

Building Local Food Councils to Improve Community Food Security



Abstract

Purpose/Objective: To bridge the gap between food insecurity and healthy food choices through development of local Food Councils (FCs).

Target Audience: Twenty-four rural, high poverty communities in Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio and South Dakota.

Theory, Prior Research, Rationale: Voices for Food (VFF) is an integrated extension and research-based grant initiative focused on enhancing food security in six states experiencing food insecurity. Research indicates that FCs are good models for increasing community engagement, to address community food system issues such as accessibility to nutritious foods and food insecurity. Each community food system is comprised of diverse sectors that offer unique strengths and challenges. VFF draws on Systems Theory to facilitate engaged dialogue and dynamic community linkages to promote food security, especially among low-income and food insecure populations.

Description: VFF was developed by a multi-disciplinary team of experts collaborating on all aspects of the initiative. The project uses a community-based approach to improve food security through targeted food system and policy changes implemented by local FCs. A *VFF Food Council Creation Guide* was provided to each community. The guide provides a wide array of resources and guidance to support FC formation, targeted policy changes and community engagement.

Evaluation: A detailed evaluation plan has been implemented for the VFF project, which includes tested tools for data collection. The first data collection cycle has been completed. A mid-point and post intervention data collection cycle is planned. VFF is collecting data from FC members and community stakeholders, as well as tracking FC activities, trainings and resources provided.

Conclusions and Implications: Using the Systems Theory in multiple states provides an avenue to test approaches in a variety of settings, thus determining the strength of a Systems initiative to effect change in widespread implementation efforts. Mid-point and post data collection cycles will offer greater clarification on community outcomes and lessons learned.

Identification of Food Insecure Communities

Food insecure communities within each of the six states were identified using a stratified criteria method which included but was not limited to:

- Identification of rural, high-poverty counties, defined as non-metro counties with poverty rates higher than 16% in 2011 as documented within the USDA/ERS map that contains poverty information for all non-metro counties in the U.S. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/atlas-of-rural-and-small-town-america/go-to-the-atlas.aspx>
- Presence of Cooperative Extension programming to allow for sustainability after completion of the VFF project.
- Counties without a currently operating FC.
- Presence of key food system stakeholders who were open to participating and cooperating in evaluation data collection efforts (some examples include: community needs assessment, stakeholder surveys, key informant interviews and on-site observations).
- Ability to match each county as an intervention or comparison community.

What Are Food Councils and How Can They Help Improve Community Food Security?

Forum for Food Issues: FCs can be described as umbrella organizations for diverse food system stakeholders to participate in safe community forums to address food system issues. FCs work from a food systems perspective, integrating and balancing the various issues and interests that shape the food system of a given community. As meaningful community engagement increases, community food system issues such as accessibility to nutritious foods and food insecurity can be addressed in a comprehensive manner, leading to sustainable solutions.

Foster Coordination Between Sectors: In taking a food systems approach (Figure 1) FCs work across the full range of food sectors – including producing, consuming, processing, distributing and waste management. FCs can facilitate engaged dialogue and dynamic community linkages across all of these sectors to promote food security, especially among low-income and food insecure populations.

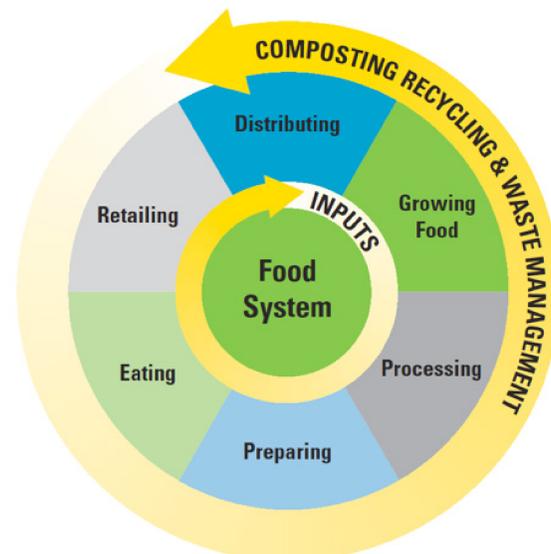


Figure 1

Policy: The role of FCs may include research, oversight, advising and advocating for specific policies. They can also help identify areas of need and either propose a change in government policy or identify the need for a non-governmental organization to initiate a new program. In this role FCs can bridge the divisions in communities that might be unaware of the effect of their mandates, policies and actions on health, nutrition and the environment.

Programs: The role of FCs may also include implementation of programs. Examples may include getting SNAP benefits accepted at farmers markets, creating school breakfast programs, or securing land for community gardens.

How Does the Voices for Food Project Help Build Community Food Councils?

The VFF project is guided by the Social Ecological Model or SEM, which holds that individual's behaviors (healthy eating, food selection) are influenced by their friends, families, organizations (schools, food pantries), communities and ultimately local, state and federal policy (Figure 2).

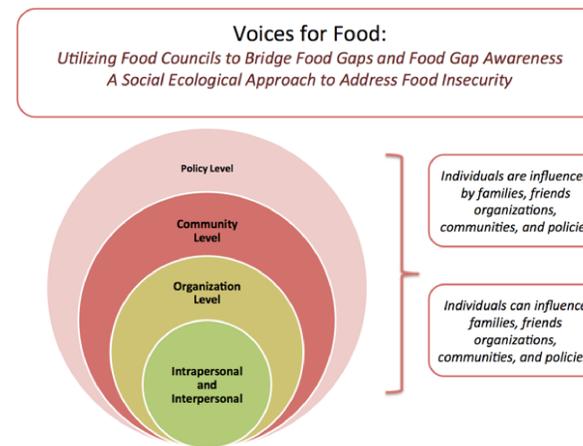


Figure 2

With this model in mind, VFF approaches FC development with a goal to empower voices within the community food system, so that engaged dialogue takes place and dynamic linkages are formed. This process includes:

- Assessment of Community Stakeholder Interest and Facilitation of FC Development:
 - Key stakeholders, who perceive a critical need, are identified, recruited and begin meeting with the intent to create a future FC.
 - Members of the VFF team assist this effort by: conducting community stakeholder surveys; facilitating community connections; and recruiting a VFF community champion.
- Each community is provided with:
 - A *VFF Food Council Creation Guide*, which offers step-by-step assistance and resources for FC formation.
 - Various curricula and resources that may be used by communities to: promote community dialogue and cultural competency; conduct nutrition education; provide food safety training; and improve access of nutritious foods to food insecure community members.
 - Resources to provide sustainability for each FC.

Intervention and Comparison Communities differ in implementation strategy and timeline, enabling assessment of the overall project without thwarting the success of any VFF community.

Authors:

Pamela Duitsman*, PhD
 duitsmanp@missouri.edu
 University of Missouri Extension
 Missouri

Lindsay Moore, MS
 moorehealthylivingllc@gmail.com
 Moore Healthy Living, LLC
 North Carolina

Donna Mehrle, MPH, RD, LD
 mehrled@missouri.edu
 University of Missouri Extension
 Missouri

Other participating states include: Indiana, Michigan, Nebraska, Ohio and South Dakota

How Will the Voices for Food Project Measure the Degree To Which Community Food Security Is Improved?

Data collection in each VFF community is taking place at three time points: pre-, mid- and post-intervention. Specifically designed data sets include but are not limited to the assessment of:

- Formation of FCs
- Food access
- Food availability
- Food quality
- Food intake by food pantry clientele
- Community use of provided resources

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