



## Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank Stakeholder Engagement Initiative (SEI) **POTENTIAL LIFE STABILIZATION PARTNERS MEETING**

Wednesday, June 9, 2021, 1:00 to 2:30 pm

### SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

While introducing themselves, everyone in the meeting briefly explained their programs and relation to 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 are the feedback and advice shared by participants:

### WHAT IS WORKING WELL

- **Providing food delivery services to their clients has allowed organizations to maintain connections with the populations they serve.** One participant said (and others agreed) that being able to deliver food during the pandemic has allowed them to keep an eye on the people they serve, which would have been difficult otherwise.
- **Work towards reducing the stigma around food insecurity.** One participant appreciated Green Grocer's ability to normalize access to fresh produce and fruits through open access to the community. The Food Bank's Life Stabilization activities and partnerships can

On Wednesday, June 9, 2021, representatives from a diverse range of potential life stabilization partner organizations participated in a meeting as part of the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank's Stakeholder Engagement Initiative (SEI). Participants represented 14 organizations (see list in Attachment 1).

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 who 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 [espanglers@pittsburghfoodbank.org](mailto:espanglers@pittsburghfoodbank.org) (also available on [SEI webpage](#)).

- **Overall positive experience with the Food Bank.** Participants described the Food Bank as being open and flexible to working with agencies and communities. Food Bank staff are outstanding, energetic, flexible, and collaborative. Staff are also quick to respond to questions and are willing to adapt their programs as best they can to meet the needs of partners. One participant said they have had no trouble getting frequent and reliable deliveries of food even though they are a small organization. Another organization mentioned that their social workers and families they referred to the Food Bank were happy with the Food Bank's services. Several participants were also happy that families were not being turned away from receiving services during the pandemic.
- **There is an appreciation for the Food Bank's leadership in connecting with current or potential life stabilization partners.** The pandemic has shifted the way organizations deliver their programs which has increased the importance of partnership development. Participants appreciated the Food Bank reaching out to build stronger connections, especially through engagement efforts from the Life Stabilization area.

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE

### Who is being served

- **Certain populations are not reached by services.** The Food Bank needs to look for ways to accommodate groups with different needs. *Suggestions for consideration: reaching people over 60, those who don't have access to cars, those who can't get out of their homes, those with different needs (e.g. pregnant, breastfeeding women, experiencing postpartum depression, differently-abled physically or mentally), and those who have difficulty navigating systems (e.g. experiencing substance abuse or mental health issues). There was a suggestion to use private delivery or transportation companies to get food to people and/or people to food locations (e.g. Postmates and Uber), and partnering with services or organizations that already go to the homes of these populations (e.g. EMS and Meals on Wheels).*
- **Resources, programs, and service providers are concentrated in urban areas, making it challenging to serve people in rural communities.** It is important to identify and work with community champions in rural communities (i.e. Cambria, Fayette, Greene). *Suggestions for consideration: Community champions can help establish connections and trust, which are crucial to successfully interacting with and serving the local community. Another participant suggested having more distribution sites in rural areas. And another idea was using malls like Pittsburgh Mills Mall as a potential permanent distribution site.*
- **Stigma around food insecurity discourages people from accessing services.** Food insecurity is a faceless crisis that impacts diverse communities. The

pandemic has shifted the narrative around food insecurity to be more representative of different people. *Suggestions for consideration: The Food Bank should continue to support efforts that address issues of stigma and work to normalize different life stabilization supports.*

### How food is received

- **Different experiences from users at informal providers compared to pantries.** Some participants have heard from users that they have positive experiences using informal services (like at community organizations) compared to going to formal services (like pantries). *Suggestions for consideration: A participant said it feels like informal services are “undervalued” at the Food Bank – in the past, there was a staff person who had excellent relationships with informal service providers.*
- **Not everyone can access drive-up distributions.** Drive-up distributions have been a great and safe way to get people who have cars food during the pandemic. However, they are a barrier to accessing food for people who don't have access to a vehicle and primarily use public transit. *Suggestions for consideration: Look into different opportunities to support individuals and families who don't have access to cars or public transportation. For example, the South Hills was mentioned as an area where there was a lack of transportation options.*
- **Communities need both emergency food sources and help becoming food secure.** The Food Bank should explore strategies that help people become food secure in the long run, in addition to providing people food in emergencies. *Suggestions for consideration: the Food Bank should leverage its network and reputation to share information and connect Food Bank users with other organizations supporting different life stabilization areas (e.g. housing and employment).*
- **Stigma and shame associated with carrying Food Bank boxes.** *Suggestions for consideration: Put food in unbranded bags/boxes to prevent shame associated with receiving support by making the bags/boxes more discreet.*
- **The food boxes are too heavy or difficult to carry.** Food bank users, particularly seniors, those who are not feeling well, and those who rely on public transit, have difficulty carrying and transporting big, heavy boxes of food. *Suggestions for consideration: Provide rolling carts to help seniors and others transport the food items they receive. Another suggestions was receiving less food to be able to better transport boxes.*

### When food is received

- **Need for more access to fresh produce and fruits in local communities.** *Suggestions for consideration: Community gardens can help people access food and provide money-saving options by increasing access to fruits and*

vegetables. Community gardens can also help people earn money if they are able to sell the food they produce.

### What food is received

- **There is an interest from these partners in exploring opportunities to use food to address food insecurity needs that their clients may have.** Participants said food is one of several social determinants of health that the population they serve require support with. *Suggestions for consideration: Continue discussions between the Food Bank and life stabilization partners to explore opportunities to work together to meet all life stabilization needs.*
- **There needs to be more culturally relevant food options.** Participants said the cultural barrier with receiving food that is not familiar to their community can create waste of unwanted food items. *Suggestions for consideration: Offer more culturally relevant options with fresh fruits and vegetables and provide culturally relevant recipe cards that show how to use the items provided in the food box. Recipe cards should also include lots of pictures to address language barriers.*
- **Prioritize distributing healthy food options.** There needs to be a systemic change to the food distributed by food banks and food pantries. If food provided in food boxes is unhealthy, we are continuing the epidemic of health issues that we're trying to stay away from and solve. *Suggestions for consideration: The Food Bank should have a dual approach that includes healthy non-perishable items and fresh foods that provide options for those experiencing high blood pressure, diabetes, allergies, and other health complications.*

### Communications

- **Navigating/accessing services in the Food Bank's network is challenging.** Some participants highlighted difficulties of Food Bank users knowing about different hours of operation and types of food available in Food Bank partner locations. *Suggestions for consideration: Create a central place to get information about location, hours, and types of food available. Other suggestions were creating one larger location that can accommodate multiple/different needs and providing more home delivery options.*
- **The Food Bank should share information about the variety of both Food Bank and other life stabilization services available with Food Bank users and partners.** *Suggestions for consideration: Build on resources/systems that already exist, and don't create something new where it isn't needed. "Aunt Bertha" is an online resource that is used by some organizations. However, Aunt Bertha is accessible only online, and many people who use food (and other) services aren't online and primarily use a phone to get information. People often call 211 to get help with food (food security is one of the top 3 reasons people call 211 - the other two currently are financial assistance and*

utility funding assistance). For those experiencing language barriers, consider translating materials or having multi-lingual maps that can locate the closest pantry or distribution sites that can accommodate that language.

- **There is a need to continue educating communities on nutrition and food preparation.** *Suggestions for consideration: One participant shared that their organization has run a pilot program to help adolescents learn about general nutrition education and cooking.*

### Coordination and Partnership

- **The Food Bank should partner more with life stabilization partners to deliver services.** The Food Bank can reach under-served populations through partnerships with life stabilizations organizations. *Suggestions for consideration: Provide training to the Food Bank's potential life stabilization partners on how to screen for food insecurity and develop a process for connecting these individuals with appropriate food/nutrition supports. One participant shared an example of an initiative for pediatric offices to house pantries that distribute backpacks of food to kids they serve. Through co-locating services with other life stabilization organizations (i.e. health or child care), there will be more opportunities for those in need to receive support from the Food Bank. Another participant suggested the Food Bank should support smaller organizations by providing funding supports.*
- **Identify clear contact information and processes so agencies can more easily partner with the Food Bank.** Clarifying this process would help agencies figure out who to contact easier and faster. *Suggestions for consideration: Food Bank staff could have ready-made presentations that they can send to potential new partners (this will include information about who to contact, what services they have, etc.).*

### Process feedback

- **Provide honorariums to increase participation in engagement meetings.** Compensation for participation is very helpful for getting people to attend these engagement meetings.

## **VISION TO SUPPORT THE FOOD BANK'S MISSION**

Participants shared the following thoughts:

- **The Food Bank needs to continue developing a mindful and dignified approach.** It is important to always be respectful and understanding of Food Bank users – they may have to overcome pride and ego before accessing Food Bank services.
- **The Food Bank should prioritize increasing food access in rural areas (e.g. Cambria).** Cambria County would be an ideal location for sites with local

fresh food and partnerships with local farmers. These sites should be accessible to everyone and could include both subsidized and for-purchase retail options and serve as a Food Bank distribution location as well.

- **The Food Bank should shrink long-term as partnerships grow to create centralized opportunities.** The goal is to cut out middleman opportunities and prioritize centralized partnerships. The Food Bank and its partners should also get creative about how education and advocacy can help progress efforts around get more people food secure.

## NEXT STEPS

Chris West, SEI Program Sponsor, thanked participants for sharing their ideas, suggestions, and feedback. Partners were also reminded to continue sharing the online survey ([www.pittsburghfoodbank.org/feedback](http://www.pittsburghfoodbank.org/feedback)) with their networks and that the SEI Team is looking for feedback from all kinds of different audiences (open until the end of June). 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](mailto:espangler@pittsburghfoodbank.org) (also available on [SEI webpage](#)).

## **Attachment 1. Organizations who participated in the meeting**

Allegheny Center Alliance Church  
Allegheny Health Network (Front Door Initiative at Jefferson Hospital)  
Career Links  
Catholic Charities  
Early Learning Connections  
Freedom Transit  
Hello Baby Priority and Healthy Start, Inc.  
Macedonia FACE  
Mon Valley Initiative  
NeighborWorks Western Pennsylvania  
Pittsburgh Job Corps  
Pittsburgh Mercy  
University of Pittsburgh Medical Center  
United Way of the Laurel Highlands