

STRATEGIES FOR THE PROVISION OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT FOODS



This brief intends to answer the question: "What have food banks and community food programs nationally done to best address providing culturally relevant food?" Though significant efforts have been made to provide more culturally relevant food to communities in need, published and grey literature about actionable strategies to address this issue are scarce. This document encompasses the best practices to approach a community to understand their needs and concerns, as well as some examples of what has been done to address the provision of culturally relevant food.

ROLE OF FOOD BANKS AND COMMUNITY FOOD PROGRAMS IN FOOD INSECURITY

Food banks and community food programs play a critical role in the emergency food system by distributing donated and purchased groceries to individuals and families experiencing food insecurity(1,2). These programs have done an exceptional job facilitating access to safe and nutritious food to many families in need. However, many food banks and community food programs have failed providing culturally relevant food(1,3).

In order to reduce food insecurity in the clients that these programs serve, interventions including culturally responsive approaches are needed. By providing culturally relevant foods that align with the client's preferences, food waste is reduced, diet quality is improved and a dignified experience is ensured(4,5).

Overall, lack of resources, demographic changes in the community served and assumptions of cultural preferences are potential barriers that food banks may experience when addressing culturally relevant food provision. Partnership with the community and constant assessment of needs should be the first step towards culturally responsive food provision.

WHAT IS CULTURALLY RELEVANT FOOD?

There is no clear consensus on the definition of culturally relevant food (6,7,8). Broadly, food is considered culturally relevant if:

- Familiar and recognizable(4)
- Supports cultural integrity while providing nutritional content(6)
- Holds significance for a particular culture or subcultural group(7)
- Corresponds to individual and collective demands and preferences(8)
- Acknowledges and appreciates experiences, traditions and diverse preferences(9)

HOW TO APPROACH A COMMUNITY?

Best Practices

To help increase the provision of culturally relevant foods in food banks and community food programs, it is necessary to understand and partner with the community that is being served. Conducting a community health assessment is a great approach to gather and analyze the genuine health-related needs and concerns of the community, such as the provision of culturally relevant foods(10).

This systematic process has been successfully used as a framework for addressing nutrition and food access through a culturally responsive lens. Overall, approaching the community for guidance and support has had positive outcomes due to the development of culturally tailored strategies.

- Bopp and collaborators used community-based participatory research to develop a culturally relevant resource guide for physical activity and nutrition. The methods followed by the researchers include initial meeting with the representatives of community organizations to gain perspective of the **community needs**, propose a **collaborative partnership** in the project; as well as subsequent meetings during the development and distribution of the guides to obtain input and feedback to ensure that the final product was culturally relevant. By **engaging with community partners**, researchers learned about the particular needs and preferences of the diverse racial/ethnic groups of the community, which helped them accomplish their goal(11).
- Leaders of the Feast for the Future Program developed a community-based collaborative partnership with American Indian communities to promote access to healthy foods through a culturally relevant intervention. Program organizers partnered with the leaders of three the tribal nations to initiate community planning on nutrition promotion. As **equal contributors** to the project, tribal leaders provided guidance for culturally relevant content and activities to be incorporated to the program based on **ongoing community feedback**. The use of this approach led to the identification of culturally relevant strategies to support the program implementation(12).
- Thayer et al. conducted a qualitative study to understand youths' perceptions of the food environment in their neighborhood. Before addressing the research question, the investigators partnered with community leaders to obtain advice on recruitment options. Adolescents were interviewed to understand their perspectives of the food environment. Following data analysis, researchers met with the community to interpret the findings. The process of collaborating with the community led to accurate **identification of the barriers** experienced by community members to obtain affordable, healthy and culturally relevant foods(13).

Best practices for conducting a community health assessment include recognizing community members as equal contributors to the process, understanding that culturally responsive approaches are dynamic and require reassessment, and integrating the vision of the community to the implementation plan.



WHAT HAS BEEN DONE TO ADDRESS PROVISION OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT FOOD?

Food bank clients with different cultural backgrounds may experience additional barriers when accessing food services. Thus, providing culturally relevant foods has turned into a priority for many food banks and community food programs. Most of these programs have concentrated much of their efforts and resources in providing culturally relevant foods to those experiencing food insecurity. The following are some of the strategies that have been implemented across the United States to provide culturally relevant food to the communities.

Culturally Responsive Food Initiative (14)

In 2020, Food Bank of the Rockies launched the pilot phase of the Culturally Responsive Food Initiative, program that aims to eliminate the barriers of access experienced by clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. In this phase, feedback was collected from pantry users, partners and cultural community organizations through interviews and surveys. As a result, Food Bank of the Rockies was able to launch culturally specific mobile pantries and increase the average availability of the top 15 culturally responsive foods by 80%. Furthermore, they have developed a guide for **building inclusive food pantries**, which is a good resource for learning how to build trust and reduce barriers to become a culturally responsive food pantry(15). This guide expands on the methods to conduct a customizable community health assessment for food banks, to tailor their interventions to fit the needs of the community they serve. The tool guide includes information about:

- Understanding the community
- Cultural and religious food preferences
- Overcoming language barriers
- Ensuring simple access
- Cultural responsive reach
- Trust and respect

"Their faces literally light up and we know we're doing the right thing when that happens. Even if you only do it for one person, it's well worth it when you see their smile and their eyes light up because you have something they recognize."

-Diana, Colorado Health Network Denver



WHAT HAS BEEN DONE TO ADDRESS PROVISION OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT FOOD?

Serving Up Tradition(16)

FoodCorps Massachusetts and Massachusetts Farm to School partnered to create a guide to promote the provision of culturally relevant foods in meal programs that serve culturally diverse communities. The resource includes detailed information on building cultural relevance in school meal programs by describing why and how to incorporate culturally appropriate foods to the menus, highlighting the importance of **finding community partners** for interventions to be effective. Furthermore, besides providing recipes from different cultures, this guide also includes several case studies where involving community partners to provide **input and feedback** based on their needs was a cornerstone for the success of the project.

"Food can evoke strong emotional feelings of comfort and security. Every student should have the opportunity to see their heritage in the food that they share with their peers."

Mellissa Honeywood, Food Service Director for Cambridge Public Schools

Madison Area Food Pantry Gardens (17)

Community gardens run by volunteers whose mission is to help neighbors by providing pantries with first-choice, fresh, nutritious and culturally relevant produce. These gardens are **embedded in the community** that local pantries serve. Direct communication with food pantries that understand the needs of the community has been useful to determine what produce will be grown in the community gardens. Overall, pantry clients are very satisfied given that they now receive fresh produce that are used as main ingredients for culturally relevant recipes to be shared with their families.

"Fresh produce is hard to come by in the pantry and this provides for that need. Having access to food that is healthy and culturally relevant is something that we weren't able to provide without this."

Volunteer, Forward Garden Farm



SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE CULTURALLY RELEVANT FOOD PROVISION

- Creation of partnerships with the community
- Collection of feedback from clients
- Ongoing re-assessment of client's needs
- Establishment of effective bilateral communication with clients
- Understanding of the calendar for cultural and religious holidays

METHODS: SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE SEARCH

I conducted a systematic search to identify both published and grey literature regarding food banks and community food systems and culturally relevant foods. Relevant research databases such as PubMed, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar were used for this search. The key search terms were the following:

- *Culturally relevant food AND food bank*
- *Culturally responsive food AND food bank*
- *Culturally appropriate food AND food bank*
- *Culturally tailored food AND food bank*
- *Culturally relevant food AND community food programs*
- *Culturally responsive food AND community food programs*
- *Culturally appropriate food AND community food programs*
- *Culturally tailored food AND community food programs*

.....

When conducting this systematic search, I noticed that even though the majority of the food banks and community food programs in the US claim that they are providing or intend to provide culturally relevant foods, the methodology followed to address culturally relevant foods is often not described in their websites or reports. Hence, this brief proposes using the community health assessment framework as a strategy to better understand the needs of the community that is being served, which often includes the provision of culturally relevant foods.



REFERENCES

FOOD BANKS AND FOOD INSECURITY

1. Bazergchi C, McKay FH, Dunn M. The Role of Food Banks in Addressing Food Insecurity: A Systematic Review. *J Community Health*. 2016;41(4):732-740. doi:10.1007/s10900-015-0147-5
2. Hardcastle SJ, Caraher M. The role of foodbanks in the context of food insecurity: Experiences and eating behaviours amongst users. *Appetite*. 2021;1:163:105208. doi: 10.1016/j.appet.2021.
3. Vahabi M, Damba C. Perceived barriers in accessing food among recent Latin American immigrants in Toronto. *Int J Equity Health*. 2013;12:1. Published 2013 Jan 3. doi:10.1186/1475-9276-12-1
4. Ramley DT, Zubieta AC, Lamba MC, Melgar-Quinonez H, Taylor C. Spanish- and English-Speaking Client Perceptions of Choice Food Pantries. *J Hunger Environ Nutr*. 2010;5(1):120-128. doi:10.1080/19320240903574387
5. Caspi CE, Davey C, Barsness CB, et al. Needs and Preferences Among Food Pantry Clients. *Appetite*. 2021;18:E29. doi:10.5888/pcd18.200531

CULTURALLY RELEVANT FOODS

6. Culturally-responsive Food Strategies. United Way of Olmsted County. <https://www.uwolmsted.org/sites/uwolmsted.org/files/Culturally-Responsive%20Food%20Strategies.pdf>. Published September 22, 2017. Accessed November 5, 2021.
7. Harper K, Lewis E, Gittelsohn J. Exploring Accessibility of Culturally Relevant Foods in a Low-Income Neighborhood in Baltimore City, *Current Developments in Nutrition*, Volume 4, Issue Supplement_2. 2020: 525. doi: 10.1093/cdn/nzaa046_025
8. Charles D. Diplomats and lawyers try to define 'culturally acceptable food'. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2014/08/27/343693680/diplomats-and-lawyers-try-to-define-culturally-acceptable-food>. Published August 27, 2014. Accessed November 22, 2021.
9. Freedman A. Serving up Tradition - A Guide for School Food in Culturally Diverse Communities. Massachusetts Farm to School. <https://www.massfarmtoschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/ServingUpTradition.pdf>. Accessed November 10, 2021.

COMMUNITY HEALTH ASSESSMENT

10. Krishnaswamy G, Ross-Viles S. Chapter 4: Community Health Assessment. In: Jones-Smith J, ed. *Public Health Nutrition: Essentials for Practitioners*. Johns Hopkins University Press; 2020: 52-79.
11. Bopp M, Fallon EA, Bolton DJ, Kahl D. Engaging community partners to develop a culturally relevant resource guide for physical activity and nutrition. *Ethn Dis*. 2012;22(2):231-238.
12. Cueva K, Lovato V, Carroll D, et al. A Qualitative Evaluation of a Community Based, Culturally Relevant Intervention to Promote Healthy Food Access in American Indian Communities. *J Community Health*. 2020;45(3):458-464. doi:10.1007/s10900-019-00760-4
13. Thayer EK, Farquhar SA, Walkinshaw LP, Wool JL, Jones-Smith J. Youth Perceptions of the Food Environment in One Seattle, WA Neighborhood: A Qualitative Study. *J Hunger Environ Nutr*. 2021. doi: 10.1080/19320248.2021.1971136

STRATEGIES TO PROVIDE CULTURALLY RELEVANT FOODS

14. Culturally responsive food initiative. Food Bank of the Rockies. <https://www.foodbankrockies.org/about/programs/culturally-responsive-food-initiative/>. Published August 30, 2021. Accessed November 12, 2021.
15. Food Bank of the Rockies and Food Bank of Wyoming. Culturally responsive food pantries. Food Bank of the Rockies. <https://49bfkv3cr9u47r18x1hwdp9u-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Best-Practices-for-Inclusive-Pantries.pdf>. Published June 21, 2021. Accessed November 9, 2021.
16. Freedman A. Serving up Tradition - A Guide for School Food in Culturally Diverse Communities. Massachusetts Farm to School. <https://www.massfarmtoschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/ServingUpTradition.pdf>. Accessed November 10, 2021.
17. Welcome to Forward Farm. Madison Area Food Pantry Gardens. <https://www.foodpantrygardens.org/index.html>. Accessed November 8, 2021.