

Cultivating Participant Voices: Proposed Work Plan

Introduction

As I understand it active participation from shoppers in advocacy has been an ongoing struggle in the Anti-Hunger movement generally and at NWH specifically. It is a persistent challenge to locate participants we would like to speak with lawmakers, donors, or other audiences. We know that their stories are powerful tools to sway hearts and minds, but finding participants willing to share them publicly has been inconsistent at best. Focus Group Reports strike me as an extremely effective response to this reality, but their shortcomings are well known, and I of course have been hired in part to tackle this problem by building more consistent relationships with participants. So, how do we bring more participant voices into conversations we view as important?

I suggest we begin by inviting participants into conversations *they* view as important. I think we all know that the trusting relationships necessary to increase involvement in advocacy cannot be built around one-off requests to speak and visits to our food bank alone. If we are serious about developing a loud and consistent participant voice in our work, then we need to take the long view. We need to develop a group of people that feels excited and empowered—emotions that can be hard to come by when you depend on a food bank for your primary source of food. So, what do we do? We begin by inviting them to have more input right here at Cherry Street. I would like to begin developing a Shopper Council comprised of regular visitors to our food bank. I think the benefits of developing such a group would not just aid our advocacy work, but everyone at NWH. It does not take much imagination to see how closer relationships and better communication with the people who use our food bank would help to keep us honest and potentially improve what we do at every level. It would also be a logical next step if we wish to remain on the cutting edge of not only fighting hunger, but also treating people with dignity while we do it.

How it Works—or doesn't

I know from experience that most people welcome the opportunity to exercise more control over their own lives regardless of being poor or hungry. However, to succeed in the long run this means it is up to us to ensure that that this is in fact what this committee allows them to do. We need to give people a real reason to participate, not just a more time intensive suggestion box. Ultimately, this would mean giving them some sort of real decision making power (some ideas below). This does not need to happen all at once, but it is important to recognize people will not participate for long if they feel it is pointless. Would you? Would I?

Figuring out how to empower such a group in a way that works for both participants and staff will be a long and at times painful process. In fact, I think it would be a major mistake to initially broadcast this intention to anyone involved. Instead I would suggest simply allowing me to do the work and seeing how things develop organically. I mention it now only because I believe it is so vital to our long-term success. A hollow showpiece will not cultivate passionate advocates, but a real committee of engaged participants could. If participants feel more ownership over the food bank they will fight much harder to protect it—and some number of them will be happy to go wherever Christina asks. For the

time being, I would ask permission to work towards developing a Shopper Council for input only. I would love to explore this idea more in collaboration with others, but I have created a rough brainstorm of what this might consist of and how long it might take below:

December-March 2017: Recruitment

- Routinely chat with shoppers while they wait in line, start informal conversations, maybe use a little bit of a non-scientific survey to help get conversations started.
- Also prioritize notable individuals from Cherry Street focus group or people recommended by staff or volunteers
- Focus on people who are regulars and use Cherry Street as their primary food source.
- Identify who might be interested and capture contact information for future follow up
- Schedule one-on-one follow up conversations as needed with strong candidates. Maybe do some light social work and connect people with other relevant resources for problems they may be facing

April-June 2017: Initial Launch

- Hold a first meeting, probably mostly a general discussion of how to improve the foodbank, things folks like and don't like about it
- Not sure yet if small stipends might be necessary to incentivize participants? Maybe a meal would work better? I would try without stipends and see what happens. Definitely do not think they will be necessary if and when group has more influence.
- Continued recruiting as necessary, hopefully can get help from prior recruits
- Aim for at least monthly meetings. May want to switch to bi-weekly depending on how everything is going.
- Early meetings could focus on general discussions and feedback, hopefully could also get shoppers access to key staff and decision makers they have questions for, such as purchasing and food bank supervisor, etc. If there is interest maybe do some little 101 type things about how food banks and the laws that affect them actually work.

July-December 2017: Grow the Council

- At this point we will have hopefully settled into a regular structure/routine that makes sense. I think these meetings can remain informal as far as roles and structures go, I have a lot of experience with this and am confident that we can do some simple things and not worry about getting bogged down in needless titles or bureaucracy.
- Now is when it would become more important to determine how we can get and keep shoppers more engaged with our work
- Maybe we could invite someone onto one of our board committees? Maybe they could have a seat at the table in some hiring decisions? Especially the ones that determine people they would interact with the most directly? Or input on where we might move and why?
- Perhaps we could give them a modest budget to have some say in purchasing? I think it would be extremely respectful and prudent to let them have some say in food items

they want or need. Maybe they could even also help invent and implement programs to get them? Or other services they might like to see us bring in?

- This is also when we begin to gauge interest in advocacy and see how we can help better get folks plugged in, at least to speak on an individual basis, if not do more
- Another nice idea might be some kind of project to make the bank itself more attractive and welcoming? Maybe work alongside volunteers?
- These are all ideas, but ultimately I would like to let the shoppers themselves guide the conversation, and I would work on practical strategies and compromises to help make some of those ideas a reality. To me, this is where it gets fun, and I think the possibilities here are endless.

Outcomes and Obstacles

I am confident that this strategy is most likely to bring about the best outcomes for us at NWH. If we want participants to be more involved, we need to invite them in to do so, and not just on our terms. I have been part of similar efforts in the past and I know what people are capable of when given the opportunity—especially when they feel part of a broader movement that is about struggling people everywhere, not just their own individual problems. That sense of mutual support is priceless. Over time I think we could develop a truly vibrant and diverse group of participants that could contribute to our work in so many wonderful ways. I am not sure when exactly, but even early on in my proposed work plan, I will likely be forming relationships that will help us come Hunger Day or other times. If we develop this council long enough we will have a self-replenishing pool of shoppers who want to help us. We won't have to hunt for them anymore, we will just have to go to them and ask for their help. Of course, that does not mean it will be easy.

Recruitment and regular attendance may be a challenge. Determining how stipends might work will be a pain which is why I hope to avoid them entirely. Retention will always be a major challenge. The large numbers of homeless we serve will be hard to stay in touch with and it just won't make sense for many individuals struggling with mental or other health issues to participate in something like this—would be a challenge for anyone with impaired mobility too probably. Other things I haven't thought of yet will happen and slow us down. However, from what I know of NWH so far I anticipate two obstacles to be the largest: language barriers and internal opposition.

This Council will not initially be representative of the population who frequents Cherry Street. Out of necessity, I will initially be recruiting people who speak English. This is not ideal. Hopefully I can recruit some bilingual people to help me tackle this on our own or down the road at some point we could explore partnerships with other orgs who may be able to assist with translation. It is a major obstacle and one I plan on tackling, but the important thing to remember here is that the purpose of this group is not actually to represent everyone who uses the food bank. This is not a scientific undertaking with a random sample and we don't want it to be. The truth is I will be picking the voices I think we want to hear and even amplify based on my own impressions. It is just a shame how many people I will not even be able to give that chance. However, I feel that is tomorrow's problem, and it is nonetheless worthwhile to get started today

As far as internal opposition goes, I think you are probably a more capable judge of that than I am, but it seems obvious to me that there are people here who will not welcome more shopper

participation in our work. I feel strongly it is something that needs to happen regardless—and even presents some great development opportunities too. More shopper voice in our work is still an asset to more conservative elements within NWH as well I think even if they are initially skeptical. From where I'm sitting it seems like it can only make us better at what we do.

There may be quicker and easier ways to get a few shopper voices more involved with what we're doing and obviously Cherry Street is just one out of the three or four hundred food banks in our network. However, I think it makes a lot of sense for us to continue to build Cherry street up as a flagship model for what other foodbanks across the State can strive for. This is our potential testing ground and I think we should use it. One Shopper Council is not going to have much impact, but if it yields more participation in advocacy and other activities, it may become something we can consult with other partners about how to implement. It is easy to see how quickly even small shopper councils of 5-10 engaged people could add up. People who can also help pack voicemail boxes, Olympia on Hunger Day, or whatever the case may be. Most of all, I will be a much more useful resource to our partner programs if I am leading by example here. The same goes for volunteers which is where I hope to turn my attention next to come up with a good work plan. I think our order of operations should be to solve problems right here in our own food bank first and then use our unique position at the center of a much larger network to help our partners implement winning strategies more quickly.