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Towards Dignity: Understanding the Relationship between Food Banks & the Right to Food in the United States

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Abstract

In the United States, there is no legal right to food. The right to food is more than food security, it encompasses dignity, access, choice, financial security, and more. Rather than addressing food insecurity through a human rights-based approach, the US relies on a complex system of emergency food providers, including food banks. Food banks most often take a charity approach to providing individuals with food, failing to meaningfully recognize or address the structural causes of hunger and poverty. In recent years there have been increased efforts made by civil society to move conversation and state level policy in the direction of a rights-based approach to food security. The shift towards a rights-based approach is a means to make the federal, state, and local governments more accountable for ending hunger and ensuring human dignity to those in need of food. This thesis explores the potential role of food banks in moving towards the right to food by gaining a better understanding of food bank staff's perceptions of current food bank models and practices. Through observation, critical review of the literature and qualitative interviews with food bank staff and experts within the right to food, this thesis offers greater insight to how food bank staff understand the current emergency food system and the viability of the right to food. Research findings illuminate food bank staffs' current understandings of the right to food, concern about engaging in advocacy and policy efforts, and the influence of the complex network of actors that exist within food banks work, including partner agencies and Feeding America. Interviewed food bank staff overwhelmingly understand food banks and charity will not solve the issue of hunger in America. I argue that through engaging in broader advocacy efforts and utilizing the power and influence of food banks to educate the public on root causes of hunger, including structural racism, food banks can help contribute toward the conditions for the right to food.

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Introduction

One of my first memories of the charitable food system comes from the fourth grade. My class took the bus to volunteer at the soup kitchen in town. I do not know what exactly 20 nine-year-olds could have accomplished beyond wreaking some havoc, but I do vividly remember getting bleach on my purple corduroy pants. I was far more concerned by the stain on my pants than anything I had observed that day. While some Rit-Dye fixed the bleach stain, the issue of hunger in my community was barely scratched by my volunteer work. My class and I were not there to solve hunger, we were there to be exposed to people "different" from ourselves and learn about the impact we could make giving our time and, in our case, our parents donations. The charitable food system relies on a moral imperative to eliminate hunger from, what many would consider, an otherwise prosperous nation. The charitable food system is made up of a variety of actors including soup kitchens, food pantries, and food banks. Each of these make up part of the larger network working to end hunger. Despite messaging from non-profit giants like Feeding America, the reality is that hunger cannot be eradicated by you and me, through charity.

Charity as a solution to hunger fails to recognize the systems and structures that allow and enable hunger to exist. Within this context, charity can be understood as a band-aid solution: only giving someone a meal or a box of foods, feeding them temporarily. In the United States, charity is elevated by the government as the best means to address the issue of hunger and poverty. Emergency food organizations, like food banks, are supported by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) through programs like The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which provides government subsidized commodity foods to food banks. Food banks, first introduced in the late 1960s, are organizations that procure and distribute food to emergency food providers, like food pantries, in their area. During the 1980s, neoliberalism

and cutbacks to welfare gave way to charitable food organizations to address food insecurity and food banks presence and popularity soared. As a result, food banks have become one of the most notable and trusted non-profits.

I have childhood memories of volunteering for food pantries, unloading boxes from the local food bank and sorting canned foods. Until college, I believed that food insecurity was simply the result of not working hard enough, that being hungry was an individual's failing. This is not surprising, as it is the dominant narrative in the US. It was not until my time working with a local community garden and coursework focusing on non-profits and community development that I began to question the narratives I had been fed. By the time I graduated in 2020 from college, I had become incredibly critical of charity and food as the solution to poverty in the US. I did not understand how these organizations could so routinely fail to acknowledge and address structural issues keeping people hungry, issues like racial inequality. At that same time, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I found myself working closely with a local pantry and the same soup kitchen I visited as a child. In each of these roles, it became increasingly evident to me how critical the work of the food bank was to not only feeding people in the community but its support to local organizations. These competing realities, that emergency food organizations could be "feeding the need", as they say, while failing to meaningfully create change stayed with me. Upon beginning my graduate degree, I was ready to dive headfirst into the critique of food banks. Soon after becoming familiar with the right to food, this trajectory shifted.

The right to food, as defined by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UN FAO), is most simply "the right to feed oneself in dignity" (United Nations 2007). Human rights frameworks offer multi-pronged solutions to injustices faced by any individual. The United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner explains a rights-based

approach as being rooted in “a system of rights and corresponding State obligations established by international law” (United Nations n.d.). A rights-based approach seeks to support and establish social change through the examination of inequality, discrimination, and power dynamics. In the context of the right to food, a rights-based approach recognizes that rights are indivisible and interconnected, thus the approach to preventing food insecurity must also address the root causes of hunger, such as poverty and inequality. Mariana Chilton and Donald Rose (2009) offer four essential components to a rights-based approach: promoting government accountability, increasing public participation, addressing vulnerability and discrimination, and linking policies to outcomes. Chilton and Rose (2009) argue that the current approach in the US to ending hunger is a needs-based approach, where food insecure people are “passive recipients” of charity without legal protections. In contrast, a rights-based approach demands an infrastructure that supports and enables people to feed themselves and access legal remedy and recourse when they are unable to.

Rather than an explicit critique of the failings of food banks, this thesis seeks to explore how food bank staff understand their organization’s current operations through the lens of the right to food. Through qualitative research methods, I explore the potential relationship between food banks and the right to food in the US. Food banks were not made to end hunger at the structural level, but to feed people facing poverty in place of the state. The relationship between food banks and the right to food is filled with potential, as innovative practices within food banks become more common and the right to food movement in the US picks up steam. The question at hand is not if food banks can solve hunger. As discussed, food bank staff unanimously do not believe that it is the responsibility of food banks to end hunger. Instead the question is, how food banks can leverage their power and notoriety to help move the charitable emergency food system

towards a rights-based approach. This thesis argues that food banks can exist as a site for change, not only within the emergency food system but across society.

Literature Review

This literature review critically examines existing literature on emergency food systems in the United States and the potential to move towards a human rights-based approach to food (rights-based approach hereinafter). Emergency food systems refer to the established infrastructure within both the public[1] (SNAP, WIC, etc.) and private (food banks, food pantries, etc.) food networks to prevent hunger (McEntee & Naumova 2012). The US presently relies on a complex network of emergency food assistance including public and private actors. The following section provides context for the shift to food assistance as private charity and the limitations in taking a rights-based approach to food security. It begins with a brief explanation of a rights-based approach and is followed by an exploration of emergency food systems and structures in the US, charity and food banks, poverty and prevailing narratives of hunger, and closes with a more comprehensive exploration of the right to food.

A rights-based approach insists on peoples' right to the agency and ability to feed themselves and if necessary, places the responsibility of feeding people on the government. Where the current model relies on volunteers, surplus, and donations, by making food an enforceable right, the government is obligated to enable people to access the food of their choice, in a dignified manner. State obligations in relation to the right to food refer to the State's duty to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights (CESCR GC 12, para 15, 1999). Respect ensures that existing access to food is not prevented or obstructed by States. Protect requires that the State implements measures to protect individuals' access to food. Fulfill is three pronged. Fulfill-

[1] See https://www.fns.usda.gov/programs for all USDA Food and Nutrition Service programs

facilitate obliges the state to work actively to strengthen people's access and utilization of available resources to help themselves. Fulfill-provide obligates the state to provide food to those who are unable to access it (CESCR, GC 12, para 15 1999). Lastly, fulfill-promote was added in 2000 in General Comment 14 on the Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health. Fulfill promote states that the government must make efforts to promote available programs and resources, and the work of advocates in realizing the right to food (CESCR GC 14, para 4, 2000).

An essential factor of the right to food framework is dignity. George Kent writes "Human rights are mainly about upholding human dignity, not about meeting physiological needs. Dignity does not come from being fed. It comes from providing for oneself." (Kent 2005). In the context of the right to food, dignity goes beyond having a dignified experience at a food pantry or food bank, but rather invokes the idea that dignity comes from self-determination and agency (Kent 2005; United Nations 2010). In the current charity model, attention to food bank client's dignity is often absent due to the structures and operations of food banks.

Charity & Emergency Food

McIntyre et al. (2016) write that many in the US feel "that their [food banks] continued presence is often unquestioned—or that their elimination would be, at best, impractical, and at worst, unfathomable." In the US, food banks have become synonymous with ending hunger. Today, there are over 300 food banks in the United States (*How Many Food Banks Are There?* 2020). Many of these food banks are associated with Feeding America, a non-profit 'hunger-relief' charity. Feeding America was founded in 1979, the same time that neoliberal ideology began taking hold in mainstream America. During this time, there was a shift from government food programs, which had historically served as the main means of ensuring food security, towards private food assistance (Bacon & Baker 2017; Poppendieck 2014). The problem with charity as the dominant means of feeding people is rooted in the fact that acts of charity are

inherently unequal. Clarke & Parsell (2022) write that "at its core, this is an unequal relationship, as it presupposes the deprivation, and subsequent dependence, of one party (the charity recipient) relative to the other (the charitable giver)" (p. 308). David Spade (2020) contends that the charity model allows the government and the ultra-wealthy to make choices not only about who deserves support but often strict stipulations to the support. Charity is often considered a 'band-aid' approach as it fails to act as a solution to the complex root causes of hunger and instead focuses only on feeding people in the interim. In her book *Feeding the Other: Whiteness, Privilege and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries,* Rebecca de Souza (2019) argues that charity is a form of capitalism-in-action within the neoliberal market. The charity model ignores the social and economic causes of food insecurity, a violation of human rights, and instead frames the issue as an individual's problem, removing the need for wide state-led action. Spade (2020) argues that nonprofits focused on poverty alleviation, such as food access, are "essentially encouraged to merely manage poor people" as a result of little state intervention. By having to rely on food banks and charity, individuals are denied dignity and agency as they do not have control over how they receive their food. The commitment to this approach prevents legitimate change within emergency food systems. In *Sweet Charity*: *Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* one of the most comprehensive and influential critiques of emergency food systems, Janet Poppendieck (1998) outlines what she terms the seven deadly "ins" of emergency food: insufficiency, inappropriateness, nutritional inadequacy, instability, inaccessibility, ineffiency, and indignity. The seven deadly "ins" are what Poppendieck considers to be the major faults of the emergency food systems. Each "in" builds off the other, illuminating the ways that charity does not offer sufficient means for alleviating hunger. Most are self-explanatory; food banks can have insufficient and unreliable quantities of food due to shifting sources and reliance on donations.

Inefficiency refers to the lack of connectivity within emergency food and social service systems, making it difficult for clients to access the resources they need in an efficient manner. Poppendieck (1998) declares indignity the most important, writing that "They [standards of equity] cannot be applied to charity, precisely because the charitable giver has no responsibility to provide equitably" (p. 229). The issue of ending hunger and the popular approaches to doing so are deeply tied to the charity approach and in turn the history of welfare assistance in the US.

A Brief History of Emergency Food Systems in the United States

The first food stamp program was motivated not only by hunger relief, but to help mitigate food surplus. This motivation continues to drive hunger relief today (Daponte & Bade 2006). Since the inception of state-run food assistance in the US, hunger has been understood in tandem with accommodating food surplus and lessening food waste, rather than as an issue of basic needs and rights (Devault & Pitts 1984). Government funded food assistance programs date back to the Great Depression, when the earliest iteration of food stamps, now called Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) was conceptualized. The Food Stamp Program was introduced to mitigate food surplus from farmers and hunger in the 1939 (Gritter 2015; Nestlé 2019; USDA 2023). Given the high levels of poverty and unemployment, people could no longer purchase food at the same rates that farmers were producing it, resulting in a glut of food waste and instability for farmers (Nestlé 2019). In the effort to simultaneously solve the issue of hunger, decrease food waste, and offer farmers more stability, the Secretary of Agriculture introduced the Food Stamp Program. The program introduced two types of food stamps. Unemployed people could purchase orange food stamps; for each orange food stamps purchased by an individual, they would receive 50 cents worth of blue stamps. The blue stamps could only be used to purchase food that the USDA deemed food surplus (Gritter 2015; Devault

& Pitts 1984; USDA 2023). Once employment rates and food surplus returned to previous levels, the program ended in 1943 (Gritter 2015).

The national conversation around hunger was reignited in the early 1960s following Senators Robert Kennedy and Joseph Clark's visit to the South which brought new attention to poverty in the region (Devault & Pitts 1984; Dickinson 2019). In 1964, as a result of increasing concern within the American public about the rising poverty level, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a War on Poverty. This set in motion a slew of social welfare programs including Medicare and Medicaid, the National School Lunch program, the Women, Infants, and Children program (WIC), and the Food Stamp Act (Moffit 2015). The passing of the Food Stamp Act once again allowed individuals to purchase food stamps. Hunger was still seen as a temporary blight people may experience, but not a long-term enduring issue. In Congress, food stamps were framed as something that everyone could access with the hopes of encouraging the general public to purchase them and support farmers (Devault & Pitts 1984). Through the 1970s, anyone who could afford to purchase food stamps, could use food stamps, deemphasizing the issue of need and hunger from the equation and focusing on the economic priority of managing food surplus (Devault & Pitts 1984; Dickinson 2019). In 1973, the Food Stamp program was folded into the USDA Farm Bill. In 1977, the purchase requirement was lifted to further increase the accessibility of the program (Gritter 2015; Nestlé 2019). This iteration became what has evolved into SNAP, which remains housed under the USDA's Food and Nutritional Services (Gritter 2015; Bacon & Baker 2017; Poppendieck 2014). Poppendieck (2014) asserts that the focus on food assistance as the solution to poverty in the US, rather than direct cash transfers was in part a result of anti-poverty advocates' choice to pursue expanded food programs, to avoid dominant anti-welfare attitudes, and to mobilize both the agriculture sector and people's moral objection to

hunger in what was supposed to be a thriving country. In *Sweet Charity,* Poppendieck (1998) argues that the ultimate success of emergency food systems lies within the "emotional and ethical impact of hunger as an issue" (p. 30). de Souza (2019) uses the term systemic charity to describe the scale and precise nature of how "money, labor, and the good intentions of people are harnessed and channeled" to food assistance (p. 50). The focus on food assistance and hunger speaks to the value based moral imperative to prevent people from going hungry (Fisher 2017; Poppendieck 1998; Dickinson 2019; Riches 2018).

While the Food Stamp Program continued through the Reagan era, it faced major cutbacks and restrictions in the early 1980s. Soon after, in the mid 1980s, coinciding with another wave of public concern about hunger, the Food Stamp program was reinvigorated. This era marked the beginnings of a shift towards private assistance. In 1983, Congress passed the Temporary Food Emergency Assistance Program (TEFAP). TEFAP, like the original Food Stamp programs, was a solution to both farmer's surplus and economic instability. Many scholars point towards the introduction of TEFAP as the indication of the onset of privatized food assistance (McEntee & Naumova 2012; Bacon & Baker 2017; Daponte & Bade 2006; Lohnes 2019). TEFAP allowed for excess commodities to be distributed via emerging private emergency food networks (Daponte & Bade 2006). The introduction of TEFAP meant that rather than having to rely on donations and purchasing, charitable organizations could now distribute more food from a more reliable source in terms of consistent quantity and food options. Daponte and Bade (2006) write that,

> Distributing TEFAP goods through the private food assistance network resulted in a dramatic increase in responsibility for the food pantries, provided food pantries with a regular supply of substantial and nutritious food, and increased the quantity of food available. It also encouraged existing charities to add food distribution to the list of services they already provided to the poor (p. 677).

TEFAP was seen as a great success, satisfying farmers and anti-hunger advocates. It not only provided non-profits with consistent access to food, but it also allowed for farmers to both reduce food and financial waste through the federal program and subsidies. In the 1990 Farm Bill, the 'T' in TEFAP was changed from "Temporary" to "The", marking the program's permanence (Poppendieck 1998; Billings 2021). The change demonstrates how rather than expanding government assistance programs, the government instead chose to enshrine and support privatized food assistance.

Accessing food assistance can be more difficult for people in need because organizations that receive food from TEFAP are required to follow government screening protocols in efforts to prevent misuse or abuse of food assistance (de Souza 2019). Not only can it be difficult for individuals, but often emergency food systems actors such as food pantries do not have the organizational capacity to complete the paperwork and thus cannot receive TEFAP (Lohnes 2019; Lohnes & Wilson 2018 in Spring et al. 2022). Additionally, there is no data on how many individuals receive TEFAP foods due to the "transient" nature of the food insecurity, as people receiving food change regularly, and the difficulty in separating commodity food from food that comes from larger donations or food drives (Billings 2021). Today, TEFAP continues to operate at a large scale. The USDA reported that in 2020, "Congress appropriated $397.1 million for TEFAP - $317.5 million to purchase food and $79.63 million for administrative support for State and local agencies" (USDA 2021).

As TEFAP grew in the 1980s and early 1990s, so did larger the emergency food system in the United States. It is important to note that SNAP and TEFAP are not the only USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) programs. The best known public emergency food systems program is SNAP, other USDA FNS nutrition direct assistance programs include WIC, National School

Lunch program, and the Farmers Market Nutrition program. USDA FNS distribution programs expand beyond TEFAP including the Food Distribution on Indian Reservations program (FDIRP, discussed more below) and the Commodity Supplemental Food program. Many of the programs focus on nutrition and food access for specific populations such as children and the elderly. The mix between direct assistance and distribution make up the web of State led public food assistance programs. Programs outside of TEFAP and SNAP will not be discussed at length but do inform the larger emergency food systems.

At the height of TEFAP and the rise of food banks, the food stamp program was highly used with 22.4 million participants per month in 1981 (USDA 2023). Despite its popularity and high usage, the shift towards neoliberalism in the 1980s led to drastic cutbacks in direct cash transfer forms of government food assistance, opening the door for subsidies for private commodity production and charitable food assistance, including food banks (Poppendieck 2014). The dominant narrative within the food security literature recognizes that charity and volunteerism allowed the state to retreat from providing social services to its people, situating both poverty and its remedy at the individual level (Clarke & Parsell 2022). Since the 1980s, food banks have become so deeply institutionalized that in a 2016 study of food bank critiques, only six out of 33 authors reviewed in the study were found to question the institutionalization of food banks (McIntyre et al. 2016). In addition to USDA programs, this can in part be attributed to the establishment of Feeding America, which resulted in the increased visibility of food banks and other charitable responses to food access (Poppendieck 2014; Lohnes 2019).

Feeding America plays a major role in the emergency food system in the US and popular perceptions of charity as the answer to food insecurity. The structure of Feeding America has not changed much since its founding in 1979. As early as 1986 there were 200 member food banks

(Poppendieck 1998). The sheer size and staying power of Feeding America speaks to its impact and influence. Feeding America began as an organization called Second Harvest. Second Harvest was born out of a recognition from the federal government of the work that the food bank St. Mary's in Phoenix Arizona was doing. St. Mary's was the first food bank in the US and opened in 1967 by John van Hengel. The Federal Community Services Administration offered a grant to St. Mary's to teach people how to replicate their operations in other communities. St. Mary's initially refused but then chose to pursue the project as a separate NGO entity. Poppendieck (1998) notes a shared understanding by Community Services Administration staff that the federal government should be credited for creating Second Harvest. In 1979, Second Harvest became that separate nonprofit, and a year later, in 1980, it began distribution of food to member food banks (Poppendieck 1998). In 2008, the name was changed to Feeding America with the goal to "more fully engage the public in the fight against hunger" (Feeding America 2008). Lohnes (2019) argues that the name change and its new mission opened the door to expanded corporate partnerships. Feeding America holds a wealth of power in the US emergency food systems. Beyond increased visibility, the organization provides food banks with close connections to major corporations like Wal-Mart and ConAgra Foods that can make major food donations. Feeding America member food banks are expected to comply to required food safety measures and metrics. In turn they receive connections to donors, an expansive food bank network, IT assistance, grant funding, and more. Most food banks in the US today are Feeding America members, however some remain independent. The prolific nature of Feeding America speaks to the enduring power of the charity model in which "gifts replaced rights" (Poppendieck 2014; Poppendieck 1998; Riches 2018).

While there is no enforceable right to food in the United States, several argue that SNAP is as close to a rights-based approach as the State has come (Dickinson 2019; Gundersen 2019; Poppendieck 2014). Even as the state fulfills the rights of low-income workers to food via SNAP, the work requirement and strict eligibility standards result in a distinction between who is deserving of assistance and who is not. In this instance, only the working poor are worthy of government assistance. Spade (2020) posits that within the charity model, government and non-profit employees "methods of deciding who is deserving, and even the rules they enforce, usually promote racist and sexist tropes" (pg. 22). Narratives of the undeserving and deserving poor work to further skew perceptions of poverty resulting in continued reliance on charity models as the dominant way of feeding hungry people in America. These prevailing narratives deny dignity to everyone, not only those who are characterized as undeserving. Despite eligibility restrictions, SNAP's services reach 42 million Americans, though there are notable gaps including non-citizens, unemployed peoples, and those paid off the books or in informal economies (Gundersen 2019; Dickinson 2019). Gundersen (2019) argues that despite these gaps, SNAP, "over at least some dimensions," ensures a right to food to low-income workers and families in the US.

Since the inception of food stamps in 1939, the issue of food surplus has been at the center of hunger relief. Instead of cash transfers or income assistance like in many developed countries (including France, Denmark, and Italy) the US has chosen to focus on food assistance as the primary form of welfare (Dickinson 2019; Poppendieck 2014). In doing so, the state no longer needs to provide for its residents, and instead supports and funds the work of private organizations to eradicate social and economic issues, including hunger. The literature makes it evident that the history of food assistance in the US has been dominated by two government programs, TEFAP and SNAP, both programs of the USDA. By offering food assistance through

SNAP with strict work and income requirements, and pushing food to private charities, the US government has set the stage for private emergency food systems, such as food banks, to become major actors in hunger relief through their increased accessibility. Feeding America has advanced the notion that charity is the answer to hunger. These structures prevent the progressive realization of the right to food in the US.

Food Banking & Corporate Influence

The emergency food systems reliance on surplus foods has not shifted since the 1980s, but rather expanded as large corporations like Wal-Mart now partner with Feeding America and food banks to provide food (Fisher 2017). Corporate capture of food systems and food banking has been a concern among critics for decades. Food banks work to 'feed the need', a common phrase within Feeding America food banks, and in order to do this, there is a constant demand to secure both food and funds. Large corporations are often able to fulfill both needs, making food banks reliant on their food and financial donations to function. Poppendieck (1998) describes the benefits corporations and businesses gain from partnership with food banks, one of is known as the "halo effect". The halo effect describes the phenomenon that occurs when companies donate to admirable social causes or community projects and then gain a positive reputation (Fisher 2017; Poppendieck 1998). When companies like Target and Wal-Mart engage in charitable giving, they become shielded from other criticisms, including labor practices and the absence of a living wage for employees (Fisher 2017). Over the last two decades, corporate giving has become integrated into company values (Fisher 2017). Andrew Fisher (2017) argues that due to the politically neutral stance most anti-hunger causes take, anti-hunger organizations are the ideal recipients of corporate giving. These large-scale donations result in outsized influence over emergency food systems organizations. By accepting donations from corporations and businesses anti-hunger organizations mask the role of big business in causing food insecurity

through low wages. (Fisher 2017). As a result, benefits of corporate philanthropy accrue as much or more to the corporations as to emergency food systems recipients.

Beyond the image boost driven by financial donations, corporate donors also benefit from avoiding dump fees from unsold food products by donating surplus, outdated, damaged, and second quality foods to local food banks (Poppendieck 1998; Lohnes 2019). Federal legislation has made it easier for businesses to donate to charities through legislation like the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Act (1996) and the Food Donation Act (2008) (Riches 2018). These laws protect persons and agencies "from civil and criminal liability for persons involved in the donation and distribution of food and grocery products to needy individuals" and "the nonprofit organizations that receive such donated items in good faith" (*Frequently Asked Questions about the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act* n.d.). Lohnes (2019) argues that food banks have been utilized as the "fix" to larger supply chain issues. He writes "although food banks are charged with resolving the problem of hunger, I argue that they are also key sites for revaluing food waste and resolving crises of overproduction under capitalism" (p. 4). The food bank fix articulates how food system actors "negotiate and concentrate" power at the site of food banks for their benefit (Lohnes 2019). This speaks to the unique position food banks occupy within emergency food systems, where they must rely on corporate giving and surplus foods to function, while still holding authority over smaller partner agencies.

Corporate culture has also infiltrated food banks, where changes in food bank organizational culture have taken place to mimic corporate partners (Fisher 2017). Food banks today often have a myriad of executives who oversee operations. The Houston Food Bank, the largest in the US, has just over 600 staff and an annual revenue of $376 Million (Houston Food Bank 2022). Many CEOs of food banks make very high salaries. The Houston Food Bank CEO's

salary, for example, was $382,626 in 2021 (Houston Food Bank 2022). While not all food banks are so large, this speaks to the immense power food banks hold and the ways they have been increasingly corporatized. Today, Feeding America is the largest nonprofit in the US, with an annual revenue of $4.4 billion (Forbes 2023). In 2021, CEO Claire Babineaux Fontenot earned just under $1 million. The average non-profit CEO in comparison earns below $250,000 (Ensor 2023). While the charity model is clearly profitable, it begs the question of whether it should be. Present operations and the status quo cannot be best practice for ending hunger when those at the top benefit so greatly.

Food Bank Operations

Because food banks continue to rely on surplus and donations, food bank users are offered little to no choice when using food banks or local partner agencies. Much of the literature on food banks operations does not seek to explore ways that food banks can shift operations from current models, but rather how to optimize current operations, i.e. maximizing food distribution efficiency and neighbors reached (see Rivera et al. 2023; Firouz et al. 2021; Chen et al. 2021; Orgut et al. 2016; Lee et al. 2017). This again illustrates the high level of institutionalization that food banks have achieved as there is an apparent lack of motivation to consider evolving past the need for food banks within the field. In addition to focusing on operations optimization, literature also largely focuses on motivations and experiences of volunteers (see Sheldon et al. 2022; Lee et al. 2021). This is not unwarranted or surprising, as volunteers are essential to food bank operations. Literature surrounding food bank staff is more limited. There some work highlighting perceptions of food bank staff on the nutrition and public health of clients (see Cahill et al. 2019).

In contrast to the focusing on these narrow topics, Jesse McEntee and Elena Naumova (2012) sought to understand how best to bridge the gap between private emergency food systems

and local food justice movements. People working and volunteering in emergency food systems were interviewed to understand the current relationship between private emergency food systems and food justice movements and how to better align the two. Food bank and pantry staff who were interviewed largely saw their work as the best solution to hunger and questioned clients who asked for more choice and better food options (McEntee & Naumova 2012). McEntee & Naumova (2012) argue that despite the emphasis on the individual feeding oneself, there is potential to evolve towards a more justice-oriented approach.

Despite food banks using the same model for upwards of 40 years, there are several examples of food banks and scholars seeking to shift away from the charity model. Even Feeding America's 2021 annual report mentions a new emphasis on policy and advocacy for the "underrepresented voices" they serve (Feeding America 2021, p. 14). Sanderson et al. (2020) sought to evaluate the success of food pantries that were beginning to implement "a more than food" strategy to ending hunger, including a trauma-informed approach. This approach recognizes food insecurity as a form of trauma. A trauma-informed approach seeks to address the needs of the whole person and to not re-traumatize people with exclusionary policies and practices (Sanderson et al. 2020).

At the food bank level, Feeding America partner food banks can be constrained by Feeding America metrics such as the Meals Per Person In Need County Level Compliance Indicator (MPIN). Strickland et al. (2019) argue that MPIN solidifies the notion that the "core competence of a food bank is determined by its proficiency in food delivery." In Alabama, three out of four food banks studied did not meet the MPIN. By Feeding America's indicators, the food banks were not adequately "feeding the need" within their service area. Nevertheless, they established new innovative programs beyond typical food bank operations to better meet the

needs of the communities they serve (Strickland et al. 2019). Programs include a breast milk bank, advocacy, a loan program, and local food hub (Strickland et al. 2019). The increase of food bank partnerships with local producers and food bank operated gardens are a good sign of innovation within the emergency food system. A 2015 study explores the ways food banks can become a part of the food justice movement through gleaning, gardening, and farming programs (Vitiello et al. 2015). Vitiello et al. (2015) argue that gleaning and gardening programs reproduce and extend the commodity and charitable food system, as they often rely on corporate retailers and volunteers. Still, Vitiello et al. (2015) note "gardening and farming programs involving poor people arguably constitute food banks' greatest investment in building communities' capacity to meet their own food needs."

In 2016, the Greater Vancouver food bank completed a survey of social innovation in food banks in the US and Canada (Greater Vancouver Food Bank 2016). They found that despite varying strategies and approaches, food banks were seeking to shift operations to include more than simply giving people food. The main research findings were nine social innovations food banks are already participating in. While the findings are innovative within the larger charity model, they center around improving current food bank operations rather than large scale systematic change.

The first is "creating a platform for shift" this speaks to strategic planning efforts and establishing necessary systems and structures for innovation. The second, "taking a whole systems approach," hopes to ensure every department is aligned in the mission from funding to capacity building to community outreach. Third is "focusing on quality over quantity" to procure healthier foods through increased educational efforts. The fourth social innovation "scaling out not up" centers harnessing the power of partner agencies to work across different sectors rather

than adding new programs within food banks themselves. The fifth ensures sustainable changes through "creating a healthy and dynamic culture of shift" for both staff and volunteers. The sixth, social innovation, is essential to move from a charity model, "balancing change with the immediate need for emergency food services." The report writes that "respectfully challenging the traditional system while still providing emergency food services is a key balance for food banks to strike." The seventh emphasizes including more diverse voices through "engaging new voices." To achieve change, food banks are implementing the eighth social innovation, identified as "starting with assets," and working with what food banks already have. Lastly, the report states that food banks are "working upstream" by engaging corporate food donors and governments to work towards addressing root causes of food insecurity" (p. 36-39).

Through this research and examples provided, it becomes evident that despite constraints and corporate capture of charitable food systems, there is not only potential for innovation and change, but it is currently taking place. As becomes clear from the literature, paramount in addressing root causes of food insecurity is discussion of poverty and race, especially in the United States.

Poverty, Deservingness, and Race

Food insecurity is intrinsically linked to poverty, though not all people in poverty are food insecure and vice versa (Bowen et al. 2021). Dating back to Elizabethan times, poverty has been framed as individual rather than structural failure. The Elizabethan Poor Laws in England first established the distinction between the deserving poor (widows, orphans, the disabled) and the undeserving poor (those simply considered lazy). The Elizabethan Poor Laws have deeply influenced social welfare policy in the US and the popular perceptions of poverty still held today. Two facets, poverty as individual failure and the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor, remain most influential (Desmond & Western 2018). Robert Moffit (2015)

writes that “simply receiving government assistance has been taken itself as a sign of undeservingness - a signal that the individual has not been exerting enough his or her own.” (p. 745). The notion of the undeserving poor became rampant during the neoliberal era, and in the 1990s, SNAP was reframed as work assistance. This change required individuals to meet new eligibility requirements centered around employment. Matthew Gritter (2015) asserts that “the way food stamps, and SNAP was reframed as helping the deserving poor and the characterization of food stamps and SNAP as the safety net of last resort—prevented significant [legislative] change in the Food Stamp and SNAP Program” (p. 4). Notably, Bowen et al. (2021) argue that “racial inequality is built into social structures and systems” including food assistance programs like SNAP, reinforcing harmful the stereotype that people of color are lazy and undeserving of assistance unless they contribute to society through work. Adam Pine & Rebecca de Souza (2024) further the argument that the US government does not prioritize policies that will “advance the need of all citizens (including racialized groups)” as a result of “the powerful white bias in public policy formation” (p. 21). The language around social welfare has been racialized and weaponized by conservatives to prevent stronger welfare policy. A notable example is ‘the welfare queen’ which projects negative racial stereotypes on black women who utilize assistance programs (Bowen et al. 2021; de Souza 2019).

Notions of charity and the undeserving poor obstruct innovation within the emergency food system. The current charity model does not inherently seek to address root causes of food insecurity and further results in and reinforces inaccurate perceptions of poverty. Rather, emergency food systems and the charity model frame the act of giving people food as a gift, implying that it is their choice to be hungry. Discussions of poverty are essential in re-framing food insecurity as a violation of the right to food. When an individual no longer has the financial

means to purchase food, they lose their right to food, because they lose both their agency and choice (Riches & Silvasti 2014). Within the US, structural conditions complicate the ability for historically marginalized groups to leave poverty, resulting in prolonged need for welfare and services, including emergency food systems. Racial disparities are especially present across socioeconomic status, which often determines food security (Bowen et al. 2021).

In the US, food insecurity disproportionately impacts marginalized racial and ethnic groups. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, in 2020 "Black non-Hispanic households were over two times more likely to be food insecure than the national average (21.7 percent versus 10.5 percent, respectively)" (USDHHS n.d.). Further, Indigenous people experience food insecurity at two times higher rates than all other Americans (Maillacheruvu 2022; Cordova Montes et al. 2022). Food insecurity is not simply caused by lack of food, but rather it is linked to poverty and structural conditions in the US, including discrimination in labor markets and educational access, that keep marginalized groups poor. The recognition of racism as a root cause of hunger is widely recognized. Feeding America, for example, offers an interactive online tool to explore how race impacts food insecurity (*See* Identifying Racism in the Drivers of Food Insecurity). Bowen et al. (2021) argue that while a bulk of literature focuses on how people move in and out of food insecurity, and how to best mitigate it, there must be an increased recognition and exploration of racism as a root cause of food insecurity in order to legitimately address the issue.

In their 2022 Shadow Report: Submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), Cordova Montes et al. argue that because government policy has continued to fail to address structural racism, Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) continue to not only be highly impacted by food insecurity, but as a result have had

their human rights violated (Cordova Montes et al. 2022). Many scholars argue that the legacy of slavery is still impacting Black communities as they are unable to build generational wealth due to systems and policies, including the carcel system and redlining (Cordova Montes et al. 2022; Bowen et al. 2021). In 2023, the Ashwini K.P., the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance[2] visited the US. In the end of visit statement, she recognized the "racially discriminatory food systems" stating that

> Individuals from racially marginalized groups are also more likely to experience the harmful effects of failed food assistance policies and the systemic racism baked into a food system that is grounded in racially discriminatory land acquisition and use, exploitative labor, and corporate food dependence. (*Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance: End of visit statement* 2023).

Human rights proponents argue that food insecurity is deeply tied to other social issues including environmental racism, housing injustice, and workers' rights (Powers 2015; Cordova Montes et al. 2022). Agricultural and domestic workers are both excluded from worker protections in the US, two areas made up largely of BIPOC workers (Dickinson 2019; Cordova Montes et al. 2022). Rights are interdependent and interconnected, thus the right to work is essential for the realization of the right to food. Dickinson (2019) suggests that through the right to work, the right to food should be realized because as a human right, it provides tools and structure to demand an adequate income and stability and therefore the ability to leave poverty. Former WhyHunger staff Jess Powers (2015) argues

> In the US, we often speak of our civil and political rights, like the right to marriage or the right to be free from police harassment, but less often about our social, cultural, and economic rights, like the right to affordable housing or the right to a minimum basic income (p. 2).

[2] Special Rapporteurs are appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council, for more see https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-racism

Similarly, it is helpful to note that as Poppendieck (2014) writes, “the US has a long tradition of focusing human rights talk on negative rights, freedoms from various forms of oppression, and particularly on the establishment of due process and other procedural rights” (p. 190). As Poppendieck explains, negative rights refer to maintaining individuals’ freedoms. In turn, positive rights refer to rights, such as the right to work and the right to food, in which the government fulfills its obligations by respecting preexisting access to human rights and making an active effort to respect, protect, and fulfil access to rights. Because the US does not prioritize positive rights, these economic, social, and cultural rights are often left to be covered by private systems like emergency food systems.

Indigenous people in the US are also impacted by engrained narratives of the undeserving poor. They experience high levels of food insecurity for a variety of reasons, most rooted in discrimination, including lack of access to land, and a long history of the US government failing to uphold treaties with Native nations (Maillacheruvu 2022). Today, the USDA Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) fills the role of SNAP, as many American Indian households do not have access to SNAP offices and authorized stores (USDA 2020). The program states households in areas near or on reservations (including the entire state of Oklahoma) can participate in FDPIR to receive a package of food delivered each month. Like SNAP and TEFAP, the food in FDPIR is largely excess commodity foods. However, as a result of advocacy efforts, food options have expanded to include some fresh produce and more culturally appropriate options (Pindus et al. 2016). Emergency food systems also support the food security of Indigenous peoples though in less specialized programs. On the Feeding America website, it vaguely states that “local food banks also work closely with Native American communities to increase access to food.” (*Hunger impacts Native American families*

and communities n.d.). There are food pantries and food banks that serve these communities, such as the Community Food Bank of Arizona that offers space to explore the potential for the right to food on Native Reservations.

The Human Right to Food within a US Context

Poppendieck (1998) writes that a core of the issue with emergency food systems is that "poor people might be, and often are, very well treated in charitable emergency food programs, but they have no rights, at least no legally enforceable rights to the benefits that such programs provide" (p. 12). There is no enforceable right to food in the US. The US has long been wary of international human rights in favor of national independence and legal sovereignty (Poppendieck 2014). Thus, positive rights, such as the right to food, are left out of popular discourse. Popular literature on emergency food systems regularly references the right to food, though moving towards a rights-based approach it is rarely articulated as the main argument (*See* Fisher 2017; de Souza 2019; Poppendieck 1998).

While barriers in implementing a rights-based approach are abundant in the US, there is a notable history to the right to food and the current movement. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech first introduced social and economic rights in the US. Given in 1941, the speech invokes what FDR deems as four essential human freedoms; freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. FDR's speech has impacted language and conversation surrounding the right to food since, particularly the "freedom from want." The contents of the speech heavily influenced the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR formally names the right to food in Article 25, paragraph one, "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services" (United Nations 1948). The UDHR is not a legally binding document

but rather a declaration. Article 11 of the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) is the first invocation of the right to food for which countries who ratified the treaty are obliged to uphold. The US has not ratified the ICESCR. While the US has no formal framework for the right to food, it is necessary to recognize that human rights are both indivisible and interconnected, as discussed above. It should be noted that while the US has not formally adopted the right to food, the US delegates to the Human Rights Commission have been engaged in subsequent related UN right to food interests (Bellows et al. 2016; Heipt 2021).

General Comment 12 on Article 11 of the ICESCR (GC 12), was published in 1999 by the Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, to expand understanding of the right to food and its implementation. GC 12 delves deeper into the meaning of the right to food and its importance. Paragraph 4 recognizes that the right to food is "inseparable from social justice" and that policy must work towards the complete eradication of poverty (Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights 1999). GC 12 recognizes the nuance and complexity of realizing the right to food and its ties to power and capital. A widely used framework within the right to food, often referred to as the 4 A's, comes from GC 12. This includes adequacy, availability, accessibility, and appropriateness (originally sustainability in GC 12) (Heipt 2021; CESCR GC 12 1999). Adequacy refers to sufficient nutrients and calories for individuals to live a healthy life; availability is the ability of an individual to produce, procure and purchase the food they want in the amount they need; accessibility refers to the infrastructure that allows an individual to access the food they need and ability to purchase; sustainability is the continued accessibility of food for generations to come though appropriateness refers to sustainability as well as the ability to access culturally relevant foods (Heipt 2021; United Nations 2010; CESCR GC 12, para 7-8, 1999).

Today, there are continued efforts to establish the right to food in the US. In their widely cited text, Chilton and Rose (2009) call for the adoption of a rights-based framework as a solution to growing food insecurity in the country. By shifting towards a rights-based approach, they argue that the US will be able to establish mechanisms to work more effectively towards solving food insecurity (Chilton & Rose 2009). Further, a right to food approach would allow for the opportunity to hold governments accountable, moving from a system where the government simply measures food insecurity, to having to act on it as it acknowledges access to food as both the duty and obligation of a State to its residents (Chilton & Rose 2009). Chilton and Rose write that a rights-based approach seeks to address conditions and environments that cause poverty so people can take "an active role in procuring food" (2009). Self-determination, allowing individuals to take this active role within the emergency food system, is a critical aspect of the right to food.

Due to a lack of success on the national level in achieving progress on establishing a right to food, right to food activists have begun to focus on states to realize of this right. Alison Cohen, a leader in the right to food movement in the US, argues that despite the US not having any legal obligations to uphold the right to food, the right to food movement allows us to look at the root causes of hunger and lends itself to grassroots leadership through the participation of civil society. The right to food centers people with direct experience with hunger and poverty in organizing and shaping policy ("The Right to Food in the US" A. Cohen, personal communication, Nov 15, 2022). In 2021, the state of Maine became the first state in the US to pass an amendment to their state constitution enshrining the right to food. Maine's success came after half a decade of advocacy and revisions led by State Rep. Craig Hickman. Maine's right to food amendment was heavily influenced by a "farmer/producer, independent locality, and

libertarian perspective" (Heipt 2021). In the passed amendment, language surrounding freedom from hunger was removed due to hesitancy by legislators that the wording would "require the Maine government to literally provide food to each Maine resident." (Heipt 2021). While this speaks to continued displacement of responsibility of the government to feed its citizens, it also gives rise to a common misunderstanding of the right to food. The Right to Adequate Food Fact Sheet #34 states that the right to food is not the right to be fed, rather it requires the government to create and facilitate the necessary conditions for individuals to access food with dignity. Human dignity is an essential facet of a rights-based approach, George Kent (2005) succinctly articulates that "human rights are mainly about upholding human dignity, not about meeting physiological needs" (p. 46). The Fact Sheet also clarifies that in instances of war, natural disaster, or if an individual is in detention, then the State is required to directly feed people.

Successes in Maine prove that organizing among food systems actors can create meaningful policy change. Efforts for an amendment in West Virginia were introduced by former state delegate Danielle Walker. In 2021, Walker proposed an amendment to the state's constitution in "providing for the right to food, food sovereignty and freedom from hunger" (*HJR 30 Text* 2021). The amendment did not pass, though momentum has continued including a recognition from the Governor that food is a human right and the reintroduction of the constitutional amendment (National Right to Food Community of Practice n.d.). Unlike Maine, organizers in West Virginia were largely rooted in anti-poverty work (Caldoff 2021). These organizing efforts are beginning to become more formalized with the creation of the National Right to Food Community of Practice (CoP). The Right to Food CoP hosts monthly meetings for individuals, organizations, and activists to learn and organize together. Food banks and food pantries involved in this CoP are engaged in conversation and collaboration to better understand how to move towards a more rights-based approach. Efforts towards the right to food in

Washington State have been led by Northwest Harvest. Northwest Harvest began as a food bank in 1967 and has since grown into a self-defined hunger relief agency (*About Us* 2022). On their website, they write that they "believe that equitable access to nutritious food is a human right and a means to drive opportunity in Washington" (*Advocacy & Public Policy* n.d.). Following the passing of Maine's constitutional amendment to the right to food, former Northwest Harvest Public Policy & Advocacy Director Christina Wong and lawyer Wendy Heipt, advocated for the same to take place in Washington, writing that Northwest Harvest would lead the work in bringing the right to food to the state. They stated they were "building a diverse grassroots movement, centering the expertise of those most impacted by our food system's inequities" (Wong & Heipt 2021). This multi-pronged approach from Northwest Harvest makes it evident that food banks have a role to play in the right to food movement.

There is critique of rights-based approaches broadly, and there has been little traction among mainstream food justice activists surrounding the right to food. The majority of food justice work in the US has been rooted in community-based initiatives led by civil society organizations rather than focusing on a national strategy towards food security (Pine & de Souza 2024). Deric Shannon argues that activists who are a part of the anarchist collective Food not Bombs believe human rights and dignity can meet the needs of the collective through direct action rather than the State. Shannon (2016) notes that it has been argued that "all theories of human rights are problematic, because expressed human desires and fundamental needs are so often forsaken in pursuit of political economic gains woven into the fabric of capitalist globalization and state processes of military protectionism" (Teeple 2005 in Shannon 2016). Some understand rights-based approaches as expressly placing the State as an entity of power over its citizens. Extending power to the State is clearly not a priority for anarchist groups like

Food not Bombs. The major characteristics of mutual aid prioritize solidarity and collective action over reliance on government action and the current system (Spade 2020). Crises like the COVID-19 pandemic opened the door for increased exposure of mutual aid to the larger public. Spade (2020) argues that mutual aid both exposes the failures of the current system and offers new alternatives through collective action. A common phrase within mutual aid work is "solidarity not charity." Solidarity speaks to removing uneven power structures present in charity models and encourages accountability across communities. This phrase emphasizes the way that the charity model and the corporatization of nonprofits tackle issues on an individual scale, ignoring the larger needs of communities and collective wellbeing. The reliance on governments and the current system to solve issues does not account for the potential and power of solidarity (Spade 2020). In her 1995 book *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity,* Wendy Brown states that rights lose their power because they differ across "vectors of power" such as race, class, gender, and socioeconomic states. She argues this is due to both their ahistorical and acultural nature and the ways in which rights are realized.

> It is expressed as well in the irony that rights sought by a politically defined *group* are conferred upon depoliticized *individuals;* at the moment a particular "we" succeeds in obtaining rights, it loses its "we-ness" and dissolves into individuals. On the spatial or social level: Rights that empower those in one social location or strata may disempower those in another (p. 99, Brown 1995).

Brown uses property and housing rights as an example of this phenomenon. In order to avoid the pitfalls Brown names, Pine and de Souza (2024) argue for the need to racialize the right to food, recognizing the historical and cultural context in which food and food sovereignty have been withheld. There are valid critiques of rights-based approaches to social change. The right to food within the US does not seek to invalidate the work of food activism and overstep the food justice movement, but rather employs itself as a tool for changing food systems and emergency food

systems, on a legal level. A rights-based approach to food creates opportunity for those who have had their rights violated to access to recourse and remedy. The legal basis for the right to food creates institutions and mechanisms for recourse in which individuals who have had their rights violated can be reviewed and remedied.

Methods

Pilot Project

In Fall of 2022, for Dr. Bellows' course, The Human Right to Adequate Food and Nutrition, I completed a research paper seeking to understand how food banks can take a rights-based approach to food assistance in the United States. That paper became a pilot project for my thesis work involving interviews with staff at four food banks across the country: the Houston Food Bank in Texas, MANNA Food Bank in North Carolina, the Food Bank of Central New York, and Northwest Harvest in Washington State. I interviewed one staff member at each food bank apart from the Food Bank of Central New York where I spoke to two staff in the same Zoom interview. Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol (IRB-#23-105), participants were emailed with a request for a brief interview. The open-ended interviews followed an interview guide and lasted only around 25 minutes. I transcribed interview audio using online software Otter and Parrot. Transcriptions were analyzed and coded for themes. Data constraints included time to prepare the paper, short interview time, and my limited experience both with the interview method and the topic. Two rights-based themes were discussed: food bank staffs' perceptions of dignity and poverty and power structures in- and outside food banks.

It was evident that food bank staff felt that shifts within broader food banking operations held potential to move from a charity-based approach to a more entitlement rights-based approach. Only two food banks were familiar with rights-based language. Despite this articulated

perceived shift, food bank staff all felt that due to stigma and racism, until the broader public shifted their own understandings of poverty, the charity model would remain dominant. Additionally, uneven concentrations of power across multiple sectors and scales were of concern. This included power concentrations in the Federal government, the corporate agro-industrial sector, the national non-profit Feeding America, and power structures within food banks themselves.

Given constraints but strong findings, the pilot was submitted for publication, and I chose to extend it for my thesis, broadening the scope of questions and the included geographic areas. Interviews from the manuscript under review inform additional findings from my thesis work.

Recruitment

The research plan was to identify 10 food banks from which to recruit staff interview respondents. Criteria to select food banks included operations diversity-including demographics served and size, geographic location, and familiarity with the right to food, as well as, participation in the pilot study (see Table 1). Geographic variety was intended to generally reflect socio-political differences across the US. Possible familiarity with the right to food and rights-based approach was determined based on state engagement in the National Right to Food Community of Practice and intended to comprise half of the sample (Maine, California, West Virginia, Washington, and New York). Additional criteria was to have a balance of food banks that both were and were not members of the national Feeding America network.

Staff from the four pilot food banks were to be re-interviewed along with staff from six additional food banks. Food banks do not generally list staff emails online leading to recruitment requests being easily ignored and sometimes passed on. Participant recruitment was most successful when personal relationships and networks could be involved.

Table 1

Food Bank Selection Criteria

Criteria Considered	*Parameters for Meeting Research Selection Criteria*	*Notes*
Geographic location	No cases of multiple from one state, unless there are vastly differing demographics or operations	Beyond state, prioritizing different regions of the country in an equal distribution taking states political make up into account (measured by present state governor and 2020 election voting).
Feeding America affiliation	Minimum of 3 non-Feeding America affiliated	Non- Feeding America food banks are typically smaller and serve a less expansive area, such as one city or county as opposed to multiple counties.
Prior knowledge or involvement with right to food	Roughly even split of knowledge levels	Decided by Right to Food Community of Practice affiliation or state.
Population Area	Range of number of individuals within food bank service area	Total population and number of food insecure people in service area
Population served	Racial and income diversity	Given typically vast service areas, this parameter was difficult to be determined in a meaningful way.
Previous participation in research	Inclusion of food banks included in pilot study	Attempted to contact and interview new staff for wider participant pool
Size of food bank	Range of size taken into consideration but not prioritized	Decided via number of counties served and meals distributed per year.

Food bank staff were selected based on the nature of employment and title. No food bank executives were interviewed. This was done to ensure that individuals interviewed were not only involved in the administrative side of their food bank and rather worked regularly with community partners and clients, often called neighbors. Further, I held concern that executives may have more reason and incentive to avoid being critical of their work, Feeding America, and food banking as a whole. This parameter was more difficult to meet than initially expected (discussed below). For additional food bank staff criteria see Table 2.

Table 2

Food Bank Staff Selection Criteria

Criteria Considered	*Parameters for Meeting Criteria*	*Notes*
Nature of Employment	Work a minimum of 30 hours a week at the food bank	Ensures no volunteers
Job Title	Must be a staff member; no CEO, CFO, Executives etc.	Department directors will be included as staff

Research was then completed to select and contact food banks. I began by prioritizing food banks in states affiliated with the right to food. In the case of Maine, there is one food bank that serves the entire state. Similarly, West Virginia has two food banks, Facing Hunger was chosen due to its unique position in serving multiple states. California, given its broad and expansive network of hunger relief programs, offered a slew of food banks, both Feeding America affiliated and independent. In this instance, I deferred to expert advice for a recommendation on which food bank to contact and prioritized an independent food bank given limited options nationally. New York and Washington had both previously been interviewed and the food banks interviewed in the pilot were contacted.

Moving to the food banks with no formal association to the right to food, geographic location was first prioritized. As food banks in Texas and North Carolina had been included in the pilot study, the South was already accounted for. The Midwest, Southwest, Mid-Atlantic were the remaining geographic regions lacking representation. The Iowa Food Bank was selected given its geographic location and knowledge that a partner agency was associated with the Right to Food Community of Practice. The Anne Arundel food bank in Maryland was selected to represent the Mid-Atlantic region and offered a small, non-Feeding America affiliated food bank that served a large city. Lastly, Arizona was chosen as the state was the origin of food baking. The Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona was selected based on region and populations

served, specifically close connections with Indigenous populations and previous recognition for innovation by Feeding America.

Following approval from the Syracuse IRB (IRB-#23-105) for exemption, food banks were contacted via email. In instances where staff emails were available, they were emailed with the goal of a timelier response. The staff emailed was selected based on proximity to operations or community outreach. In cases where staff emails were not available online, emails were sent to the general 'contact us' email address of the food bank. If I had great difficulty getting responses, I called the food bank. In instances I called, I was generally sent to voicemail or had . Recruitment of participants began in early October 2023 and continued into January 2024.

In order to access staff, I regularly had to get past multiple barriers. The time of recruitment resulted in a busy holiday season and limited capacity for staff. Additionally, the food banks themselves were a barrier to access staff. In more than one instance an executive responded to my inquiry for an interview. In these cases, I stated that given my research parameters it was required I speak with someone with the title director or below. This was largely met with understanding, and I was then directed to a staff I could speak with. It should be considered that in the case of Facing Hunger and Food Bank of Iowa, executives dictated who I spoke with. Ultimately, I was not able to successfully contact the Houston Food Bank or the Good Shepard Food Bank in Maine to schedule an interview despite multiple emails and calls over several months. I reached out to the Vermont Food Bank in place of Good Shepard for New England representation. I spoke to a total of nine food bank staff (see Table 3 for final food bank set). Food bank staff were almost evenly split across gender, with four male staff and five female staff. Staff were majority white, with one individual identifying as Hispanic. Of the nine staff,

only one individual had experienced food insecurity. Food bank staff's pervious occupations were mainly related to non-profit work. Additional areas included higher education or academia.

Table 3

Food Banks Interviewed

Food Bank Name	*States Served*	*Pounds Distributed Annually*[3]	*Total Population in Area Served*	*Food Bank Right to Food Familiarity*[4]	*Feeding America Affiliation*	*State Political Make Up*[5]	*Food Insecurity Rate in Area Served* [6]	*Race & Ethnic Distribution in Area Served*[7]	*Food Bank Referenced As*
Anne Arundel Community Food Bank	MD	3,406,634	594,582	No	No	Blue	8.1%	19.8% Black; 9.4% Hispanic; 4.6% Asian; 63.8% White	Anne Arundel (MD)
Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona	AZ	42,788,566	1,285,854	Yes	Yes	Red	11%	2.74% Black; 47.84% Hispanic; 5.12% Indigenous; 43.12% White	Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona
Facing Hunger	WV, KY, OH	12,905,803	710,829	Yes	Yes	Red	13.8%	2.56% Black; 1.69% Hispanic; 2.06% two or more races; 93.43% White	Facing Hunger (WV)
Food Bank of Central New York	NY	20,203,283	1,354,427	No	Yes	Blue	10.3%	3.84% Black; 3.83% Hispanic; 2.19% two or more races; 88.95% White	Food Bank of Central New York
Food Bank of Iowa	IA	17,207,611	1,550,962	No	Yes	Red	7.6%	3.62% Black; 7.21% Hispanic; 5.79% two or more races; 81.25% White	Food Bank of Iowa
Jacobs & Cushman San Diego Food Bank	CA	44,000,000	3,269,973	Yes	No	Blue	9%	5.6% Black; 35% Hispanic; 13.1% Asian; 43.4% White	San Diego Food Bank

[3] Pounds of Feeding America affiliates from Feeding America site; independent food banks pounds from the food banks own website, the Houston Food Bank, interviewed in the pilot study and referenced below distributes 100,000,000 pounds annually
[4] Familiarity based on: involvement in National Right to Food Community of Practice participation (Northwest Harvest, Jacobs & Cushman San Diego Food Bank, Vermont Food Bank), location within a state that has active right to food efforts (Facing Hunger), or language on website (Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona).
[5] State make up determined by current governor & legislator majority.
[6] Food Insecurity Rates from Feeding America Data from 2021 from https://map.feedingamerica.org/
[7] Four largest racial groups are listed US 2020 Census Data from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/

MANNA Food Bank	NC	20,895,999	776,948	No	Yes	Red	12.6%	2.53% Black; 5.91% Hispanic; 3.63% Indigenous; 86.01% White	MANNA (NC)
Northwest Harvest	WA	N/A[8]	7,812,880	Yes	No	Blue	8.9%	4.6% Black; 14% Hispanic; 10.5% Asian; 65.1% White	Northwest Harvest (WA)
Vermont Food Bank	VT	13,228,231	647,464	Yes	Yes	Blue	8.7%	1.5% Black; 2.3% Hispanic; 2.1% Asian; 2.1% two or more races; 91.9% White	Vermont Food Bank

Experts were chosen out of a smaller field. Experts who had extensive knowledge of the right to food, food banks, or who were currently practicing more advocacy and policy-based emergency food systems work were selected to provide a more comprehensive look at the current status of the right to food in the United States. Suggestions for expert selection were taken from Alison Cohen, coordinator of the National Right to Food Community of Practice, given her depth of knowledge of the field. Cohen was also interviewed as an expert. Efforts were made to ensure that there was diversity in occupation, place of work, and identity, including gender and race and ethnicity.

Interview Guide & Survey Development

This thesis largely relies on qualitative interviews. Interviews were chosen as the primary method for gathering data as they offer the opportunity to understand individuals' own perspectives and viewpoints on topics through their own lived experience (Tracy 2019). In understanding food bank staff perspectives on their work and the right to food, it was important to ensure that interviewees were able to share their own unique standpoint rather than the food banks' itself. Interviews provide entry to the lived everyday details and organizational operations

[8] Northwest Harvest has not reported on pounds of food distributed since 2015.

that cannot be understood through observation or research (Tracy 2019). The interview guide was created to ensure there was structure during the interviews, but flexibility as needed. The interview guide was informed by pilot interviews and conversation with individuals involved in the pilot study including Food Bank of Central New York staff and experts Rita Chang and Alison Cohen. The pre-interview survey was created to obtain information that may not explicitly be referenced within interviews including identity and demographics, previous occupation, and lived experience with food insecurity. The pre-interview survey was emailed to participants with the informed consent following agreement to participate.

Data Collection

A. Pre-Interview Survey & Interviews

Interviews were conducted via Zoom. Prior to meeting, interviewees were asked to complete the informed consent and pre-interview survey. I reviewed pre-interview surveys in advance to ensure I understood everyone's background and lived experience as it might inform how they approached the interviews. This information is not reported in depth in this thesis due to parameters within the informed consent. Each interview roughly followed the same interview guide, though additional questions were asked as needed to ensure clarity and to understand specifics of food bank operations and staff perceptions. Interviews were recorded with respondent's permission. They began with an explanation of the project. To ensure active listening, notes were also taken throughout the interview (practice from Seidman 2019). food bank staff and expert interviews took place over the same time period (October 2023-February 2024) and informed each other. Interviews with food bank staff and experts alike lasted around 45 minutes based on the available time of the interviewee and content of the conversation. One was as short as 30 minutes while others lasted a full hour. Following the completion of interviews, audio recordings were transcribed using the transcription software Descript. Pre-

interview surveys were numbered based on order of interview to match audio file numbers and were then analyzed for patterns and interviews were coded for themes. Confidentiality of food bank staff interviewees is protected per IRB-#23-105, the only identifying information provided is the food banks name. Expert interviewees granted permission to use their names with the opportunity to review the content prior to its completion.

B. Observation

In addition to interviews and the brief survey, I also engaged in observation as a methodology. In both the monthly National Right to Food Community of Practice meetings as an attendee and at the Food Bank of Central New York as a volunteer. In both instances, I acted as a participant-observer by taking part in the activities I observed (Alder & Clark 2014). National Right to Food CoP meetings took place over Zoom monthly and engaged a variety of individuals across the US working in academia, emergency food systems, and government with interests in the right to food. These meetings offered the chance for me to stay up to date with current discussions and discourses surrounding the right to food, understand major points of interest for potential and current practitioners, and become more familiarized myself with what the right to food looks like in practice. Meetings were attended beginning in August 2023 through the end of the thesis project in April 2024. In the instance I had a conflict, the recorded meeting was reviewed. Similarly, volunteering regularly at the Food Bank of Central New York allowed me to become better acquainted with current food bank operations. I volunteered as able from August through December 2023. Volunteer shifts were competitive and there were limited options. I most often volunteered with packing and sorting shifts or putting together fundraising and outreach mailing materials. Field notes were taken in a journal and via voice notes on my personal phone, then transcribed.

C. Literature Review

An extensive review of literature was also conducted. Pre-existing academic literature was analyzed to explore pre-existing conversation regarding food bank staff perceptions of emergency food systems work. Additionally, literature on food banks and the right to food is minimal, literature exploring food bank innovation was read and reviewed with a rights-based framework to understand how current operational practices may link to the right to food, even if unnamed. Food bank literature, including blog posts, annual reports, and newsletters were also reviewed from food banks interviewed, and additional food banks to better understand how food banks present themselves and their work to the general public.

Coding & Analysis

Multiple rounds of coding took place. An initial round to explore and establish themes and take notes was followed by a more in-depth round in which data was looked at through the established themes. Interview data and observation field notes were then sorted based on theme. Main themes were given a color and data was color coded to reflect the theme. Following the first two rounds, data was explored a third time to pull important and relevant quotes. Quotes were also sorted by theme and color-coded.

Background & Positionality

This work comes from a long interest and connection to emergency food systems. Growing up, I regularly volunteered in our local soup kitchen, at churches distributing meals and other supplies to the unhoused, and at food bank distribution events. During my time as an undergraduate, I volunteered regularly with a community garden and a local food pantry. This food pantry, situated in the basement of a church in the only historically black neighborhood of Chapel Hill, Northside, relied heavily on student volunteers to keep it running, largely students volunteering to meet class requirements (myself included). Students were placed at different

stations around the room and were responsible for making sure patrons of the pantry only took their allotted amount. In this experience, I first began to think deeply about the errors and shortcomings of our emergency food systems. Why were students from a well-resourced, majority white-university the ones who got to tell someone what they could and could not take? For the first time I found myself explicitly critiquing this system I had long been a part of, and I found myself questioning what my place within it was. In the years following this experience, largely punctuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, I found myself more tied to emergency food systems. I coordinated volunteers to local community gardens, food pantries, and soup kitchens in the summer of 2020, often going myself to do food recovery pickups from Wal-Mart and Food Lion. I eventually ended up helping oversee operations of a small student run food pantry at Duke University prior to attending graduate school.

Having read more literature and having had more experience within emergency food systems, I was deeply critical of the expectations and lack of understanding surrounding student hunger on campus. Despite this, in my time with the pantry I found myself questioning how much more we could do with what we had; a client choice model with little restrictions, flexible hours, multiple feedback mechanisms for clients, gift card distributions for supplies we did not stock, and a wealth of childcare supplies. We were doing everything right by many standards yet the number of students using the pantry continued to increase. Many would say this is a good thing as it meant more people were becoming aware of the pantry, while this may have been true, I kept coming up against the frustrating reality that the only thing that could actually mediate the situation and end student food insecurity was an increased stipend and more affordable housing for graduate students. Although I did not have the language to articulate a rights-based approach to ending hunger at Duke, that was exactly what I was looking for. I argue that we were working

towards one, prioritizing human dignity and transparency, but as seen throughout this work, without the most powerful on your side it is difficult to achieve such a thing. It is important to articulate that this is the background I come to this work with. The focus on staff of emergency food systems is pushed by my own desire to understand how people reckon with doing work they know will not end the problem they hope to address; how people justify working in emergency food systems knowing that while it is indisputable they are feeding people, they are also perpetuating the charity system that prevents the possibility for enduring systemic change.

Findings

Dignity and Moving Beyond Client Choice: Existing Practices within Food Banking

Dignity is central to human rights. It is an essential foundational concept first referenced in the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Dignity refers to more than being treated with respect. Dignity within a human rights context speaks to self-determination and the ability of individuals to have power and agency over their lives. Rights based language is not widely used in the US, thus while food bank staff displayed varying levels of knowledge on the right to food, most were not deeply familiar with it. The right to food is often misunderstood as the right to be fed. Further, as Luke Elzinga, Policy and Advocacy Manager at DMARC, noted, it can be easy to misunderstand the meaning as people often use the phrase “food is a human right” but do not understand what the right to food means as an enforceable legal right. The right to food refers to all individuals' ability to access and procure food, through financial means and physical proximity. The right to food provides access to legal remedy and recourse in the absence of the right. A central aspect of the right to food is self-determination. Cohen stated that for the right to food to exist, there had to be “self-determination and agency among communities to determine

what their food environments [should] look like." Practices exist within food banking that begin to address aspects of the right to food, but do not encompass the breadth of the framework, lacking essential aspects including both client and community self-determination. Despite the absence of a complete understanding and approach to the right to food, throughout conversations with food bank staff and experts, dignity was a central theme.

A. Current Understanding of Rights Based Approaches

During each interview, participants were asked about their understanding of the right to food (Table 4). Everyone agreed with the concept of food as a basic human right, though the understanding of the nuanced meanings of the right to food varied. Three staff had no working knowledge of the right to food (Anne Arundel (MD), Food Bank of Iowa, and MANNA (NC)). These staff all asked for additional information to better understand the concept and after hearing a brief explanation were interested in learning more about the concept and the movement. Two staff had some familiarity with the right to food but did not confidently assert their knowledge on the subject. Four staff had working knowledge of the right to food, mentioning UN literature, and conveying knowledge that the right to food was more than the right to be fed. Staff with working knowledge did not convey that they understood the legal aspects of the right to food as a framework, for example the obligation of the state to develop processes of monitoring, recourse, and remedy.

Table 4

Food Bank Staff Knowledge & Understanding of Right to Food

Interview Site	**Knowledge**	**Understanding/Definition**
Anne Arundel Food Bank (MD)	No knowledge	Looked up right to food prior to interview; was not familiar but felt the philosophy was something that they are embracing; saw food as a necessity not a privilege, righting an injustice.

Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona	Working knowledge	Familiar with right to food language; used by food bank, belief that everyone has a right to food fuels the work of their organization; mentioned UN.
Facing Hunger Food Bank (WV)	Some knowledge	Believed everyone has a right to food; felt there are enough resources that no one should be going hungry.
Food Bank of Iowa	No knowledge	Unfamiliar and asked to learn more; following an explanation thought that everyone has a right to food; recognized the nuance that it is beyond being fed.
Jacobs & Cushman San Diego Food Bank (CA)	Some knowledge	Learning more and more about the right to food; understood it as growing and changing as things are being implemented in the US; saw it as not only access to food but choice, abundance, and nutrition.
MANNA Food Bank (NC)	No knowledge	Not familiar with "ethos or principles but familiar with the basic knowledge…of it"; agrees food is a basic human right.
Northwest Harvest (WA)	Working knowledge	Defines using the three A's framework: food is available, adequate, and accessible.
The Food Bank of Central New York	Working knowledge	Understands the right to food as coming from government policy; feels right to food is easy to misunderstand in the US as the right to be fed; uses definition from UN Fact Sheet No. 34 on the Right to Adequate Food.
Vermont Food Bank	Working knowledge	Right to food as eliminating barriers to deserving food; removing need for charity or requirements to meet edibility for social services; emphasis on access to food.

Some experts employed international human rights instruments to define and understand the right to food (Table 5), including the former Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Jean Ziegler's definition, and the five A's[9]: availability, accessibility, adequacy, sustainability, and agency. Cohen defined the five A's as follows

> The way I understand [it] is that food has to be, all of this [the five A's] has to happen at the same time. Food has to be available and healthy, and safe, and culturally relevant. It has to be accessible, so people need to be able to either have

[9] While sustainability does not begin with an A, Cohen and others reference this set of characteristics as the five A's, this framework stems from the three A's (sometimes referred to the four A's when sustainability is included). Agency is the additional A.

> enough money to buy food or the physical sort of infrastructure to get them to places where they can purchase food or grow food. It has to be adequate, which I think it's back to sort of the health and the quality of the food. And also that there's enough of that really good food close to places where people live. That it should be sustainable, it has to be produced in such a way that future generations can also continue to grow food so that the healthy environment is, you know, we understand that the health of the environment, the health of communities is dependent upon the health of the environment. And I think a final characteristic for me is that people need to be the ones that are defining and creating and living within their own food systems, right? So, agency, there needs to be self-determination and agency among communities to determine, you know, what their food environments look like (Alison Cohen).

Remaining experts understanding of the right to food was informed more closely by their own work and background.

Table 5

Expert Understanding of Right to Food

Expert	**Understanding or preferred definition**
Alison Cohen, National Right to Food Community of Practice	Right to food as a call to action and a legal framework; 5 A's (availability, accessibility, adequacy, sustainability, and agency)
Denisse Cordova, University of Miami Human Rights Law Clinic	Defines via normative framework[10] from General Comment 12.
Joshua Lohnes, West Virginia University, Center for Resilient Communities	Right to food as food as commons instead of food as a commodity.
Luke Elzinga, DMARC Food Pantry Network	Freedom from hunger; people being able to access the food they want when they want beyond physical access.
Rita Chang, Northwest Harvest Policy & Advocacy	Former Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Jean Ziegler's definition: "The right to food is the right to have regular, permanent and unobstructed access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensures a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free from anxiety" (Ziegler 2001).

[10] The normative framework refers to the 4 A's in GC 12.

Although not all food bank staff were familiar or held a strong understanding of the right to food, many recognized and spoke about goals present in the right to food. Cordova shared that rights-based language was less utilized in the US as a result of the lack of an existing framework surrounding economic, social, and cultural rights. She stated, “we should be using terms that people in the US are familiar with because that's what folks feel more comfortable using, such as food justice as opposed to the human right to food.” Cordova uses terms like food sovereignty, food justice, and the right to food interchangeably on purpose, to make sure her audience understands that they are all talking about the same thing.

Food bank staffs’ answers largely lacked the nuance and familiarity with human rights instruments when compared to experts. Still, food bank staffs’ understandings reflected and encompassed different aspects of the right to food. San Diego (CA) staff attested to the importance of agency, sharing that neighbors know what they want, what they will use, and what is best for their families so they should be given the infrastructure to get more choice. Food bank staff spoke to the importance of neighbor’s dignity and doing what they felt they could to uphold dignity. Cordova felt that food banks were “absolutely needed” as a transition to a rights-based approach takes place and recognized the spectrum of knowledge and willingness to transition away from current models. With little prior knowledge of the right to food, Anne Arundel (MD) staff recognized the obligation they held as an organization to food insecure people “I think the recognition that it's not just enough to fill somebody’s stomach. It’s you know, we have an obligation, as responsibility, an opportunity to make sure that we’re providing the best that we can with your limited resources.” Food bank staff and experts held a range of knowledge and varied understandings of the right to food. At the center of these interpretations was a recognition that food security goes beyond only giving people food. Chang articulated this sentiment,

> I think the beauty around the right to food is, it's beyond just food security. It's beyond just possession of a thing, but [it's] really treating food as a mechanism to really be able to live the full manifestation of what it means to be human and to thrive in community.

Going beyond food security requires emergency food providers, like food banks, to not just recognize the importance of dignity, but act on it.

B. Client Choice as Agency

Food banks' existing practices and operations are wide ranging with different focuses and goals but are all centered around procuring and distributing food to individuals (discussed in depth below). A common practice within food banking and emergency food distribution is the client choice model. Client choice, as the name implies, gives clients (neighbors) increased power over the food and options available to them instead of receiving a pre-packed box of food. Typically, client choice pantries are set up like a grocery store, with shelves that people can browse and select the food items they want. Both the variety and contents of the shelves vary greatly from pantry to pantry. Client choice pantries typically still have restrictions on the number of items people can take from the shelves. Food bank staff articulated that client choice style pantries are an attempt to make visiting a pantry or food bank a more dignified experience by increasing agency and choice. Every food bank interviewed either has direct client choice services or encourages partner agencies to operate a client choice model.

Food bank staff offered a variety of examples of the importance of client choice and the ways that it facilitates choice and dignity. Facing Hunger (WV) staff emphasized the importance of allowing people to make their own decisions and be autonomous. Several staff spoke to the value of offering experiences with choice, including the staff at the Community Food Bank of Arizona who shared that they work to provide multiple options of the same products, like crunchy and smooth peanut butter. Multiple food bank staff described the return to the client

choice model following the COVID-19 pandemic. To minimize risk at that time, food banks and pantries returned to prepackaged food boxes. Staff at MANNA (NC) and Anne Arundel (MD) were both experiencing hesitancy from partner agencies to return to client choice. Food bank staff as it can strain pantries with limited capacity, due to increased stocking and organizing efforts. Both MANNA (NC) and Anne Arundel (MD) provide client choice through their own direct service mobile market programs. The Food Bank of Central New York staff suggested that in feedback they had received, some neighbors preferred prepacked food boxes over client choice. The staff stated they were working to better understand why and suggested it could be due to mobility issues among older clients or stigma that came with spending extended time inside the pantry. The staff shared that they were carefully reviewing operations and working to find the best fit for different communities.

One of the more radical iterations of the client choice model has been implemented by Northwest Harvest (WA). The Northwest Harvest (WA) staff described their community markets as hoping to emulate "a humble Trader Joe's experience." After learning the organization would need to change their physical space, Northwest Harvest (WA) had to close their Cherry Street Food Bank. When they did, they reevaluated their operations and chose to shift away from the food bank model, towards a community market, essentially a free grocery store. They opened their first community market in Seattle, called the SODO Community Market, and in April 2023, opened a second location in Yakima, the Fruitvale Community Market. Northwest Harvest staff shared that while the community markets have standardized operations, they serve unique communities and therefore respond to different needs. These needs ranging from ensuring culturally appropriate foods available, to meeting the demand for parking versus being accessible via public transit. The community markets are set up in the style of a grocery store. Northwest

Harvest (WA) intentionally designed the spaces to ensure a welcoming environment with warm wood, and lighting positioned to highlight the available produce. The markets have modular bins that can easily be moved, rotated, or removed to quell concerns of scarcity for market goers. The staff shared a story from opening day where they had a single bin of sweet potatoes out. The limited number of bins "created kind of this cluster of people that were getting a little bit agitated because they didn't feel like they could get there fast enough to get the sweet potatoes they were looking for." The market staff filled more bins and created a four-by-four square. This action alleviated the tension as shoppers could see that the supply of sweet potatoes was not limited. The staff shared that "we pushed more out on the floor to show that we had enough of it. And then people started taking less because they could see that we had a sufficient quantity to get through the day." The markets are actively working to disrupt and shift typical emergency food operations by centering the dignity of food insecure individuals at the community markets.

While the markets are quite radical, they are not without flaws. There are still suggestion limits on items, though the staff made it clear that they understand shoppers are "not taking advantage of us" but rather they are providing for the "person to meet their needs." Individuals must queue before they enter since the space is only designed for 10-20 people. In Seattle, most people walk or take public transportation to the market and must wait outside. In Yakima most people drive and wait in their cars. The staff shared that they are working to mitigate the wait time and aim to be as responsive to communities and their unique needs as possible. Northwest Harvest (WA) staff hopes that through their work they can challenge the grocery store system.

> And say, "hey grocery stores, why is food so expensive? Why can't you have a little free section in your food? Why can't we have a blended system where, people who have the ability to pay and people who don't have the ability to pay don't?" (Northwest Harvest staff)

There is no question that Northwest Harvest (WA) and their community market models are taking client choice to new and more just levels. Despite this Cohen asserted that having volunteered at the SODO market, she does not think that the markets are "embodying the right to food" but rather "acknowledging that dignity is a critical piece of this." Both Cohen and Lohnes contended that true dignity is the ability to pay for food, and to have the ability to choose if you pay. Lohnes stated that facilitating choice to pay is actually promoting agency and client choice by creating participation in the process.

> Do I want to pay or do I want free food? Oh, that's a choice that I actually feel empowered. I come to the community kitchen every week. Nobody even asks me if I want to pay. Maybe I can pay. Like, it's, talk about dignity. It's like, you have to go be destitute to receive this food (Joshua Lohnes).

Food bank staffs' current focus when asked about dignity centers around choice for neighbors. Facilitating choice to ensure dignity is one part of the right to food, but as Lohnes says, current food bank systems and policies do not "solve for the right to food." As a result, essential aspects of rights-based approaches, including agency as the ability to pay, are left out of conversations and practices.

C. Beyond Client Choice: Addressing Racism and Structural Inequality

Client choice is one practice food banks and emergency food providers have implemented in the hopes of creating a more dignified experience for neighbors. Beyond client choice, there are other programs and practices that have been implemented that move food banks towards the right to food. As noted, food banks interviewed were largely not using rights-based language. Despite that, as the Food Bank of Central New York staff observed, some food banks are moving towards a rights-based approach, they are just not framing it that way. At the San Diego Food Bank (CA), the staff shared about a program called Feeding Everyone with Equity and Dignity (FEED). The FEED program provides food bank ID cards that people can use at

food distributions across the county. Individuals no longer have to fill out forms or go through the process at every pantry they visit. The staff relayed that the FEED program makes the experience of receiving food feel less transactional and cut the time people had to wait in line and instead could just be welcomed and get their food.

Because human rights are interconnected and indivisible, a rights-based approach in emergency food systems should go beyond food distribution to food sovereignty and access to land. Multiple food bank staff spoke of prioritizing support for local food economies by purchasing food from local producers. Food Bank of Iowa, San Diego Food Bank (CA), and the Food Bank of Central New York staff all mentioned state government programs or statewide initiatives that enabled them to purchase food from local farmers and producers. Northwest Harvest (WA) staff found that because the community markets operate on a smaller scale, they were able to prioritize working with smaller producers, including BIPOC farmers to secure fresh produce. Local growers were also prioritized by the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona, providing produce for their farmers market that people could purchase with SNAP benefits. At the Food Bank of Iowa, the staff shared more about efforts to ensure that their purchases would support local Iowa businesses, including local farmers. The food bank has been working with a local group of African pastors and a local farm that employs immigrant farmers to grow culturally relevant foods for neighbors, like African eggplant. The farmers are paid for the produce and the food bank can distribute more culturally relevant foods to their clients. Staff felt that it was mutually beneficial to both parties. While neither of these practices were presented as ways food banks are addressing the right to food, both begin to address essential aspects of the right to food, including availability, adequacy, and agency.

Interviews underscore the fact that food bank staff are aware of structural issues that cause food insecurity and the need to address racism in emergency food systems. Staff recognized the root causes of hunger were not being addressed because of the charity model. Food Bank of Iowa and San Diego Food Bank (CA) staff each expressed their desire for fair housing and a living wage or universal basic income to actually move the needle on hunger. Facing Hunger (WV) staff felt that the charity model, specifically when implemented by faith-based organizations, resulted in a "double edged sword" wherein an important service is being provided, but it comes from the wrong motivation. They articulated that access should be the top priority, and neighbors' experiences should feel like more than "just showing up for USDA government commodities." The Vermont Food Bank staff furthered this sentiment, "[i]t's just very evident that kind of charity perspective and how it actively works against the ability to improve the conditions of the people who are in need of food." Still, they felt a move from charity was possible, as did the Anne Arundel (MD) staff though they sensed there was still a long way to go before real progress was made. These root causes of hunger are deeply tied to racism and inequality. The Vermont Food Bank staff identified the lack of equal rights as a root cause of hunger. Chang articulated the right to food as being deeply connected to housing, healthcare, land, water, and education. The absence of these rights is connected to systemic racism and need to be addressed through a recognition of such.

Food bank staff interviewed shared additional efforts that their organizations have undertaken in recent years to address racism in the food system. Staff at Facing Hunger (WV), Food Bank of Iowa, Vermont Food Bank, MANNA (NC), and the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona all spoke to increased focus on 'DEI' (diversity, equity, and inclusion) at their food banks. The food banks work with organizations to provide staff training and educational

sessions on the impacts of policies like redlining in the communities they serve. The staff at MANNA (NC) felt that while it was difficult to gauge the real impact they had made on hunger in the community, they were proud of the food bank's commitment to equity. “We’re very committed. We have, you know, a lot of companies and nonprofits may put the DEI statement on their website. But, you know, we really live it and breathe it. Talk it every day.” While these conversations are essential in achieving food justice, the Vermont Food Bank staff felt that for their organization and others, DEI efforts were all talk and no action.

> I think that in 2021 and 2022, it became seemingly imperative for a lot of organizations to do things like create racial equity statements like we have and say that they were in support of this movement to create equity in our society. But when it comes to actually making fundamental changes to how organizations are run in order to create that world. That's where the resistance comes in (Vermont Food Bank staff).

Despite actions at the level of individual food banks, regardless of legitimacy and sincerity, without systemic change within food systems, at the corporate food level, the resistance and lack of meaningful action to address racism will remain.

D. Critique & Responsibility

A key component of the right to food is the legal aspect. The right to food requires the government to uphold obligations to ensure food security. While these legal frameworks are vital in the progressive realization of the right to food, it is also essential to include civil society. When asked about the viability of establishing a rights-based approach to food security, interviewees felt it was possible, but that it would be a slow and long process. The Vermont Food Bank respondent was the only individual to offer a critique of a rights-based approach stating that trust in such an approach has been eroded by lack of confidence in the US government.

> People who agree with a lot of my beliefs about how we end hunger but would disagree with the idea of a right to food because they come from more sort of

> anarchist, Food Not Bombs and those sorts of structures, which, you know, point away from governments. Generally, I think that for a lot of people now they're getting more and more fed up with the US government and they don't see rights based solutions as realistic or as having the kind of power that they might have had at a time when people believed more in the way democracies practice in the US.(Vermont Food Bank staff)

Cordova felt that critiques of a rights-based approach and the focus on the government as the site of change were valid. She stated that she believed the ultimate goal of activists in food security and food access was aligned with the goals of the right to food, "for everyone to have access to good food, good, healthy, nutritious food, without having to worry about whether I can pay for this or that." Cordova senses that this change did not need to only happen in one place, but across actors simultaneously. "I think we should be working towards strengthening SNAP and we should be working towards having food sovereign communities where there's no involvement by the government." This speaks to what Chang has observed during her time at Northwest Harvest (WA).

> It's been really apparent to me that (many of) the communities here that we work with are not asking for a constitutional amendment. They're asking for these concrete ways to implement programs; they're asking for specific things (Rita Chang).

The right to food is a nuanced and multi-pronged solution to food insecurity, while it creates legal frameworks and mechanisms to ensure food security, it can also take place outside of government structures.

All interviewees were asked who they thought was responsible for ending hunger in the US (Table 6). It is evident that food bank staff do not see themselves, or the food bank as an organization, as the solution to hunger in the US. Instead, answers largely fell into two pools, the

government and everyone.[11] Joshua Lohnes was the only respondent with a different answer. Lohnes argued that "the corporate food regime has grown so large and powerful that they are on par as an institution as the state." He specified that the corporate food regime extends beyond corporations to actors like large landowners that facilitate and encourage the capital centric globalized food system. Lohnes did still include state responsibility in ending hunger through managing the corporate food regime and facilitating citizens ability to control their own food systems.

Table 6

Responsibility to End Hunger

Interviewee	**Responsible for Ending Hunger**
Anne Arundel Food Bank (MD)	Everyone
Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona	Everyone
Facing Hunger Food Bank (WV)	Everyone
Food Bank of Iowa	Government
Jacobs & Cushman San Diego Food Bank (CA)	Government
MANNA Food Bank (NC)	Government
Northwest Harvest (WA)	Government & Everyone
The Food Bank of Central New York	Government & Everyone
Vermont Food Bank	Government
Alison Cohen	Government
Denisse Cordova	Government
Joshua Lohnes	Corporate Food Regime & Government
Luke Elzinga	Government

[11] Some answers were more nuanced but have been distilled for the table, Government & Everyone explicitly stated both.

Rita Chang	Government & Everyone

Chang believes that the right to food is food security *and* an emotional component; the state has an obligation to care for every single person to make sure they have what they need, making sure the conditions exist so people can be food secure. Responses that mentioned collective action or "everyone" believed that people could help to facilitate these conditions. Cohen spoke to the current barriers that exist in realizing the right to food in the US. She named: weakened civil society, lack of human rights education, entrenchment and financial support of the charity model, the dominant understanding of food as a commodity, and the lack of sustained social movements. Each of these barriers are interlinked, making it particularly difficult to get the government to recognize its responsibility to end hunger.

Power in Emergency Food: Can it Be Redistributed?

Food banks are situated in a unique position within emergency food systems. Above them sit food corporations, Feeding America, and the USDA. These entities hold power over food banks through financial and food donations, controlling narratives, and regulations. Below food banks are smaller emergency food organizations, like food pantries and food shelves[12], and food insecure individuals or as they are more frequently referred to by food bank staff, neighbors. Food banks can dictate regulations for their partner agencies through contracts and access to food donations and therefore the food that neighbors have access to. Power structures have largely remained the same since the inception of food banks in the 1960s, resulting in deeply etched practices, values, and narratives within food banks. Complex power structures dictate the work of food banks. Feeding America and the USDA as institutions inform the historical practices and

[12] Food shelves are typically smaller food pantries

narratives present in emergency food. In moving towards a rights-based approach, a redistribution of power is essential. This includes empowering neighbors, shifting narratives, and considering how to best harness the power food banks already hold as actors within the emergency food systems.

A. Dignity and the TEFAP Gaps

When asked about sourcing food, Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona staff responded quickly, sharing the importance of TEFAP to their organization and stating that "TEFAP is really our bread and butter." Heavy reliance on TEFAP was not unique to any food bank, staff were quick to express the importance of TEFAP in their daily operations and distributions. Despite a sense of gratitude for TEFAP, conversations often pointed to the gaps that TEFAP leaves and the challenges it creates for food banks and partner agencies alike. Ensuring a dignified experience for neighbors is complicated by TEFAP. To receive TEFAP foods, individuals must meet requirements established by the USDA and administered by state offices including, income eligibility. There are additional restrictions on the number of times neighbors can receive food from TEFAP pantries. Historically, restrictions required food banks and partner agencies to collect a variety of information from neighbors including household information and addresses. Presently, food banks and pantries are only required by the USDA to ask neighbors to self-attest that they fall into the income eligibility guidelines once a year. Food Bank of Iowa staff articulated multiple times that data collection can feel "gross." Despite reservations, the staff recognized they still had to collect some level of information from their partner agencies about who was being served. Food Bank of Iowa staff acknowledged the benefits of having data collected for funding and grant reporting stating that data can be hugely beneficial to continue the mission of food distribution. Still, staff reiterated that data collection made it difficult to create a welcoming and dignified experience

for neighbors “I don't want anybody to leave feeling worse than they came in.” Anne Arundel (MD) staff articulated similar desires to collect more data but ultimately, they prioritized respecting the comfort of neighbors and did not collect data beyond what is required by TEFAP. The staff expanded on their reasoning, sharing that undocumented people who utilize pantry services were nervous about “being tracked” and that in general, questions about race made neighbors uncomfortable. Despite only collecting the minimum data required, the Anne Arundel (MD) staff found it challenging to assure people that the data was not being used in a negative or harmful way. Food banks and partner agencies who are required by the USDA to collect household information must navigate this gray area of maintaining neighbors' dignity while ensuring they have enough food to distribute.

There has been creative problem solving towards ensuring stronger emphasis on dignity. At the San Diego Food Bank (CA), they offer an intake form in 26 languages and hold regular distributions where there is no data collected, with no ID required or income level requirements. San Diego (CA) staff felt being more inclusive in data collection practices moved towards reducing the stigma that comes with “the bureaucracy of filling out forms” and helps “to provide that type of experience where folks are familiar and comfortable, and treated with dignity and like they are the members of the community that they are.” Similarly, at Northwest Harvest (WA), they do not ask for any identifying information at their community markets and instead just count the number of people who enter the store. The staff shared that they used to be a sign in sheet asking people for their name and the number of people in their household. Northwest Harvest (WA) noticed that people were giving false information and ultimately decided that if the data being collected was not accurate, then there was no reason to collect the data as they were not required to. Data collection, including income levels, furthers narratives that only

certain people deserve access to food. A true rights-based approach to food security would provide universal access. TEFAP administrative processes are often burdensome and place food distributors in positions where they are unable to provide a dignified experience for neighbors due to data collection.

Beyond data collection, TEFAP creates additional barriers for food banks in the limited variety of food they provide. Across food banks, staff asked themselves: how do we fill the gaps TEFAP leaves with purchasing? Of the food banks interviewed, none depended on TEFAP for more than around 30% of the foods they distributed. This leaves a major gap for food banks to fill. Food banks do this through donations, in the form of food drives and food rescue, and have increasingly turned to purchasing food. There was consensus that TEFAP provided the staples but had to be supplemented. TEFAP only provides commodity foods[13]. Food banks interviewed chose to focus their purchasing on fresh produce and culturally appropriate foods. Cohen succinctly stated that with TEFAP "it's food as a commodity, not food as a right." Food as a commodity centers food within the market rather than understanding food as being accessible without any restrictions. In receiving TEFAP, food banks are required to maintain the structures that place food as a commodity.

Food bank staff described thoughtful purchasing methods. San Diego (CA) and Iowa Food Bank staff spoke on their efforts to purchase from local farms through both formal programs like the USDA's Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA) and via established relationships with local producers. Many described efforts to work towards providing the healthiest foods and most expensive foods through their own purchasing

[13] Newly proposed USDA TEFAP provisions include a language shift from the "outdated" term commodity to "USDA foods" (see https://www.fns.usda.gov/usda-foods/improving-access-parity-proposed-rule)

efforts. At Northwest Harvest (WA), the purchasing for their two different markets is informed by the communities that are being served. For example, the SODO community market serves a largely Chinese community whereas the Hispanic community in Fruitvale requires different produce to meet culturally desired foods. Anne Arundel (MD) staff described the shift COVID-19 caused in losing food donations. As food drives were no longer able to be held as easily, the food bank was forced to begin to start purchasing food. It became apparent they could prioritize healthy foods and control their inventory. Purchasing empowers food banks to better meet the needs of the communities they serve and offer more nutritious foods.

Food banks interviewed described the increase in purchasing following the end of additional government support spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic. Food bank infrastructure was built out to hold more quantities of food, creating an imperative to fill the space with purchased foods. Joshua Lohnes argues that this shift in food purchasing post COVID-19 aid is only so notable because the quantity of food shot so high during the pandemic. Lohnes also questioned the scale of TEFAP stating "when did it even get to the point where we needed two billion dollars' worth of TEFAP when it used to be 400 million a year?" Notably, at least two of the food banks interviewed, MANNA (NC) and the Food Bank of Central New York, have worked on or completed warehouse expansions in the last year. San Diego (CA) staff echoed concerns from Lohnes about the continued growth of food banking "We've just been on this track of bigger and bigger and bigger for so many years that something needs to happen to shift that and provide the needs at more of a root cause." The pressure to maintain the level of food during the COVID-19 pandemic and the increase in TEFAP shows how the USDA is able to maintain control of emergency food systems.

B. Feeding America's Narrative

Feeding America offers a wealth of resources to food banks. It can facilitate large scale donations and grants, corporate partnerships, and food recovery from retailers. The organization offers an expansive knowledge base and tools for communicating with partners. Of the six Feeding America partner food banks interviewed, staff were largely grateful for these connections and resources provided and shared similar points of view about the organization. Staff pointed to the regulations and food safety rules that Feeding America requires of them. Food Bank of Iowa staff spoke about the contracts that the food bank signs with Feeding America each year committing to meeting at least 60% of the need in their service area[14]. Only the Vermont Food Bank staff gave an outright critique of Feeding America. Specifically calling the organization conservative and stating their work was too narrowly focused on food distribution and initially struggled in getting support from Feeding America to fund the Food Bank Innovation Lab project. The Food Bank Innovation Lab is a pilot project that's four programs have been informed by stakeholders. The projects include community governance of food banking, reinventing food access for older adults, accessing all benefits through one door, and Black wealth redistribution. Each program seeks to address a different problem identified by stakeholders, including food insecure individuals. Feeding America deemed the Food Bank Innovation Lab to be "outside the scope of their organization." The staff shared they went into the experience 'naively' and didn't understand the politics of the work. Feeding America has the power to instill norms withing food banking and emergency food systems, limiting the ability for food banks to innovate. Rita Chang, an expert and staff at Northwest Harvest (WA), a non-member food bank, called Feeding America the "the loudest voice in the emergency food network because of their capacity, because of their budget, [and] because of their visibility."

[14] Food Bank of Central New York staff expressed this was a way to "ensure food banks are actively engaged."

Staff at Facing Hunger (WV) recognized that because of their own limited capacity, Feeding America enabled them to fill gaps food bank staff otherwise could not. Facing Hunger (WV) and Food Bank of Central New York staff were thankful for the chance to connect with other food bankers nationally through Feeding America and to workshop and share ideas and best practices. In contrast, San Diego (CA) staff felt they were able to be more "nimble and innovative" as an independent food bank but were able to maintain a strong relationship with the local Feeding America partner in San Diego (CA).

Several food bank staff including MANNA (NC), the Food Bank of Central New York, and the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona, described a shift in surplus food donations from stores such as Wal-Mart, as retailers have gotten "smarter" with their supply. MANNA (NC) staff shared the following,

> 80 percent of our food pre-COVID, we weren't paying for it. Well, overnight, the retailers got smarter. The consumers, i.e. Joe public, working from home, staying at home, going to the grocery store and going out less. So, the retailers that we were relying upon for donations not only didn't have the inventory, they were becoming sophisticated and realizing that there was a larger secondary market. They started selling a lot more of the goods that we would have otherwise received via donation. We went from, you know, roughly $400,000 in our food procurement budget pre-COVID to now close to four million dollars a year (MANNA Food Bank staff).

As the landscape of food waste changes, Feeding America continues to hold power in their connections and ability to broker partnerships and relationships between food banks and retailers. Staff at Anne Arundel, an independent food bank in state Maryland, shared frustrations with the food recovery program. Their frustrations were rooted in the fact that big box stores participating in retail recovery programs often "just see us as, you know, a good way to get rid of stuff that otherwise they'd have to dispose of." Anne Arundel (MD) and other food banks do not have a choice what food they want, and instead often end up overburdened with things like

candy that they must transport, weigh, and distribute. Anne Arundel (MD) staff shared concern as this was outside of their mission of providing healthy foods to individuals. They stated that Feeding America would not partner with them due to their small size, but they are a downstream partner of the Feeding America member, the Maryland Food Bank. Because they are an independent food bank, they have no direct line to contact Feeding America with feedback or to ask for better parameters and education surrounding what is part of the recovery program.

Chang expressed concerns with food recovery models and the way corporations approach food waste. She stated that since emergency food is so tied to corporations and the notion that overproduction is waste, "waste is translated into donations for people to eat." The ability to shift the meaning of food waste speaks to the control of the narrative Feeding America holds over emergency food systems. Chang articulated the questionable imagery of food waste and the treatment of giving people waste through an example of an advertisement for a local food drive where hockey players hit canned foods into a donation box. There is no dignity in making hunger "funny and attractive" to encourage people to donate foods.

The dominant narratives over hunger and food waste in America reinforces damaging notions of poverty and charity. Cohen believes that narrative change is one piece to the larger puzzle. Cohen pointed out that "volunteers are seen as the heroes and the hungry people are victims." Commonly used in Feeding America food banks is the phrase 'hunger heroes.' Today at the Food Bank of Central New York, when one walks into the warehouse, they are greeted by a giant banner stating, "together we are ending hunger." While the sentiment is powerful, it falls back into the Feeding America led narrative that hungry people are victims and volunteers are heroes. Still, shifts in the narrative from the top are beginning to happen. When asked about addressing the root causes of hunger in their community, Facing Hunger (WV) staff articulated

that they felt they were moving towards doing so in the last few months, propelled by a new emphasis from Feeding America on shifting from "pounds to people" unlike in the past where the focus was "just get [the] pounds [of food] out." The staff shared that Feeding America was one of the main reasons for the shift to focusing more on the neighbor behind "points" like food tonnage distributed. Across food bank staff and experts, there was recognition that Feeding America controls a major part of America's emergency food systems. Through powerful connections to corporate sponsorships, Feeding America can set the precedents and norms from everything to food safety regulation to the narrative of hunger.

C. Food Bank Advocacy and the Pressures to Remain Apolitical

Political advocacy has entered the work of food banks in recent years. Although food bank staff were not asked directly about politics and advocacy, the topic came up during conversation with several food bank staff, including Food Bank of Central New York, San Diego (CA), MANNA (NC), and the Food Bank of Iowa. Power dynamics discussed above inform the level of advocacy food banks engage with. MANNA (NC) staff shared that they felt Feeding America should be a 'major player' in the advocacy space, advocating for food banks and food insecure individuals.

During a presentation to a class, Central New York staff spoke on the tension between food banks addressing hunger and addressing food security. They argued hunger relief is dependent on charity, where food security is dependent on policy. San Diego (CA) staff echoed this dynamic sharing that the line between policy work and lobbying (an area that they "steer clear of") was difficult to draw but they recognized that in order to see neighbor need go down, "the tools to address that [hunger] are largely in those advocacy and policy work areas." Multiple staff described general expectations that they had to adhere to as non-profit organizations to remain apolitical. Food Bank of Central New York staff also noted their food bank's Director of

Government Relations worked to ensure elected officials had up to date information and knowledge surrounding food insecurity in the area. Similarly, San Diego (CA) staff shared that they often provide legislative updates to local politicians about community needs being "one of the big areas where we can help guide some of those decisions from when it comes to the point of implementing something real around the Right to Food." They went on to add that "as a non-profit there's not a ton we can do in the political spaces, but we do provide that information that is helpful to see what the need is." These constraints were echoed by MANNA (NC) staff who made it very clear that as an organization they had to maintain impartiality and non-partisanship in any advocacy work. Still, they did their best to "mobilize and advocate and let people know what's going on." Food Bank of Iowa staff spoke on a recent personal interest in advocacy efforts and tensions faced by food banks stating that

> I recognize that policy changes the way; I mean, that's the way that we're going to make any significant change in ending food insecurity. So I think there's things we could do politically- is not the right word- but we could be more vocal about harmful bills and inviting legislators in and sharing our space and inviting them to pantries. And again, sometimes that can feel kind of gross because some people are clearly just there for a photo-op. Um, but I do think some people, I mean, they just don't know (Food Bank of Iowa Staff).

There is evident apprehension among food bank staff regarding the role of food banks in the advocacy and policy sphere. Despite this, many food banks share advocacy updates on their websites or blogs, and some have gone as far as recognizing the links between hunger and other social and economic issues like housing and living wages. There is an important caveat that these advocacy updates often revolve around policy that directly impacts food banks, such as food bank funding, SNAP, TEFAP, and Healthy School Meals. When asked, interviewed experts were quick to acknowledge that they felt food banks held a responsibility to be political. Chang argued that by saying emergency food systems work is apolitical, individuals are abdicating power that

they hold to make change. Cohen pointed to the connection to poverty, arguing that because food banks work on behalf of the poor, they are inherently participating in a political act and that many fail to recognize the link between the two. Lohnes spoke to the constraints that food banks face from above that prevent them from more actively engaging in politics. He felt the need to remain apolitical came from the leadership of food banks who,

> don't actually want to encounter the politics of hunger and poverty. And actually, create movements that build political power to confront poverty....and if you look at Feeding America 's policy objectives that they then fund food bank policy people to advocate for, they're all policies that benefit the corporate food regime. (Joshua Lohnes).

Lohnes points to the control that Feeding America and food bank boards and donors have over food banks when it comes to policy and advocacy. This issue is not unique to food banks, many non-profit actors must answer to and operate in line with priorities of funders. Vermont Food Bank staff spoke to this phenomenon, sharing that decisions are usually made based on where people want the money to go instead of the most effective ideas. As Lohnes notes, since corporate food actors are deeply embedded in emergency food systems, it becomes especially difficult for food banks to move towards advocating for policy that addresses root causes of hunger. Power structures enable the priorities of boards and donors typically made up of corporate food actors. Their priorities, financial gain, align with the charity model and prevents legitimate innovation within food banking and emergency food systems.

Food banks appeal to people regardless of their political standpoint, creating opportunities to receive donations and support from across the political spectrum. Despite strong criticism from experts and hesitancy from food bank staff to engage in advocacy efforts, there are already food banks and other emergency food systems actors harnessing their power as an organization to impact policy. Northwest Harvest (WA) identifies themselves as a food justice

organization and engages in political advocacy beyond food systems with annual policy platforms that extend to broader issues related to poverty alleviation like TANF and housing justice. DMARC, a food pantry network in IA, advocates and lobbies for increased TEFAP and SNAP support as well as other issues that impact agriculture in the state. Both Northwest Harvest (WA) and DMARC prioritize issues directly relating to their work of hunger relief more than broader anti-poverty efforts and speak to the potential for anti-hunger organizations to step into a more political role rather than cede responsibility. There is no question that food banks face a complex challenge in balancing funding from major corporations to 'feed the need' while fighting for actual change.

D. The Power of Food Banks

While food banks must respond to the web of powerful actors introduced above (TEFAP, Feeding America, corporations, and donors), it became evident through interviews and research that food banks themselves hold great power. MANNA (NC) staff recognized the power their food bank holds within the community as they have a positive reputation and strong brand recognition. Given the right environment and conditions, food banks can innovate and shift operations to move towards a rights-based approach to solving food insecurity. Moving beyond charity and addressing hunger through multi-pronged work that encompasses long term sustained solutions for everyone. Food bank staff discussed the power of food bank executives in dictating operations and priorities. For some, with support from executives, innovation changes in operations were able to take place. The Central New York staff spoke to the approval of a new strategic plan by executives that sought to engage communities more deeply in the food banks service area through a new Director of Community Impact position. At the Anne Arundel (MD), through the organization's leadership changes they were able to shift operations to holistically address hunger and nutrition through healthy food purchasing. Northwest Harvest (WA) staff felt

the support from their organization's leadership allowed them to abandon their former charity-based distribution model and implement a choice-based model that allowed for dignity. Additionally, Chang understood their advocacy and policy work was possible due to the commitment and dedication of a staff member who built the unit and team. She emphasized that their policy and advocacy work was only feasible due to the passion and staying power of the individual as they managed to avoid turnover, a major issue within nonprofits.

An executive team can make or break a food banks ability to move towards a rights-based approach. Vermont Food Bank's Food Justice Innovation Lab had the approval and support of the executives, allowing the Lab to operate outside the constraints of funder priorities. This is not without other challenges within leadership. Even though support was shown for the Food Bank Innovation Lab, staff stressed that the food bank's leadership impeded the food bank's ability to tackle root causes of hunger, including racism. While leadership often knew the 'right thing to say,' staff felt there was no action behind the words and those who advocated for meaningful action were often pushed out of the organization. Staff believed "It [recognizing root causes of hunger] questions the hierarchies that are in place. The reason that they would probably use would be the financial costs. But underneath that, I think is just that people don't like the idea of their power being challenged." Expert Luke Elzinga, of the DMARC Food Pantry Network, spoke to the challenges his organization faced working with the local food bank and statewide food bank organization. He felt that executives were only had their best interest in mind and failed to understand the needs of other groups and stakeholders. It becomes clear that changes towards a rights-based approach require the support of food bank executives and leaders.

Even with restrictions due to TEFAP, Feeding America, and governance, food banks can and have utilized their power to begin to change the narratives around hunger through their

communication to volunteers and the public. Volunteers are often in a unique position of policing what food is good enough to be distributed and enforcing (or not) limits on how much food people can have. At Northwest Harvest (WA), following the transformation from a typical food bank to a community market, volunteers were given a "reorientation process." They focused on language shifting from hard limits on what clients could take to general suggestions to enable more agency and dignity. Northwest Harvest (WA) staff disclosed that some volunteers did stop working with the organization, suggesting that the language shift may have challenged their own belief systems too deeply. Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona staff shared that their biggest goal is to treat everyone who walks through their door with respect and dignity, and that this ethic informs how their volunteers are trained. Cohen strongly advocated for food banks to harness their power to change the dominant narratives through volunteer education. She "would love to see food banks begin to do political education with their volunteers, which basically means helping them understand truly what's at the root cause of hunger and what are the kinds of policies they could begin advocating for" such as a universal basic income or living wage. Anne Arundel (MD) and the Food Bank of Central New York staff both spoke to the responsibility they felt to educate the public about the realities of hunger. Anne Arundel (MD) staff spoke to the ability of their organization to help reframe narratives of hunger, as they no longer allow photographs to be taken at distribution sites to protect clients and their dignity.

As mentioned above, food banks yield power over their partner agencies. Some, like the Food Bank of Central New York, Facing Hunger (WV), MANNA (NC), and Anne Arundel (MD) utilize this to encourage client choice models (discussed more above) within pantries to provide neighbors with more agency. Perhaps most promising is the ability of food banks to redistribute power to the hungry. Chang holds the belief that "pursuing the right to food

inherently means putting power back into the hands of people who've been dispossessed of that power." She argues that food banks have the power to give voice and platform to food insecure individuals to both humanize and equip them with knowledge that they need to make demands of their government. MANNA (NC) gives people with lived food insecurity experience a place on the executive board and opportunities to speak at events and meetings. This is not an easy feat, and a high level of care must be taken to ensure that those with lived experience are not just exploited for the benefit of the organization. Lohnes suggested more thoughtful ways of paying individuals for their time, by respecting income eligibility for SNAP and ensuring meetings are held in accessible spaces that foster participation and diminish uneven power dynamics. He argues that while it is difficult to redistribute power to food insecure individuals within the current system, it is not impossible, and people need to "enter the reality of the people you're trying to reach."

Food banks contend with intricate power dynamics above, below, and within their organizations. Throughout the data emerges this complex network dominated by TEFAP, Feeding America, and food bank executives and board (all enmeshed with the corporate food regime). While these structures can hinder food banks in working towards the right to food, the power food banks hold over partner agencies, volunteers, and general messaging is evident. As food banks work and operations are dictated by these power dynamics, the question shifts to the mission and capacity of food banks work.

Working Myself Out of a Job: Capacity & Constraints of Food Bank Operations

Food banks face constraints in moving past their mission of feeding people towards long term food security. Another major theme throughout the data was the capacity of food banks and the constraints of their mission. Food bank staff articulated that the main priority of their work and their organization was to feed people in need. Given the immediate need, and obligation to

serve the food insecure, engaging in more broad poverty alleviation efforts are not prioritized. Despite the immediate pressures to feed food insecure individuals, food bank staff and experts pointed towards how food banks can harness existing operations and partner agency networks to engage in more rights-based practices.

Nonprofit organizations, like food banks utilize mission statements to frame and center the scope of their work. Of the food banks interviewed, their mission statements (see Table 7) most often invoked healthy and nutritious foods (four food banks) and the role of partners and their network (five food banks). Three food banks' mission statements referred to education surrounding hunger. The Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona was the only food bank to mention root causes of hunger and dignity in their mission statement. It should be recognized that mission statements are not entirely inclusive of the work food banks are doing, but rather offer insight into how they choose to present their work to the broader community including donors and clients. Northwest Harvest (WA) for example does not mention advocacy or root causes in their mission statement but have a very strong emphasis on both areas in their operations. Despite this caveat, the mission statements make two things evident; first, providing healthy and nourishing foods remains to be the main priority for many food banks. Second, partnerships and networks are essential for the work of food banks. The missions and capacity of food banks are influenced by donors and stakeholders and the immediate hunger millions of Americans face. It became apparent the main priority of food banks is to "feed the need." None of the food banks mission statements speak to eliminating the need for food banks and emergency food organizations.

Table 7

Food Bank Mission Statements & Themes

Food Bank	*Complete Mission Statement*	*Themes*
Anne Arundel Food Bank (MD)	It's our mission to alleviate food insecurity in Anne Arundel County by partnering across our community to obtain and distribute nourishing food to our neighbors in need.	Partners & network, healthy & nutritious foods
Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona	The Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona responds to the root causes of hunger, and seeks to restore dignity, health, opportunity and hope to people living in poverty. Our mission is to change lives in the communities we serve by feeding the hungry today, and building a healthy, hunger-free tomorrow.	Dignity
Facing Hunger Food Bank (WV)	We're on a mission to feed people struggling with food insecurity by distributing nutritious food and groceries through our vast agency network.	Partners & network, Healthy & nutritious foods
Food Bank of Iowa	We provide food that helps Iowa children, families, seniors and veterans lead full and active lives, strengthening the communities where they live. We value compassion, commitment, collaboration, creativity and courage.	Partners & network
Jacobs & Cushman San Diego Food Bank (CA)	The Jacobs & Cushman San Diego Food Bank and our North County Food Bank chapter provide nutritious food to people in need, advocate for the hungry, and educate the public about hunger-related issues.	Education, healthy & nutritious foods
MANNA Food Bank (NC)	MANNA Food Bank's mission is to involve, educate, and unite people in the work of ending hunger in Western North Carolina.	Education
Northwest Harvest (WA)	The mission of Northwest Harvest is growing food justice through collective action.	Collective, food justice
The Food Bank of Central New York	Leading the effort to eliminate hunger in our region, by partnership with others in our community, through education, advocacy, and distribution of nutritious food.	Education, partners & network, healthy & nutritious foods
Vermont Food Bank	The mission of the Vermont Foodbank is to gather and share quality food and nurture partnerships so that no one in Vermont will go hungry.	Partners & network

A. Operations Beyond Distribution

Food bank staff articulated a range of priorities but largely focused on increasing both the amount of food distributed and the nutritional value of the food. For the Facing Hunger staff in West Virginia, they prioritized getting more food into rural areas. Food Bank of Iowa staff spoke to trying to get as much healthy and culturally relevant food as possible with as little money as possible. MANNA (NC) staff shared that beyond securing food, they had aims to serve more people than ever before. The Community Food Bank of Arizona and the Food Bank of Central New York staff both mentioned working towards long term solutions and addressing

contributing factors to food insecurity. Northwest Harvest (WA) and Vermont Food Bank staff were not asked explicitly about operational priorities. Throughout the conversation, Northwest Harvest (WA) emphasized their goal of serving culturally relevant foods to people with as much dignity as possible. Vermont Food Bank staff did not speak to their organization's priorities but their own, sharing goals of redistributing power across emergency food systems. Overall maintaining an adequate supply of food to distribute supersedes all other priorities for food banks.

Surprisingly, only two food bank staff referenced the idea of 'working oneself out of a job,' a phrase sometimes heard within emergency food organizations. San Diego (CA) and Food Bank of Iowa staff both spoke to this, sharing the complexities of addressing the immediate needs of hunger and recognizing that if they are doing their jobs well, then hunger will be eradicated, and the need will end. Lohnes described food banks as in the business of crisis management stating "the food bank is always, always in the business of resolving crises. Whether those crises are hunger and food insecurity at the household level or the food system crisis itself." Interviews highlighted the competing expectations of food banks, to both address immediate need and end hunger. The structure of the food banking system prioritizes the immediate need and therefore limits organizations' capacity to address hunger at the root cause level. If food banks do not have the organizational capacity to do more than feed the need, that does not necessarily mean they are uninterested in doing so. As the Food Bank of Iowa staff put it "as a food bank, food is our priority." They went on to say they had hopes of engaging in more advocacy efforts. Even with constraints, some food banks are moving towards more holistic approaches to hunger with additional programing and advocacy efforts.

Increasingly, food banks are implementing direct service programs instead of only distributing food to partners. At the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona, the staff shared about multiple programs that engaged the community directly and sought to address issues of food access and income, through job training and the food banks community farm. One of these programs is the Caridad Community Kitchen[15]. The staff described the kitchen as a space where both poverty and hunger were being addressed at the same time. The kitchen serves as a space to prep meals to distribute to seniors *and* provides culinary training to people who are unemployed or underemployed to secure higher paying jobs. The food bank also has a six-acre community farm that seeks to educate people about producing foods for themselves. Anne Arundel (MD), MANNA (NC), Facing Hunger (WV), and the Food Bank of Central New York staff all mentioned forays into direct service through mobile markets that bring food, often prioritizing, fresh produce into rural or low-income low access areas. The Food Bank of Iowa staff spoke to the barriers they experience as a result of not providing direct services, sharing that they cannot get direct feedback from neighbors easily since they do not interface with them.

Direct services provided by food banks provide additional ways to distribute food and cultivate the space to engage directly with the communities they serve. When food banks step away from exclusively acting as a distributor, there is the possibility of beginning to address systemic causes of food insecurity. Programs like the six-acre farm at the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona offer examples of how food banks can begin to address issues of food sovereignty. Food sovereignty refers to the ability of individuals to have control over the production, distribution, and consumption of their foods. Creating spaces for people to learn

[15] The Vermont Food Bank has a similar program called the Community Kitchen Academy but did not come up during the interview with the staff.

about growing and producing their own food is one piece of the larger puzzle to achieve food sovereignty. Northwest Harvest (WA) is another example of a food bank addressing systemic causes, through their extensive policy and advocacy work. Facing Hunger (WV) works closely with the local university, Marshall University, to address student food insecurity. One of the pilot projects at the Food Bank Innovation Lab at the Vermont Food Bank is engaging in Black wealth redistribution through cash transfers to Black Vermonters. There is evident potential for food banks to engage in work that addresses hunger through food justice. The question lies in the capacity of the organization.

B. Partner Agencies Impact

Partner agencies can help food banks to better understand and address issues of poverty that influence food insecurity. Partner agencies, such as community food pantries, health clinics and housing support offices, play a major role in supporting the work of food banks, allowing them to interact with neighbors and filling service area gaps more directly. These partners work with food banks in a variety of ways, sometimes as pantries distributing goods or as social services providing wraparound services. Within this context, wraparound services refer to additional needs required by individuals in poverty ranging from housing, heating, insurance, and more. Food bank staff made it clear that partner agencies are invaluable to the work they do beyond food distribution.

When asked about addressing root causes of food insecurity several food bank staff stated that they worked with partner agencies to address broader structural issues. While efforts go beyond food distribution, they are still centered around addressing poverty though food. MANNA (NC) asks partner agencies to implement what they call “client centric values” which recognize the impact of “systemic injustices and oppression” in the creation and perpetuation of poverty (*See Client Centric Values* 2021). At the San Diego Food Bank (CA), staff shared “a lot of that

[addressing root causes] comes through our partnerships. Because we are a food bank, we are focused largely on, you know, accumulating and distributing food." They described their efforts stating they work to address education on hunger and awareness of CalFresh (California's SNAP program) through partners. The Food Bank of Central New York staff emphasized that collaboration with local partners was essential in increasing food access and education, sharing that they worked regularly with medical and health organizations to address food insecurity in more complete ways. They felt that collaboration was able to extend past typical partners, like food pantries, because "everybody has a vested interest in food." The Food Bank of Iowa staff spoke to the role partners fill that food banks cannot due to limitations of capacity and space, sharing that

> We're just somewhat limited in what we can do. I think we would all love to have… I don't know... Insert 10 wraparound services in our building, but that's just not how we're set up. I feel like we understand it [root causes of hunger]. We can only do so much (Food Bank of Iowa staff).

Alison Cohen corroborated the importance of partner agencies with her own experience at the anti-hunger organization WhyHunger. She shared that the organization often helped connect and partner food banks with community development organizations to work towards broader poverty alleviation. It is evident that food banks rely heavily on partner organizations to carry out work that they cannot conduct themselves, or work that they see as out of the scope of their mission.

Collecting feedback and creating communication lines between food banks and neighbors can be difficult as not all food banks engage in direct service. Partner agencies offer a direct link between the two and help food banks foster stronger and more meaningful communication channels. When asked about ways to collect feedback from partners, food banks feedback mechanisms ranged in formality. Anne Arundel (MD) staff spoke to a goal of not over burdening neighbors but still collecting valuable feedback on topics like food preference and quantity,

frequency of visits to pantries, and suggestions for improving the overall experience. Facing Hunger (WV) surveyed partners and neighbors on operations in addition to town halls. The town halls allow the food bank and community members engage and gather feedback. Beyond feedback, the town halls also provide attendees with information on relevant legislation, with the aim to "empower people facing hunger to speak with elected officials" and the larger community on the impact of the legislation (Facing Hunger Food Bank 2023). The Food Bank of Central New York and Northwest Harvest (WA) were both working on creating formalized mechanisms for feedback on their existing services and operations. Northwest Harvest (WA) did include communities in planning processes for their second community market, Fruitvale. The staff shared that their priority was being as responsive to communities as possible. San Diego (CA) staff shared that through communications with partner agencies, they were able to understand better the needs in relation to outreach and capacity and "hot topics" that may arise within the agencies. Staff at the Food Bank of Iowa shared that their expansive service area and not engaging in direct service made it difficult to engage with neighbors to obtain feedback. The staff also pointed to the complexities that can arise sharing,

> ...also knowing that time is precious. We will need to incentivize that [getting individuals to talk with us]. You know, I don't ever want to feel like we're tokenizing somebody. We do genuinely want their feedback, but I know it can very easily transition into like, well, I'm just the face of food insecurity, you know? So we've talked about how do we connect more with our neighbors? We ask our pantries for a lot of feedback, but it would be helpful to connect directly with those neighbors (Food Bank of Iowa staff).

Staff at MANNA (NC) described how they have formal feedback mechanisms for partner agencies, including annual conferences and surveys. But in terms of feedback from "neighbors in need" the staff was unsure about data collection and formal structures though they recognized the

importance and value. Feedback can be a valuable tool for food banks and partner agencies alike to ensure that they are meeting the needs and desires of neighbors.

Partner agencies are food banks direct line to neighbors. Partner agencies not only give food banks access to neighbors through food distribution, but they enable food banks to broaden their services and operations without requiring increased infrastructure and capacity. Partner agencies have wider goals and missions than food banks that go beyond food distribution. Agencies operations are widespread, some focusing on health, housing, or education. By addressing issues of poverty beyond food, partner agencies can address root causes of hunger. This allows food banks to move towards a rights-based approach to food through elevating and supporting the work of partners.

C. Jumping Off the Hamster Wheel of Emergency Food

Food banks are not ending hunger; staff recognized that while they had seen successes of hunger alleviation in the short term, there was no end in sight. Food banks' operational priorities focus largely on food procurement and food distribution. Naturally, this leaves room for critique as most food banks make minimal efforts to address root causes of hunger. Food bank staff expressed knowledge of root causes of hunger and wanted to address poverty and branch into wider operations, but many felt constrained by their clients' immediate need. Cohen described this mindset, prominent in food banks and emergency food systems, as maintaining a charity approach due to the sense of urgency to feed people. "It's sort of like we're on a hamster wheel and we just have to keep moving. Because if we don't, it will stop. And then we will be out of a job and more people will be hungry." The hamster wheel exemplifies the kind of unending crisis management food banks find themselves carrying out. Staff overwhelmingly felt that they cannot both manage the crisis and work towards systems change through advocacy and additional programs. Lohnes pointed to the fact that the "Feeding America template" has been everywhere

because of the lack of capacity food banks often have. It is easier to apply an existing model than undergo extensive and intense strategic planning. This urgency to feed people, and therefore the crisis driven hamster wheel, speaks to the ways food bank operations have become so streamlined in order to maximize efficiency and feed the most people possible. Staff at the Food Bank of Iowa spoke to the disconnect between food bank success and ending hunger, "on the one hand, if our numbers are going up, that's hard to see. That means more people are in need. However, if our numbers are going up, those people found services." The Food Bank of Central New York staff simply stated that "we're so far away from eliminating hunger."

Ending hunger requires more than distributing food, Chang laid out the issue of hunger and the potential role of food banks.

> Why do we have hunger in America? It's because people aren't getting paid enough to live, that they have to work multiple jobs, that the benefits aren't keeping up, that poverty is an endless cycle. So looking at this organization that started in the 1960s, as just a food bank, and seeing its potential to, to grow into something that could address immediate needs for now, but also how do we work ourselves out of a job? How do we make sure that people have the things that they need in order to feed themselves and their families with dignity? (Rita Chang).

Staff at the Food Bank of Central New York understood the importance of addressing system level change and made it clear they understood that feeding people and ending hunger were different tasks and difficult to complete at the same time. This is in part due to the urgency food banks face in feeding people. MANNA (NC) staff described the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic stating that they became a "disaster relief organization overnight." Today, they maintain a tab on their website for disaster response promising relief during weather events. Lohnes' point about food banks as crisis management rings true, the experience of MANNA (NC) illustrates that food banks must adapt and respond quickly to present needs, making it difficult to address larger systemic causes of hunger. The Community Food Bank of Southern

Arizona staff stated that they understood the scale of the issue of chronic food insecurity and felt their organization was seeking to feed people and at the same time as working towards structural change.

> We recognize that addressing hunger and poverty on this kind of scale takes more than a food box and we are here to hand a food box to someone but we are also interested in the bigger change that's needed as far as making that something that is accessible to everybody (Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona staff).

While it is necessary and possible to feed people and work towards greater poverty alleviation, when considering long term systemic change, food bank staff did not seem to think that food banks were the answer to ending hunger. When asked about the responsibility to end hunger, across interviewees, both staff and experts, there were two main answers: the government and everyone. Cohen explicitly stated that it was not the food banks. Staff at MANNA (NC) shared what they felt the reality of the situation was.

> Should we have a vision that's about ending hunger in Western North Carolina? Because until we have systemic change from the federal, state, regional, county, city, the reality is, there's always going to be a need for the likes of a MANNA food bank. Until we have wholesale systemic change at the federal level and how we analyze our social welfare net and federal programs (MANNA staff).

The question becomes how food banks can create the infrastructure to both feed people and advocate for change on the systemic level. Elzinga described the process of getting DMARC, a food pantry network in Iowa, to enter advocacy. Through Closing the Hunger Gap's annual conference, as described online as a "network of organizations and individuals working to expand hunger relief efforts beyond food distribution towards strategies that promote social justice and address the root causes of hunger," Elzinga was able to connect with Northwest Harvest (WA). Through this connection he learned about their strategy to move towards more advocacy centered work through the Millennial Impact Report (2014). The report articulated that millennials were more interested in donating to movements and challenging the status quo than

to traditional charities. Elzinga was able to use this as leverage to begin increasing advocacy efforts with the support of DMARC's executives. Today Elzinga serves as DMARC's Policy and Advocacy Manager. Staff at the Vermont Food Bank revered the Oregon Food Bank for offering an example of how food banks can do both food distribution and work towards addressing root causes including systemic racism. They shared that working with Feeding America had disheartened them but saw the possibility of systems level change through the work of the Oregon Food Bank, which is a Feeding America member. The staff noted,

> If you spend any time on their website, they've just reframed everything in terms of food banking, toward the idea of really addressing root causes around the fact that racism is a cause of food insecurity and have come up with some really great programming...And so because this, this food bank existed in Oregon, I was like, okay well, it's possible to be a Feeding America food bank and to do this kind of work (Vermont Food Bank Staff).

Online, the Oregon Food Bank has an acknowledgement that they have "caused harm in the past by not fully centering people most impacted by hunger in our work and in the stories we tell. We acknowledge this with grief and humility, and understand we have much work to do." This is an impactful display of recognition of the power food banks hold and their ability to reconcile with communities they serve. Vermont Food Bank staff suggested that there were achievable ways to move beyond food distribution, "It's not a revolutionary idea of let's stop distributing food or something. It's more like an idea that we could take like one percent or five percent of our operating expenses and put it towards root cause work." Unquestionably, food banks and anti-hunger organizations can do more than feeding people by focusing on advocacy, systemic racism, and other causes of poverty. Food bank staff and experts highlight the ways the capacity and mission of food banking prioritizes feeding people, making it difficult to move beyond mission statements and the charity model. Despite these constraints, food banks can begin to

work towards the right to food by engaging in advocacy efforts, recognizing root causes of hunger, and feeding people with dignity.

Discussion

The Right to Food through Policy, Advocacy, and Narrative Change

Findings illustrate several critical aspects essential to understanding the relationship between food banks and the right to food. First, food banks have limited capacity and are constrained by their mission and the immediate need that hungry individuals face. Second, the food bank staff interviewed did not see themselves as the solution to food insecurity despite messaging within mission statements and prevailing narratives about ending hunger. Food bank staff are placed in a tedious position where they must navigate ensuring that people are being fed and their operations can continue, while knowing that structural change is essential to end hunger. Third, complex power structures, ranging from Feeding America to corporate food actors, dictate the work of food banks. Lastly, food bank staff were not entirely familiar with the nuances of the right to food but have already begun to look at addressing hunger in more sustainable ways and are prioritizing dignity, a foundational piece of human rights. Although dignity was a constant across interviews, there was no single definition articulated. Respondents instead revealed a universal and intuitive knowledge of the importance of ensuring human dignity.

This discussion section will explore two components of the major findings: food bank engagement in policy and advocacy, and narrative change through a human rights framework. The findings will be discussed through human rights instruments as informed by General Comment 12 on the Right to Food (1999) and the PANTHER Principles. This includes the Five As (availability, accessibility, adequacy, sustainability, and agency). PANTHER is an acronym

used to encompass the breadth of human rights principles: participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, human dignity, empowerment, and the rule of law. The presence of each is essential in the progressive realization of the right to food. Unlike the charity model, a rights-based approach to food enables individuals to achieve self-determination; it creates conditions for those experiencing food insecurity to gain control over, not only the ways they access food and what foods, but their lives. From interviews, observation, and the literature, it becomes evident that food banks can have a relationship to the right to food movement. The question to explore is how food banks can best harness their power and influence to create conditions for the right to food in the US.

Policy & Advocacy

Food bank staff and experts alike wanted to see structural change in how hunger and food insecurity is addressed. For hunger to be eradicated, respondents universally reported, the state must take more aggressive action. Food bank staff felt overextended by the pressure to continue to meet the immediate demand of hunger. To move past this constant need, I argue that government intervention is essential. Food banks are not obligated to engage in advocacy and policy. Choosing to take part in working for structural change could open their capacity to engage in more innovative operations beyond food distribution, allowing them to make more meaningful interventions in ending hunger.

Several food bank staff supported a universal basic income or a living wage. Financial security is essential because hunger is not simply a lack of food, but a result of poverty (Riches & Silvasti 2014; Bowen et al. 2020). The right to food includes financial access to appropriate and nutritious food. The US does not address poverty through direct assistance, like cash transfer programs, and instead focuses on poverty alleviation efforts through food security programs like SNAP and WIC (Dickinson 2019). This is not without some success as SNAP provides nine

times the amount of food that the Feeding America network does (Poppendieck 2021; Feeding America 2020). Only focusing on food instead of a wider approach fails to address poverty as a systemic issue and instead provides a temporary fix for working families. When the State increased access to SNAP during the COVID-19 pandemic, Food Bank of Iowa staff noticed their service numbers decreasing. This was not a universal experience, as other respondents experienced increased demand during the pandemic. As the pandemic era SNAP benefits ended in many states in February of 2023, Feeding America reported that 65% of food banks saw an increase in demand in the following months (Feeding America 2023).

Lohnes (2019) and Poppendieck (1998) both stress the importance of the government to the survival of food banking as the state provides both funds and food, the two most essential needs of any food bank. While food banks largely support anti-hunger and entitlement programs, including WIC, food bank advocacy efforts typically focus on ensuring the government protects and funds the two programs that most directly impact food banks' work: SNAP and TEFAP. The impact of SNAP on food banks is widely recognized. Often, most of the advocacy work that food banks do is directly related to protecting and bolstering SNAP (Fisher 2017). In March of 2024, Feeding America organized a "fly-in" to Washington D.C., for food banks, including Facing Hunger (WV), to ask lawmakers to strengthen anti-hunger programs, specifically SNAP and TEFAP, in the Farm Bill. Food banks also presently advocate for increased budget and protection of TEFAP. Food banks and Feeding America often push for increased funding to TEFAP from the USDA, resulting in greater amounts of commodity food for food banks to distribute. Experts and critics contend that these practices are self-serving for food banks, as their advocacy work solely focuses on keeping food banks operating rather than attempting to solve the structural issues that create hunger (Lohnes 2019; Poppendieck 1998; Fisher 2017).

SNAP does not encompass the breadth of the right to food. SNAP's eligibility restrictions and usage parameters do not empower individuals to have agency over their food choices. Purchasing stipulations and eligibility requirements prevent the full realization of the right to food. Despite this, food banks should continue to support neighbors in applying for SNAP, and advocate for its protection as it is one of the few state led programs that begins to provide a legal framework around accessing food. Andrew Fisher (2017) argues that advocacy and protection of SNAP is necessary because as the private emergency food system grows, it becomes easier for "conservatives to claim that charity can replace the role of the government in meeting the needs of the hungry" (p. 55).

Similarly, TEFAP does provide food that allows food banks to 'feed the need.' Lohnes (2019) also notes that TEFAP strengthens non-discrimination within emergency food systems as a result of the policies and requirements that come with distributing government foods. Reliance on TEFAP results in major gaps of food, often lacking in nutritional value and culturally appropriateness. There is no question that increasing SNAP and TEFAP are essential for alleviating hunger in the US. In focusing advocacy efforts on SNAP and TEFAP, food banks avoid addressing the overt discriminatory nature of poverty. To achieve legitimate structural change, food banks need to further their advocacy efforts beyond SNAP and TEFAP as ways to expand their own capacity.

Recognizing the racial aspect of food insecurity is one way advocacy efforts by food banks can address root causes of hunger. Hunger disproportionately impacts black and brown people (USDHHS n.d.; Maillacheruvu 2022; Cordova Montes et al. 2022). Racist practices such as redlining continue to impact communities today, resulting in food apartheid, where individuals are systematically removed from access to food (Reese 2019). Dominant narratives of charity

posit hunger as an issue that can be solved by the everyday person, through donations of their time and food. In reality, state led intervention is necessary to end hunger. By ignoring the racial aspect of hunger and upholding the charity model, within a fraught and divided political landscape, Feeding America and food bank boards and leaders can maintain broad support for their cause. There is access to corporate donations, support from both sides of the congressional aisle, and far-reaching engagement from citizens across the board seeking to engage in acts of goodwill and charitable giving.

Findings illustrate that support from food bank leadership is essential in engaging in any kind of operational change, from new programs to political advocacy. Oftentimes, due to the structure of nonprofit organizations, food banks are at the mercy of their internal leadership, board of directors, and donors. Fisher (2017) explores this issue, citing that food bank staff are typically more liberal in contrast to more conservative boards and executive leadership. He notes that 25% of food bank board members are affiliated with Fortune 1000 companies; out of that number, one third are affiliated with food-related companies (p.59). When the leadership and financial viability of an organization depends on corporate food actors, it is difficult to engage in work that does not align with the money makers best interests, such as advocating for a minimum wage.

Changes in charitable giving open the stage for food banks to begin to participate in new practices, such as broadening advocacy to address issues connected to poverty and race. Northwest Harvest (WA) and DMARC (IA) both utilized the findings of the 2014 Millennial Impact Report as leverage to argue for engaging in more advocacy-based work. The Report and research since have shown that millennials prioritize giving to causes rather than specific organizations and support activism and movement-based work (Case 2019). In turn, since the

COVID-19 pandemic, foundations and philanthropy have begun to give funds and grants with less stringent requirements (Malmgrem 2024). Corporate philanthropy is focusing more on social and economic inequality rather than traditional charity (Cohen 2023).

Multiple food bank staff made it very clear that they did not believe they could engage in political or partisan advocacy work despite personally believing in structural change. In some instances, hesitancy in engaging in political work is rooted in conservative leadership. Findings show that having executive leadership on board of any project made it easier to initiate and complete. Staff at the Houston Food Bank, the largest food bank in the US, expressed that the political values of the state of Texas heavily influenced their operations (Leek & Bellows forthcoming). Additionally, there are parameters and restrictions that organizations, like food banks, with 501(c)(3) status must adhere to, but the language is vague, and the ultimate decision is left to the IRS. The IRS states that they can engage in advocacy and lobbying as long as it is not a "substantial part of its activities" (Candid n.d.). This leaves space for food banks to broaden their engagement with advocacy. Food banks often already have links to their state and local legislators, as they provide updates on hunger in the areas to politicians. Food banks can leverage these connections to advocate for structural change in the emergency food system. Some food banks, including Northwest Harvest (WA), have already engaged in more broad advocacy work. Northwest Harvest's 2024 legislative policies mainly focus on food related legislation, but in addition they are supporting bills on housing security and tenant's rights. Feeding New York State, an organization supporting the work of the ten food banks, including Food Bank of Central New York, is undertaking advocacy efforts in 2024 that include supporting a human services employee minimum wage (*State Priorities* n.d.). The efforts of both Northwest Harvest and

Feeding New York State efforts illustrate the ways food banks can employ their power to create policy change beyond SNAP and TEFAP.

Advocacy can result in major changes to food access and food systems. Making each component of the five A's framework (availability, accessibility, adequacy, sustainability, and agency) a reality requires increased action by the government to address poverty and changes in the food system. One way that the US can move towards a rights-based approach to food is through harnessing the power of food banks to engage more deeply in political advocacy on issues of poverty and even environmental protection to advance sustainability. Advocacy efforts currently focus on the nutritional adequacy of available foods through increasing access to SNAP. Food banks can achieve the more nuanced aspects of the 5 A's through advocacy. Availability refers to the ability for people to "produce, procure, and/or purchase the amount and types of food they need and desire' (Heipt 2021). By advocating for more financial security through an increased minimum wage, or universal basic income, food banks can make headway in achieving availability. More engagement in advocacy efforts does not necessarily have to come from food banks directly visiting Capitol Hill and the local state house. Instead, food banks can take part in the right to food movement by creating channels for food insecure individuals to participate in advocacy. Agency gives individuals control over their food and how they access it. By elevating food insecure individuals to participate in advocacy efforts, food banks can further agency. A rights-based approach elevates and empowers individuals whose rights have been violated.

The viability of advocacy and policy as a means for food banks to move towards the right to food can be understood through the PANTHER Principles (participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, human dignity, empowerment, and the rule of law). The

PANTHER Principles inform and build upon each other. Participation refers to the individual's ability to have control and agency over their food. Having control and agency over food results in the principle of human dignity being fulfilled. Dignity, described as "immutable" by the Food and Agriculture Organization (referenced as Gomez 2014), requires non-discrimination. Non-discrimination not only demands that all peoples are entitled to the same rights regardless of identity, but also requires governments to dismantle structural conditions that create inequality (Gomez 2014). Rights holders can monitor and measure government and organization actions through the principle of transparency. Transparency requires policies and practices to be available to the public. PANTHER as a human rights instrument provides a process of values and principles for duty bearers, both governments and organizations like food banks, to tackle human rights issues, including the right to food. Through advocacy efforts, food banks can engage with the PANTHER Principles in a meaningful way.

Participation enables those impacted by rights violations to become a decision maker at multiple levels of the food system. Across interviews, client choice was one way that food bank staff were working to increase the agency of neighbors. Despite the added options and ability to choose, client choice does not give neighbors control over their food. By creating avenues for participation, food banks give neighbors the opportunity to inform and dictate how they receive food. One example, as cited by Lohnes and Cohen would be giving neighbors the option to pay for their food. Allowing individuals the opportunity to choose if they pay for the food they receive, creates active participation in the process. This action both empowers neighbors and strengthens the presence of dignity. In *The Stop: How the Fight for Good Food Transformed a Community and Inspired a Movement* authors Andrea Curtis and Nick Saul describe a Canadian food bank's journey away from only providing food, towards taking a multi-pronged approach to

hunger through advocacy, education, and engagement. The Stop enables food insecure individuals to learn to grow and cook their own food *and* elevates voices of the food insecure through advocacy efforts at the policy level. The notion that people can overcome structural inequality to feed themselves without the help of government intervention is inaccurate and outdated, no group understands this more than the food insecure themselves.

Food banks must empower and respect food insecure individuals. Empowerment, another PANTHER principle, speaks to building the power and capacity of individuals to "create solutions to address their problems, to control their own destinies and fulfill their potential" (Gomez 2014). Some food banks, including MANNA, have begun to empower neighbors experiencing food insecurity to participate on boards of directors. Multiple food bank staff expressed concern in ensuring that neighbor involvement in operations and governance was done with dignity. Food bank staff concerns included making sure participation did not feel transactional and ensuring people were adequately compensated for their time and work. In creating welcoming spaces for neighbors to engage with food bank governance and advocacy efforts, food banks can empower neighbors to lead the programs and policies that impact them most. To achieve empowerment of neighbors, accountability and transparency mechanisms will need to be strengthened. Accountability recognizes "that duty bearers are responsible towards those most affected by public decisions, actions and performance, especially those most vulnerable or most at risk of exclusion and discrimination" (Gomez 2014). Findings indicated a lack of infrastructure for food insecure individuals to provide feedback and engage directly with food banks. Food banks can implement more formal ways for neighbors to provide feedback and to share their decision-making practices. Through this work and embedding rights-based principles, food banks' focus can shift from self-sufficiency to self-determination for neighbors.

A rights-based approach to food includes advocacy and engaging in hunger as an issue of poverty, connected to race. To move towards this distinction of self-determination, popular perceptions of poverty and hunger must be revised. In order to revise, food banks can elevate individuals most impacted by poverty and racism to lead narrative change.

Harnessing Control of the Narrative

A rights-based approach to food insecurity requires the understanding that hunger is created by structural failings, not an individual's failing. Interviews with both experts and food bank staff made it evident that those working in emergency food systems do not see food banks as the answer to hunger. Staff did not characterize themselves or their work as the solution to food insecurity, but rather as filling an immediate need. This is not a new idea, emergency food providers have long recognized and understood that they are not solutions to poverty, but "responses to hunger" (Poppendieck 1998, p. 38). Feeding people in the short term is what food banks were designed to do. Despite this narrow scope, the retreat of the government in providing for its people resulted in food banks and food pantries being recognized as essential work to end hunger (Poppendieck 1998; Fisher 2017). Riches (2018) argues that "the social construction of hunger as a matter for charity allows us to believe there is very little that governments can do, assuming they wish to" (pg. 84). A dominant narrative, as evidenced by the food banks' own mission statements, is the mission to end hunger within their communities. This may not be an ill-intentioned or inaccurate mission but as interviews and the literature illustrate, ending hunger requires structural action to address poverty. Presently, food banks and the language they use emphasize and center food banks and charity as a solution to hunger. de Souza (2019) writes that within emergency food organizations

> pathologizing language and imagery [are used] to pull at the heart strings of citizens and to motivate charitable food donations. These stories portray hunger as

> a significant problem that can be solved by individuals “doing good,” when in reality, the hunger problem is far too vast to be solved by charity (pg. 46).

Rita Chang, Northwest Harvest staff and expert respondent, articulated that the most impactful thing food banks could do to move towards the right to food was to decrease the visibility of food banks as the solution to hunger. Her sentiments are echoed in the literature. Food banks reframing their work and lessening their visibility in the public eye is one way that they can create meaningful change within the emergency food system (Poppendieck 1998; de Souza 2019; Fisher 2017). A rights-based approach to food insecurity requires the understanding that hunger is created by structural failings, not an individual's failing.

Food banks can fulfill the principle of non-discrimination through working to undo present perceptions of poverty that result in unequal access to food. Food banks must work towards changing narratives to depict the realities of hunger more accurately and decrease attention to charity as a solution. They must also provide political education to the public on food insecurity and poverty. Perceptions of poverty are a major barrier to shifting from the charity model. In the pilot project for this study, food bank staff expressed that shifting from the charity model would require the larger public to move away from prevailing narratives of the undeserving poor versus deserving poor (Leek & Bellows forthcoming). Staff at the Houston Food Bank shared that “do-gooders" of society used food banks and charity to feel good about themselves. Staff felt that these same people did not trust neighbors to make decisions for themselves and therefore would not be interested in giving more power and agency to food insecure individuals (Leek & Bellows forthcoming).

Perceptions of poverty are deeply linked to racism within the US. Dominant ideologies about poverty and hunger must be replaced with more nuanced understandings that recognize that systemic racism keeps black and brown people in poverty. Food banks are beginning to

increase staff education on issues of racism, though often through corporatized DEI language (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion), as noted by the Vermont Food Bank staff. Still, acknowledging and working towards addressing racism, and non-discrimination more generally, is essential in moving towards a rights-based approach. Undoing these harmful racist narratives also give way to 5 A's accessibility and appropriateness. Accessibility refers to ensuring there is adequate infrastructure to allow food insecure individuals to purchase and procure food they want without having to give up other basic needs (Heipt 2021). In reframing narratives of hunger to include the root causes, food banks can help to create stronger infrastructure and financial support, allowing marginalized groups to better access food. Appropriateness speaks to the cultural relevancy of the food accessed. By confronting and unraveling racism within emergency food systems, food banks can increase the appropriateness of food available by more accurately understanding the needs of the neighbors they serve. Returning to Cohen and Lohnes example, even providing the option to pay for food can change the charity centric narrative's focus on absolute need and better illustrate that food insecurity exists in different ways on a spectrum. Food banks should activate their expansive web of actors to begin to reframe hunger and undo these racist and harmful narratives of poverty.

Findings show that food banks operations are dictated by their organizational capacity and overhead power structures. Because of this, for food banks to move away from the charity model and towards a rights-based approach, food banks must examine what power they do have and figure out how to best use it. Interviews and literature show that food banks often have a positive reputation in their communities and an expansive reach due to large service areas, partner networks, and volunteer bases. One way food banks can engage with the right to food is through capitalizing on their influence and reach to reframe hunger.

Northwest Harvest offers one example of the possibility reframing hunger as seen through their volunteer reorientation process. Beth A. Dixon argues that the volunteer can be used as a tool to begin to enact a "food justice narrative." Dixon (2018) writes that volunteers in emergency food systems can be transformed into advocates through the process of education on structural causes of hunger. Similarly, Rebecca de Souza (2019) calls for food pantries to become sites of "critical consciousness," educating staff, donors, volunteers, and neighbors on food justice. She believes "food pantries should become centers for the production and distribution of new narratives." (p. 217). Food banks can, and should, wield their influence to reframe narratives of hunger through education. Findings demonstrate that some food banks are already looking to educate their larger communities on issues of hunger and food insecurity. Food banks can further this work by more deeply embedding education on the relationship between race and food insecurity into pre-existing volunteer and public education efforts. It should be noted that, as findings demonstrate, food banks have different levels of capacity and knowledge on issues of race and the right to food. Spaces like the Right to Food National Community of Practice and Closing the Hunger Gap conferences offer areas where food banks can begin to engage with these issues and learn about narrative change as a tool.

For food banks to realize and respect dignity in every food bank neighbor, the work discussed above is critical: increasing advocacy to address root causes of hunger, elevating the voices of the food insecure, and educating the public to change perceptions of hunger and poverty. From literature, interviews, and observation, dignity is the tenant of human rights that emergency food systems already do, understand and prioritize. Dignity cannot exist in a vacuum, it must be understood, protected, and achieved in tandem with other human rights frameworks and principles, including agency, accessibility, participation, non-discrimination, empowerment,

and accountability. By expanding knowledge and operations to embrace a rights-based approach, food banks can more successfully address hunger. Given the US government's general refusal to recognize social and economic rights, achieving a legal right to food at the federal level that is backed by the rule of law may remain unlikely for the time being. However, the legal aspect of the right to food is just one piece of a larger framework. Through engaging food banks, the right to food movement has the potential to greatly expand its reach, and food banks have the potential to influence and impact structural change, ensuring dignity and access to food for economically insecure individuals.

Limitations & Recommendations Moving Forward

This paper has several limitations that should be recognized. Due to constraints of time and access, there were a limited number of people interviewed. As concerns the food bank staff, several of those respondents were selected by individuals in executive roles. This could have resulted in a slight bias against criticism of food banking structures, but it is difficult to know. There were several issues that came up that could not be thoroughly explored, including what food bank staff understood as root causes of hunger, and limitations they saw to the right to food. Follow up interviews to dissect these issues more deeply would have proven useful for the research. The demographic makeup of these interviewees was largely white, with only three non-white individuals, none of whom identified as black. Additionally, only three of the respondents (expert and food bank staff) interviewed had experienced food insecurity. Given the racial aspect of food insecurity and the importance of elevating voices of those with lived experience, this is a major gap in the research. All experts held affiliation with the National Right to Food Community of Practice. This could have resulted in a more homogenous set of views. Future research should make a more concerted effort to access a more diverse pool of interviewees and create more space for individuals who have experienced food insecurity. Additionally, future

research should more closely examine connections to food sovereignty and indigenous people's food security.

Food bank operations are complex and nuanced. Despite interviews, observation, and a close review of the literature, it was difficult to fully understand the intricacies of food banking at the technical level. Further research on TEFAP, reporting requirements, and how different food banks handle data collection would prove useful to better understand the relationship between commodity food and dignity. Additionally, given food banks large service areas (for example, the Food Bank of Iowa serves 55 counties), it was difficult to assess the attributes of the service area in a meaningful way. More complex data analysis that accounts for differences in need and service between rural and urban areas could prove helpful. Better conveying the make-up and spread of operations within the food banks larger service areas would also be beneficial (i.e. number of pantries in each city within service area etc.).

Given schedule constraints, I was often not able to attend the National Right to Food Community of Practice meetings live, and instead had to watch recordings and examine notes and transcriptions. This resulted in missing conversations within Zoom breakout rooms and the chat. There is ample space to continue to study the relationship between the right to food and food banks and consider the actionable and concrete ways food banks can become involved. Lastly, critiques of rights-based approaches to social issues were not given adequate space to be discussed. Critiques come from a range of perspectives and actors. Additional research on hesitancy in trusting the government to address food security could be conducted. Specifically, the relationship between how some food bank staff and neighbors understand the US government to be a source of enduring white supremacist values and how those same persons understand the

viability of the right to food and its progressive realization as an obligation of the US government needs careful attention and research.

Conclusion

Food banks sit in a distinct position within the emergency food system. Their work is dictated by the US government through the USDA, corporate food actors, and through private charity in the form of Feeding America. Below food banks in the power structure is a vast network of partner agencies, volunteers, and individual donors. Due to their position, food banks are uniquely situated to implement and oversee change within emergency food systems. As stated in the United Nations Fact Sheet No. 34, "food security is a precondition to the right to food." Food banks will not be able to achieve food security on their own, let alone the right to food. A true rights-based approach requires a legal dimension, however in the absence of government intervention, civil society organizations, including food banks can begin to actualize the right to food.

This research shows that food bank staff understand and recognize root causes of hunger and the need for government intervention to end hunger. Food banks and partner agencies should not be expected to abandon present operations to "solve" the right to food, but rather should begin to educate themselves and explore ways that they can begin to support the progressive realization of the right to food in the US. Research illustrates that this is possible through several ways. Food banks must equip themselves to be leaders in policy and advocacy to address poverty. Economic rights are often ignored in the US, shifting from a focus on charitable food distribution as poverty alleviation to direct assistance. Addressing poverty at the root cause, with attention to the role of race and class, moves towards a rights-based approach to food. Further, food banks' vast networks offer themselves as the ideal place to rework harmful narratives of

poverty. From the findings, narrative change is essential in moving away from charity driven solutions to food insecurity. Through narrative change and broadened advocacy efforts, food banks can displace themselves as the solution to hunger, and instead give power to individuals with lived experience to shape food insecurity efforts with dignity.

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Curriculum Vita

Education

Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, 2024

- Master of Science in Food Studies; Certificate of Advanced Study in Civil Society Organizations
- Thesis "Towards Dignity: Understanding the Relationship between Food Banks & the Right to Food in the United States"

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, 2020

- Bachelor of Arts in Communications and Global Studies; Minor in Women and Gender Studies; Graduated with Distinction

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Experience

Syracuse Onondaga Food Systems Alliance, Community Grantmaking Intern, 2023-Present

- Developed curriculum and materials for participatory grantmaking workshops
- Guided the work of the 1st Food Justice Fund Leadership Council
- Collaborated with community partners to support strategic planning efforts

Syracuse Urban Food Forest Project, Research Assistant, 2023-Present

- Supported community outreach efforts through community events and tabling
- Researched diverse topics related to food systems i.e. food forests and urban agriculture
- Contributed to academic research on wild edible foraging

Duke University, AmeriCorps VISTA in Dean of Students Office, 2021-2022

- Assessed and tracked student food insecurity trends and program outcomes
- Improved access and education on student food insecurity resources across campus
- Organized and led 3rd Annual Campus Food Insecurity Symposium on Food Justice

Champlain College, AmeriCorps VISTA in Office of Diversity and Inclusion, 2020-2021

- Introduced First Generation student programming and student support resources
- Executed weekly programs for students to increase DEI competency
- Revamped office communications and social media accounts, increased engagement

Wilderness Trail Inc., Assistant Director, 2017- 2019

- Oversaw operations including volunteer management, fundraising, and communications
- Delegated tasks to 23+ staff members, created updated programming for junior staff
- Increased efficiency in ordering and organizing food supply and equipment

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Volunteer Work

Wilderness Trail, Board of Directors 2022-Present

- Served on hiring committee, participated in visioning and strategic planning

The Food Bank of Central New York 2023-Present

- Packed boxes of food, organized mailing materials, aided in food rescue

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Awards

Food Studies Department Graduate Marshal, 2024
Evan Weissman Graduate Student Scholarship, 2023