

# Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank Stakeholder Engagement Initiative (SEI): Part 1 Integrated Summary Report July 2021

**WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!**

Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank is a nonprofit organization that distributes millions of meals annually across 11 counties in southwestern Pennsylvania through a network of more than 600 partners and programs.

The Food Bank is launching an engagement effort to identify how we can improve what we do. The Food Bank succeeds when it is best able to respond to the needs of the people it serves.

**We want to hear from those who use Food Bank services - as well as those who could benefit but don't use Food Bank services - about their ideas, and work together over the next year to explore what changes we can make to serve people in new and better ways.**

There are two ways to share your thoughts:

1. Online at [pittsburghfoodbank.org/feedback](https://pittsburghfoodbank.org/feedback)
2. By completing the survey inside and mailing this pre-paid letter

Survey closes on June 30, 2021

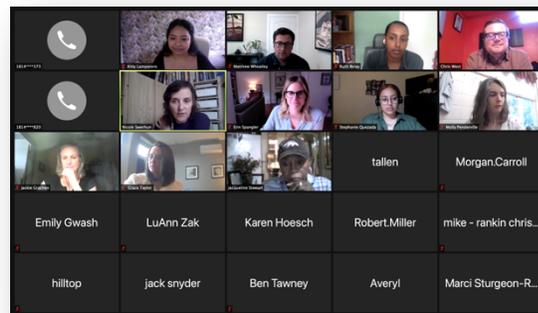
For more information, get in touch with: **Sam Zaengler, Engagement Initiative Project Manager**  
[ezs@pittsburghfoodbank.org](mailto:ezs@pittsburghfoodbank.org)  
 412-460-3563 ext. 436

community food bank

**To share your thoughts by mail, answer the questions on the back.**

Once completed, follow these 3 easy steps:

1. Fold this letter the same way you received it. Make sure the return address is visible once folded.
2. Seal it by peeling off the strip above and pressing the paper together.
3. Mail the letter. No stamp needed.



As you answer the questions below, think about your overall experience with the Food Bank.

**WHO** we serve **WHAT** we serve **WHEN** we serve **WHERE** we serve **HOW** we serve

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 that could benefit from its services** 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?

Please identify which of the following describes your relationship with the Food Bank. Select all that apply.

Uses Food Bank services  Could benefit from services  Donor  Volunteer  General public but not using them

What county do you live in? \_\_\_\_\_ What is your race/ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_ Would you like to be part of a focus group to further share your thoughts and hear from others? If you please enter your email, please provide email: \_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender? \_\_\_\_\_ What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_  Yes  No

Phone #/Email: \_\_\_\_\_



## OVERVIEW

In Spring 2021, Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank launched Part 1 of the three-part [Stakeholder Engagement Initiative \(SEI\)](#) to engage diverse stakeholders and interest groups in a collaborative process to build the Food Bank of the future. The SEI process used a variety of engagement mechanisms to capture feedback including virtual meetings, Do-It-Yourself Partner meetings, interviews, and online/hard copy surveys. Across the Food Bank's eleven county service area, the survey was distributed via mail-in flyers, Facebook ads/social media promotions, and partners organizations. Over 1200 people participated in a virtual meeting and/or completed a survey (see attachments for more information). The following questions guided the Food Bank's engagement with different stakeholder groups:

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 considered the who, what, when, where, and how the Food Bank provides services when answering the questions. Community members, region-wide leaders, partners, potential partners, Food Bank staff and board members shared their insights with the SEI project team and Swerhun Inc., a third-party facilitation team. Provided below is a summary of overarching themes received during Part 1 of the SEI engagement process.

## SUMMARY OF OVERARCHING THEMES

Participants shared a variety of feedback with the team. Included below is a list of consistent themes that emerged across all stakeholder groups and engagement activities.

## WHAT IS WORKING WELL?

- 1. The Food Bank's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has showcased its ability to pivot and innovate to meet the needs of local communities.** Many described the Food Bank's efforts during this hard time as both "nimble" and "adaptive" in meeting community needs. The pandemic has provided an opportunity for innovation and new collaborations in delivering services. There was significant support for the Food Bank to continue many of these efforts (including, but not limited to, Green Grocer, Drive-Up Distributions and Doorstep Delivery). The pandemic has also strengthened the Food Bank's position in the community with increased financial support from donors, funders, and government entities as well as (OR support network with more government funding, more donations from the community and more) partnerships established with other life stabilization organizations.
- 2. The reputation, trust, and mission of the Food Bank is celebrated by diverse stakeholder groups.** Participants in the process consistently said that the Food Bank is a trusted institution in the region whose mission continues to actively improve the lives of local communities. Many people acknowledged the Food Bank's continued commitment to addressing food insecurity and providing emergency food support. The Food Bank network is also strongly committed to providing critical services in communities. This is reflected in the strong donor, volunteer, partner, staff, and community networks that support the Food Bank's operations.
- 3. The Food Bank provides critical supports needed in the community – through their regular distribution programs (e.g. monthly or bi-weekly at pantries), daily support programs (for example school meals), special emergency food programs (e.g. Drive-Up Distributions and new community partners), and their advocacy in the fight against hunger and building awareness of regional food security issues.** The Food Bank has been successful in leveraging the increased media coverage and community attention to build awareness of food insecurity and normalizing access to services.
- 4. Overall, the Food Bank staff were considered responsive, reliable and have great relationships with partners, donors, community members and other stakeholders.** Most participants described Food Bank staff as enthusiastic, friendly, respectful, courteous, and kind.

## NUANCED STRENGTHS & CHALLENGES

- 1. The Food Bank's internal and external communications are stronger in some areas than others.** Existing partners, volunteers, donors, and some community members said that they are effectively plugged into the Food Bank's communication network (newsletters, website, social media, and flyers). Other stakeholders said they were not as connected to formal or informal communication networks and thus were not aware of the available services and/or partnership opportunities. Many participants said they learned about new programs and services they had not been aware of during the introductory presentation or breakout sessions during SEI meetings.
- 2. Food distribution methods used by the Food Bank and its partners are considered received positively overall, including the quality of the food, variety of food and operations.** Participants also shared suggestions for improvement. There was strong support for the fresh produce, pre-packed food boxes, and the overall variety of foods distributed. However, several participants also described the challenges they face when they receive poor quality food including meat, wilted, or spoiled fresh produce and the limited variety of food options in the pre-packed boxes. In general, there was an emphasis on prioritizing healthy options and other staples such as milk, juice, cereal, and canned foods were appreciated. There was also a desire by several community members to also receive gift cards when available, so they can choose the items they want to buy.
- 3. The Food Bank has strengths and weaknesses when it comes to reaching vulnerable and underserved communities.** Several partners noted that the Food Bank has done a good job at leveraging partnerships to reach communities who have difficulties accessing services – for example, partnerships with other life stabilization organizations, education facilities and delivery/mobile approaches to reach underserved communities. There is strong support for strengthening and deepening relationships with partners, especially to help address the challenge of connecting with people in rural communities and other underserved groups.

## CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

- 1. The Food Bank can be difficult to navigate. Partners, potential partners, and people who need food assistance said that they have difficulty understanding how or who to connect with at the Food Bank.** Despite having great relationships with Food Bank staff, many said it is not easy to navigate the Food Banks' and partners' networks and services (including phone systems, different departments, and what services are available). As a result, some community members were unable to sign up for or access services.

2. **Transportation and availability of distributions (hours, location, distribution models) are barriers to accessing services.** Many reported that they had difficulty accessing services because they did not have access to consistent or reliable transportation. Others reported that it was difficult to transport heavy pre-packed boxes on publications or because of physical mobility limitations. Similarly, limited distribution hours were identified as another barrier to accessing services for those who do not have time to travel long distances and/or could only access services in the evening or other times outside regular business hours.
3. **There is still stigma associated with accessing services that is a barrier to receiving needed supports.** Participants expressed concern over underserved populations not being able to access services due to other barriers such as not qualifying for services. Additionally, the Food Bank and its partners should develop strategic initiatives and programs that are discreet and accessible for these specific underserved communities (i.e. no branding on boxes/bags, no financial requirement for accessing services, etc.). Services need to be both accessible and protect the dignity of Food Bank users by providing client-choice and freedom to access services anywhere.
4. **Local communities want more ways to contribute resources.** Several donors indicated that they are eager to contribute more - both in terms of the number and variety of volunteering opportunities available and in the ways in which they can donate their resources, whether skills, capital, or time. Existing and new volunteers would like better communication moving forward about the different volunteer opportunities.

## **IDEAS & SUGGESTIONS**

1. **Develop a multi-prong communication mechanism to share information about Food Bank or network programs and services.** Many participants suggested that the Food Bank use diverse, customizable approaches to reach different populations and meet the unique needs of different stakeholders (i.e. email/text message system, flyers, posters, newsletters, social media, and word of mouth). In addition, it was suggested that the Food Bank make investments in their call center team to continue to expand outreach efforts (i.e. hiring more staff and expanding engagement efforts).
2. **Increase diversity and flexibility in food selection options and service delivery.** Provide Food Bank users more options for product selection (i.e fresh produce, grab-and-go meals, healthy options for specific dietary needs, culturally-relevant food, and recipe cards) along with flexible and consistent service delivery (i.e. evening hours, 24-hour pick up locations or

food lockers and delivery options). In addition, the Food Bank should provide equitable access to some other necessities such as baby formula, hygiene items and cooking utensils. The Food Bank should also consider further prioritizing access to fresh food and reducing waste by investing in locally-sourced foods and urban agricultural opportunities.

3. **Invest and strengthen Food Bank partnerships & networks.** The Food Bank should continue to build the capacity of their partners through grants and other organizational supports. It's especially important to build capacity in rural and underserved areas. There were several suggestions to create diversified revenue streams and pass along profits or savings to Food Bank partners/distributors to invest in local initiative and grants for other capacity building supports (i.e. equipment, staff, and tech).
4. **Improve technology, strategic data collection and program evaluation.** The Food Bank has an opportunity to leverage technology to improve services delivery and increase access to food services (i.e. developing an app, food lockers, and customizable/opt-in messaging systems). Additionally, improving data collection can help the Food Bank and partners to improve service delivery through creating an information collection system by capturing specifics (such as changes in the number of households served and dietary requirements or beneficiary information), which can help streamline processes. Staff could work across departments to identify gaps in service (using Key Performance Indicators) and work with partners to address them.
5. **Eliminate stigma around food insecurity.** In partnership with other organizations (i.e. partners, schools, and other life stabilization organizations), the Food Bank can create or promote advocacy campaigns, initiatives, and other programs to increase awareness of food insecurity and different intersectional supports and community needs.
6. **Promote opportunities around nutrition education and engagement.** Across various stakeholders, nutrition education was seen as a great vehicle for engaging with the community. There are opportunities to promote nutrition through cooking videos, in-person cooking lessons, recipe cards for different dietary needs/cultures, and increasing access to nutritionists.
7. **Strengthen the organization's management practices to better foster staff growth and productivity.** Some Food Bank staff suggested that more resources be dedicated to strategy, planning and visioning activities. In addition, there were several suggestions around breaking

down silos by improving communication with more frequent and more consistent organizational updates and cross-functional collaboration.

8. **Provide more opportunities for volunteers.** The Food Bank has an opportunity to invest in, strengthen, and train their volunteer network. Participants strongly supported developing opportunities for youth and millennials to volunteer and benefit from their experiences (i.e. workforce development opportunities, and engaging schools/colleges) and be able to donate their diverse skillsets.
  
9. **Strengthen advocacy and planning by involving more people with lived experience. Program improvements could be better achieved by elevating diverse voices in advocacy efforts.** This could include perspectives from individuals with lived experience accessing the Food Bank to staff, nutrition program providers and administrators. Additionally, the Food Recipient Advisory Board could improve planning through more shared decision-making. The Food Bank should also leverage its position as a trusted organization to advocate at the local, state, and federal level for addressing issues of food insecurity and poverty reduction.
  
10. **Develop more co-location opportunities for service delivery. The Food Bank should consider working with partners to co-locate Food Bank services with other partner services (i.e. health care facilities, schools, day-care, family centers, churches, etc.).** Through collaboration with a variety of life stabilization organizations, the Food Bank can also co-locate food assistance services with several different services (i.e. monthly mobile events with life stabilizations partners like offering healthcare screenings or benefits assistance).

## **VISION FOR THE FUTURE FOOD BANK**

1. **Scale up operations and tackle other basic needs of the community.** Overwhelmingly, responses centered on the desire to see the Food Bank maintain its role in the community and, in some cases, increase access by groups who need these services but may struggle to access them. Key groups identified include people without transportation or internet, people experiencing homelessness, people living in food deserts, marginalized communities (newcomers and racialized communities) and families (women, men, and youth). Participants also identified an opportunity to broaden community programming, either independently or in partnership with social service agencies (i.e. exploring co-location opportunities and formal partnerships).

2. **In the long-term, scale down operations as the needs of food insecure people are met.** Many said that the ideal vision for the Food Bank should focus on life stabilization work, with the ultimate goal of “not needing to exist anymore” because the food insecurity rate is no longer regional issues (while still maintain emergency food needs in the community). Ideas included working to advocate for livable wages, for access to adequate education and housing, and increased support from social services. Participants felt that a focus on advocacy work and public policy efforts was important. Many want the Food Bank to be a pilot model for other organizations and try to replicate any successful initiatives across the city.
3. **Have a decentralized approach to service delivery that includes more smaller food access locations to meet the needs of food insecure populations.** Many participants focused on the importance of maintaining the Food Bank’s current role in communities and with partners. These partners see the benefit of keeping these services very local to meet client needs in a more personalized way. Community members also emphasized 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 that serve as satellite centers that could even be opened by entrepreneurs. Several partners want to see the Food Bank’s core function expanded and some partners want to see existing services offered more regularly, such as an increased ability to reach and feed children.
4. **Move beyond a distribution model, become a strong hub and advocate, to help support users in accessing other resources and services.** The Food Bank could focus specific efforts on underserved neighborhoods to expand its reach. Additionally, some suggested that the Food Bank branch into underserved rural areas. More specifically, the Food Bank could expand its focus to better understand how racism and other social barriers affect its users. From these learnings, the Food Bank could develop an advocacy platform to bring greater attention to these issues and simultaneously, work with various regional partners to pilot programs aimed at addressing these systemic issues that contribute to food insecurity. Improving diversity and representation at the leadership level of the Food Bank would also help.

## LOOKING AHEAD

The [Stakeholder Engagement Initiative](#) is unfolding in three parts, with information shared and feedback sought from a wide variety of voices representing each of our stakeholder groups every step of the way. The input received in Part 1 of the SEI process will continue to strengthen the Food Bank's efforts to meet the needs of communities across southwestern PA. Part 2 will return in Fall 2021 to share further analysis of feedback received and test ideas gleaned from Part 1 with this diverse range of stakeholders.

*This summary was written by Swerhun Inc., an independent third-party facilitation organization. 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).*

