

On Thursday, June 24, 2021, eight individuals from the community participated in a focus group as part of the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank's Stakeholder Engagement Initiative (SEI). All participants were familiar with the Food Bank in their local communities.

The meeting 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](#)).

Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank Stakeholder Engagement Initiative (SEI) SEI FOCUS GROUP 2

Thursday, June 24, 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

- **Produce to People** is a popular program that has a great reputation.
- **Our Family Support Center distributes food** and that works well for us as an access point. Did they also talk about how they liked the co-location of those services?
- **Media coverage of the food boxes was effective.** My family heard about it on the news and my step-mom was able to pick up a box for our family.

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

- **It's important to help mothers with kids.**

- **People need to be able to connect to other life stabilization organizations when accessing the Food Bank's services.** The whole process of being in need is not easy. Navigating different support systems (i.e. Welfare and 211) is a challenge. *Suggestions to consider: The Food Bank should connect people accessing food services to other services (housing, clothing, employment, and other emergency supports). Having this information in a format that people can take home with them would be good – then they can make phone calls and explain their situation in a place that they have some privacy.*

What food is available

- **Food options available at different pantries differ from area to area.** A couple of participants highlighted that the variety of food items available are different depending on the location they went. Others described receiving unwanted items or items that they did not know how to prepare. *Suggestions to consider: Families would appreciate more selection of a variety of items, including fresh vegetables and fruits. Several participants said that would like to select items and receive recipe cards for both familiar and unfamiliar items. One participant also emphasized the importance of having staff to support in the food selection process at a pantry so that community members are not discouraged by a difficult/confusing process. Another suggestion was to develop a mechanism for those accessing services to know what items are available at different pantries.*

In response, the SEI Project team also explained that not all pantries have the same items. It depends on the funding, equipment, and staffing the pantry has available and its different partnerships.

- **Community members require other necessities, outside of just traditional food items.** The Food Bank should not direct people to other partners but should offer those other necessities themselves. *Suggestions for consideration: Some participants said that there were food pantries that offered both food and other supplies like diapers, baby formula and pet food and that should be expanded to other locations.*

How food is served

- **Food Bank services are not available at different times of the day.** Several participants described the challenges of accessing services outside of traditional hours of operations (usually 9:00 - 5:00 pm). *Suggestions for consideration: Flexible hours of service at local locations is important for people to be able to access services. One proposed option was creating evening distributions hours or establishing a 24-hour distribution site. 24-hour permanent distribution sites would increase access to emergency supports.*

- **Nutrition education is an existing gap for senior and youth populations.** *Suggestions for consideration: Seniors and youth should have access to nutritionists to provide advice and education on healthy options.*

Where food is served

- **Not everyone has access to either transportation or childcare options required to travel to pantries or distribution sites.** It can also be hard to transport food if you don't have a cart (especially if someone lives on the second floor). These are barriers to accessing services. *Suggestions to consider: Distribution sites should be accessible for those who do not have cars or access to transportation. The Food Bank should look for ways to bring services to local communities by exploring different mobile or delivery options. Another suggestion was to expand the doorstep delivery to mothers with children under 5 years old. Coordination with partner organizations is another suggested option for meeting people where they access other services (i.e. family support centers, employment and education service providers).*

Communication

- **People don't necessarily know what they need to bring when they visit a food pantry.** New food bank users can be unsure of how to use the pantry once they arrive there. *Suggestions to consider: Create a list of things that people can reference before they travel to a pantry - whether that's documentation, a bag to carry things, etc. Also, once someone arrives, it's important that they have a good experience in the pantry. Consider having someone there who can help the visitor orient themselves, understand how the system works, what choices are available to them - without this, some people have had bad experiences that left them uncomfortable and that's meant that they won't come back to the pantry in the future.*
- **People are not aware of the Food Bank's services.** The Food Bank should look for ways to inform the communities on different services through a variety of mechanisms. *Suggestions to consider: Several participants suggested using flyers, posters, opt-in text messaging and email systems, and social media to notify recipients about upcoming distributions and send reminders to people registered for distributions in their area (5- or 10-miles radius) and other local updates from the Food Bank and partner organizations. Additionally, word of mouth is also an important method for reaching community members. One participant said that families had previously given them boxes from the Food Bank distribution, despite never personally accessing services from the Food Bank. The Food Bank can explore informal distribution methods of other community members distributing boxes.*
- **It can be difficult to access information on services or apply for support through centralized phone systems, like 211.** A participant described the

challenge of getting a representative on the phone or not having their phone call returned. It was so difficult to get through they ultimately decided not to pursue it further. Other participants affirmed that they had also had similarly experiences. It is a missed opportunity when people are unable to access services from a lack of awareness or from barriers to navigating different support systems. *Suggestions to consider: Those in need of services should be able to quickly access services.*

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. Participants also shared their interest in helping identify where pop-up sites for future engagements could be. 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](#)).