



Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank Stakeholder Engagement Initiative (SEI) PARTNERS & MEMBERS WORKSHOP 2

Wednesday, June 2, 2021, 9:00 to 11:00 am

SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

While introducing themselves, everyone in the meeting briefly explained their programs and partnership with the Food Bank. The small group discussion focused on the first three questions, followed by a group plenary conversation to cover the last three questions:

1. What do you like about your experience with the Food Bank? What's working well?
2. What don't you like about your experience with the Food Bank? What's not working well?
3. What suggestions do you have to help strengthen or improve the Food Bank's operations and services?
4. What's your vision for the future of the Food Bank?
5. How can the Food Bank do a better job of connecting with people and partners that it doesn't currently reach?
6. How can the Food Bank do a better job of connecting with partners that it doesn't currently work with?

Participants were asked to consider the who, what, when, where, and how the Food Bank provides services. Here is the feedback and advice shared by participants:

WHAT IS WORKING WELL

- **Participants appreciated the Food Bank's ability to adapt during the pandemic**, especially the increased communication levels, the fresh vegetable options, the delivery of as many pre-packaged food boxes as needed by pantries and the online ordering system.

On Wednesday, June 2, 2021 representatives from a diverse range of partner and member stakeholder organizations participated in a workshop as part of the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank Stakeholder Engagement Initiative (SEI). Participants represented 23 organizations (see list in Attachment 1).

The focus group was held online using Zoom video conferencing software and included a brief introduction of the project from Chris West, followed by facilitated small group discussions and a plenary discussion between all participants.

The meeting was facilitated by Swerhun Inc., who also wrote this summary. As facilitators that are not advocating for any particular outcome of this project, the intent is to capture the perspectives shared during the discussion, not to assess the merit or accuracy of any of these perspectives. This summary does not indicate an endorsement of any of these perspectives on the part of Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank.

The summary was subject to participant review prior to being finalized. If you have questions about what's here, please don't hesitate to get in touch with the SEI Project Team through Erin Spangler, Engagement Initiative Project Manager, 412-460-3663 ext. 498 or espangler@pittsburghfoodbank.org (also available on [SEI webpage](#)).

- **Partners highlighted the accessibility and convenience of Food Bank’s services.** Partner organizations noted that the Food Bank has a variety of services and resources to support partners. The affordability of the Food Bank services allows partners to primarily order from the Food Bank, in particular fresh produce.
- **Pre-packaged boxes have reduced the burden of packing on partners.** Several partners noted the benefits of the pre-packaged boxes for easy distribution to families and local communities. There is an interest in continuing pre-packaged boxes post-pandemic.
- **Food Bank’s effective and fast response to partners.** Participants noted that Food Bank’s staff were always quick to respond to questions and requests whenever partners call or email staff. The responsiveness helps partner organizations do their job and makes Food Bank’s partners feel valued.
- **Food Bank’s existing connection with other life stabilization programs.** The Food Bank has been supportive of other life stabilizations organizations (e.g. those focused on employment and social services). Participants noted that the Life Stabilization Team at the Food Bank has continued to promote efforts of other life stabilization partners.
- **There’s a great range of resources and supports available from the Food Bank.** Partners have really embraced Food Bank’s efforts to support through assisting with new equipment, grants, and much more. In particular, this support has been beneficial for small pantries working with the Food Bank.
- **The waiving of documentation requirements and restrictions during COVID helped partners reach more people.** It was suggested that opportunities to continue this approach be considered (as opposed to returning to past systems where people had to “prove” their level of need).
- **The pandemic has created opportunities for doing things differently. The Food Bank should look for different ways to embed the learning from the pandemic.** The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a lot about what people need and how they access it. We should hold onto these lessons and carry them forward beyond the pandemic.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE

Communications

- **Food Bank needs to create a better system for awareness and access of their services for both partners and clients.** Some counties and towns are unaware of the Food Bank services available to them. Food pantries are also unaware of other service providers in the area, creating duplication of services. *Suggestions to consider: A map of services (like which pantry offers delivery services) can be created for both clients and partners to create a better network of services. Other suggestions include creating a post about services on the local town webpages, regular newsletter, county-specific packages with information on all types of services available in their area, and better awareness on phone numbers people can call to find out about food services in their area. Similarly, another participant suggested creating a program guide specific to partners and clients to be shared in digital and print formats.*
- **Food Bank should look for innovative ways to connect with communities through leveraging technology and mobile devices.** Corporations like Amazon have figured out how to use technology and systems to make deliveries accessible. The Food Bank should use technology to expand its reach and programs. *Suggestions to consider: Food Bank can create different programs that allow for the use of food lockers for immediate service needs. Participant also noted 412 Food Rescue has pivoted to allow for home delivery through the usage of an app. Another example provided was United Way 211 which provides free and confidential services for finding resources.*
- **Better communication between delivery drivers and pantries receiving the food.** This would help those receiving the food coordinate and organize themselves better to receive the delivery of food. *Suggestions to consider: Food Bank delivery drivers should call 30 minutes before they arrive to help partners/drivers be there on time.*

Coordination and Partnership

- **Pantries have capacity to serve more people but have difficulty connecting with them.** *Suggestions to consider: Use regional hubs to support collaboration between counties and reach smaller food pantries in rural communities. Further collaboration between these*

pantries and the Food Bank can help direct people to these regional hubs.

- **Food Bank is a larger institution that can help support partners and leverage their position to make partnerships with other institutions and organizations.** The Food Bank is in a great position to support system change through advocacy and connecting with other institutions like the United Ways, and Department of Human Services (Allegheny County). *Suggestions to consider: Food Bank should partner and collaborate with other organizations to increase attention to food security issues and other life stabilization supports (employment, transportation, education, etc.). The Food Bank should have lobbyists on retainer to support advocacy efforts and Food Bank's government relations team.*
- **Continue to focus on communication, transparency and access so partners or volunteers know how to contribute to the Food Bank's mission.** The system as a whole may feel impenetrable for smaller organizations/individuals, creating silos. *Suggestions to consider: Work to ensure smaller groups can contribute and intermingle with the Food Bank.*
- **Be aware of the impacts of mission drift for the Food Bank and other life stabilization organizations.** The COVID-19 pandemic has increased financial support from different actors (donations, volunteer support and other organizational support) and interest from other life stabilization organizations to provide emergency food support. *Suggestions to consider: Food Bank should prioritize long-term food security and work through other partners to deliver other life stabilization services like employment. These other life stabilization supports can be transformational to stabilizing families and achieving long-term food security to shorten the line. The Food Bank should continue to support through spreading awareness of these different life stabilization organizations to Food Bank users and where possible supporting these organizations (i.e. providing employment and volunteer placements and sharing flyers of other organizations). One participant emphasized the importance of being aware of other life stabilization organizations' capacity. Referrals are great but if partners don't have the capacity, it poses a challenge for delivering the services needed.*
- **Support systems are not well coordinated with other organizations and local communities.** It also means that participants must register in multiple places and share their stories multiple times. *Suggestion to*

consider: It would be helpful to have better coordination between the food bank network and other non-food networks. Suggestions for consideration: The Food Bank could connect with “Welcoming Pittsburgh”, a group that works out of the Mayor’s office and sees things through a refugee/immigrant lens. The Food Bank and its network could better utilize technology to coordinate the back-end of the work (this already happens in Indiana County where 28 social services agencies share one Release of Information Form and a Google Drive that all partners have access to – which has worked very well, eliminating receipt of services sharing their story multiple times). Rather than inventing a new system, consider directing people to United Way’s 211 services and recognize that when working with seniors that still operate in a world of landlines and paper, it’s essential to reach them through word-of-mouth referrals from people they trust.

What food is received

- **Partners have no control over how much the Food Bank sends—especially when it’s more than the organization’s storage capacity.** One Partner noted multiple instances where they received more than their warehouse can hold which resulted in organizations getting refrigerated box truck that they had to be running 24-7 to keep things cool. Participants noted that was a challenge in particular with the Advance Choices program. *Suggestion to consider: Partners want a mechanism to control the volume received in deliveries.*
- **A few participants said that sometimes produce is not in a good condition.** Some of the produce boxes can be moldy and then the pantries must use their own funds to pay to dispose of it. *Suggestions to consider: It would be good if the Food Bank had a way to ensure that the produce was in good condition. Produce from the American Heart Association has always been beautiful, however that program will end soon.*
- **There’s a dire need to provide healthy choices and culturally relevant foods (i.e newcomer families).** This is especially necessary for people with diabetes, obesity, and refugee/newcomer families who want access to food familiar to them. *Suggestion to consider: The “Thrive” boxes are pretty healthy, including canned tuna (for example) and shelf-stable foods. The Food Bank has a large presence and can use its sphere of influence to be a powerful advocate for improving healthy food provided in senior’s boxes. Additionally, Food Bank should survey partners and Food Bank users to find out what kinds of food would be relevant to their local communities and find ways to meet needs for*

culturally different diets/cultural practices (i.e Halal, vegetarian). When possible, food bank users should be able to select their own food. One participant suggested partnering with the Welcome Pittsburgh group run through the mayors' office to connect with refugee and newcomer organizations.

How food is received

- **Heavy pre-packaged boxes are difficult to transport and can be a barrier to access Food Bank services.** People have trouble transporting heavy 20-pound food boxes, especially when travelling by public transportations. *Suggestions to consider: Participant noted that bags were easier to transport than boxes and their pantry was looking into buying bags with wheels. Other participants suggested expanding the Doorstep Delivery program or other programs that bring boxes directly into communities.*
- **Service delivery has shifted during the pandemic which has increased a burden on people receiving food to contact the Food Bank directly.** People are used to receiving food from their local pantry. For Doorstep Delivery, it meant that people now received the service directly from the Food Bank (because many pantries didn't have the capacity to support delivery). With this change, people were told to contact Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank directly. The process is intimidating and often didn't work. Partners were told by Food Bank users that they called the main phone number at the Food Bank and left a message, but they didn't hear back. Partners have tried calling themselves and had to select from 9 options provided by the phone message and then ended up on hold for 43 minutes. This isn't something that many people can or will do, so partners ended up signing people up themselves for services. *Suggestions to consider: For current and future programs, consider the Food Bank as the "mothership" and the pantries as the "children". The pantries do the work in the trenches and are the people that the community is used to dealing with. The Food Bank is too big and too intimidating.*

When food is received

- **There are seasonal gaps to access food during the summer.** Some programs and funding offered during the school year don't carry over into the summer months and other programs that support SNAP users accessing fresh food like the West Pittsburgh Food Trust (funding ends June 1st). *Suggestions to consider: Partners noted that the Food Bank needs to explore options to provide/replace food to students*

(and their families) during the summer months that they typically receive through school programs.

Other Feedback

- **Promote the SEI survey(s) with food boxes.** Include a sticker on the food boxes that encourages people to complete the survey(s) for this process.

WHAT'S YOUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF THE FOOD BANK

Participants shared the following thoughts:

- Food Bank's mission should support a future where if the community would see someone in need, they would recognize that need and move to fill it by connecting those in need with resources provided by partner organizations and the Food Bank.
- Food Bank should permanently adopt the approach taken during the COVID-19 pandemic that everyone in need can receive support from the Food Bank without having to prove need through documentation.
- Through continued support from different partners, levels of government and blended funding opportunities, everyone in need of food deserves access without having to prove their need.
- Food Bank should continue to support integration of programming across multiple services (food, workforce development, housing, etc.) both meeting immediate needs and also achieve better outcomes in the long-term.

NEXT STEPS

Chris West, SEI Program Sponsor, thanked participants for sharing their ideas, suggestions and feedback. He acknowledged partners' contributions in sharing the paper survey and coordinating with Erin Spangler, SEI Project Manager. Partners were also reminded to continue sharing the online survey (www.pittsburghfoodbank.org/feedback) with their networks. SEI Team is looking for feedback from all kinds of different audiences (open until the end of June).

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Attachment 1. Organizations participating in the meeting

Allegheny County Department of Human Services
AmeriCorps - The Institute for Non-profit Leadership at Slippery Rock University
Auberle
Rebuilding Together Pittsburgh
Boys & Girls Clubs of Western PA
Bridge City Church
Chartiers Center
CISS HOUSE OF HOPE MINISTRIES
Conemaugh Memorial Medical Center
Coraopolis Community Development
Farm to Table Buy Local
Hello Neighbor
Human Services Center Corporation
Indiana County Community Action Program
Jubilee Ministries International
Lawrence County Social Services, Inc.
Partner4Work
Project Destiny Inc.
Rainbow Kitchen Community Services
Salvation Army - Harbor Light
South Hills Interfaith Movement (SHIM)
United Way of Southwestern PA
Victory Family Church