

On Thursday, June 17, 2021, three individuals from the community participated in a focus group as part of Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank's Stakeholder Engagement Initiative (SEI). All participants were very familiar with the Food Bank as volunteers and/or using Food Bank services to access food for their families.

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 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](#)).

Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank Stakeholder Engagement Initiative (SEI) Community Members - Focus Group 1 Thursday, June 17, 2021, 6:00 to 7:30 pm

SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

Discussion was generally organized around the following 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?

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

- **Drive-up distributions work well.** The process was well organized and very convenient. People could sign up and carpool with neighbors to pick up food (which is necessary, since transportation is still a barrier for some).
- **Senior boxes were amazing.** This is especially true in areas with a lot of elderly people. The boost for nutritional needs that the boxes provided was good.
- **Food pantries with shop-through locations are fantastic** because they offer choice.
- **Special efforts by individuals really make a difference.** There was a woman baking bread and giving it to families at one food distribution site that made an extra effort to connect with kids and returning families (for example, putting candies on the bread at Easter). The police also dropped off food boxes, which was appreciated.
- **Produce to People has been well received by the community.** The monthly food pantry day was supplemented by Produce to People on a separate day to fulfill the monthly food/nutritional needs of people.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE

Participants identified both challenges and opportunities to address those challenges. The challenges are in regular text and their suggestions (for the Food Bank to consider) are *in italics*.

Who is being served

- **Your zip code can limit your access to food.** Some families arrive at pantries because they need food, but they get turned away because they're from a zip code that doesn't qualify for support from that particular pantry. These families are told to go to another pantry, but without transportation, that other pantry isn't an option.

What food is available

- **Some communities lack fruits and vegetables.** It's "heartbreaking to be in a place with no fruits and vegetables."
- **Sometimes people don't know what to do with what they receive in their boxes.** Some foods are unfamiliar to people or they don't know how to prepare it or use it. Examples are eggplant, squash, ground turkey or even canned potatoes. People don't want the food to go to waste, so they try and share those items with their friends or family, but they'd prefer to have food that works for their own family. *Suggestions to consider: One participant was active in creating videos with recipes and cooking tips with food that they got from the Food Bank and sharing them on social media. Through discussion, several ideas were shared for Food Bank to consider, including:*
 - *put recipe cards in food boxes (which is good for people that aren't savvy with Zoom or social media or able to get online);*
 - *record short videos of how to prepare different types of food typically included in food boxes;*
 - *offer food demos on-site where people pick up food to show them how to easily prepare different foods and give them the opportunity to taste it;*
 - *offer virtual cooking classes and bring in a chef (e.g. 5pm on Tuesdays on Zoom or on the public cable TV network) and people can tune into the class online; and*
 - *partner with a culinary school and have students come in to work with the Food Bank as part of their work placement program (for example) – they can spend a rotation contributing to the Food Bank by offering recipes, demonstrations, providing samples, etc. for credit at school and to get the experiences they need. This is a good practicum and also transitions them from school into the community and building relationships with people – especially with schools re-opening.*
- **Sometimes people have food restrictions that means they can't eat everything they receive in their boxes.** Some people are vegetarian or don't eat pork. Some people are picky eaters and don't like certain tastes and textures. When people receive foods they can't eat, most try and find someone they know who would eat it so it doesn't go to waste. *Through*

discussion, ideas shared for Food Bank to consider included:

- *use separate smaller boxes to distribute food, putting vegetables in a box on their own and meats in a box on their own - so a vegetarian family could say “no, thank you” and not accept a meat box;*
- *have one location for food that is vegetarian-friendly and let people know that.*
- **Sometimes food in the boxes is not fresh.** A bad orange can make the whole box spoil quickly, especially if the box isn't opened immediately. If kids get to the box first, sometimes they end up eating bad fruit, which is worrying. *Participants suggested that Food Bank have some type of screening process (or a better screening process) so spoiled fruits and vegetables are removed before delivery.*

How food is served

- **Boxes can be difficult to physically manage.** Transportation can be difficult, as is cutting up the box so it can be put into the trash. If the trash pick up isn't happening soon, it means the box is sitting around for a week. *Consider having food picked up in reuseable bags and providing people the option to pick what goes into those bags.*
- **The sign-up processes are different in different locations which can be confusing (for example, in Oakland it's different than in Homestead), and it can also be invasive.** If people are at a pantry, it's because they need to be there. It's unclear why it's necessary to fill out a questionnaire and a lot of paperwork - it's a barrier to some people accessing the food they need because they don't want to explain their situation and they don't want to express their need.
- **There aren't enough volunteers to meet the need in some locations.** For example, in Homewood there are hundreds of families that receive food but volunteers are mostly women, often elderly, and it's difficult for them to unload the truck and prep boxes. They are relied on because they're available (since they're no longer working). *Participants said that it would be great if the Food Bank could help with the recruitment of volunteers in its community locations. Also changing the time the truck comes (maybe on the weekend or outside of the 9am-5pm hours) so more people are available to volunteer would be helpful.*

Communications

- **Some people aren't aware of opportunities to receive food.** *Suggestions included: have print ads available for community leaders to share; and have more locations in communities that distribute food (e.g. doctors' offices, churches, etc.).*

WHAT'S YOUR VISION FOR THE FOOD BANK IN THE FUTURE?

Participants said they imagine:

- a Jetsons-like drive-up where you push a button and food comes out.
- pantries where they know what's in your bag without having to "check out" like some stores do.
- more accessible locations on a smaller scale to better support freshness, better match supply and demand, and increase convenience – almost like pop-ups in the community (similar to the Little Libraries some people have) that serve as satellite centers that could even be opened up by entrepreneurs.
- Food Bank as a place/building where people can take cooking classes, there's something for kids to do, there are supports for those who are homeless, and a location that generally offers people help/services and is seen as a community place. Sometimes people accessing the Food Bank are worried about being labelled. With several different things happening at one location, there's more privacy because people won't know which of those activities in the building you're there for. Then it wouldn't be viewed as the Food Bank and sometimes have a negative stigma. It would also be good to have a place where visitors could talk in private with someone where they could say what was really going on and what they needed help with (people may not want to provide info and do things in a public setting).
- regular focus groups because people are resourceful, and the Food Bank should keep listening to them.

OTHER THOUGHTS

The group discussed the choices facing food banks across the USA regarding how best to balance the need to "feed the line" and at the same time to "shorten the line". Participants said that:

- When there's a state of emergency, like is the case with the COVID-19 pandemic, feeding the line is essential. People only come to the food pantry when they need it. Sometimes the gas bill is higher (like in the winter) or someone has an injury with no insurance coverage, and then it's important that the Food Bank be available. *They suggested the Food Bank continue to focus on feeding the line, recognizing that people only use it when they need it, but acknowledging that shorten the line work was important as well. They also suggested:*
 - *The Food Bank use data to determine where, when, and why people need food and best align Food Bank resources with that need (and at the same time always recognize that there may be limits to what the data can tell you because it's hard to identify people who need food but don't feel comfortable – for whatever reason – revealing that).*
 - *The Food Bank offer resources for community members to advocate for themselves, for example, the Black Women's Policy Agenda is an organization that does this.*
 - *The Food Bank could create a quarterly newsletter and put it into every food box as a way for people to volunteer, change policy, and maybe even*

change their careers if employment/workforce development opportunities were included.

- *Continue the important work of food pantries, recognizing that there may be another pandemic or other crisis that means people will need it.*

NEXT STEPS

Chris thanked participants for sharing their ideas, suggestions and feedback and looked forward to staying connected through Parts 2 and 3 of the Stakeholder Engagement Initiative process. 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](#)).