



CARE
PROJECT

**Voices of Hunger in
Lafayette/West Lafayette:
Culture-centered Dialogues**

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Food Insecurity: Setting up the Context

There are more than 925 million food insecure persons in America (Newsweek, 2010). The problem of hunger and food insecurity is compounded by the economic recession, and the soaring gas prices in that the purchasing power of families is depleting in the face of rising food costs (Newsweek, 2010). The rising food insecurity and hunger in America prompted the President Barack Obama's present move to strengthen food security through various food assistance programs intended to reverse the trend by 2015. The establishment of the Supplemental Nutrition for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program, the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) formerly known as Food Stamp Program and several interventions geared toward halting food insecurity attest to the magnitude of the problem in America (The WIC Program, 2009, Food and Nutrition Act, 2008).

In addition to the government responses, different organizations such as Not for Profit Organizations (NGOs), charity organizations and churches are responding to the threat of hunger and food insecurity through the establishment of food pantries and food banks. We will return to this in detail later in this paper. However, conspicuously erased from much of the programs are the voices of the food insecure who exist at the margins. The absence of marginalized populations at the site of these food programs is of concern, and underscores the importance of culturally relevant approaches that listens to the unique challenges of the hungry and food insecure. It is reasonable to infer that the absence of the food insecure from government programs explains the failure of present top down food assistance programs. For instance, despite three decades of the existence of WIC and SNAP, food insecurity and hunger remain on the rise in America. WIC was established in 1972 (The WIC Program, 2009).

Within the context of our culture-centered project, the centralized location soliciting, collecting, and redistributing food to those in need is that of Food Finders Food Bank, Inc. Food Finders Food Bank in Tippecanoe County, Indiana currently serves a number of surrounding counties, both suburban and rural, in the Northwest-Central region of Indiana. Specifically, food is donated from farmers, individuals businesses (grocers/restaurants), large manufacturers or processors, the USDA, personalized local donations, and larger emergency food relief organizations (Feeding America) to the local food bank, Food Finders. This organization then redistributes the food to local nonprofit food bank member agencies, such as food pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters for the needy. It is at these locations where those experiencing food insecurity are able to gain access to food, whether that be per receiving food products to be taken home or actual cooked food to be eaten at a shelter or kitchen.

According to a 2010 survey conducted by the Feeding American organization, representing 101 food agencies served by Food Finders and 231 clients of those agencies, most emergency food agencies in the Food Finders service area are faith-based organizations (Feeding America, 2010). The average length of operation of these service providers is 18 years, with almost half having served clients for 11-30 years. Despite seeing an increase in clients since 2006, 90% of clients surveyed who use these services are very or somewhat satisfied with the quantity, variety, and quality of the food they receive. 64% of those food agencies assessed do provide clothing to clients, and almost 50% provide some form of transportation. Interestingly, though, most emergency food providers do not provide SNAP program benefits, counseling, employment trainings, or eligibility counseling for other federal programs. In this

service area specifically, 36% of food pantries, 22% of kitchens, and 11% of shelters reported turning clients away during the previous year, with the most common reason being lack of food.

Against the backdrop of the failure of expert interventions such as the food assistance programs, there is increasing demand for a Culture Centered Approach to address health, and food insecurity (Dutta, 2008). Culture Centered Approach listens to marginalized populations in the design of health and food interventions. In the context of food insecurity, CCA will deconstruct the missing links in contemporary food assistance programs in America, and offer constructive ways on how to meaningfully engage with marginalized populations that are the beneficiaries of the food assistance programs.

In addition, CCA will ask, how does the dominant structures silence or erase the agency of marginalized communities who lack the opportunities to voice their concerns. We use agency here to mean the capacity to make decisions regarding food access. For instance, what does hunger mean? What does food mean to the marginalized? How best should food be distributed to the food insecure? (Access) What kinds of food are desirable? What quantities should be distributed at the pantries, and at what intervals? CCA seeks to reverse the status quo by listening to the voices of the food insecure population who have been rendered invisible in the dominant top down food assistance programs. In this sense, CCA offers entry point for alternative definition of the kinds of food that should be delivered at the food banks, and how the food insecure should be treated at the pantries.

In this report, we examine the lived experiences of food insecure persons in the Lafayette/West Lafayette area in Indiana. We seek to understand what food insecurity means to the food insecure in West Lafayette/Lafayette. In addition, we examine the operations of the various food delivering organizations in West Lafayette, and juxtapose their operations with the lived experiences of the food insecure. Our goal is to assess the need of food insecure, and offer meaningful ways of engaging with the food insecure. In order to achieve this goal, we conducted 17 in-depth interviews, 3 longitudinal focus groups, and PhotoVoice Workshops. This report is meant to be read in complement with the PhotoVoice Art Exhibit titled "Voices of Hunger" that is on display.

The reality of food insecurity

Umm, I don't know, but, I don't know, but I think it is also hard in America here because umm it just doesn't seem like it's a real problem. But I guess it is, I guess there are other people in this situation but I've always in past times thought how can people ever get to a point where there is no food, where there is no food in their house, how can they get to that point? And because there is so much help out there, there is so much help out in America. But for me, umm, I don't receive assistance. So, umm, and because of income I could not receive assistance. So I feel like especially with the economy the way it is now umm it's become a real thing to me (beginning to cry, sniffle). So, umm, anyway, trying not to get too emotional here. (Participant # 1)

The emotions of having to go through something like this. It is definitely emotionally harder. Umm, I don't know, it just kind of makes you wake up and realize I guess what you take for granted. I mean, you know, before when food was getting a little bit low, oh I can just go to the food pantry, you know, and do whatever. Umm, do something like that. Umm, but now it's not,

we're really hitting hard these past couple of days waiting for the next pay check to come in. Umm, and so during that time there has been no money. Nothing in the bank accounts, nothing. And It's not just food were lacking, it's the gas. How are we going to get to our jobs if we hardly have any gas in our vehicles to get to our jobs? (Participant # 1)

I do have a bachelors and masters degree from Purdue University. The bachelors is in industrial management and the masters is in wood science, that's technically the name for it, but I specified it furniture design and manufacturing and I did have a little management career up until 1993. When my allergies causing severe ADHD, my bipolar worsen, I could no longer function in the middle management, and then we gradually gradually we...our savings disappeared, and so at the present time, we are going to about 12 food pantries at a month to be able to survive. (Participant # 8)

Yeah, different times when I've been without a job. In between jobs. Like, unemployment, like right now I'm not working. Just, well, I had 5 teenagers in my house, I couldn't feed them all, and I wasn't, I had lost my job. Well we were down to three then, Andy's the big one. But, I mean, try to feed a family of 5 on zero budget. Well, Andy had a job but I mean, on \$200 a week you can't do it. I mean, we cannot get government help, so I HAVE to go (emphasized). (Participant # 9)

Gratitude: The value of food pantries

We love food pantries. I cannot stress it enough; we love food pantries because until we discovered food pantries, food was still our No. 2 budget expense. We fairly and frequently moved because eventually we would get behind in the rent. But that doesn't happen anymore. In fact, we actually own a house now. It's somewhat government subsidized - 168 dollars a month is government subsidized. But that's just right here. The metaphor is like being in a pool of water. And if something like a medical cause happens and causes a wave, we go underwater. It's no longer happening, because we have very minimal food costs, and because of the food we take in from food pantries. This doesn't happen anymore. We have now lived the longest, the longest we have ever lived, 5 years and 3months. We now own two other houses. One was for four years and two months, the other one for four years and ten months. So this now the longest we have ever loaned a house, because food expenses are now very minimal and we are able to pay all the other bills like the rent, we are able to buy the mortgage. So again we love food pantries and that I think sums up the most you need to know about our situation and why we love food pantries. (participant # 10)

So in other words I had a life once...the illness pretty much was too much to overcome. But that's how well Purdue educated me, I mean that's a pretty good paying job. That only lasted a year, because I had another bipolar and ADHD relapse. And it also coincided that my company was facing a major downside. They laid off the general manger that I reported to, they laid off 7 out of the 9 managers that reported to him, I was one of the them, they kept two sale managers, they laid all the other managers including me the quality manger. But it would have happened anyway, because I was sinking into a very bad bipolar depression, and so that was the last that I hoped, and in 2005, it became official, I realized I needed to get some stability, even though social security is low, it's fixed, you have not much hope of breaking that ceiling, at least it

stabilized us, that was the only two things that stabilized us, the food pantries and the fact that I got social security disability because of my illnesses, so that's another very important, very critical thing to know, why we love food pantries, is along with social security, those are the only two things that stabilized us,. Otherwise you would get evicted of not paying the rent, we would have to move again, our lives would be all torn up, Christopher might not be a student at Purdue under those circumstances, that's another way to state it, that's how important food pantries are to us, that's why I wanted to show up to these interviews because I wanted to get those comments, and into official recorded parts of your data base. (Participant #12)

They don't give you meat and stuff like that, 90% of them don't give you meat, but at least it's can goods and basics. So that saves me when I do get cash to go to the store then I can focus on milk, eggs, bread, you know, the basics that I need to get that you don't get from the food pantries. So, but different times mainly in between jobs. And right now I'm not working so, and Andy broke his leg, so we've had no income (laughs). So, yeah, that's why. I mean, if we didn't have the food pantries right now we would have nothing. (Participant # 8)

Yes, it does. It just like I said it just depends upon the people, you know. I'm thankful that they're there. And, if they give me a choice then I'll, do you want spaghetti or do you want elbow macaroni, which noodles do you want? That kind of choice, fine. I'm always polite and smiling and I thank them because they are volunteering their time to help me. (Participant # 5)

Dignity, begging for food, and stigma

But stuck in a rough spot, but anyway, back to the experience with food pantries. As far as going there, it's really embarrassing. I try not to let myself get embarrassed but it is, it is embarrassing going. Umm, I don't know, the people are always nice when I go. They seem very, like they want to help. I mean I realize they are volunteers from churches and stuff like that but they are always nice. They give you, I don't know, sometimes I'm just like I'm in a position where I'm begging for food, I hate being in that position in the first place. (Participant # 1)

My kids wouldn't go with me. Oh, not now, never. These kids nowadays they won't even use coupons. If you go to Goodwill even if you buy Abercrombie and Fitch, they better now know where it came from. My kids would absolutely die than to go into a food pantry and eat. So, I did these things because, to survive. Me and Andy, and by golly they ate the food but they don't want to know where it came from. Today's generation are just, or at least all the kids that I've ran in to, young ones, consider it 2nd hand food. I'm not no, do you not like my fried chicken? Green beans are green beans! But yeah, the kids, oh they all loved the food, don't get me wrong, but they just didn't want any part of it. My kids anyways. So, I mean, that was just my house. So I just went and did what I had to do, and cooked the food. And they didn't ask questions. (Participant # 4)

Quality of food

I remember getting a box of something, I don't know if it was corn meal or corn muffin mix or pancake mix and the worm thingys are in there and you just gotta pitch it and throw it away. Umm, I don't know, I feel kind of bad for food pantries because here they are trying to give out

food to people and they gotta have the non-perishable goods, and the non-perishable goods, there is only so much you can do with it. Right now, at home I have a bunch of bags of beans and I'm sorry people don't just eat beans like that all the time. So I mean I still have them and I could do something with them but I don't know, like I said again, we're in a spot when you're begging for food you're at the mercy of whoever is giving you what. And umm, most of the time, you're looking for relief and you end up getting something that you're kids aren't even going to eat like the Northern beans or whatever you know. I don't know if I'm getting my point across. I'm basically trying to say that when you're begging for food you're at the mercy of the other people and they will give you what they can but they're also doing the best they can. I know they are because you can only do so much, a lot of what people normally eat is not non-perishable. And the only thing they are allowed to really give out are the perishable, I mean the non-perishable foods. Umm, so, anyway, us, Americans I think have come so accustomed to perishable foods, that I don't know it kinda makes us a little bit spoiled. (Participant # 1)

Umm, well sometimes it's not all that good looking so you don't even bother picking anything up. And actually to be honest with you that's most of the time that's the case, but umm, oh I remember, oh it was apples, they actually weren't that bad. Last fall, I remember picking up a bunch of apples, I don't know I have kids actually, not only do they enjoy and like vegetables, but they like a big variety of things. I don't have picky kids. My kids aren't the ones that sit and only eat hamburgers all day long or a certain kind of food. They like their vegetables. Anyways, they were excited when I brought home apples. So that was kind of neat. Lately, it's been fruit and vegetables have been like a treat instead of this is what you need to eat every day to survive. Like you know what I'm saying most kids get excited because you brought me home chocolate milk or you brought me home a candy bar, oh what a treat, my kids are like you brought home apples, that's awesome, thank you! I don't know, it was nice seeing apples not canned up something that was, I don't know to me it was real, it was real food. (Participant # 13)

I guess my biggest complaint would be the day old food, the stale food. I mean it's kind of, two things about it, is one it's, you know a relief to get the food and then you're all excited about it, but then you're quickly disappointed because there's something wrong with it and you can't eat it. That would be one complaint I have. Then the other one would be, oh I just lost it, I had two thoughts on it. Oh, it's kind of a, I can't think of a better term, it's kind of like a slap in the face. Oh you're begging for food so we'll just give her leftovers. So those two things are the things I dislike the most about it. It's almost like ridicule. (Participant # 16)

Uh yeah. The quality of food its low rated. It's the food people don't want. It's off brand names. Its food that's, you're not getting the quality of food that everyone else is getting when you go to these food pantries. It's always the minimum things. You never get any high quality food out of there. (Participant # 4)

Logistical issues: Quantity, transportation, information

That's basically it, the gas money, you have to wait outside in line sometimes 25 minutes in January, when it's 10 degrees outside. And the third one, that's why we are going to more and more food pantries, we used to get the same amount of food by going to say 6 food pantries. But

now we need go to 12, because the food they are passing out is about half maybe 60% of what they used to pass out, but it has gone down towards half. (Participant # 9)

So, but yeah, the access. There's just, there's some good ones but you're only allowed to go once a month. What good is it to go once a month? They give you one bag of food for once a month and it's like (pauses). Now I don't look a gift horse in the mouth, and I appreciate every single bag that I get, but, I don't understand how one bag is going to help a family survive because...you know once a month. And I understand that there's, you're trying to feed a lot of people, (Participant # 10)

Well like I said, I've got all my lists. Um, I wish I had a list for surrounding communities. I would go every day if I could. Most of them are, there's one, most of them are once of month and there's about ten of them give or take on average that are easily accessible for me. And I go to all ten, so, at least ten times a month. I mean, to ten different ones. St. John's I can go twice a month and I go every time I can go, every two weeks I go. But most of them are all once a month, so, and as soon as I remember the week that I go, kind of in my mind or write it down on the calendar, okay I went to this one this one this week, so that way next month I go hit it again. And the minute I can, because by that time, all that food is gone. You know, because it's one bag each. I don't know if you've been to the food pantries and seen what they give, because, I mean, bless their hearts I will never run out of green beans, I will never run out of corn. And like I said, I can chuckle about it now, but there was a time where there was nothing in my cupboards, nothing. So, and I did rely on St. Ann's because, too bad they aren't open 7 days a week, because you go all weekend without anything, you know. I couldn't wait to get down there to get those two things of soup because actually their food is good. I've ate it! So, you know, what do the people do on weekends? I mean there's the mental health, I've never been to that one. The day shelter or whatever. I've never, I'll go hungry. (Participant # 15)

Gas to get there. It used to be a car to get there. I didn't have a vehicle. And so I couldn't get there. Cause I live way out in the country, we're clear out on Jackson Highway in West Lafayette. So, um, right now with me not working it's a matter of getting gas in the car to get to town to go to all of these places cause Wea Baptist is way out off 350. They are completely on the other side of the county for me. Battleground, you know. So, that's my struggles is that. It's just mainly gas before I didn't have a car so I would have to...Andy was working and we were sharing a car and we were sharing a car. He wasn't making enough that we could still eat, if you know. He was lucky to bring home \$200 a week. By the time you pay rent, electric, this and that, there's no money left for food on \$200 a week. There's just not. So, I would have to find rides. So, I mean I've had my struggles when we didn't have a car. So, I could not imagine going to the food pantries on a bus, a city bus. I had to ride a city bus for a year when I lived down here. There's just no way, those bags are so heavy. Can goods! But my struggles is just mainly gas, getting to them now. (Participant # 8)

Resourcefulness and working through constraints

These are the food pantries that I schedule every month, I have actually been to Lafayette Transitional Housing. I have to record it. I went on Monday, but I will fill in the rest of these. Some of these you can only go within two days of the month. Of the last time you went,

salvation army is like that. If you go on the 21th of the month, the next month you have to be in between the 19th and the 23rd, they only allow two days difference. So there are some scheduling, shall we say not anomalies, there are some scheduling tricks to be able to do what we do. But April we will get filled in and here are the two main sources, the salvation army they list all the food pantries in the area. Of course our Christian based organization, which you also have Lafayette urban ministry which is quasi governmental because they got some fund from the government to be able to run. And they are one of the few food pantries you go in two times per week, you cannot go as much as in two weeks. The other food pantries are restricted to once per month, I just want you to know that, we have to be very organized to get, you know to have the gas money and everything else. I called super Tuesday, sometimes we go to 5 food pantries on Tuesday, on one day...(food pantry names), the Lafayette ad ministry, saint James Louis church, faith community administry, We will go to Hanna community center, which used to be part of the Christian and family resources center, now things have changed, now they call it something else. We go to Elmore church of Christ. That's part of their ad ministry as a Christian church is to run food pantries. Some of them are smaller and don't have that much of a selection, maybe get half a bag of groceries when you go. (participant # 7)

I have limited amount of gas money, so I want to group, on Tuesday usually, sometimes on Thursday, because those food pantries are open either Tuesday or Thursday, I have to make sure I am very efficient using my Gas money, then I would group all my goals and I can go at 9 am in the morning, and I hit James at 9:25, I have a 10 o'clock standing appointment on second Tuesday of each month, and then at 12 o'clock Hanna is open, and at 1 o'clock church of Christ is open, so in other words the time is nicely spaced so I can get all five of them in.

Action Items

- Need and Gratitude: The Food Finders and food pantries in Lafayette/West Lafayette serve a vital need for food in the area. Participants often discuss their gratitude to the food pantries and to Food Finders for their work in feeding those in need. Also, they point out that they are able to survive because of the food pantries; otherwise, they would have no places to access food. They suggest that food pantries serve an increasingly impoverished population in the region because of job losses and poverty.
- This could happen to anyone: Participants in our project point out that becoming poor often happened to them overnight. They often noted the lives and jobs they had before getting into situation where they were completely out of financial resources. The reality of hunger for them therefore lies in how suddenly it becomes an issue because of job loss and because of the economic inability to pay for the food.
- Dignity and begging: Participants note the shame that is often attached to the act of begging for food. They talked about how the stigma of begging initially stopped them from going to food pantries. They also talked about others in their immediate families (particularly children) who didn't want to visit food pantries or eat food from food pantries because of the stigma attached to the act of begging for food.
- Quality of food. Participants articulated multiple perspectives about quality of food, but their primary concern was regarding the expiry date of the food that was served to them. They appreciated receiving fresh food, and often referred to the partnerships with the farmers as an option they enjoyed. They also talked about the fact that they did not like

the stale food that was sometimes given out. They stressed the importance of storing meats properly and making sure that steps are taken to ensure that the food is both presentable as well as consumable.

- Quantity of food. The participants in our project noted that the quantity of food served at any one pantry was typically not enough to fulfill their needs. Therefore, they had to make trips to multiple pantries in order to make sure that their food needs were met.
- Transportation and logistics: Participants discussed the difficulties they faced in getting to the food pantries. In this context, they discussed the importance of setting up public transportation facilities in order to transport them to the food pantries.
- Information sharing and social support: Participants discussed the ways in which they communicated with each other to learn about access to food resources across town. They also discussed the importance of setting up a "Coalition for the Hungry" so that their voices may be heard in the design and development of policies and interventions.

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