

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS REPORT



Background

The city of Philadelphia is home to over 1.6 million residents and a dynamic food system. The city demonstrates a strong urban agriculture, food retail, and food manufacturing landscape. Additionally, there is a robust network of food-aligned and food-adjacent organizations supporting our neighbors and working towards a more just city.

Despite these attributes, there are several challenges facing the local food system. Philadelphia is one of the country's poorest major cities with at least 23% living in poverty [1] and 17% facing food insecurity [2]. Public benefits such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are underutilized, and diet-related chronic disease rates are the highest in the state. Further, community gardeners and urban farmers struggle with land acquisition, and those working along the food supply chain struggle to support their families. Food supply chain jobs—from production and processing to retail and hospitality—account for 12% of all jobs in Philadelphia, some 79,000 jobs as of 2018, with an average annual wage of just over \$24,500 per year [3].

FPAC Overview

The Food Policy Advisory Council is made up of 30 appointed members representing Philadelphia's food system who advise the Mayor and local officials on how to create a food system that is just. A just food system means everyone in Philadelphia has the power and resources to access and control our food, land, and labor. Racism, white supremacy, and other forms of oppression keep us from getting where we want to go. To address these barriers and shift power, FPAC works to change policy. We are led by the wisdom and power of those most affected by oppression – Black, Brown, Indigenous, poor, and marginalized people. As we create a space for all of our voices, we find and remove the barriers in our food system that keep us from taking charge of our food, land, and labor.

FPAC's subcommittees currently cover four food policy priorities: Anti-Hunger, Good Food Economy, Urban Agriculture, and Zero Waste. FPAC also convenes a joint standing subcommittee on Communications & Outreach and Membership & Governance to support FPAC operations. Subcommittee members include food justice advocates who may or may not also represent a food system-aligned organization.

This report is a product of the FPAC Anti-Hunger subcommittee's work to center the people closest to the issue of hunger. Through conversations with a diverse range of individuals, we strive to raise their issues to develop policy recommendations that prioritize racial and economic justice.

1. Philadelphia 2021: The State of the City. April 2021. Available from The Pew Charitable Trusts: <https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2021/04/philadelphia-2021-state-of-the-city.pdf>.
2. Gundersen, C., M. Hake, A. Dewey, E. Engelhard (2021). The Impact of the Coronavirus on Food Insecurity in 2020 & 2021, Update March 2021 [Data file and FAQ]. Available from Feeding America: State-By-State Resource: The Impact of Coronavirus on Food Insecurity - Feeding America Action.
3. Good Eats: The Greater Philadelphia Food Economy, and Good Food's Potential to Drive Growth, Improve Health, and Expand Opportunity. November 2019. Available from The Economy League of Greater Philadelphia: <https://economyleague.org/driving-regional-change/campaigns-projects/good-eats-2>

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Community Conversations

The Project

In Spring 2021, the Anti-Hunger Subcommittee started the Community Conversations Project which included a series of informal interviews to better understand the issues that organizations doing food security work were experiencing on the ground. In addition, conversations were used to provide insights on how the City can help anti-hunger organizations better serve residents. This report presents the results of the twenty-two interviews completed by subcommittee members. Interviewees represented non-profit organizations that address hunger in diverse ways including food pantries, social service programs, farms and gardens, and advocacy groups. Utilizing the notes from these structured interviews, Thomas Jefferson University researchers (Jefferson) assessed challenges and opportunities within Philadelphia's food system.

Methodology

Key Themes Analysis

Using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software program, Jefferson researchers identified key themes from notes taken during the informal interviews through qualitative analysis based on an agreed-upon set of codes and categories. Key themes represent one interpretation of throughlines and common areas of support requested across organizations. Interview takeaways are listed for each key theme in blue italics. These were taken directly from the interview notes and are not direct quotations from interviewees, therefore may lack some context.

Policy and Programmatic Asks Analysis

Jefferson conducted a separate, manual qualitative analysis that examined interview notes for specific examples of policy-related issues and recommendations. First, researchers identified new codes in a policy summary that counted frequency of total (# of times) and unique (# of organizations) mentions. Both Jefferson and Anti-Hunger Subcommittee members reviewed the analysis and provided a bulleted interpretation of the interviewees' policy and programmatic asks. These policy and programmatic asks were then organized by areas of the food system and mirror the categories used in Philadelphia's Urban Agriculture Plan, Growing from the Root.

Key Themes

1

Continuously fight against oppression and remove systemic barriers

Interviewed organizations believe that social justice and equity are at the center of their work. Residents are facing food insecurity due to the larger forces of systemic injustice including historic disinvestment, intergenerational poverty, and structural racism. Organizations view their work as an essential component to achieving equity in the city. Organizations described food as an entry point, and want city officials to understand that these organizations offer important touch points to residents who might otherwise be difficult to reach. Interviewees describe the importance of addressing the root causes of hunger and how they can play an active role in that work.

A challenge to addressing root causes is that funding sources do not always allow them to expand their work beyond food distribution, which means they are treating symptoms, but not addressing the cause. Organizations described the need to educate more broadly on the root causes of hunger, so that volunteers, funding agencies, and governmental officials understand how their clients' needs arise.

Interview Takeaways

- *Support local minority businesses and local businesses.*
- *City government could create positions where people are based in communities or talking to local politicians based in those communities. This role could include a liaison for anti-hunger organizations to work with city government officials.*
- *[There is a] need to consider food access and housing as human rights.*

Key Themes

2

Provide holistic, dignified, trauma-informed services

Organizations described the holistic needs of their clients and often described how they met those needs; they do not just give out food. Organizations want government officials to understand what their organizations do beyond distributing food to enhance the quality of life of clients. Support for these organizations should allow organizations to provide services with dignity, as relationship building is a key aspect of their work. One representative described the need for staff and volunteers at all anti-hunger organizations to receive anti-bias and trauma-informed service training because many of their clients have been prevented from using other food security resources. This presents an opportunity for the City to provide resources to train volunteers in particular.

Organizations also described the importance of offering culturally relevant foods that meet a variety of dietary preferences. Many interviewees described the variety of foods they offered as a positive attribute, or discussed how clients ask for more variety that align with their religious, dietary, or cultural needs and preferences.

The relationships organizations establish with clients are key to the effectiveness of their work, but they need funding to allow for the time and space required to build trust.

Creating a positive environment and talking with clients helps build rapport and increases engagement. This helps elevate the organization's presence in the community, which helps enhance their services.

Interview Takeaways

- *You cannot address food insecurity without addressing housing and mental health, it is all interconnected.*
- *Funding needs to allow for expansion of space and enhancement of the physical environment- not just cover food costs. Being on site often builds trust, making you familiar with folks.*
- *[There is a] need for an understanding that what [organizations] (are) doing is far beyond feeding people; [the] intent and hope [is] to improve health outcomes across the board. Research supports this (e.g. urban farming leads to improved mental health outcomes, decreased crime, etc.) and would be helpful if policymakers remember this in their work.*
- *What is the ultimate goal here? Right now it feels like funding these organizations for giving out the food. We understand this is how the dollars are allocated... we get that, but how can we do it with dignity so people don't have to stand on these long lines.*

Key Themes

3

Strengthen partner relationships, collaboration, and resource sharing

Interviewees described how food is an entry point and offers an opportunity for anti-hunger organizations to provide access to a variety of services for residents. Partnerships between organizations create opportunities to connect clients with specific programs and resources including financial support, housing, legal and behavioral health.

Organizations described how they currently provide a variety of services in one location and expressed a willingness to expand partnerships between organizations to offer more services. For example, collaborating on meal delivery services was often referenced as an area for development.

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Interview Takeaways

- Offer access to centralized delivery services. [We] asked them to partner with the delivery programs they were already doing. The food delivery component came about that way. It would be great to have a centralized system so that someone looking for free meals and for delivery could find what they need without having to call around to multiple organizations.
- Supporting partnerships will help expand reach while maintaining the access that smaller organizations have.
- [i] would like the food system as a whole to be more collaborative, efficient, more sharing of resources/less waste including collaboration on reducing food waste and litter.
- [There is a] big need for citywide assistance with delivery routing/logistics.

Key Themes

4

Increase resources and organization capacity

Many interviewees assessed that their organization's funds and other resources were stretched to their limits. For example, there were a few references that they were not expanding or that they had long lines. Smaller organizations talked about funding, even at small levels having low level grant opportunities. These organizations pointed out how important it is to have small, community-based organizations on the ground. In order for them to continue to serve and grow they need more space, people (staff/volunteers), and storage.

Many organizations need refrigeration and storage, while farming organizations identified the need for land and property. Food distribution sites described a need for supplies to allow them to continue distributions in inclement weather. It was commonly cited that administrative and organizational support is needed to recruit volunteers, advocate for better wages for staff, increase resources to enhance organizational management, and identify opportunities to learn what is working from other anti-hunger organizations.

To increase capacity, these organizations need more support in applying for grant funding and accessing other governmental funds. Interviewees also described challenges when navigating city application processes for permits, funding, and programs.

Interview Takeaways

- [There is a need] to find more infrastructure and support for small organizations to remain location/community-based
- There is plenty of food but it is being wasted. We live in abundance; how do we get it to those that need it?

Key Themes

5

Improve access to information

Organizations described the grassroots approaches they use to reach their clients, many of whom do not have access to internet or phone service consistently. They described low-tech ways of reaching clients including word of mouth and adding flyers to meals. It was also evident that social media and group texting platforms are a key way of getting the word out and offer efficiency in time sensitive situations. In some cases, expanding access to the internet may enhance client outreach and help with organizing volunteers and staff. Because these organizations are key touchpoints to residents, their ability to communicate with current and potential clients might also increase access to other beneficial services.

Equitable engagement strategies, including translation services, are needed to spread the word about things like food and land access. Organizations recognized that resources, materials and programs need to be available in multiple languages and described needing increased translation services.

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Interview Takeaways

- *Trainings [are needed] on the best ways to communicate digitally and manage those communications.*
- *City government could improve internet access by expanding [Comcast] Lift Zones and offering free wifi in shelters.*
- *Support [is needed] to develop health literacy of residents and increase translation services.*
- *Technical support is needed for these organizations. One organization described the inability to respond to emails as an “email roadblock”*
- *Digital divide reduces their reach.*

Food System Policy and Programmatic Asks

Both Jefferson researchers and Anti-Hunger subcommittee members reviewed the results of the Community Conversations to look for specific policy and programmatic asks. The asks are organized by areas of the food system and mirror the categories used in Philadelphia's Urban Agriculture Plan, Growing from the Root.

PEOPLE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Ensure that all workers in the food system are paid a living wage, have a manageable schedule, and have a good working environment to decrease burnout◦ Increase the minimum wage◦ Train and support new leaders in the food system, including youth◦ Subsidize Philadelphia farmers
LAND	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Create transparency and systems of support around public land access, utilization, and ownership, including the need to simplify process and permit timeliness
PRODUCTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Identify opportunities to connect or utilize food service equipment and spaces such as culinary kitchens, refrigeration/freezer units, and storage space
PREPARATION & DISTRIBUTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Develop a system to efficiently deliver food to people in their homes◦ Provide resources to enable all farmer's markets to accept SNAP payments

CONSUMPTION

- Expand enrollment in and use of SNAP benefits through methods like automatic enrollment, increased language access, expanding grocery stores that accept online SNAP and creating flexibility for paying delivery fees
- Provide culturally relevant food options that are aligned with multiple dietary requirements
- Support creation of more community kitchens for workforce development and to increase neighborhood food access
- Need for culturally relevant recipes, nutrition education, and cooking demonstrations

WASTE MANAGEMENT

- Create a more collaborative and efficient system for sharing food resources and reducing food waste
- Need a centralized system for organizations to manage food waste and locate excess food
- Support trash pick up and disposal at food distribution sites

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

- Create a centralized location where residents can find resources
- Provide funding and/or access to training including trauma-informed practices, anti-bias/diversity, equity and inclusion, and social determinants of health
- Need grants to build organization infrastructure in addition to food distribution
- Build opportunities for co-locating social services
- Foster inter-organizational collaboration to build capacity, make connections, and bridge gaps
- Need focused support from the City to support smaller organizations; for example, technical assistance with grant writing and navigating City processes
- Provide support to organizations to help navigate the City's administrative processes such as permits and record keeping
- Advocate for diversified funding streams such as reimbursement from insurance companies for addressing social determinants of health
- Review process for food purchasing and contracts to increase opportunities for local growers and food vendors
- Develop processes for data collection and reporting on those experiencing hunger
- Support higher education institutions that are working to improve food security for students
- Celebrate and recognize the volunteers who are doing food security work

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