduation I have somewhere to go so I don't just get isolated," Danielle said. She struggled in particular with getting out of her house, and not feeling isolated, but expressed how coming to class every day and being social and around people was really good and really important for her. This program worked as a reminder for her of this important need in her life. It is important to acknowledge that each student faced their own challenges and struggles throughout the program. Regardless, each continued to come every day though until they finished, because they knew that despite the challenges, this program was a positive step that would result in the potential for a better life for themselves and their families, in whatever ways that meant for them.

Along with these challenges, in the second round of interviews moments of negativity and critiques of the program popped up as well. A critique that was mentioned by two students was that often it was challenging to find all of the ingredients for the recipes they were working on. Because the program relies on food that is at the food shelf, there is not always a surplus of options or ingredients available.

"I understand because it is the food shelf and everything is donated but I just, I feel like...you are trying to teach us the prime essentials of the kitchen and cooking but the recipes that we are given and because it is the food shelf, we don't have what we

need. We're being taught to only substitute...but I love the program. I'm learning and having fun."

This critique was mentioned by two students and seemed to be the central point of frustration in their experience. Although by relying on food at the food shelf, CKA is fighting food waste which is beneficial for the community, it results in shortcomings for the CKA program.

Another point of frustration discussed by students related to the fact that each student came from a different background and a different level of experience in the kitchen. Like I mentioned previously, although this can be seen as a positive aspect of the program, making it work for any community member to help them achieve their goals, it can result in challenges for the students as a result. The youngest student in the program expressed how because there was a large age gap between himself and the other students it was challenging for him to relate to them and their experiences. Where others had a slightly easier time finding community amongst their peers, he struggled more in finding this. He was grateful though that the assistant chef was around his age, so he was able to bond with him and form a friendship. Branching off of this idea that every student comes from a different background, Jessica expressed how this has caused personal frustrations for her own experiences in the kitchen.

"I think my patience is being tested in general...I think just the different learning styles of the people in the class here makes the flow of the class a little different than I'm used to...and there's just varying levels of experience in the kitchen and also levels of motivation to learn...but yeah I find myself taking on an assistant teacher kind of role in a way...it helps me learn too."



Jessica entered into the program with experience working in kitchens. Due to this her level of experience was higher than many of the other students. Although having students from various backgrounds and skill levels make the program much more accessible to all, and may result in a collaborative environment, it also poses challenges for some students. Jessica was able to twist this frustration in a way that benefited her own experience, taking on more of a teacher role and helping other students in the kitchen as needed, resulting in further learning for herself as well. These points of frustration in student experiences are important to acknowledge, in order to portray a holistic overview of the CKA and of student experiences. Although I argue that this program largely results in positive impacts for the students and for the community, moments of negativity and shortcomings of the program, inevitably come up as well.

In reflecting more positively on their experiences with the program, many expressed personal growth as well as growth in the kitchen. Julia told me a story of completing a favorite recipe that she never thought she was capable of before: "...he gave me a recipe for General Tso's chicken which is my favorite, and I couldn't believe I actually completed it in one day...it was challenging but I did it." Another student, Laura, described the more practical skills that she gained that have resulted in growth in the kitchen and career potential. "I have a lot more credentials now than I ever did before. I now have the two-year Vermont liquor license through this class, we're ServSafe certified...and that just opens more doors." These credentials provide students with greater capabilities in the kitchen as well as in potential job opportunities. Jessica focused more on her own personal growth as a result of the program commenting on how she has been exposed to new ways of doing things and new learning styles, due to the diversity of students in the course.

“...I’ve gotten out of my comfort zone quite a bit...” Each of these experiences, although varying have resulted in positive results for each student. It is fascinating to observe how although every student is taking the same course, due to individual differences, everyone will gain something different from CKA based on their own goals and desires. The impacts of the program are multi-dimensional and varying, but are leading to positive change not just for the individual students but for the larger community as well.

Along with the current CKA students, I also had the opportunity to interview Evan. Evan completed the CKA program during the last session and is now the chef assistant to the current group of CKA students. In this role he helps the head chef lead and guide the students throughout the session. It is clear through talking to Evan, that this program allows students to gain confidence in their abilities, and to know their worth. When I was talking to him about his future career plans he said the following. “No dishwashing, because I have higher skill than that so I want to have a decent job.” He knows that through this program, he has gained the skills he needs to have a good job, and is confident in that. This confidence is something I noticed the current students possess as well, when talking about their future plans.

When commenting on what he personally gained from the program, similarly to the current students I had talked to, Evan did not mention anything specific to the kitchen or any specific cooking skills. Instead he mentioned a change in attitude.

“It helped me get a better attitude. That’s what you need in the workplace. You need a better attitude with people, you can’t get upset over little things....being a fast adapter. Fast at adapting with new situations, especially with the kitchen. Especially

with my class we weren't here the whole time because of the renovations here... so it was very hectic, with that it really changed the workplace environment for me..."

Evan noted a very important aspect of the CKA program here. Although it provides students with skills to prepare them for a job in the culinary industry, it provides much more than that as well. For many, like Evan, it results in an attitude change, which can be translated and utilized in any career he decides to pursue, as well as in his personal life. The ability to be fast adapting in new situations will allow for resilience. This resilience that CKA students gain ensures that even when things get tough, they know they now have the skills they need to be okay and continue being productive in the community.

In my discussion with Evan he pointed out the importance of this program, outside of just career and job related opportunities, but for the families and for the home. He commented on how so many people rely on ordering food out, and do not know how to cook for themselves or for their families anymore. The CKA program provides people with the skills they need to take back and acquire their food agency, and cook meals for themselves and their families from scratch.

"I think it's important because not a lot of people these days cook at home, most people these days go out and they just get fast food. Like my family for example, every night they get fast food, and I can't do it. My mom is like 'Do you want McDonalds?' and I'm like I just got out of work I can't eat McDonalds, like I can't do that. So this experience, is really nice cause it just teaches the well rounds so, someone can learn how to make a meal and they'll bring that home and they can share that with someone else, and then they can make that meal, and it's literally like \$10 to make it instead of going out at McDonalds and spending \$10 on one

person. \$10 and you make the whole family a meal. That's why I really like this program. I go home and I just find random ingredients and put it together and make something really nice."

Evan brings up a lot of important points here when talking about the value of having the skills to prepare food at home. Often individuals are in a situation where they do not have the capabilities to prepare their own food. When discussing food agency Trubek et al., mentions, "Such moves, from aspiration to action, are particularly important in the contemporary American context, where it is increasingly feasible to choose not to cook and still be fed." (Trubek et al. 298). The skills that these students acquire provides them with the capacity to select ingredients and prepare a meal from scratch at home. This saves families money because as Evan mentions, you can create a well-rounded healthy meal from scratch with fresh ingredients at a cheaper cost, than relying on fast food and eating out. Having the skills to prepare meals at home also results in healthier eating habits. Evan explained to me that after taking the CKA course he would much rather prepare his own food than go out and eat. By creating meals from scratch, he is eliminating processed, unhealthy food options, that he otherwise would have needed to rely on. Bringing this new skill set into the home will not only impact the CKA students' eating choices, but their families' eating choices. Eating a healthier diet by limiting the intake of fast food results in people feeling better and having more energy. This acquired food agency will have positive impacts on the individual's life, allowing them to have the energy and health to be productive in their personal life as well as in their career surrounding food.

Every student that comes to CKA comes in with their own personal goals and hopes for what they want to get out of the program, and what they want to achieve in the future.

They come in after experiencing unemployment and underemployment and are taking that next step, which I imagine is extremely challenging and intimidating, to gain skills which will lead to positive impacts, bettering their lives. This program teaches students not only skills in the kitchen, but life skills as well. Confidence is gained, and students learn that they are capable of achieving their goals both in the kitchen, and outside of the kitchen. The program has its shortcomings, and the students often experience challenges along the way, as this full time program is tough and rigorous, but they continue to come each day until they complete it. I have observed changes in confidence and attitude amongst these students. At the beginning some were shy or timid, but by the end stood with a sense of confidence around Feeding Chittenden. At their graduation ceremony I watched as they served the meal they had prepared for friends and family, prideful and passionate as they discussed what they had created and the ingredients they had used. This three month program had led to a transformation within the students, who now left with confidence, experience, and new capabilities.

### **Impacts of the Community Kitchen Academy on the Burlington Community**

It is clear from the previous section that the CKA has lasting positive impacts on the students in the program, providing them with skills to improve their personal lives and careers. This program also includes various unique elements though that result in positive impacts for different aspects of the community as well. On discussing the various facets of CKA's impact, Service Coordinator, Hannah, explained the importance of programs like CKA.

“I think it’s necessary to have programs that do these kinds of things, but also programs that think in that kind of dynamic way where they can serve more than one purpose, because it is a big deal, it’s a big deal program, and you can’t have something like that unless...or why would you have something like that unless it was serving as many purposes as it possible could.”

A program like CKA requires the collaboration of many different people, and many different resources in order to run efficiently. With the amount of time, energy, and resources it requires to run a program like this, it is important that it is functioning in a unique, dynamic, meaningful way, that is impactful in not just the students’ lives but in the greater community as well. The impacts of CKA can be felt and observed in a multi-dimensional way.

One important aspect of the CKA program is surrounding the food that the students use during the program, in the kitchen. All of the food comes from the food shelf, and is food that has been donated that would have otherwise gone to waste. In this way, the CKA program is contributing to fighting food waste in the Burlington community, by taking it and repurposing it into important ingredients they can learn with, in the kitchen, and prepare meals with. Oftentimes when I am conducting participant observation in the receiving section of the food pantry, CKA students will come in looking through the various boxes of donated produce, searching for the perfect ingredients for their recipes. Recently I put aside a whole box of green peppers for a student who was cooking some type of chili recipe in class that day. It is important to understand that these students are not able to go out and purchase whatever ingredients they need for that day's class. They rely on

donations and ingredients in the food shelf, transforming and altering recipes based on what is available to them, and in that way eliminating food waste in the community.

Every day in class the students cook meals that they consume for lunch. They then package and redistribute the remainder of the food out into the food pantry for clients to take home, which is another extremely important element of the CKA program. Hannah explained this to me when I talked with her about her thoughts on the importance of CKA in the community.

“...this course well it...produces thousands and thousands of pounds of food, in the form of prepared meals that are then distributed to the community. So not only are people learning but these students are then providing food for their own community. So the community really extends outside of the classroom and outside of the kitchen and the fruit of their labor, literally, is shared with those in need in the community, and that lends a second purpose, maybe even a third purpose to what this type of programming is all about.”

Through this distribution clients are receiving healthy meals made from scratch with fresh ingredients. They are able to take food home with them, and have a warm meal that is already prepared. This contributes to fighting food insecurity in the community, by providing clients with prepared meals, and contributes to healthy eating, as they are provided with food that is made from whole ingredients and is not processed or a fast food alternative. Providing food to the community that they are a part of is a very rewarding task for the CKA students, because they are able to observe their hard work being used in a very meaningful way. One of the students told me a story about a day she was tasked with distributing food into the pantry.

“Yesterday we packaged a whole bunch of stuff that Evan and James and Chef made on Monday, and we put them all in containers and I wrote the names and I put them in the stock refrigerator in the food shelf area, and it was over like, maybe 60 different containers of soup, lasagna, and after writing the ingredients on each container, I took a cart and put them all in the cooler, and it seems by the end of the day, they were all snagged up. That was rewarding.”

It is gratifying for students to see that the meals that they are creating are having an impact in the lives of people of the Burlington community. Not only are they learning important culinary and career skills, but they are simultaneously giving back to community members.

Another important aspect of the CKA program is the impact that it has on businesses in the Burlington community. This program trains people extremely well with skills required to enter into the culinary industry. One aspect of the program is the internship week. During this week students are placed at different internship sites around the community, learning new skills and gaining experience in potential future career opportunities. The students I talked to about their internship week all had great experiences and learned a lot at their sites. One woman completed her internship with Sodexo on UVM’s campus. She lit up when I asked her about her experience, “ “Oh my goodness! And I got some pictures! I made some roses out of frosting, rose buds, leaves, decorated lots of cupcakes...and scones, and Danishes, and lots of cookies.” This experience allowed her to gain new skills in a specific area that she was really passionate about, and also prepared her further for a job in this area of the culinary industry. Another woman discussed her internship experience with me when I asked about her goals for the future. “I really liked the internship because I was able to be like an apprentice basically under a



baker...so I think that would be really fun to continue trying to learn that way.” This experience opened her eyes to a new skill, and a new way of learning. She hopes to find other experiences like this in the future, to expand upon her skill set. Each of these internship experiences has contributed to preparing the students for various jobs in the community.

In terms of finding jobs with businesses in the community, the students are continuously supported and guided, even after they graduate. Hannah discussed with me her role in this process. “I am working on building up our job board and making sure that that is clear. I work with people who have done the program and come back, to help them apply and find jobs. I have more time and energy to dedicate to follow up...so that’s really what I’ve been trying to champion.” Hannah also explained to me the further value of the CKA program in Burlington, through the businesses that hire CKA graduates.

“I think it is really valued in this community, not just by the students but I talk to people hiring, I talk a lot to the folks who hire our students and they love getting CKA grads, because our students know what they’re doing, and to think that in itself is a huge stimulus for local businesses, because we are training at a very high skill level, training their employees for them, how do you not value that...and we have chefs at Waterworks and Sodexo and all over town, who hire graduates and are psyched on that because they really know what they’re doing. The value continues to be shown in areas all over the community map.”

The students leave the CKA program extremely well trained and prepared, which is why many businesses are so excited to hire these students. They recognize that these students will be coming to them with a certain caliber of skill, and do not have to worry that they

will not know how to complete certain tasks. By having a cohort of well-trained CKA graduates available for hire, there is potential for a result in restaurants being better themselves, as an impact of this, and due to the availability of highly skilled individuals around. Along with their culinary training they have also improved upon personal and workplace skills relating to confidence, attitude, and work-ethic. These attributes as well, contribute to a larger group of dedicated, hard-working employees. This has positive impacts for the restaurants and businesses, which results in positive impact on the larger Burlington community.

The positive impacts of the Community Kitchen Academy can be felt in multi-dimensional ways throughout the Burlington community. Food insecure individuals are provided with fresh, healthy meals created with ingredients that would have otherwise been wasted. Students graduate the CKA program with new job and culinary skills which in turn impacts and betters their own personal lives as well as betters the community through entering the workforce in the Burlington community. Although CKA is a vocational job training program, the benefits are multi-faceted. It is due to community development programs like CKA that it is crucial we include emergency food shelves and pantries in our vision and mission of community food security.

### **The Inclusion of Emergency Food**

For too long emergency food pantries and food shelves have been ignored in discourse surrounding food security. They have been viewed as an alternative or last resort option and have been seen as a space functioning outside of our central food system. They

are often forgotten about or pushed aside in conversations and are rarely included in visions of food security.

We must recognize the value that emergency food pantries and shelves bring to our communities. It is clear from data discussed in the literature review that these spaces are being heavily relied upon and used consistently and chronically by community members. This chronic use of these spaces has led to a transformation in their traditional roles, to now employing unique and meaningful programs within our communities that support and promote community food security. It is clear that these spaces are beginning to recognize their new role in our communities as well. With the change in name to Feeding Chittenden, the food shelf made a statement to the community recognizing their community development value, beyond solely providing food to clients. This shift is important to understand and to evaluate in order to highlight the value of the space and to learn from its positive impacts.

The Community Kitchen Academy at Feeding Chittenden is just one example of a community development program being employed by an emergency food shelf. The multidimensional positive impacts of this program can be observed and felt in various aspects and through various people throughout the Burlington community. Other spaces of emergency food have transformed as well, implementing various programs similar to CKA or different programs that focus on other important skills related to things such as gardening or education, that also result in meaningful impacts on the community. Learning about these programs is vital in understanding how they are influencing and impacting the community, resulting in community development and food security.

Community food security focuses on a community based framework that centers around community development which extends beyond the traditional approach of addressing food insecurity at the individual level to the community level, focusing on collaboration and local food systems. The CKA contributes to this movement by utilizing food from the local food system, often receiving produce donated from various producers and farmers that would have otherwise been wasted. The meals created with these ingredients are circled back out into the community, feeding food insecure individuals. The program contributes to and supports community development through its central job training element, providing students with culinary and work-ethic skills so that they are capable of going out into the community and finding a secure job. Employing these students helps to ensure that in the future they personally will no longer be food insecure, because now they have the capacity and the agency to be more productive members of the community through higher skilled jobs, resulting in financial security. This also benefits the businesses of the community as they have the ability to hire well trained employees who have graduated from the CKA program. All of these elements contribute to the promotion of community food security.

It is because of emergency food shelves such as Feeding Chittenden, and the programs they employ, such as the Community Kitchen Academy, that we must begin including emergency food in our discourse surrounding community food security. It is crucial that we learn about CKA and programs like it to better understand their multi-dimensional community benefits. We can no longer ignore or push aside emergency food shelves. Their contribution is impactful and meaningful, having lasting effects in our communities. We need to include emergency food shelves in our vision, mission, and

discourse surrounding food security, as they are employing community development programs that promote community food security in diverse and meaningful ways.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

### **Limitations**

It is important to recognize the limitations to this research. The data collected from participant observation and interviews pointed to specific findings that not only argued for the inclusion of emergency food in our discourse and action surrounding community food security, but included concepts such as food citizenship and food agency into the discussion.

In the discussion of the findings a basic definition and understanding of what it means to be a food citizen is referred to. This includes having the capacity through education to make informed choices regarding food, that will promote a sustainable food system. It takes the power off of policy makers and public health professionals and puts the power into the individual and the community. This is one very specific type of citizen though, and one very specific type of food citizen. Due to the various aspects of citizenship and the different types of citizenship that exist, it was impossible to explore the term fully. More specifically, there may be different types of food citizens, or food citizens functioning in different ways in different parts of the food system, that were left out of this thesis. Based on the research conducted, I was only able to explore the concept of food citizenship as it relates to students of the CKA program.

In terms of food agency, I was only able to explore this concept in relation to the students of the CKA program, and the type of food agency I observed them building. I believe there are very interesting connections between building food agency and becoming a food citizen that I was able to discuss on a basic level, but I was not able to explore this

connection in more detail as the students graduated from the CKA program into the greater Burlington community.

### **Directions for Future Research**

It is crucial that the concepts brought up and included in this thesis, such as food citizenship and food agency are further explored in the context of emergency food. When reviewing the literature there was little in the discourse linking these concepts to emergency food. Through the discussion of the findings in this thesis it was necessary to introduce and include these concepts as they relate to emergency food, but now they must be explored in more complex ways in this context. There is an important link between building food agency and becoming a food citizen, that will be important to further research and comprehend. Exploring what it means to be a food citizen in this context of emergency food, as well as exploring the different types of food citizens, is another crucial aspect of future research.

Lastly, there is an important link between the moral neoliberal and ethical citizen that scholar Muehlebach describes as emerging out of neoliberalism, and the food citizen that I describe in this thesis. The mass mobilization of ethical citizenship which embraces social solidarity, and seems to exist outside of the realm of charity can be interestingly linked to emergency food and the concept of food citizenship. Future research should explore these concepts, connecting them more complexly in order to better understand neoliberalism, or to critique neoliberalism and emergency food.

## **Conclusion**

When I began this project I had a very vague and uninformed idea about what went on at a food shelf. All I knew was that I was deeply passionate and inspired by food, and was extremely troubled by the thought of individuals not having sufficient access to culturally appropriate, nutritionally adequate food. From these raw passions grew my project and the central theme of my thesis. My excitement for emergency food grew as I gained more experience interacting with people at Feeding Chittenden, and my research focus and questions changed and evolved. I hit low points when I observed the anger and competitiveness that often exists in these spaces, and at times questioned if community can exist at all in this environment. These moments always passed though, and I was soon grounded again by the positive spirits and collaboration of the clients and staff around me. Although nuanced and complex, community does exist in this space.

Each experience at Feeding Chittenden helped to inspire and focus my thesis in a way that I believe is meaningful and will have tangible impacts on the community. I am hopeful my research will add to the conversations surrounding emergency food and the Community Food Security movement, making a strong argument for the inclusion of emergency food in this discourse. At the beginning of this project Hannah expressed to me that there was a lack of qualitative data describing the experiences and impacts of the CKA program. It is my hope that the qualitative data I provide through interviews with students will be important to Feeding Chittenden in highlighting student experiences, and can act as an example for other food shelves as well. My experiences at Feeding Chittenden have been some of the most rewarding of my life, and I owe that all to the clients and staff that have been so kind and welcoming and willing to discuss their experiences with me.



Food is deeply personal. It is intertwined with our beliefs, our values, our experiences. Unfortunately many remain without adequate access to this human right. They are forced to rely on the spaces of emergency food that I have discussed in depth throughout this thesis. I am hopeful that emergency food pantries and shelves such as Feeding Chittenden have transitioned away from their traditional role of providing food in acute, short-term situations. They are now promoting community development and food security in unique and meaningful ways, that support, guide, and lift community members up- educating and nourishing them. I have found this to be true at Feeding Chittenden through the Community Kitchen Academy, and am confident that similar programs with multi-faceted goals and results exist and are emerging in other communities as well.

For emergency food pantries and shelves that feel stuck in their traditional roles of solely providing food to clients, I am hopeful that they use Feeding Chittenden and the Community Kitchen Academy as well as similar community centered programs across the country, as an example. It is possible to employ community public health programs, functioning as a hub and center for community development, and promoting food security, while simultaneously emphasizing and supporting local food systems. So many emergency food pantries and shelves are already doing these things or are working towards doing these things. That is why it is crucial we include emergency food in our conversations, discourse, and actions surrounding community food security. Our inclusion of emergency food in our vision and mission of food security will strengthen our community food systems, promoting food security in complex and meaningful ways that champion and lift up communities in multi-dimensional ways.

In light of current global events, it would have been irresponsible to not discuss the significant impacts that COVID-19 is having on human lives across the globe. This public health crisis will have particular impacts on the populations mentioned in this thesis- the food insecure, the homeless, those who depend on employment in the food sector, and those who are or now will be unemployed or underemployed. Thankfully I finished conducting research at Feeding Chittenden prior to the outbreak of the Corona virus in the United States. It is important to note that all participant observation and interviews were conducted prior to February of 2020. However, since the outbreak, I have continued to volunteer at Feeding Chittenden weekly. The space feels heavy. Clients, for the time being, are not able to enter the building to pick out their groceries. Instead they are provided with a pre-packaged box of various hand-selected food items, which is passed to them through the doorway of the building. The Community Kitchen Academy session that was supposed to begin this month is no longer able to. The students that I highlighted throughout this thesis, although having graduated the program prior to the outbreak, are likely struggling and out of work. Food and the careers and industries surrounding food, are in a sense at a halt. Restaurants are struggling to remain open dealing with the necessity of making enough money while simultaneously worrying about the health of their employees and consumers. Employees are being laid off and hiring is at a standstill.

The positive impacts that Feeding Chittenden and the Community Kitchen Academy have on the Burlington community still hold true, but due to the current circumstances are not able to radiate outwards as they have before. The sense of community that exists through the space of Feeding Chittenden is being sacrificed for the greater good and health of the population as we practice social distancing. This sacrifice of person-to-person

connection at the food shelf is not easy, but it is necessary. I am hopeful that the deep roots and connections that branch out from Feeding Chittenden into Burlington will hold strong at this time, bringing community members and businesses together, despite the lack of physical connection that is possible. I am confident that when we emerge from this crisis, positivity will radiate once again, and I am hopeful that the community is comforted knowing that in these uncertain times, food will continue to nourish our bodies and souls.

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