



Food Pantry Initiative

A Report on the African American Experience
with SUN Community School Food Pantries

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Background

Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) Program

REACH, Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health, is a 5-year grant (2018-2023) awarded to the Multnomah County Health Department (MCHD) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The purpose of REACH is to address health disparities in the African American/Black, and African Immigrant/Refugee communities in Multnomah County. These communities suffer the highest burden of chronic disease (i.e., hypertension, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and obesity). These disease disparities are a manifestation of centuries long oppression, discrimination, and subjection to various forms of systematic racism, all still present today. Although Multnomah County Health Department's REACH program does not claim to have all the answers, we take a bold stance to address these problems by leading with the motto "cultural preservation as a means to protecting health."

REACH focuses on three main domains: Built Environment, Community Clinical Linkage, and Nutrition. Within the nutrition domain, one strategy includes making improvements to local programs/systems. REACH's approach focuses on the local Schools Uniting Neighborhoods Initiative's (SUN School) food pantries in efforts to reduce food insecurity and increase access to healthy food options within the Black community.

Food Insecurity in the Black Community, a Historical Perspective:

"African American households face hunger at a rate more than twice that of white, non-Hispanic households... and getting enough to eat is a consistent struggle for 1 in 4 African American children." – Feeding America¹

There are numerous studies that suggest people of color, but more specifically, Black/African American/African Immigrant individuals experience hunger and food insecurity at rates much higher than that of their white counterparts. According to the USDA, 22.5% of African American households and 18.5% of Hispanic households are food insecure, both of which are higher than the national average of 12.3%.

Food insecurity is a multi-faceted issue often affecting those who have been historically oppressed and subjected to various forms of systematic racism. Feeding America's research illustrates a variety of disparities, such as the racial wage gap, underfunded schools, and

¹ Feeding America. Retrieved Feb 10th, 2020 from <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/african-american>

inequitable housing/homeownership, all of which contribute to food insecurity and poor access to nutritious food.

The Alliance to End Hunger states that hunger is also a racial equity issue. Redlining and exclusionary laws in Oregon, and much of the United States, have prevented access to homeownership and wealth building opportunities. Black individuals do not have equal opportunity to achieve stability and security through home ownership thus perpetuating generational poverty, a leading factor to food insecurity.

Quality schools and stable employment can play a significant role in addressing these disparities. For young people, safe and high-quality public schools with ideal classroom sizes, current textbooks, and relevant course offerings keep students engaged while providing a pathway out of poverty. Yet this is not available for many Black youth. In recent years, research has shown how the school to prison pipeline, aimed at young Black teens, also contributes to poverty and thus, indirectly, to food insecurity.² For adults, stable employment with benefits and proper living wages are fundamental. Yet, African Americans face unemployment nearly double that of whites and, if employed, are less likely to have an employer-sponsored retirement plan.³ This creates a cycle of perpetual poverty and food insecurity in the Black community throughout the life continuum.

Objective

Why Focus on the SUN Community School Food Pantries?

Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN) Schools are in 89 schools across Multnomah County, Oregon. In partnership with Oregon Food Bank and Multnomah County's Department of County Human Services, food pantries are located in 22 of these SUN Schools. SUN School Food Pantries provide 3-5 days of nutritious food to families free of charge. Most food pantries distribute food once per week at a regular time. A recent analysis concluded that SUN School food pantries are underutilized by Black/African American students. Underutilization is defined by the percentage of Black/African Americans using the food pantry relative to the population of Black/African

² Gamblin, Marlysa D. "Mass Incarceration: A Major Cause of Hunger." *Bread for the World*, Feb. 2018, www.bread.org/sites/default/files/downloads/briefing-paper-mass-incarceration-february-2018.pdf.

³ The Alliance to End Hunger. Retrieved Feb 10th 2020, from <https://alliancetoendhunger.org/>

American children at those schools. This data was determined by using Oregon Department of Education 2017-2018 Enrollment data and data from the same time period from Oregon Food Bank's food pantry client intake database (Link2Feed). Using this data, REACH and DCHS staff selected eight SUN Community School experiencing underutilization of their food pantries by Black/African American families to collect the community's input. Most of the schools are serving less than 8% of the schools' Black/African American families in the SUN School food pantries.

While SUN School food pantries are important, *equitable* SUN School food pantries are vital. Black communities have been relegated to the outskirts of society and disenfranchised for centuries. This perpetual marginalization manifests through poverty and food insecurity. There is hope that food pantries can bridge the food access gap; however, food pantries must operate in an accessible, intentional, and equitable way. A recent report from Bread for the World, emphasized the importance of food access stating:

"Barriers to becoming food secure and attaining equitable nutritional outcomes range from the systemic racial wealth divide, to job segregation, to living in areas of concentrated poverty that lack full-service groceries and transportation options ("food deserts" and "transit deserts"). These and other barriers limit financial and geographical access to healthy food options for people of color, which in turn prevents or hinders progress against hunger and poor nutrition."⁴

REACH's approach to addressing the food access disparity is straightforward: center the needs of Multnomah County's Black community. By centering the experiences, needs, and perspectives of the Black community, we can move collectively toward a stronger, inclusive, and more welcoming food pantry that serves all people well.

Methods

Our evaluation strategy has three goals:

1. To understand the underlying reasons or barriers Black/African American students are not utilizing food pantry services.
2. To leverage our findings as the foundation in defining solutions, addressing community concerns and bridging the gap with the goal of ultimately increasing overall food pantry utilization, especially among the Black/African American community.

⁴ Gamblin, Marlysa D. "Mass Incarceration: A Major Cause of Hunger." *Bread for the World*, Feb. 2018, www.bread.org/sites/default/files/downloads/briefing-paper-mass-incarceration-february-2018.pdf.

3. To determine if the implemented solutions (or PSE changes) to the SUN School food pantry program increases utilization among the Black/African American community of students and their families.

The first component of our evaluation, to better understand the reasons behind the African American underutilization of SUN School food pantries, utilized a mixed-methods approach through the collection of quantitative and qualitative data at the above-mentioned eight schools. We conducted 1) surveys with parents; 2) focus groups with parents; and 3) interviews with SUN School site managers and food pantry managers. This report focuses on the first goal and provides suggestions for improvements that could help increase food pantry utilization among the Black/African American community.

REACH partnered with the DCHS's Anti-Hunger Program Specialist Sr., Frances Hall, to help identify the evaluation goals, survey methods and questions; to facilitate the connection with families and school administrators; and to identify school led events, conferences, and social gatherings where surveys could be administered.

Outreach and Recruitment

Interviews with SUN School Site Managers and Pantry Managers

SUN School managers have a unique perspective. As employees of the partnering community organizations (See Appendix C), they are stationed in the schools working directly with students. This allows the managers to gain unique insights on the dynamics and needs of the students while understanding the challenges of food pantry operations. We interviewed SUN School site managers or food pantry managers at seven of the eight schools. Interview questions are attached as Appendix A.

Surveys were analyzed by the REACH Nutrition lead. Excel spreadsheet analysis tools (i.e., pivot table) was used to analyze quantitative data and to discover themes and frequencies. Qualitative data, such as comments and suggestions were categorized and placed in themed buckets. This information was then used to describe common feelings, thoughts, and barriers about food pantry utilization.

Surveys with Parents

Surveys were paper and pen self-administered in person and distributed to self-identified Black/African American or African Immigrant/Refugee parents within the specified eight schools. Recruitment occurred through social media platforms, word of mouth, school events and activities, and SUN School managers. A total of 87 parents responded to the survey.

The survey was structured to encourage participants to convey their thoughts and feelings about the current food pantry program, why it has or has not worked for them, and how to create a more culturally inclusive and welcoming food pantry experience. (See Appendix B for the survey)

Criteria to participate in the survey were as follows:

- a) Parents of children attending the school of interest
- b) Age 18 years and older
- c) Self- identify as Black/African American or African Immigrant/Refugee
- d) Reside in Multnomah County

Similar to the SUN School site manager surveys, quantitative participant survey data was imported into the SPSS Statistical Software Package v23 for calculating frequencies and basic analyses. Additionally, qualitative data, such as participant comments and suggestions were categorized and placed in themed buckets, which was then used to describe common feelings, thoughts, and barriers about food pantry utilization.

Key Themes & Recommendations

SUN School Site Managers and Pantry Managers

While many of the SUN School managers provided opinions, thoughts and suggestions specific to their school, several overall themes emerged, including:

1. Stigma around the use of a food pantry.

Many SUN School managers mentioned they heard from families about their concerns around the stigma of using a food pantry, stating that “the fear of looking poor” prevented them from utilizing it.

Recommendation (Communication): Campaign to normalize food pantry usage. This could include featuring community leaders and influencers vocalizing their support or connection to food pantries.

2. Language and cultural barriers.

Many of the schools with large African immigrant populations mentioned their challenges accessing the pantries due to lack of language support. One SUN School manager stated “Lack of knowledge or awareness of the food pantry maybe an issue. Letters are sent home with students. However, there may be some language barriers? Not all languages are represented, specifically African languages (i.e. Somali and Swahili).” Additionally,

culturally specific food items tend to be very difficult to obtain at the pantries due to limitations based on availability at the Oregon Food Bank.

Recommendation (Policy change): There needs to be a sense of responsibility to the African and African immigrant populations of the school. Schools that have a large Somali population, for example, should make an effort to inform families in their native language. Additionally, thoughtful practices around food storage is necessary. Policy should be in place that incorporates Islam halal food practices including separation of pork and other halal meat products in separate cooling storage.

3. Pantry distribution times.

Distribution times may be a barrier. Schools' distribution times are often based on room availability, rather than convenience for participants. This may create various challenges, such as for families with transportation limitations. For example, one school dismisses class at 11:45 am on Wednesdays but distribution begins at 3:00 pm, over 3 hours after class is dismissed. This may create some challenges for the parents at this school.

Recommendation (Systems change): Thoughtfulness and community feedback on pantry distribution times. Many variables, such as staff and room availability, weigh the decision on when to host a pantry; however, participant engagement and convenience should be heavily considered.

4. Lack of representation.

Representation matters, we all know this. People generally gravitate and are drawn to others who look similar to themselves. Unfortunately, from the schools in our sample, only two had at least one Black pantry staff member or volunteer, and even then they were not consistently at the pantry during distribution.

Recommendation (Systems Change): Intentional hiring/volunteering recruitment practices could improve the diversity of pantry staff and volunteers.

5. Access to pantry.

Accessibility issues were mentioned by most SUN School managers. One SUN School manager mentioned "Food pantry is located in a very hidden space: basement, back corner. No one can easily find it." Location is very important; if the pantry location is hidden or not easily located, that creates a barrier for potential participants. Another accessibility issue mentioned included transportation. Many children and their families use public transportation or walking as their main means of transportation to and from

school. This creates a barrier for families, as many are unable to transport the items collected at the food pantry effectively.

Recommendation (Environmental Change): The pantry should be in a highly visible and easy to find location or at the very least have clear signs or direction on how to find the pantry in multiple languages. Additionally, rolling bags/carts could be provided to regular participants who use public transportation.

Parent SUN Community School Food Pantry Engagement Surveys

Although parents' survey responses varied significantly, several overall themes emerged, many of which were similar to the themes mentioned above:

1. Targeted outreach and marketing.

As we expected since we sampled schools with underutilization rates, **64%** of the parents we surveyed expressed not having used the food pantry at all in the past year. Additionally, **36%** stated not having known about the existence of the pantry. Several suggestions were made about continued engagement with participants as well as reaching out to encourage new participants.

Recommendation (System Change): Culturally specific and targeted outreach and marketing is vital to building awareness and engaging participants. Examples for how to conduct marketing and outreach activities include: culturally specific handouts about pantry times and location, increased social media and use of phone calls or text messages.

"I don't have much information about the food pantry, but I would like to know more information" – Parkrose Middle Parent

When asked what you would change about the food pantry, one Roosevelt high parent said *"Post more information about them. I love the food pantries, just didn't know about it here at Roosevelt"*

2. Myth busting.

There is a common myth about the food available at pantries. Frequently respondents mentioned their belief that it is unhealthy, canned, or expired items. Additionally, another common misperception mentioned by some parents was that food pantry access was limited based on income. However, the Oregon Food Bank does not have income-based restrictions for school pantry use.

Recommendation (Communication): Offering community members an opportunity to see what is available at the pantry and providing examples may reduce this common misperception. Also, explicitly mentioning that there are no income restrictions or listing the criteria for participation in marketing materials could provide clarity and peace of mind for those considering attending.

"I do like food pantry, because save time and money. I dislike because, it's not fresh and not healthy." – Parkrose Middle Parent

"We do not use food pantries because I'm concerned about the quality of the food." Parkrose Middle Parent

One parent at Glenfair Elementary asked *"Do I need proof of income and SS#?"*

Another from Parkrose Middle mentioned *"...been told I'm not eligible for most programs due to wage requirements."*

3. Language Barriers.

Thirty-five percent of our survey respondents expressed that it would be helpful to have food pantry information in a language other than English. Many of those participants specifically mentioned Swahili, Somali and other African languages.

Recommendation (Systems Change): Schools should consider printing fliers and materials in languages other than only English and Spanish. Perhaps school demographics could inform which languages are considered.

4. Representation matters.

Based on observation of the eight pantries we sampled, an interesting pattern emerged. The ethnicity/race of the participant base at many of the pantries mirrored that of the staff. It is not surprising many Black community members do not visit the food pantry at their schools, as lack of representation may inadvertently create feelings of unwelcome. Tellingly, 51% of our surveyed parents reported not feeling connected to the food pantry at their child's school.

Recommendation (Environmental Change): It is not only necessary but imperative that pantries work to diversify pantry staff and volunteers. Specified recruitment may assist with the lack of diversity.

"I did not feel very welcome there because of the way people acted and continuously redirected me for resources." – Glenfair Grandparent

"I like the selection but not the favoritism of certain people. It's obvious how the options are given to a specific race or person than others."- Parkrose Middle Parent

When asked what the food pantry could do to make her feel more welcome, one Roosevelt High parent said, *"more culturally specific food and representation."*

5. Accessibility.

More than a quarter of our respondents mentioned barriers that made it difficult to utilize the pantry. Barriers included: feelings of unwelcome, long wait times, work schedule and transportation. Many parents who may have been aware and interested in using the pantry found challenges with securing transportation. Some used public transportation, while others walked or carpooled. Understanding the impact the transportation barrier has on some community members should catalyze leadership to brainstorm and offer solutions to those parents.

Recommendation (System Change): Suggestions include, carpool, volunteer run delivery, or even providing a roller cart/bag for easier transport. One parent even suggested that perhaps food could be sent home with the child (i.e., a backpack program).

"Love it- but without a car it's hard to go." – Shaver Elementary Parent

When asked why you have not visited the food pantry, one Woodlawn parent mentioned, *"I have no transportation..."*

6. Normalize the food pantry and reduce stigma.

In many cultural groups, food pantries or forms of assistance may carry some level of stigma. Due to the historical shaming of Black people in this country for many decades, Black community members are very reluctant to seek any assistance. The reluctance comes from fear of being labeled poor, less than, or a "welfare queen" and therefore, not using the pantry despite the need for it.

Recommendation (Communication & Systems Change): Perhaps the marketing campaign could implement some language normalizing the pantry and initiatives highlighting prominent members of the community supporting pantry usage.

“Didn’t know about it (but if I did) I wouldn’t want to embarrass my child.” –

Roosevelt High Parent

“Families I know have accessed the pantries, others may be apprehensive due to stigmas.” – Woodlawn Elementary Parent

7. Family Voice & Food Selection.

Although many parents appreciate the staple items available at pantries (meat, produce, etc.) they also provided feedback on food items they would like to see in the pantries. The majority of participants, almost 100%, mentioned fruits, vegetable, meats, and dairy as important to their families. A number of participants also mentioned culturally specific items such as injera, cornmeal, and grits as important.

Recommendation (Systems Change): Creating a food advisory committee, comprised of community members that could come together occasionally to provide guidance and direction on food ordering seemed to have struck an interest in many of the parents surveyed.

Sources:

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Woodlawn Elementary – Case Study

The Oregon Food Bank School Participation report highlighted Woodlawn's pantry as one serving its Black population exceptionally well. In the 2017/18 school year, Woodlawn served 67 Black families, 47% of the school's Black population. Thus, we may gain some perspective and solutions from Woodlawn for improvements to be made at other SUN School food pantries.

What makes Woodlawn so special? How are they able to engage so many of their Black families and retain them over time? What was their "secret sauce"? Mary Evens, Family and Community Engagement Coordinator for Woodlawn, who runs and coordinates the food pantry located at Woodlawn, summarized that the two most important aspects to her successful pantry was: community investment and social cohesion.

The surrounding community's interest and desire in hosting a pantry is what brought Woodlawn's food pantry to existence and the community is how it is maintained and sustained. The volunteer base is comprised of diverse individuals from the community and surrounding areas, including three **Black volunteers** that volunteer regularly (more than any of the schools in our sample schools). Additionally, the volunteers are **exceptionally invested in the success of the pantry**. One volunteer drives her personal vehicle to the Oregon Food Bank every Wednesday to "shop the dock" and pick up additional items for the pantry. Other volunteers come in early to ensure that the pantry is well organized and stay after hours to clean and reorganize after pantry distribution. **Food demonstrations** are also a regular activity at the pantry, often inviting Black food enthusiasts and cooks to demonstrate how to utilize the available produce. One week, the Haitian national soup was featured while families learned about the historical significance of the soup from the cook.

Another contributing factor is the **Black specific targeted outreach** often done by the pantry leadership. Outreach included posting relevant information and updates about the pantry in culturally- specific social media groups and outlets, so that folks could stay informed and feel engaged. Mary described the pantry as "highly relationship based." She made "Woodlawn Food Pantry" t-shirts for the volunteers that were personalized with the volunteer's name. She also acknowledged the importance of the volunteers to the success of the pantry.

The Woodlawn pantry also strives to be comprehensive and available to participants. For example, there is a tablet available to look up questions about recipes and information about produce and other items. While participants wait, they are encouraged to engage in activities such as basketball and/or socialize in the gym, creating a space for **social cohesion** and community building. The pantry opens at 5:30 pm on Wednesdays, directly after SUN School dismissal. This gives parents an opportunity to shop as they come to pick up their children.

When asked about the food items available, Mary mentioned that staples such as butter, oil, and rice are commonly available; however, she always looks for culturally specific food items when available. When asked to summarize why the food pantry has been so successful, she stated “We’re all in this together. I believe that something as easy as a smile and handshake builds community and strengthens relationships.”

See here for a story about the Woodlawn food pantry:

<https://www.kgw.com/mobile/article/news/investigations/inside-woodlawn/inside-woodlawn-ep-6-helping-families-in-need/283-9eabd4c2-ae2c-45f0-a22f-4750060ec803>

Appendices

Appendix A: SUN School Managers Survey

1. In your opinion, what are some potential barriers you have observed as to why African American/African Immigrants do not utilize the food pantry?
2. What are the demographics of your school? Is there a Black Immigrant population? If so, what countries and languages are represented? If applicable, does the Black Immigrant community participate in the food pantry? What countries and languages are represented?
3. How does the operations of your food pantry work? Walk me through the process for a parent who accesses this service for the first time.
4. How do you determine the hours of food distribution?
5. Do you have Black/African American volunteers at your food pantry? What, if any, recruitment efforts have you done for volunteers from this community?
6. How do you determine what types of food to order? Do you have a food advisory committee? Would you be interested in developing one?
7. We are interested in surveying some African American/African Immigrant families about their perspectives of the food pantry. It will help inform us develop suggestions on how to improve the pantry to meet the needs of the community. Would it be okay if we attended an event to survey parents?

Appendix B: Parent Survey

1. Are you aware of the food pantry offered through your child's school?
2. How do you like to receive information about the food pantry?
3. Would it be helpful if food pantry information was provided in additional languages other than English?
4. About how often did you use the food pantry at your child's school during the last school year?
5. Please use the space below to tell us in your own words what do you like or don't like about the food pantry.
6. Do you feel welcome at the school's food pantry?
7. Do you feel connected to the school's food pantry?
 - a) How many of your friends or family members go to this food pantry?

- b) How familiar are you with the people who work at the food pantry?
8. Does the food pantry have the foods that your family eats?
 9. What foods are important to your family?
 10. What's one thing you would change about the pantry?
 11. If you have NOT visited the pantry, why not?
 12. Anything else we should know about the food pantry that hasn't been mentioned above?
 13. How many adults live in your household?
 14. How many children live in your household (18 and under)? What are their grade levels?
 15. What is your race? Choose all that apply.
 16. Do you currently receive SNAP (or EBT or Food Stamps) benefits?
 17. Do you receive WIC (Women, Infants, Children Special Supplemental Nutrition Program) benefits?
 18. Are you currently enrolled in the Oregon Health Plan (OHP), which is the state's Medicaid program?
 19. What is your annual household income?

Appendix C: Subject Schools and Partnering Lead Community Organizations

Subject School	School District	Lead Community Organization
Alder Elementary	Reynolds School District	Metropolitan Family Service
David Douglas High School	David Douglas School District	Self Enhancement Inc.
Glenfair Elementary	Reynolds School District	Metropolitan Family Service
Harrison Park K-8	Portland Public Schools	IRCO
Mill Park Elementary	David Douglas School District	IRCO
Parkrose Middle School	Parkrose School District	IRCO
Roosevelt High School	Portland Public Schools	Self Enhancement Inc.