

# *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

## Sharing Power, Building Community: Strategies for Improving Nutrition Education at Food Pantries

Research Conducted on Behalf of Northwest Harvest

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*In this project, we seek to challenge dominant narratives by foregrounding the stories of those who are food insecure. While we may not be able to retain all the nuances and details of every story we've been told, the emotional impact of them stays with us forever. Stories have the power to normalize oppression, but they also have the power to heal.*

## Introduction

The problem of food insecurity is a complex one that requires both a long-term structural response to reduce the numbers of people who are hungry and an emergent response to serve those who are. Food pantries are at the center of that emergent response; they are tasked with meeting the needs of those who are food insecure in their respective communities. As the emergency food system in the United States has evolved, however, many food pantries have added elements to this basic mission. One such addition has been nutrition education programs, such as, cooking and other educational classes, in-line food demonstration carts, recipes, and posters. Nearly 80% of food pantries implement nutrition education activities with topics such as: “improving diet, health and wellbeing, maximizing utilization of emergency food, improving food security by building healthy [nutrition education], and cooking and resource management skills”. Nutrition education programs have the ability to educate and provide resources for customers, but less and less people are attending classes, there is no existing research that explains these declining rates of attendance, and more passive forms of nutrition education (e.g., posters) cannot accomplish all that is possible with more interactive forms of education.



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This current research is designed as an initial step in filling that gap. We aim to begin the conversation about what works and what doesn't in nutrition education at food pantries and how nutrition education programs can best fit the needs of food pantry customers.

## Research Methods

**Purpose:** This project was a joint endeavor between Northwest Harvest and the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Seattle University. It sought to address three related research questions of concern to Northwest Harvest. These questions were:

1. How can exposure to and participation in nutrition education be increased?
2. Where is nutrition education most effective?
3. What are the differences in programming between effective and ineffective nutrition education classes?

**Method:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with EFS professionals and food pantry customers. Purposive sampling was used to recruit EFS professionals. Food pantry customers were recruited to the study using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling.

**Data Sources:** The total sample included five EFS professionals who worked in organizations in Spokane, WA, Seattle, WA, Bloomington, IN, Tucson, AZ, and Des Moines, WA. Four of the organizations were food pantries; one was a food distributor. All EFS professional interviewees were white

women. One of the interviews was conducted in person; the other four were conducted via Zoom. The final sample of food pantry customers consisted of 10 individuals: three African-American women, three Latina women, one Latino man, one white man, one white woman, and one Thai man. Participants ranged in age from 40 to 70. All interviews were conducted in-person: two interviews conducted with a Spanish interpreter.

For the Emergency Food System professional interviews, the interview themes were:

1. Professional Background
2. Philosophy of Nutrition Education in the Emergency Food System
3. Nutrition Education Program Experiences

For the customer interviews, the themes were:

1. Experience with Food Banks
2. Experience with Food Nutrition Programs
3. Nutrition Education Improvements

## The Social Context

There is a shared desire among all of the customers we spoke with to dismantle the stereotypes that are embedded in our society regarding people who need resources. Customers expressed a need for Emergency Food System (EFS) professionals working or volunteering in a food pantry to resist the rhetoric of “greedy people abusing the system.” Contrary to the dominant narrative that circulates in our culture, people are not hungry or poor because of lack of access to food or economic opportunities. People are poor or hungry because of the disparities around power. In particular, we want to draw attention to stereotypes, stigmas, and efforts to advance food and racial justice.

While food pantry customers are disproportionately people of color, the ranks of EFS professional staff are dominated by white people, especially white women. We asked them to reflect on their social positionality, and we specifically asked them how they and their organizations navigate the “white savior complex”. A common thread in their responses was that engaging with food pantry customers and low-income communities requires sensitivity to difference, but they varied

in what factors they identified as consequential differences. Several highlighted the relationship between race and decision-making power. For instance, one EFS professional noted that her organization’s board is all white, with few women and few customers. The result is a stark difference in who has the power to make decisions.

Additionally, one of the most prominent and important transformations occurring in the emergency food system is a move from a charity model to a food justice model. The charity model treats customers as helpless victims of poverty to be rescued, while the food justice model seeks to affirm customers’ dignity and power to help themselves and their communities. This model also understands food insecurity as part of a larger systemic social problem, rather than a problem of individual circumstances.



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*“I think that again we believe that food is a basic human right and that then obligates communities to certain actions and those include making sure that all people have access to food. That isn’t necessarily solved through the idea of grocery stores in food deserts. That access ties to money...”*

## Guiding Philosophies and Themes

**Shift from delivering calories to nourishing bodies:** This section reveals that professionals in the emergency food system now recognize that food pantries need to focus on more than the distribution of high calorie foods; they need to aim to nourish their customers. For customers, being nourished means not just having access to healthy foods. It also means there are appropriate foods and information to help customers eat diets appropriate to their health conditions and that customers receive support with things that relate to or are aggravated by food insecurity, like financial concerns, housing instability, and interpersonal struggles.

**Importance of nutrition education:** Some people might emphasize practical benefits, like a customer learning to make their food dollars go further or a food pantry ensuring that more food in its donation stream is consumed, while others may be focused on more social benefits, like community building and broadening the mission of food pantries. Taken together, however, they make a strong case for the

importance of nutrition education.

**Leveraging community assets:** Our interviews with customers make it clear that many are willing to offer their insights, time, and even labor to support nutrition education at food pantries, but the pantries must be able and willing to compensate customers for their contributions. A philosophy shared by the EFS professionals is the importance of developing and effectively deploying resources beyond their paid staff and grant funding. These efforts span a wide range from partnering with other community groups and enlisting customers and other community members as volunteers to relying on medical and other experts for some programming.

**Redistributing power:** It is not enough for customers and volunteers to be recruited to leadership or teaching positions in nutrition education programs. The model of EFS work needs to be fundamentally reimaged so that decision-making power is in the hands of those most affected by decisions: customers.



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*Acknowledging that poverty and food insecurity are consequences of how resources are distributed helps to combat stigma because it shifts the focus from the choices of individuals to the way inequality is built into social arrangements.*

## Barriers to Nutrition Programs

**Physical Locations and Policies:** The most fundamental question of access for customers is: can I get food from this food pantry? At the most basic level, if customers cannot get to a food pantry or their use of services is limited because they are considered outside the pantry's service region, they will have little or no access to any of the nutrition education services a pantry might provide, whether that be classes, in-line food demonstration, or educational signage.

The main challenge the customers shared was the fact that most food pantries were physically inaccessible. Customers shared their difficulty in holding heavy items or the ableset-up of a food pantry. On this point, there appears to be a substantial and important disconnect between the experiences of customers and the perspective of EFS professionals. When we asked EFS professionals about disabled access to their facilities, none of them indicated that customers with disabilities faced significant barriers to accessing services.

Internal policies create additional barriers and can include online registration only; no-show policies where customers can be banned from future participation; punitive measures for being late; and limits to how many classes someone can attend.

**Customers' Awareness of Programs:** The three main mediums used to share nutrition education are posters that are on the walls of a food pantry, classes, and in-line food demonstration carts. Customers typically learn about nutrition programming at food pantries via word of mouth from friends and family or knowledge passed through EFS professionals and posters.

**Customers' Interest in Programs:** Customers stated that they were drawn to the nutrition education classes because of extra resources, the community aspect, trying new foods, and learning new ways to make the same dish. The social pull factor, or community aspect, surfaced from several interviews who appreciated having a reason to leave their house. A few customers highlighted that they liked when there was time to chat with friends during a pause in the class, but that sometimes this happened while the instructor was talking, making it hard to hear.

**Customers' Other Commitments:** Customers that came to the food pantry had families to care for, jobs, medical needs, and responsibilities that made it difficult to attend classes. Customers also suggested offering different days and times for the classes so that there were more opportunities to attend.



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**Transportation:** The main mode of transportation for customers was a car. However, one customer shared that he had mechanical issues and another customer said, "gas is expensive." Similarly, one customer explained the food pantry she was assigned is far from her house so she does not normally go to that neighborhood and would not want to just for the class.

In addition, customers expressed difficulties with shuttles offered for seniors due to difficulties in standing or sitting for long periods, as well as, trying to move through the food pantry and attend classes while adhering to the schedule of the shuttle.

**Childcare:** A majority of customers had concerns about what they would do with their children when they attended nutrition education classes. Suggestions of offering a daycare during these hours or allowing children into the classes came up in multiple interviews. Some had older kids that the parents said would enjoy and learn a lot from participating in classes and some had younger kids that would need daycare.

As for the EFS professionals, they offered several ways to accommodate children: welcome children to classes with no minimum age requirement or invite children age 13 to 18 if they are accompanied by an adult; separate classes for younger youth; encourage parents and children to share in the classes, even in the case of very young children; designated kids' space in the classroom; daycare services available as needed; and lastly, offer children's books to occupy kids while their parents or guardians are in class or the food pantry line.

*"It's easy to think that it's an individual failing and not a larger systemic or community failing."*

## Overcoming Barriers

Based on our conversations, we believe the hallmarks of successful nutrition education programs are those that meet customers where they are, emphasize community, build partnerships with a holistic approach, and build in feedback mechanisms.

**Meeting Customers Where They Are:** This notion needs to be understood broadly to include meeting customers where they are physically, medically, and culturally. The physical aspect refers to shifting resources to more accessible locations, the medical refers to providing adequate nutrition based medical information for customers with medical problems and dietary restrictions, and the cultural aspect refers to creating culturally relevant programming to best serve the diverse range of customers.

The most obvious part of meeting customers where they are physically is providing nutrition education opportunities wherever food insecure people can be fruitfully engaged. Sometimes this is at food pantries, while other times this can be a mobile market, schools, community centers, libraries, and youth centers. EFS professionals described several partnerships as examples: a local university conducting surveys to learn about customers health needs; college students conducting specific nutrition education programming at off-site school locations; and a local Federally Qualified Healthcare Center (FQHC)-- a medical center that primarily serves low-income patients--helping customers cope with diet-related diseases. The majority of customers interviewed shared their desire to have nutrition education on the specific medical problems they were facing so that they could make better choices when taking home ingredients from the food pantry.

Programming at food pantries should reflect their respective customer's cultures. Due to language, customers claim there are currently many inaccessible nutrition education programs. Food pantries need to do the following: make sure that recipes and passive forms of nutrition education, like signage, are available in the languages most common among food pantry customers; tailor recipes and menus to the food traditions of customers and choose relevant items to grow in garden programs; and consider the race and cultural background of teachers as these can be alienating to customers from different backgrounds. This is also an excellent opportunity to seek recipes and cooking instructions from a diverse customer base.

**Emphasize Community:** "A sense of community" in a food pantry is defined by customers as a friendly environment

with volunteer staff and EFS professionals that genuinely care about their wellbeing and reject negative stereotypes about people needing food assistance. Some customers said that building community was the very reason they returned to the food pantry's classes. One EFS professional said her organization sees social isolation as one of four core challenges faced by her customers, and the chance to socialize can be a motivator that brings customers to classes.

*"If I had to dream of a solution, one is, in a perfect world, food would just be a right. A human right that people just have a right to food."*

Customers and EFS professionals acknowledge the importance of customers feeling respected and being treated with dignity. EFS professionals must work to: build in social gatherings, establish a welcoming and respectful environment for people of all backgrounds, and offer customers the platform to build community themselves. Furthermore, EFS professionals must ensure that programs recognize customers as people who have something to offer. This means not only empowering them to contribute by recognizing their expertise, but also including them as equal decision-makers in program design.

**Build Partnerships with a Holistic Approach:** Another way to overcome the barriers hindering the effectiveness of nutrition education programs is to build sustainable partnerships between food pantries and the community. These partnerships are shown to be most successful when they address customers' needs holistically.



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The array of entities with which EFS organizations can and do develop partnerships is remarkably broad and diverse. The professionals we talked to discussed partnerships with customers and their families, community groups, volunteers, volunteer corps (e.g., Vista, AmeriCorp, Jesuit Volunteer Corp), local agencies that serve immigrant and refugee populations, grant agencies, retail partners that donate food, churches (that often house food pantries), healthcare institutions (including FQHCs), colleges and universities, local farmers, and public health agencies.

Many customers also expressed their desire for food pantries to build partnerships with other organizations to provide resources including: eye glasses, health care and access to a dentist. As one customer put it, food pantries should interlink different agencies providing resources because as of now the EFS “feeds the body, but not the mind and soul.”

***Build in Feedback Mechanisms:*** A final element that emerged as a hallmark of successful nutrition education programs was building in feedback protocols so that customer and community perspectives can be central to creating, implementing, assessing, and reforming programs. Like meeting people where they are culturally, this valued capacity seemed to be one in which there was room for improvement. Despite these failings, feedback mechanisms are a way to monitor the progress of a food pantry and make sure that customers have access to nutrition education classes.



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*“If we are in this position of power, which we are, we need to step away from the power and let our customers have the power. Let them make the decisions. Therefore, we are not seen as this intrusive agency who comes in and makes decisions because we can.”*



## Conclusion

Customers expressed gratitude that pantries exist and that there is an effort to feed hungry people, and they also offered a broader vision of food justice for the future. Neighborhood gardens, the assertion that food is a human right, and the importance of sharing food rather than wasting it were all aspects of food justice voiced by customers. For EFS professionals, the meaning of food justice varied from the importance of listening to customers to the assertion that food justice cannot be separated from racial justice. Customers, for their part, encourage food pantries to understand nourishment holistically and not beginning and ending with food alone.

The EFS professionals identified power redistribution as critical to ensuring that more of customers' personal experience, needs, and expertise are brought to bear on food pantry operations. For some, this meant EFS professionals redefining their role to be advocates rather than service providers; for others it meant broader structural efforts, such as advocacy and mentoring programs, that would eventually bring customers into leadership positions.

Professionals working in the emergency food system do their work in a variety of settings where unique customer demographics, resource constraints, and cultural values shape what is feasible. For this reason, it is not possible to provide a template or slate of programs that can be effective for all. What we can do, however, is look for common denominators in what EFS professionals themselves say works, what they deem best practices, and what customers say would improve their access to and experience with nutrition education.



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### **Coronavirus Acknowledgement:**

*The vast majority of work on this project (conception, data collection, analysis, and substantial writing) was completed before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. This public health crisis has transformed the work of food banks and food pantries in a number of ways. The need to remain physically distant to contain the viral spread has required that food be distributed in ways other than having customers gather inside food pantries. At the same time, job losses and financial uncertainty created by stay-at-home orders and business shutdowns have led to an astronomical rise in the number of people who are food insecure and seeking assistance from food banks. This same economic impact has also meant donations to most food banks have decreased, just as the need has spiked. For all these reasons, the function of food pantries that is the subject of this report—nutrition education—has been severely curtailed, if not stopped outright. Nutrition education classes and recipe sampling, which have typically been conducted in person, are simply not safe during a pandemic, and food pantries are understandably marshalling all their resources to meet communities' increased need for food.*

*Under these circumstances, the discussions and recommendations in this report may be less pressing than they were when we began the project, but, we still believe they are important and relevant.*



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