Ensuring Efficacy in Local Food Shelf Programming

2023

Summary Report

Farmstand at the Food Shelf

Contents

Foreword

The contents of this report come from a years-worth of time spent at the South Burlington Food Shelf and Common Roots, as I set out to explore whether the current programming matched the needs of Food Shelf Customers. **Although I relied on various methods to collect quantitative and qualitative data, the most valuable data turned out to be the time I spent at my place of research.** Six hours a week at the food shelf, plus more at Common Roots, allowed me to observe the operational practices of both organizations, as well as experience crucial relationship-building with customers, volunteers, and staff.

My insights in this report reflect the compassion and care shown by the South Burlington Community, and this will hopefully serve as a reflexive practice that furthers the mission of both organizations. **This report will serve as a testament to the importance of the Farmstand at the Food Shelf and showcase how the singularity of the program serves households in South Burlington.**

A Powerful Partnership

Starting in 2020, the Farmstand at the Food Shelf began distributing Common Root's organic produce to Food Shelf Customers during the growing season, from May to November. **For the last four years, fresh produce, grown only a few miles away, has been available to the hundreds of households served by the South Burlington Food Shelf.** The Farmstand mimics a "farmer's market setup", where Food Shelf Customers are free to browse the bounty of veggies- from squash, to radishes, and beyond- and take whatever they will use. Food Shelf Customers are given both the agency to choose the produce they want, as well as to take with no limits, a practice that is not often possible in food assistance spaces.

While the official partnership between Common Roots and the South Burlington Food Shelf has lasted for four years, the professional relationship between the directors of each organization extends back more than 15 years. The mutual respect and admiration between these two directors manifests in the expansiveness allowed for the programming of the Farmstand at the Food Shelf. The relationship between both directors and organizations is marked by trust, support, and mutual aid, allowing for the joint program to flourish and adapt.

Farmstand at the Food Shelf Hours:

Thursdays 4pm-6pm

Fridays 8am-10pm

Saturdays 8am-10pm

What the Farmstand at the Food Shelf Provides:

- High quality, local, organic produce
- Lightly-processed foods made with Common Roots Produce
- Fresh meals made by Common Roots' chef
- Recipes
- Local animal proteins
- Plant starts

The Challenges of Food Shelves and Nutrition

Food shelves are just one strategy in the fight against hunger. Amongst food shelves, different operations, as well as the kinds of food available, change the experiences of food shelf customers. The amount of client-choice and agency customers have is determined by the way a food shelf operates. **Generally speaking, food shelf customers tend to have poorer diet quality than their counterparts (Simmet et al., 2017)(Byker Shanks, 2017).** A wide variety of nutrition interventions appear to be effective, but oftentimes food shelves lack fresh produce and culturally appropriate foods that would generate more long-term solutions (An et al., 2019) (Verpy et al., 2003). Food shelves may be limited in the fresh produce they can supply, but when they do have access to fresh food, their impact can be enhanced (Bertmann et al., 2021). **The hours of the South Burlington Food Shelf and the high quality produce offered by Common Roots have combined to create a unique program with a particular ability to meet the needs of customers.**

Methodology

This research utilized both quantitative and qualitative data collection. Continuing Common Roots' procedure from previous summers, customers gave feedback on each week's recipe samples by rating the samples, and the responses were recorded. Data regarding the number of people who used the Farmstand each day, how many samples were taken, how many printed recipes were taken, and other observations (like popular produce) was recorded.

A short survey was distributed to food shelf customers to gauge the effectiveness of the educational programming as well as participants' satisfaction with the different aspects offered by the Farmstand. The survey employed a variety of question types aimed at learning about what features of the current programming Food Shelf Customers found helpful and what more they would like to see in the future.

Interviews with the directors of Common Roots and the South Burlington Food Shelf were conducted to get a sense of their goals for the Farm Stand at the Food Shelf, as well as how they view the programming. Interviews were semi-structured and NVivo was used for open-coding to find themes.

What We Found

Food shelf customers frequently spoke of the value of the Farmstand, an idea reinforced by the results of the data collection. From May to November, Food Shelf Customers utilized the Farmstand hundreds of times. From just August to November, produce, recipe samples, and prepared meals were taken from the Farmstand 563 times. **On average 74% of food shelf customers used the Farmstand.** Thursday proved to be the most popular day at the Farmstand for Food Shelf users, with 44% of customers shopping on Thursdays.

Friday and Saturday saw almost equal amounts of customers, with 29% and 27% of customers, respectively. Feedback from samples show the majority of taste tests were positive. **The most popular recipe samples were the maple balsamic salad dressing and the squash cornbread.** One hundred percent of the 21 customers who tried the maple balsamic salad dressing reported that they liked it. From August to November, customers took home 384 full sized versions of the recipe samples.

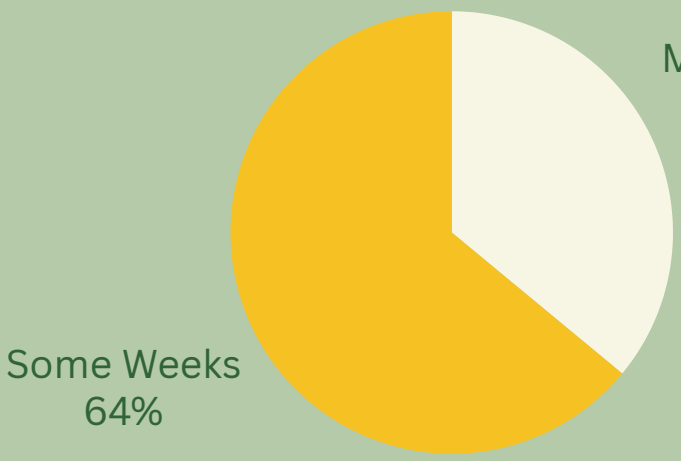
The 2023 Farmstand in Numbers

3,123 visits to the food shelf
$69,600 worth of food donated by Common Roots
384+ recipe samples distributed
4 varieties of plant starts shared (cucumbers, tomatoes, lettuce, and peppers)

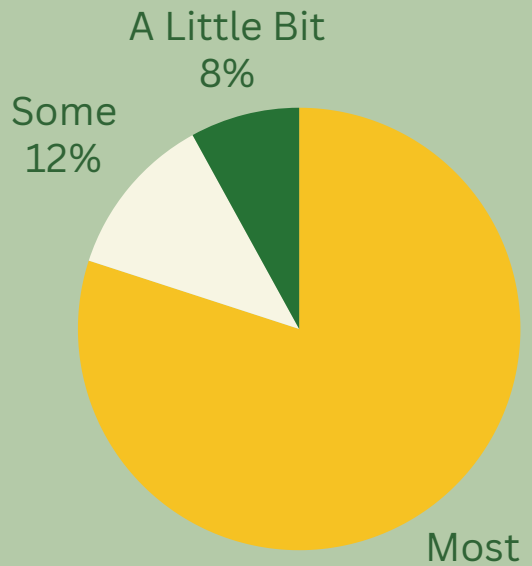
Survey Distribution and Results

After three months of data collection, we received 26 responses from Food Shelf Customers known to use the Farmstand. Impediments to getting survey responses included the time-consuming nature of filling out surveys and potential language barriers and literacy.**The survey showed consistent support for the current programming at the Farmstand, both by customers using multiple aspects of the programming and finding them helpful.** Eighty percent of respondents reported being familiar with most of the produce offered. For the times that customers were unfamiliar with produce, it was a fair split between if people would take unfamiliar produce or not.

In my household we cook with produce from the Common Roots stand....



How much produce have you cooked with/eaten before?



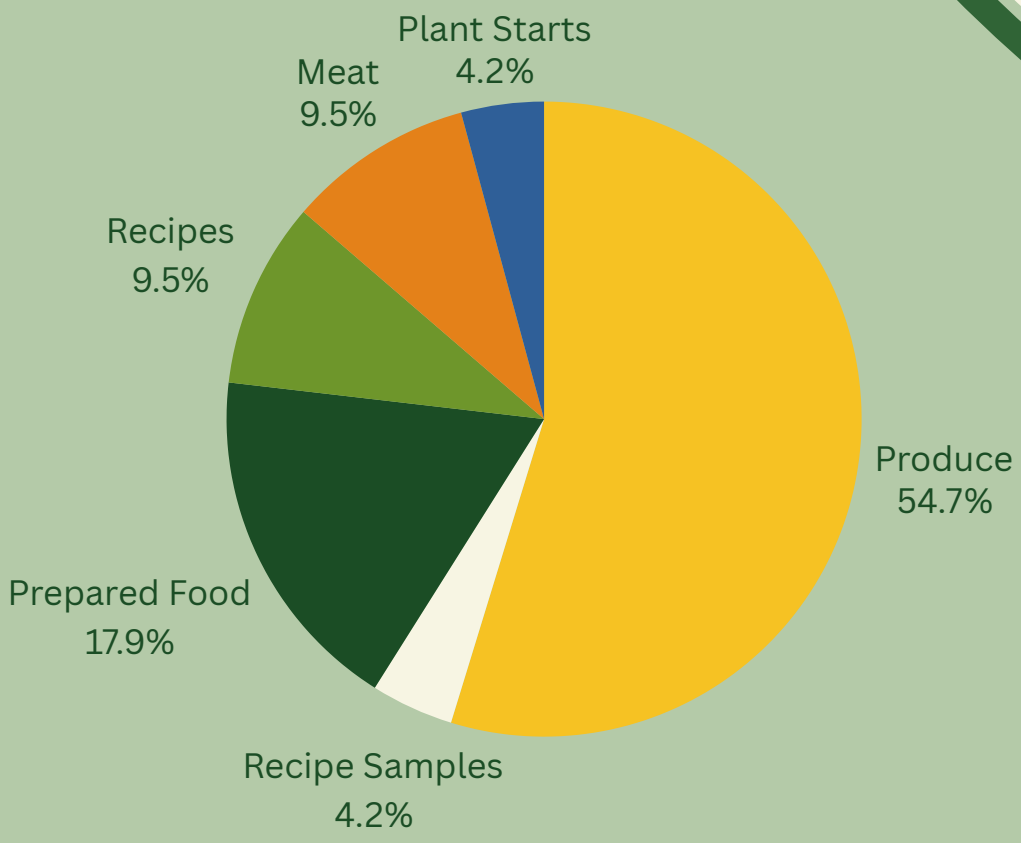
A surprising result was that more people reported having no barriers to using produce than those that reported having barriers. **The most common barrier was not knowing how to cook with the produce.**

Are there barriers to using Common Roots produce?

Barriers to Cooking with Produce

Amongst all of the offerings at the Farmstand, produce was repeatedly ranked as being the most helpful for customers. Prepared food and recipe samples also ranked highly, showing that having ready-made meals, or lightly processed food products available to customers is a valuable part of the Farmstand.

What features of the Farmstand were ranked as the most helpful?



Customers repeatedly praised the quality of the produce, and highlighted the local aspect of the produce. Additionally, numerous customers commented on the time-saving nature of prepared meals and recipe samples. The final question on the survey was open-response, and responses included requests for larger quantities of tomatoes, cucumbers, and cabbages. A few requests went outside what is typically harvested from the Common Roots farm, such as mushrooms, watermelon, and fish.

Matching the Programming to the Needs

Many of the initial questions at the beginning of this research were around whether the current Farmstand programming has been matching the needs of customers at the Food Shelf. Results show mostly satisfied customers, with no vocalized desire for major program change. **Most customers are familiar with the produce and able to use it**. Food shelf customers, through surveys and in person, were vocal in their appreciation for the programming.

Even aspects of the programming not found helpful by the majority, like printed recipes, still had their own admirers, as revealed through in person interactions. **A barrier brought up was around frequency of being able to use the food shelf, which is unfortunately not within the bounds of the Farmstand programming.** All of the surveys taken were filled out by customers who frequented the Farmstand. However, there were plenty of customers who shopped at the food shelf but not at the Farmstand. Although these customers did not take the survey, they often mentioned in-person their lack of storage space for fresh produce or lack of cooking facilities to prepare produce.

Going Forward

The Farmstand at the Food Shelf increases access to fresh, local produce for hundreds of South Burlington households. **The amicable and welcoming environment of the food shelf plus the unique programming offered by Common Roots have created a powerful tool for distributing high quality produce.** Maintaining the current program is worthwhile, as it has been well received. Using the feedback from the survey, next season's produce can be more specifically tailored to the desires of Food Shelf Customers. Continuing to create lightly-processed foods and prepared meals will supplement the fresh produce taken by customers. Amplifying the reach of Farmstand programming by understanding more about Food Shelf Customers who don't utilize the Farmstand is a prudent next step.

> Fresh veggies are expensive, [Common Roots vegetables] are excellent.

> Staff is amazing- so dedicated and smart, people make this system happen.

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Aknowledgments

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