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Assessing the Need for a Social Worker at the Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf

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Introduction

Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf (CEFS)
- Largest direct service emergency food provider in Vermont
- Serves over 12,000 people/year
- Works to alleviate hunger through grocery services, hot meals, and home delivery
- Offers a culinary job training program
- CEFS seeks to understand client need for assistance in accessing/coordinating additional public assistance services and resources
- If so, could CEFS improve its services by staffing a social worker on site?
- Project Goal: Collect data from CEFS users to assess current need for in-house social worker to assist with diverse needs beyond emergency food assistance.

Methods

- Conducted literature search to identify surveys/needs assessments regarding role of social workers in low-income, high-needs populations
- Interviewed CEFS Community Engagement Manager
- Designed survey (based on above) to assess:
  - Basic demographics of CEFS clientele
  - Clients’ use of other assistance programs and need for additional services not currently available
  - Barriers to accessing public assistance programs
  - Anticipated utilization of social work services
- Draft survey piloted over two-week period
- Final survey revised and administered to 70 users of CEFS over a four-week period
- Responses entered and analyzed using Microsoft Excel

Results

Key Findings

81% of respondents stated they would use a social worker at CEFS

51% reported difficulty accessing services.
Most common barriers included:
1. Paperwork
2. Determining eligibility

Only 2 out of 70 food shelf users surveyed reported an income above 185% of the federal poverty line

Discussion/Conclusion

Take-Away Points

- Services utilized are not meeting clients’ needs
- Barriers cited most frequently:
  - Filling out paperwork
  - Negative experiences seeking services
  - Lack of transportation and internet access
  - Confusion about eligibility
- Above barriers could be addressed through social work services
- Most respondents have a household income which makes them eligible for federal and state services
- Many respondents expressed feeling satisfied, comfortable, and respected during CEFS interactions

Limitations

- Small sample size
- Limited survey collection period (October)
- Data is from a self-selecting population as clients volunteered to participate
- Possible variation in survey administration (seven administrators)

Future Directions

The high level of eligibility among respondents, barriers to accessing services, and expressed desire for service coordination suggest a strong need for a social worker on staff at CEFS. With a person in this position, the food shelf could further provide opportunities for their clients to break the cycle of poverty.

References

