

Charitable Food System Conversations: Emerging Themes

Introduction

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services Chronic Disease Prevention Program (CDPP) aims to improve nutrition and decrease chronic disease for Wisconsinites, especially those most affected by health disparities. As such, we aim to enhance access to healthy, high-quality, and culturally relevant foods for those accessing the emergency food system.

We conducted nine informal interviews in the fall of 2024 with charitable food system (CFS) organizations, including food banks and community action program (CAP) agencies across Wisconsin. In this context, we focused on CFS organizations who source and distribute food for food pantries and other outlets.

The goal of these interviews was to learn about their roles and operations in the system, understand the evolving landscape of food sourcing and distribution through CFS organizations, and hear about how nutrition fits into their work. The following themes emerged from our conversations.



Values

Charitable food system organizations value sourcing high quality, nutritious foods for their clients.

Sourcing

CFS organizations procure food from a wide range of sources, including government commodities, grocery stores, and community gardens and local farms. Relationship building with multiple partners is essential to ensure an adequate food supply for clients.

Challenges

CFS organizations face a wide variety of challenges including staff capacity, insufficient infrastructure (freezer and refrigerator space), funding constraints, and sourcing and distributing fresh, nutritious foods.

“We are currently in the process of revamping our nutritional policy ... The strategy that we take with that is not from a negative space but from a positive space. So, saying we want to emphasize these good, nutritious, healthy foods but we’re not necessarily going to say no to candy and soda. But we’re not going to put any emphasis on them ... it’s changed our inventory structure enough that we could say this is a successful strategy.” - Food bank director



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Pantry Models

Food pantries use the food distribution model best fit for their community. Two common models used across the state include choice, or grocery shopping model, and drive-through model with assembled boxes.

Nutrition Standards

Providing nutritious food is very important to CFS organizations, however, there are no set nutrition standards in use across the state. Common guidelines used include The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) MyPlate and the Healthy Eating Research (HER) Nutrition Guidelines for the Charitable Food System, but many agencies do not use formal nutrition standards.

Implementation of Nutrition Standards

Implementation of nutrition standards is challenging, especially when it comes to donated food. An organization's ability to successfully implement nutrition guidelines depends greatly on staffing capacity and volunteers.

Culturally Relevant Foods

All of the CFS organizations aim to source and distribute culturally-affirming foods when possible. A majority of them also have methods to gather information about the cultural food preferences of their community members.

Nutrition Education

Nutrition education activities occur regularly at food banks and pantries. Partners, such as UW-Extension FoodWise, are critical in making this happen.

Food Boxes or Food is Medicine

CFS organizations may have the infrastructure to participate in other food-related programs, such as medically-tailored food boxes. There is current and future potential for CFS partners to engage in emerging Food is Medicine strategies.



CFS organizations are innovative, resilient, and mission-driven. We heard about numerous ways that agencies continue to overcome challenges. CDPP is committed to supporting the CFS in its efforts to serve our diverse communities throughout the state.

"We have a great partnership. We have a local grocery store chain ... and we can actually get a list of what food is in their warehouse, to receive case pricing. It's cheaper than it would be at the store. We order what we want ... and they drop it off at our warehouse for free."

- CAP Agency CEO



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