



Documenting the Impact of a Food Pantry Program in Promoting Stability and Independence Among New Haven Residents

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Background

An estimated 22% of New Haven residents live with food insecurity.¹ This means more than 1 in 5 residents of New Haven do not have enough food or enough money to buy food. Notably, issues of food insecurity disproportionately affect people of color and those of lower socioeconomic status, therefore exacerbating disparities in health issues related to food insecurity.²

Christian Community Action (CCA) is a local social service organization that provides housing, financial assistance, food, and other support services for low-income New Haven residents. Their food pantry program, which operates on an appointment-only basis, has regularly provided food to over 80 individuals and families in the New Haven area. CCA is interested in identifying areas for improvement to strengthen their service provision and are also collecting data to bolster their advocacy efforts.

Objectives

1. **Assess** satisfaction amongst users of a food pantry program in New Haven.
2. **Develop** a sustainable method for obtaining and incorporating feedback for quality improvement processes.
3. **Strengthen understanding of** how usage of CCA's food pantry promotes stability and independence among food pantry users.

Methods

Qualitative Data Collection:

- We conducted six semi-structured observations of a typical food pantry appointment with CCA clients.
- We conducted four 10-20-minute semi-structured interviews with five clients of the CCA food pantry.
- Questions focused on overall satisfaction with their choice of foods and experiences with the pantry, as well as influences the pantry has had on their independence and stability, and recommendations for improvements.
- The interview data was transcribed by the team members, and then coded and analyzed in Dedoose using a grounded theory approach.

Quantitative Data Collection:

- Themes from the qualitative analysis as well as existing survey tools (USDA, n.d.; Herron, K., 2017; Askew, T. 2010; Sample Satisfaction Survey, n.d; NFPN n.d; Maryland Food Bank, 2019) were used to inform the development of a 17-item client satisfaction survey. The survey was piloted to six food pantry clients and explored overall satisfaction, food preferences, food insecurity, and independence and stability, and also provided space for additional feedback pertinent to future improvements for CCA to consider.

Results

- **Client Satisfaction with the CCA Food Pantry**
 - **Choice of food:** Clients were largely satisfied with the choice of food at the pantry. However, they also expressed that they would appreciate more diverse cultural foods and more consistent stock of meats, milk, and eggs.



It's not like I go there and someone just hands me a box, like I get to pick out what I want.



- **Client experience:** Clients expressed a positive outlook toward the staff in regard to their treatment at the pantry as well as their helpfulness and willingness to accommodate the clients.
- **Accessibility and efficiency of the food pantry:** Clients valued the ease and efficiency of the process of getting food as well as the proximity of the pantry, allowing them better and more reliable access to the food.
- **Impact of Food Pantry & CCA on Client Independence and Stability**
 - **Supplementary assistance:** For those using federal benefit programs or other forms of assistance, many explained that the income or aid from these programs was often not enough to cover their needs and, as a result, the food pantry program was used to supplement those needs.
 - **Additional resources:** CCA provides many other support services in addition to food assistance, including utility payment assistance, housing assistance, and provision of toiletries and clothing donations, which were identified as a major benefit for food pantry clients.
- **Areas for Improvement**
 - **More consistent supplies of food and shortage of perishables:** Certain types of food seem to be inconsistently offered to clients. Specifically, clients noted shortages at the CCA food pantry of perishable items such as meat, vegetables, and milk.
 - **Stronger enforcement of rules and limitations:** Some CCA clients felt that CCA should enforce more stringent rules on the amount of food people can take.
 - **Food safety:** CCA receives the majority of its food pantry items from the Connecticut food bank, and often those items are close to, or beyond, their best sell-buy date. Clients have expressed concern about being given food past the sell by date on packaging, and perhaps may not understand the meaning of those dates.

“...we could use more toiletries. Yeah maybe once a month, a bottle of shampoo, a couple bars of soap, and a tube of toothpaste, you know? That would help.”

Recommendations

- Develop an electronic database to store data collected from satisfaction surveys; delegate data entry to a specific employee’s daily tasks.
- CCA should consider providing additional educational information for clients about food safety and expiration dates, to help clients use safe food practices while reducing unnecessary food waste.
- Assess current ordering and distribution of perishables to explore current uptake and waste.
- Continue ensuring culturally competent foods from a wide range of diverse backgrounds.
- Explore opportunities to expand the offering of additional resources such as toiletries and clothing donations either directly through CCA or indirectly in partnership with other organizations.

Limitations

- Due to extraordinary circumstances related to COVID-19, we were limited in the number of interviews we were able to conduct, which could have affected the representation of the diverse experiences of food pantry clients.
- Relatedly, we were unable to pilot the survey to the targeted sample size and were only able to elicit responses via phone administration, which resulted in the absence of anonymity and could have introduced bias into the sample.

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