

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

Responding to food insecurity and community crises through food policy council partnerships in a rural setting

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ABSTRACT:

Food insecurity is a constant struggle for many communities and food needs are often amplified during times of crisis. The objective of this paper is to describe the progress in our community food policy council partnership by presenting the elements of success in facilitating policy change and programs that have helped our community in rural Pennsylvania respond to a variety of challenges, including the COVID-19 crisis. We also critically examine ongoing challenges and implications for our work. The elements that have contributed to sustaining our collective work include having a common agenda; collaboration; maintaining independent but mutually supporting member organizational goals; valuing those who are most impacted; and continuous communication. By applying these elements of partnership, the council remains focused on healthy food access, particularly during this COVID-19 crisis and ongoing food-related inequities.

Adams County, located in south-central Pennsylvania, is an example of a rural community that has identified food insecurity as a significant unmet need, despite the fact that the county ranks relatively well in terms of health outcomes in the state of Pennsylvania (1). This contrast highlights an issue that many rural counties face. Their problems may not stand out to state governments compared to more urban areas or more impoverished rural regions but they may be constrained by limited funding streams and few community-based organizations. With low-wage jobs dominating the economic landscape, many families experience food insecurity and available food assistance programs have fallen short of solving this problem. The gap between self-sufficiency incomes and qualifying incomes for food assistance programs in Adams County is significant. According to the Living Wage Calculator, the annual living wage for a family of three (a parent with two children) in Adams County is estimated to be approximately \$67,000 (2020-2021) (2), yet the maximum annual gross income to qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) with a household size of three in Pennsylvania in 2020 was approximately \$28,000 (3). The percentage of children eligible for free and reduced lunch has increased in the past 10 years, increasing in the Gettysburg area, for example, from 33.6% (2009-2010) to 51.2% (2018-2019) (4). Additionally, rates of obesity continue to be high and consumption of fruits and vegetables continues to be low (5), despite the fact that the region is agriculturally abundant (6). Much of the revenue associated with the agricultural industry does not stay in the local area, as growers are able to sell their products for more money in more densely populated areas.

For more than a decade, the work of the Adams County Food Policy Council (ACFPC) has focused on addressing food insecurity, given the health and socioeconomic context described above. In 2007, participants in a poverty-reduction initiative program called Support Circles (7)

began sharing their experiences with setbacks in food security despite achieving economic and job successes. Momentum to create a food policy council was generated by listening to these voices, inviting a food policy council advocate to town, and initiating community conversations to begin working on how to take action. The county commissioners officially recognized the ACFPC in 2009. Compounding food and economic security for many families, there was also a state budget impasse crisis in PA in 2009, when the state budget was frozen for an extended period and social services were significantly interrupted. The ACFPC has continued to serve as a home for community discussions about ongoing and crisis-related food insecurity issues.

Food policy councils, as defined by Food Policy Networks (8), are networks that represent multiple stakeholders to address food-related issues and needs in a community. The establishment of food policy councils in the US has grown rapidly in the past decade. Councils are complex, heterogeneous, and address a wide range of issues under the umbrella of “food policy,” including food access, economic development and anti-hunger, to name a few (8,9). While research and reports on food policy councils are expanding, including two publications that examine the ACFPC (10,11), information published by food policy councils themselves is limited, especially from rural communities. As one of the longest-running food policy councils in the state, we are often asked to consult with other communities attempting to organize new councils, particularly after Pennsylvania set a goal of every county and/or region having a local food alliance by 2020 (12). The purpose of this paper is to describe the progress in our community partnership over the past decade by outlining the elements of success in facilitating policy change and programs that have helped our community respond to a variety of challenges and crises, including COVID-19. We also critically examine ongoing challenges and implications for our work.

The Partnership

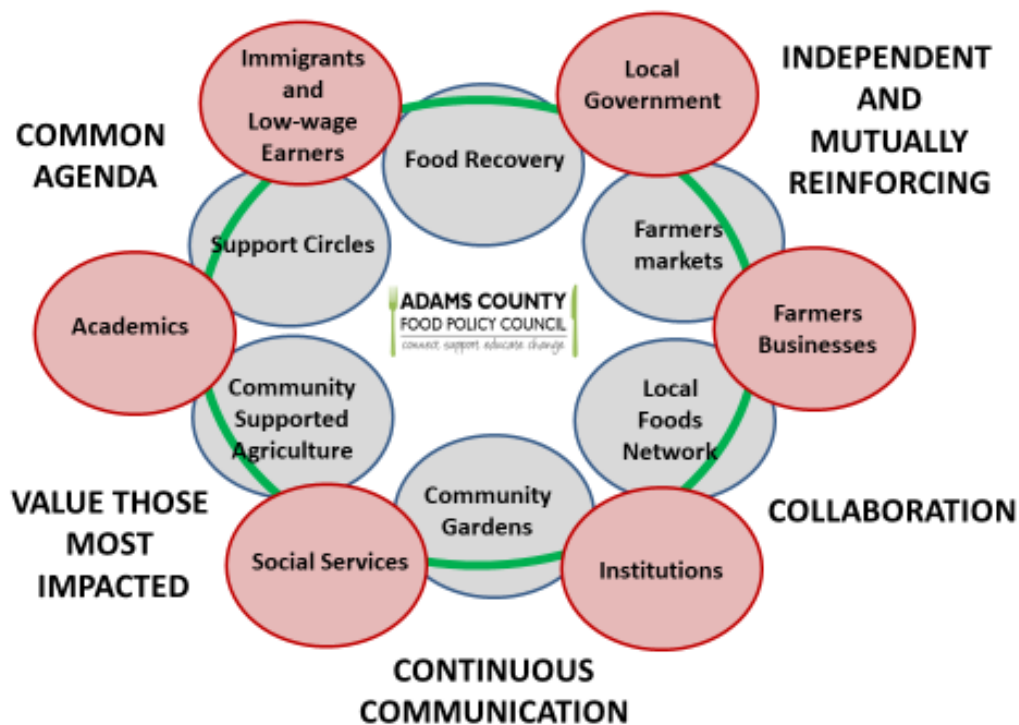
Like the majority of food policy councils, as described by the 2018 Food Policy Report (8), healthy food access has been a policy priority of the ACFPC. The council's vision is that all residents of Adams County will have access to a safe, nutritious, affordable and adequate food supply within a sustainable system that promotes the local economy (13). While federal food assistance programs ameliorate food insecurity for some, many families do not qualify for federal benefits, whether due to low poverty thresholds or documentation status. In addition to healthy food access, the ACFPC also prioritizes local food waste reduction and food systems.

The all-volunteer council's core membership includes approximately twenty active members at any given time, representing local health organizations, social service agencies, farmer's market associations, higher education, local government and community members. We also maintain communication with a wide extended network of governmental officials, growers and retailers. The ACFPC convenes monthly meetings that are open to the public and anyone may become a member. We make decisions by discussion and consensus and the workload, including website maintenance, communications and grant administration, is distributed across member organizations according to member capacity. Additional council dynamics and structure has been described in detail by Calancie et al. (2017) (10). In recent years, we conducted an internal evaluation, held retreats for strategic planning, established formal leadership structures within participant programs, facilitated community forums and presented at several conferences. It is through these self-reflection and evaluation processes we conceptualized our work through the framework presented below.

Elements of Success

The primary elements that have contributed to sustaining the work of the ACFPC include having a common agenda; collaboration; maintaining independent but mutually supporting member organizational goals; valuing those who are most impacted; and continuous communication (Figure 1). While these elements were significantly influenced by Kania and Kramer’s collective impact model (15), we found that the model did not fully capture our approach. We modified that framework to include an intentional focus on valuing those who are most affected and to highlight the independent, but mutually reinforcing goals of member organizations. We have used this framework to share our story of sustaining our work with examples below.

Figure 1. Adams County (PA) Food Policy Council Collaboration Model.



The creation of the ACFPC was a direct result of Support Circles families sharing their stories of food insecurity with other community members and organizations, making it clear that existing food assistance programs were not adequately addressing the full scope of the need. By valuing and listening to those most affected, the ACFPC was able to bring people and organizations working independently on local foods and food access issues together to create a common food access agenda. By keeping this common agenda at the center of the ACFPC's work, member organizations have independently changed institutional policies and procedures, which have affected community-level operations, policies and local awareness about food issues. An example of a change resulting from this collective work is the day-to-day operations of the food pantry run by South Central Community Action Programs (SCCAP). Listening to participant's voices about how to foster dignity and autonomy in food choices, the organization was able to remodel the food pantry space to offer a shopping experience similar to going to a retail store, allowing families to choose the foods they prefer. Another example of organizational shifts that have occurred because of the work of the ACFPC is the evolution of The Gleaning Project (TGP) (15). Originally an independent, volunteer-run organization, TGP expanded and became a permanent part of the operations of SCCAP with a paid staff. This became possible because of the commitment to the common food access agenda, the network connections and conversations that happened at monthly council meetings, and receiving input from participants and growers who benefited from the project. This project continues to connect with numerous community volunteers, also helping to raise local awareness about local food access and reduction of food waste.

Another example of the common agenda influencing independent and mutually reinforcing goals was the repurposing of the campus farm (Painted Turtle Farm (PTF)) (16) at

the local small liberal arts college (Gettysburg College) when campus administrators (through the Center for Public Service) assumed the leadership roles with the ACFPC and the PTF. By listening to the experiences of immigrants living and working in Adams County and their desires to have more agency for growing their own foods, the PTF agenda was re-focused to provide plots of land for Mexican American/Latinx families (primarily long-term residents) to grow preferred foods, in addition to bringing a community-supported agriculture (CSA) option to area residents. PTF has also become a key space for fostering social networks and communicating about other salient social justice issues, such as local, state and national immigration policies.

Influenced by the growing commitment to increase access to healthy foods, the Adams County Farmers Market Association (ACFMA) began implementing strategies to provide a robust outlet for local farmers while establishing policies and programs that prioritized low-wage shoppers. These efforts included shifting location and hours, accepting SNAP benefits, securing private funding to double SNAP and FMNP dollars, and partnering with ACFPC to be the primary point of sales for participants in Healthy Options (described below). Because ACFMA was a member of the ACFPC, collaboration could happen and feedback was more easily gathered and shared between programs, customers, program participants and vendors. The ACFPC connections provided a place for innovation and collaboration that was mutually beneficial. Healthy Options (17,18) also supports local growers and the local economy, helping to realize the ACFPC vision of having a sustainable local food system.

While each member organization independently prioritized healthy food access, the ACFPC has also initiated two collaborative healthy food access programs. Since 2011, the ACFPC has administered Healthy Options, a food voucher program that supports low-wage

earners, immigrants and senior citizens who experience food insecurity, yet are not eligible for SNAP. Another program we coordinate is Fruit and Vegetable Bucks (19), which provides SNAP recipients additional food assistance in the form of produce discounts at a local commercial grocery. Members of the ACFPC have managed these two food voucher/discount programs jointly, rather than one organization taking full responsibility. Social service agencies communicate with each other to refer individuals to the programs, vouchers are printed and distributed and/or programmed into systems, local markets and grocery stores accommodate the vouchers as currency, and vendors are reimbursed for products purchased with vouchers. Many other local organizations are involved with affiliated activities, including group walks, swimming lessons, cooking demonstrations, food preservation classes and community potlucks. To create a more formal way to build and share leadership of the Healthy Options program with those most affected, some participants have become program leaders (the majority of whom are Latinx and bilingual). Leaders have assumed administrative and social networking roles, which helps to ensure that the program is inclusive and is in constant communication with people affected the most.

Fundraising and grant seeking for these programs has also been a collaborative effort. As the program grew through the years, we had to diversify our funding and seek grants and other fundraising strategies. Communicating the success of the program and having community-wide representation within ACFPC, the message about the need for healthy foods permeated throughout the community and more organizations aligned their work with the common agenda as it resonated with their own agendas. This resulted in more people and organizations committing funds and helping with fundraising, including the local hospital, churches and the college campus kitchen.

Challenges

Limited Resources and Workload

Although the ACFPC has these successes to share, there are challenges this rural food policy council continues to face, particularly as we consider the effects of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, the most obvious being limited resources. One benefit of sustaining a food policy council in a small, rural area is member organizations are used to working together and getting creative about stretching limited resources from small funding streams. Council membership and the workload is entirely voluntary and has been sustained with member organizations valuing the work enough to subsume the council's work as part of their own institutional agendas, with some individuals and/or organizations volunteering to take on more of the workload than others. Another related challenge is making sure that the collaborative overlap remains collectively productive, rather than redundant; to make sure the council is a good steward of limited funds. While collaborative programs, such as Healthy Options and Fruit and Vegetable Bucks, have been a team effort with continuous communication being key to success, after many years of administering these programs, the council must constantly re-evaluate administrative workload distribution, fundraising, capacity and outreach as it considers the sustainability of programs. As the programs have grown, so have the operating costs for organizations.

Governance and Representation

More than ten years from inception, the ACFPC remains active and engaged in local and regional food policy conversations and action, proving itself resilient despite many changes in membership and leadership. During a 2017 retreat to discuss self-evaluation results, we

discussed the importance of personal commitment to working toward food justice, the benefits of coming together to form strong linkages to achieve collective goals, and helping each other piece together resources. We discussed how to foster ownership in the council's work amongst a larger group of members, rather than a model in which a few do the bulk of the work, with passive participation by many others. While many of us attribute the ease by which the council functions to its informality, volunteer membership and consensus decision-making approach, we have also considered initiating more formalized committee assignments and organizational membership contracts that could also help individuals advocate more for this work within their own organizations. New members have identified a steep learning curve and that the council could facilitate better communication by creating orientation packets and assigning mentors to interested potential new partners.

Research on representation by Koski et al. (2016) highlights factors shown to influence substantive representation, including shared goals, local norms, organization structure and heterogeneity in member capacity (20). Consistent with those findings, shared goals, informal norms and open structure has contributed to sustained representation on the council from many local organizations for many years. Yet, while one of the major tenets of the ACFPC has been to value those most affected, it can be challenging to achieve adequate representation from food-insecure community members, growers, agricultural workers, or other residents most affected by food-related issues. The council meets monthly on a weekday morning, which has been necessary to allow community organizations to take leadership roles and take on the workload of the council on a volunteer basis, but this time is not always convenient for community members and local growers to attend meetings. Many of the programs and access points remain centralized in the main town within this rural community and the council has been discussing ways ensure

populations all across the county are included. The council has held community forums, invites individuals and organizations to present their work to the council, provides columns in the local newspaper, involves community members in program leadership (e.g. Healthy Options program leaders), and keeps local officials informed, but staying meaningfully connected to all stakeholders is a recurring challenge. While we aspire to be a council focused on food justice and not just food access, the council has yet to truly grapple with facilitating shifts in power and decision making to those most affected by the issues we are trying to address.

COVID-19 Response

During COVID-19, our immediate efforts pivoted to responding to the pandemic crisis by maintaining our common agenda focused on food access, amplifying our constant communication, working collaboratively, co-creating mutually reinforcing initiatives, and valuing those most affected by this crisis. One way the council has accomplished this is by convening community call-ins with a broad set of partners to stay informed about local food resources in this constantly changing environment. Agenda items have included disseminating information from the schools for meal pickups, collaborating on bulk food purchasing, finding creative ways to address limitations faced with food ordering and EBT card distribution, helping the community to understand how the immigration policies impact families seeking food assistance, and provision of bilingual resources. The council is also initiating a project examining the effects of COVID-19 on social determinants of health in Adams County to help our community plan and respond to this crisis. In addition to questions about food, income and housing insecurity, we are asking about social networks and isolation to help inform interventions that can address the multiple dimensions affecting our community during this

crisis. We have submitted articles to local news outlets, created resources about food access to distribute locally, and have invited residents to join us in responding to this crisis.

Conclusions

In rural areas where there may be significant challenges with fewer people and limited resources, organizing around food policy issues can have important implications for addressing intersecting social justice issues and crises. For this council, policy change has largely meant influencing shifts within member organizations that helped to generate more systemic community changes and collaborative work over time. The council has been an important anchor for networking, connecting people and organizations extending far beyond our core membership, and facilitating communication to respond to community food needs quickly during typical times and during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The elements of success described in this paper speak to how the work of the ACFPC has reverberated throughout the community. We endeavor to expand this collaborative work by seeking ways to communicate further our agenda and successes with the larger community, continue to raise awareness about the food access needs in the community, and engage new members and organizations.

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