



Undergraduate Journal
of Service Learning & Community-Based Research

Restructuring the Approach: An Inside Perspective on Addressing Food Insecurity

Rafat Solaiman

University of Minnesota

Introduction

Serving others allows us to tackle the most complex social issues ailing many communities today. However, it is the *act of learning* in the context of service that allows for growth to occur among individuals while truly understanding the entirety of issues. Work on social issues is promoted by numerous organizations today but the general population is not exposed to the same view of the situations as those who sit in leadership roles within these organizations. I have been fortunate enough to stumble upon the opportunity to start my own organization that tackles one of these social issues: food insecurity.

Before taking initiative with my own organization, I heard of the need for volunteers at my local food shelf through my community members. Upon applying to volunteer, the director of the food shelf invited me into their facility to take a look around the space. Before that moment I had never seen what a food shelf really looked like and had no idea what to expect. I observed the following: numerous empty shelves lined the walls and no youth volunteers were present. Upon further questioning I learned that: counter to my initial belief and the common perception, most of the food shelves are not funded by the governments, rather, they are operated as nonprofits that rely heavily on public donors. Thus, fundraising for local food shelves is critical for their survival.

There is oftentimes confusion on the difference between food shelves, food pantries, and food banks. Food banks are the organizations that collect food items from the food industry and food drives. Food shelves then purchase these items at low costs from food banks in addition to receiving items from their own local food drives. Food shelves and food pantries are synonymous terms.

The struggles of my local food shelf sparked the creation of my own organization. In 2017, I started Fasting For Friends, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that mainly focuses on serving the southern and metro region of Minnesota. The name stemmed from the concept of having donors build greater empathy towards food insecurity by fasting for a meal, tracking their savings, and donating to a food shelf in need. The mission of Fasting For Friends is to aid underfunded and understaffed food shelves in food insecure communities. While I initially made the assumption for this need after interacting with my local food shelf, upon further questioning to other food shelves it became evident that many food shelves were in need of assistance in some area or another: providing culturally-specific meals, requiring more volunteers for higher efficiency during meal distribution, being in more need of nutritious options, etc.. Food shelves need a permanent helpline and that's exactly what Fasting For Friends aims to provide.

Many individuals are only able to see the workings of nonprofit organizations from a relatively "outside" perspective as a community member or volunteer. My experiences at Fasting For Friends has allowed me to gain an "inside" perspective through leading the activities of the organization, as well as collaborating with other nonprofits on this issue.

The Issue at Hand

Many of us take for granted the meals we are able to enjoy on our plates. While we oftentimes instinctively think of countries overseas when hearing about food insecurity and hunger, the issue poses a significant problem within the United States borders. Food insecurity currently affects more than 42 million people within the US, thus causing the issue to be considered a major health crisis (Gundersen & Ziliak, 2018). The significant size of the problem astounded me and motivated me to delve further into learning about the issue.

My first step to truly understanding food insecurity was to understand the definitions behind the issue. According to the USDA, food insecurity is defined as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy lifestyle (Definitions of Food Security, 2019). On the other hand, hunger is a physiological state that results from food insecurity. This distinction allowed me to understand that food insecurity is a consistent form hunger. The issue is more severe than just an occasional longing for more food.

Food insecurity is a consistent cycle and a complex issue. It is understood that individual characteristics, such as age, education, race, income, marital status, etc. contribute to household food insecurity. The food insecure individual then experiences “moderators” like chronic stress, food environment, and genetic factors, which lead to various chronic diseases (Laraia, 2013). Children within these food insecure households also face hindered educational achievement (Hannum, Liu, & Frongillo, 2014). All of these outcomes displayed the many additional issues faced by food insecure individuals aside from access to food. These findings brought up the realization that food insecurity affected various aspects of an individual’s life.

During my time in my local food shelf I witnessed the aforementioned obstacles that contribute to poverty and food insecurity among many individuals. I served immigrant, non-native English speakers who were trying to settle into an entirely new environment and culture; visitors with apparent ailing health conditions; retired individuals who were struggling to make ends meet; and young mothers occupied with their multiple children. All of these individuals were facing obstacles that made it more difficult to obtain jobs with decent wages and maintain good health with nutritious purchases.

Food is a fundamental part of our lives, yet so many people struggle to gain access to it. The victims of food insecurity are victims of a cycle that is difficult to break. This has made the issue highly difficult to overcome as a society.

Current Work Being Done

During my time working with Fasting For Friends, I have also worked with and observed a number of local organizations who provide relief to food insecure individuals. These organizations included food shelves, soup kitchens, and backpack lunch programs. Food shelves exhibited their importance as the first line of defense against food insecurity by providing recurring provisions. I witnessed soup kitchens providing emergency assistance with minimal screening to individuals in immediate need of food. Minimal screening was important in that it did not exclude individuals who didn't meet specific poverty thresholds or didn't have certain paperwork. Work with backpack lunch programs exposed me to the reality of the number of students who struggle to attain healthy and filling meals during school breaks and holidays.

While these are local organizations doing local work, a broader view shows lots of work in addressing food insecurity done by national organizations. A prime example is Feeding America, a nonprofit organization playing a large role on the issue by supplying for a national network of food banks, conducting research on food insecurity, and creating numerous resources for communities.

A lot of the local work that I have facilitated and observed most directly works on temporary relief for food insecure individuals. A set of key players in this temporary relief are food shelves. People often turn to national organizations when seeking a long-term solution. However, this undermines the strong impact of food shelves in diminishing food insecurity. Contrary to common belief, food insecurity tends to be a temporary issue with less than 15% of

households remaining food insecure for greater than 3 years (Frequency of Food Insecurity, 2019). With the current programs that are set in place that help these low-income individuals get back on their feet, food shelves prove to be key players in mitigating food insecurity. However, many food shelves cannot provide the most nutritious and culturally specific food options to their clients without proper funds. They also cannot properly function without adequate numbers of volunteers. This gap in funding and volunteer aid for food shelves is important, and one that Fasting For Friends fills.

The efforts of both local and national organizations have been paying dividends to diminishing the issue, as food insecurity in the United States has decreased from 11.8% in 2017 to 11.1% in 2018 (USDA, 2019). While this is a measurable improvement, more must be done to aid food shelves in providing nutritious and culturally specific options. This allows for food insecure individuals to decrease their risk of health problems during their time of need.

A New Approach

Tackling food insecurity is no doubt a daunting task. As a child I have heard about the issue of food insecurity quite often, but in the present day it seems as if it has been put on the backburner much like many issues that persist for long periods of time. Upon in-depth analyses of the current programs set in place to diminish food insecurity I found deficiency in a key area: equipping the younger generation to become more competent and proactive in dealing with food insecurity. This is why Fasting For Friends believes in empowering the younger generation to be the ones who provide assistance to their local food shelf and community through the concept of three pillars: education, service, and leadership.

By educating youth and adults through engaging activities, lessons, and conversations, new ideas are quickly brought to the table. In my work alongside my team, we have been able to

gain the interest of many community members in providing assistance to their local food shelf simply by giving 15-minute educational presentations on the issue. While this is a start, more must be done for youth within their schools in order to spark greater awareness and interest in addressing food insecurity. We strongly emphasize education as it is the most impactful way to enact social change and remove ignorance regarding the issue.

Our team has found that educational resources are not being implemented effectively as schools are not integrating them into their curriculums. A good example of an effective resource was developed by the Center for A Livable Future at Johns Hopkins, which launched FoodSpan in 2016. FoodSpan is a free curriculum explaining the workings of the food system, as well as the social issues that trouble it. The curriculum includes interactive presentations, activities, and worksheets. Our team has found implementation of resources like this nonexistent within local schools. However, this is understandable with the considerable amounts of effort necessary by teachers to implement new material into school curriculums. This is why we developed our own lesson plan kits as an organization to provide to teachers in order to minimize their efforts in implementing the material. In a society with an abundance of resources and a lack of effective distribution, education can drastically change the understanding of communities on how to spread resources.

Service implies that we directly interact with people facing food insecurity in order to make personal connections and gain knowledge through experiential learning. After individuals are educated on the issue, they are able gain a foundation on how to address it. It was through the context of service that I was able to truly understand the personal vantage point behind the issue. I observed first-hand the obstacles many faced, such as health, age, schooling, work, culture, and language. It was through service that I was able to identify the lack of youth involvement within

my local food shelf. Through the service component, student chapters build a permanent relationship with their local food shelves and aid with fundraising and volunteer events. By engaging more youth in service work related to food insecurity through our organization, we were able to have the youth see the direct impact they are able to provide for combatting food insecurity.

In order to allow youth to apply their learning through service and education, implementing leadership practices marks the tail-end of our work. Through student-led events and groups we have allowed youth to take full initiative in becoming a part of the food insecurity conversation, while also receiving handbooks, guides, and other resources in order to guide them along the correct path. I have seen this growth among youth as they partake in local food drives, collaborate with team members, and create awareness within their schools. As these student chapters serve as a continuation of our work by providing a permanent helpline to their local food shelf, they learn valuable concepts like teamwork, communication, and collaboration.

Conclusion

Learning through service is essential in developing new ways to approach pressing social issues like food insecurity. My work through my nonprofit organization has opened my eyes to the reality of the situation. The continuity of the issue can be attributed to the complex cycle that makes food insecurity difficult to overcome. Food shelves are a key player in diminishing food insecurity, yet they oftentimes remain underfunded and understaffed. While food shelves are considered temporary solutions, food insecurity is mostly a temporary problem. Food insecurity rates within the United States have shown a slow and steady decline, but the lasting health impacts of food insecurity can be better mitigated if food shelves can provide more nutritious options.

We must restructure the approach in tackling food insecurity by looking into how we can serve the specific needs of the efforts of each community. A stronger focus on equipping the youth with the tools and knowledge necessary to become leaders of the issue is needed. This can be accomplished by educating youth through lessons in school on how to aid the issue at hand. It is not only important to have a structure for this approach, but also to have a process. This is the methodology of Fasting For Friends, as we have mapped out a structure and process encompassing education, service, and leadership. Schools must adopt a more significant role within the structure by integrating educational resources discussing food insecurity and potential solutions. While the educational resources are available, they are not being effectively shared and implemented. It is the job of social organizations to provide full plans and materials to educators for easy implementation of lessons into their curriculum. Greater advocacy is also necessary from students within their communities to encourage schools to add these lessons. As a result, teachers will be able to better prepare their students to tackle real-world issues, and students will gain significant leadership skills and community engagement.

Service learning has given me the opportunity to enhance my knowledge on food insecurity from a different perspective and has allowed me to identify problems within the issue. I encourage youth and adults to immerse themselves within service work and be mindful of their surroundings. If issues persist for long periods of time, we should ask ourselves *why* the current methods are not working effectively and *how* we can change/add to them. It is when we question ourselves during service learning that we truly maximize the outcome of the experience.

References

- Gundersen, C., & Ziliak, J. P. (2018, February 16). Food Insecurity Research in the United States: Where We Have Been and Where We Need to Go. *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy*, 40(1), 119-135.
- Hannum, E., Liu, J., & Frongillo, E. A. (2014, January). Poverty, food insecurity and nutritional deprivation in rural China: Implications for children's literacy achievement. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 34, 90-97.
- Laraia, B. A. (2013, March 6). Food Insecurity and Chronic Disease. *Advances in Nutrition*, 4(2), 203-212.
- USDA. (2019, September). *Definitions of Food Security*. Retrieved from USDA, Economic Research Service: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx>
- USDA. (2019, September). *Food Security and Nutrition Assistance*. Retrieved from USDA, Economic Research Service: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-security-and-nutrition-assistance/>
- USDA. (2019, September). *Frequency of Food Insecurity*. Retrieved from USDA, Economic Research Service: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/frequency-of-food-insecurity/>