

LINN COUNTY HUNGER FREE NETWORK

Focus Groups

April 2010

In April 2010, the Linn County Hunger Free Network conducted 6 focus groups as a follow up to the surveys collected in December 2009 and January 2010. Focus groups were held at Abundance of Love Food Pantry, Mission of Hope, Salvation Army, Open Hands Food Pantry, River of Life, and SE Linn Community Center. Three of the conversations occurred in a traditional focus group setting; and the remaining three were 1-on-1 conversations between LCHFN committee members and individual clients. We were able to engage 42 clients in conversations.

The conversations supported several of the things we learned from the original survey.

- Several of the clients interviewed were either not working, or had an unemployed spouse.
- Several clients were on disability, or had a family member on disability.
- A majority of those we spoke to were using 2–4 different pantries within a month to meet their needs.
- A large number of our clients learned about the different services through word of mouth – friends, family, and neighbors.
- Several respondents indicated an interest in fresh fruit and vegetables.

However, we learned new things not supported by the survey

- Most clients we spoke with indicated that transportation was not a major issue for them.
- Many also indicated that hours of service did not appear to always be a problem
- Clients expressed enthusiastic responses to having recipes included in their food boxes; clients want to be able to use the items in their food box together to make a meal.

Responses to pre-focus group questionnaire

- 23% of the clients reached had participated in the original survey.
- About 2-1-1
 - 54.76% of respondents have heard of 2-1-1
 - 33.33% have used 2-1-1 to reach services.
 - 95.24% stated they would use 2-1-1 in the future if they need to get connected to services.
- About SNAP/Food Stamps
 - 38.10% of respondents were receiving SNAP benefits.
 - 59.52% of respondents were not receiving SNAP for various reasons.
 - 28.57% of respondents had applied but did not qualify for SNAP, or qualified for very little and chose to decline.
 - 23.81% have not applied and do not know if they qualify for benefits

- 4.76% of respondents are not interested in receiving SNAP assistance at all.
 - 23.81% of respondents would be interested in having a pantry staff or volunteer assist them in filling out SNAP applications.
 - 28.57% of respondents would not be interested in having someone at a pantry or meal site assist with filing a SNAP application
 - 21.43% are uncertain if they'd want someone assisting them with the application.
- Quantity of food needed in a month
 - 42.86% of respondents indicated they needed roughly 2 weeks worth of food from pantries to meet their needs.
 - 21.43% indicated they needed 1 week's worth of food to meet their needs; the same number indicated they needed 3 weeks' worth of food to meet their needs.

Awareness of services

- As was made clear by the survey, many of our respondents learned about the various meal sites and pantries they utilize from friends, families, and neighbors. Word of mouth is a powerful tool to getting information out in the community.
- There were indications that clients learned about a particular site through some form of networking – a client at a particular pantry will point them to another possibility.
- Clients suggested fliers as a means of informing the public of the services available. The fliers could be distributed in the less fortunate neighborhoods in the community, laundromats, malls, grocery stores and schools.
- It was also mentioned that other ways to reach community members was through services they are already utilizing. For example, clients attending AA, 520 and Fellowship Club might also be in need of meal services.

Transportation/location

- Many clients did not personally identify transportation as an issue. Clients in the more rural pantries had working vehicles; however, they did identify the price of gas as an issue. It was noted that individuals will work to combine errands into one trip, including visits to however many pantries they habitually go to in a given month.
- Several participants indicated that they knew individuals who had transportation issues. Many respondents provide rides to friends and neighbors who don't have transportation. Several clients expressed an interest in being able to do pick-ups for neighbors or friends who may be unable to make the trips.
- Clients who utilize public transportation face issues such as insufficient funds, or not having exact change in order to board a bus. Clients also face the issues of sometimes having to board multiple buses, and paying each time, in order to reach their destination.
- In addition, the bus schedules are limited – after certain hours, individuals no longer have access to public transportation.
- Clients are also challenged in figuring out how to carry the food back home on the bus; it was mentioned that a large number of clients bring backpacks with them to load the food they receive.

- For meal sites, it was mentioned that having service providers pool their resources together to provide meals in one central location might be more beneficial for those needing services.

Hours of service

- Clients indicated that they were accessing services during their lunch period, or after leaving work. While not ideal, they have been making the daytime hours work with their schedule.
- Service providers don't necessarily believe that evening or weekend hours will work better; mainly, they worry about finding volunteers to staff those hours. In addition, not all service providers feel that clients will be visiting the sites on the weekends, as they believe that is the time when families usually take time together to get away.
- Several clients express the belief that if people are not able to access the services, it's because they are not trying hard enough, as there are many service providers in the area.
- Several other clients feel that weekend and evening hours are essential, particularly for meal sites. Right now, only Green Square Meals provide evening meals during the week, and First Lutheran and First Presbyterian each provide evening meals on Saturdays and Sundays, respectively. Not everyone can get to those sites.

Number of times services can be accessed

- A large number of clients indicated that they use multiple pantries within a month; the general feeling was that they would rather not have to.
- Clients stated that they sometimes have problems remembering which pantry is open when.
- However, several stated that they "make do" with what they receive – they make sure to use the items received creatively to make them last, and to make meals their families will eat.

Food preparation

- Many clients responded enthusiastically to the idea of having recipes included in their food box; sometimes, it makes it easier to decide what to have for dinner.
- Clients want to be able to make a complete meal with the items in their food box.
- Clients do not necessarily encounter food items they don't know how to use, but rather, something they might not like.
- As clients visit several different sites, they want to be able to choose or refuse items in their food box as most pantries will often offer the same exact food items.
- Several clients admitted to giving things away to friends and family, if there is something they can't use or if they have an abundance of one item.