VOICES FOR FOOD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Using Food Councils to Bridge the Gap Between Food Security and Healthy Food Choices

VOICES for FOOD

Produced by: SDSU Extension

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Food insecure populations are often challenged by their limited resources when making dietary choices, which affect the quality and quantity of healthy foods they eat. Unfortunately, poor nutrition increases the risks for obesity and diet-related chronic diseases.

The healthcare costs associated with chronic diseases often further limit people's financial resources, compounding their food insecurity. In addition, acquiring healthy foods and managing food dollars can be especially challenging in impoverished rural communities that lack full-service grocery stores, markets, and other food services. Community organizations, food pantries, and food insecure families do not always engage with one another to address these challenges. Consequently, opportunities are missed to fully capitalize on local human, natural, and financial resources to effectively address health and food insecurity.

This project, Voices for Food, is a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) funded initiative. Voices for Food represents the many voices necessary to improve the food security and well-being of those in impoverished rural communities. The success of this project depends on the collective impact of the voices present in the community. Voices from the food sectors, food pantries, churches, schools, local government agencies, food insecure families, volunteers and other community champions must all be heard. All community members have valuable abilities, unique experiences, and vital ideas to contribute.

Promoting Health and Food Security
The overarching goal of this project is to facilitate engaged dialogue and dynamic linkages or voices for food by promoting health and food security within the food system, especially among low-income and food insecure populations. Each community is comprised of diverse sectors and a food system that offers unique strengths and challenges that can affect its residents' food security. Some of these challenges include a lack of planning between food system sectors and food insecurity being poorly understood throughout the sectors of the community. Working to bridge between these sectors (food system and community) will strengthen the voices of the community as a whole and promote food security.

Food Security
According to the USDA, food security means access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life (USDA, 2013).

Community Coaching
The Voices for Food project found that engaging a community coach, a person that supported the community in identifying, achieving, and celebrating their own unique goals, showed greater impact. For this project the community coaches were Land Grant University Cooperative Extension staff.

Food Systems
The food system model shows how all of the food system sectors (consisting of the people, processes and places) are involved with moving food from the farm to its ultimate destination, whether it is the family dinner table, a local restaurant, or a cafeteria lunch line.
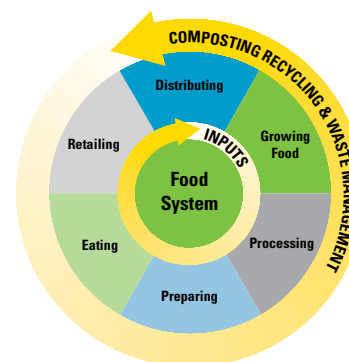
Figure 1. The Food System is comprised of several sectors with each having an important part in the food we eat.

Voices for Food Social-Ecological Model of Behavior Change
The *Voices for Food Toolkit* provides food system strategies to effectively address social-ecological influences on health behaviors and food security (see Figure 2).

Social-ecological factors that influence food selection taking place at food pantries in particular may ace the following challenge and influences.

- Challenge: Pantry clients not choosing canned fruits and vegetables when fresh options are not available.

- Community influences:
  o Community members and food retailers do not donate enough fresh foods.
  o Community does not understand the needs of the pantry clients.
  o Food pantries and farmers are not working together to provide pantry clients with fresh foods.

- Pantry influences:
  o Lack of fresh foods for pantry clients to select from.
  o Food demonstrations do not include culturally appropriate foods.
  o Pantry staff doesn't understand the needs of the clients.

- Individual influences:
  o Food pantry selections do not align with pantry clients' knowledge, skills, and preferences.
  o Clients do not feel empowered to express their needs and wants.

When the challenge and influences listed above are in play, offering culturally sensitive food demonstrations, providing fresh produce selections, and being mindful of the challenges that existed may improve the clients' nutrition.

Voices for Food Project
Facilitating engaged dialogue and dynamic linkages or "voices for food" in the community food system

Food Council: Establishing Food Councils – Bringing Food System Partners Together to Address Community Food Insecurity

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- Discussing & assessing community food issues
- Planning & coordinating between food system sectors
- Creating & implementing programs & services that address local needs
- Influencing & evaluating food policy at local, state and federal levels

Food Pantry: Establishing MyChoice: The Guided Client-Choice Model

- Guiding clients' food choices with nutrition in mind
- Engaging with food council & clients
- Promoting nutrition and food safety to low-income audiences & volunteers
- Increasing client's awareness of the food system
- Providing ancillary services

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Food pantry clients & families: improving health and food security

- Choosing healthier food options with guidance
- Assessing resources & services to improve food insecurity
- Participating in food system dialogue & activities
- Engaging in nutrition education opportunities
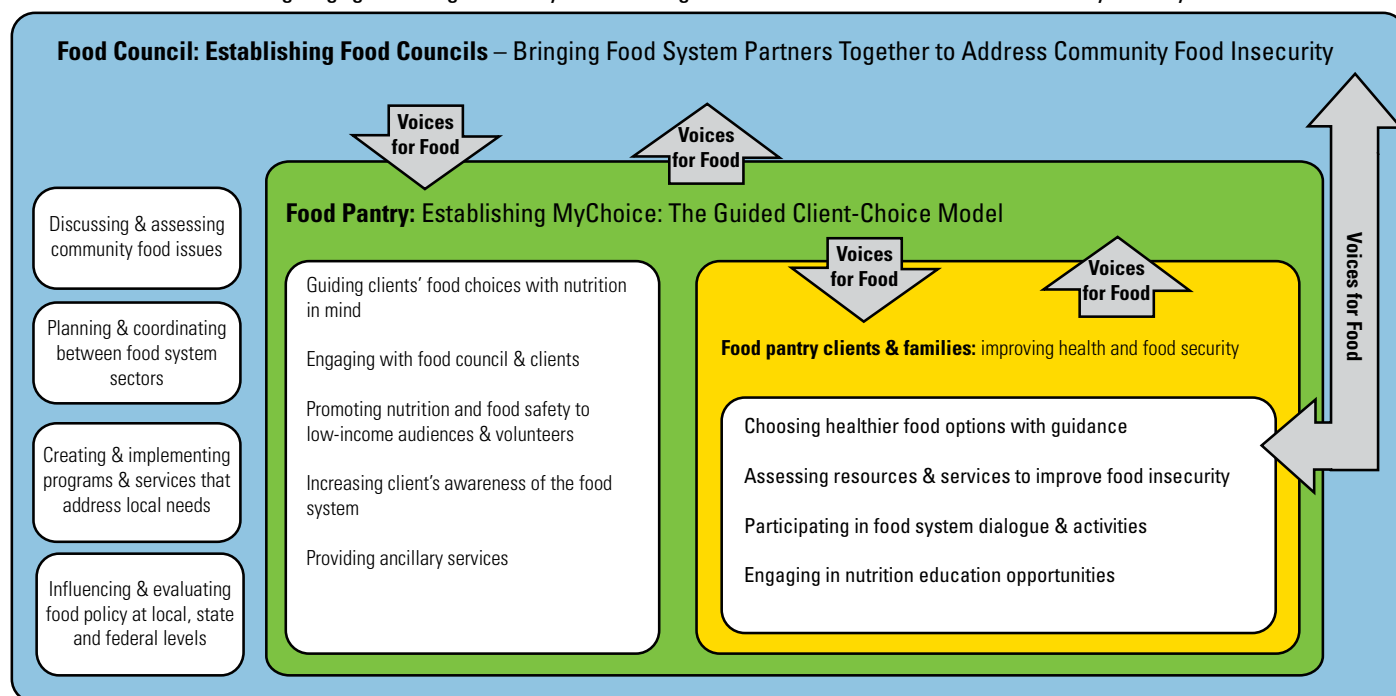
Voices for Food

Figure 2. The Voices for Food model of behavior change demonstrates the integration of the food system model and social-ecological model. It shows the different levels of focus for this initiative.

THE *VOICES FOR FOOD: FOOD COUNCIL CREATION GUIDE*

The *Voices for Food: Food Council Creation Guide* focuses on engaging community stakeholders by convening a food council. Stakeholders who may want to serve on the food council include representatives from the healthcare industry, faith-based organizations, the food production and retailing sectors, city and county governments, education, emergency food groups, agencies serving low-income audiences, and residents. Assembling a broad-based, diverse group from the community improves the odds that members' areas of interest, passion, and shared values can be incorporated into the planning process, making food council work more thorough and integrating the work throughout the community.

A food council is a group of community stakeholders from each sector of the food system, including growing food, processing, distributing, retailing, preparing, and eating. Food councils can serve a variety of functions, including acting as a forum for food issues, fostering coordination among sectors, informing policy, and implementing programs.

As food councils consider how to structure their work, their focus should be on supporting comprehensive strategies that are evidence-based and that direct meaningful activities for local consumers.

For example, the greatest needs might be increasing access to foods that are recommended in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and ensuring nutrition education is available to help support healthy food choices in the food pantry. There may be a need for education or support for local producers to increase the supply of healthy produce for local pantry clients. Ultimately, after food councils identify specific community needs, the council needs to develop goals, strategies, and measurable objectives, and interventions to meet those community needs.

The *Voices for Food: Food Council Creation Guide* is designed to help guide communities through the process of developing a food council.

Getting Started
Before getting started, it is important to recognize that not all communities are ready for a food council. Therefore, the National Institute for Health's organizational readiness for implementing change (ORIC) tool can be used to assess whether the community is ready to move forward.

Once the ORIC has been completed, the Food Council Scorecard can be used next. This practical scorecard serves to measure progress and initiate goal setting when developing or strengthening the food council. It should be completed periodically to continue to monitor progress and set goals. Particularly in the early stages of development, food councils need to involve people from a variety of sectors and viewpoints in their work. This

includes stakeholders from various sectors of the local food system (sometimes called food system actors) and from intersecting groups (known as food system partners). Councils should consider how to engage young people in their work, either as full council members or as volunteers with council activities.

One goal of most food councils is to increase community involvement in the food system. Working to achieve this goal will help to increase the sustainability of the food council's efforts.

Taking Action

Establishing an effective food council requires engaging a broad group of people in at least one community conversation. At these events, participants discuss changes they would like to see in the local food system and consider the possible outcomes of making those changes. Some communities eventually capture the vision for the food system that develops from the community conversations in a food charter or other, similar document.

Most councils benefit from creating mission, vision and purpose statements. These statements form the basis for the council's specific, realistic goals.

It's essential for councils to communicate with stakeholders and partners at every stage of their work.

Suggested Strategies

No two communities are exactly alike and no two food councils will have the same priorities and strategies for addressing the food system needs of their communities. The Suggested Strategies for Food Councils section of this guide are focuses on improving food access within emergency food assistance sites, ensuring transportation and land use decisions are made in the context of the food system, connecting growers and local markets, and facilitating community agriculture and direct food markets.

Finances

This section of the guide is designed to help food councils understand that their budgets should be managed in a way that directly reflects the goals and priorities of the group. It also provides some suggestions about various fund-raising methods, such as seeking grants and donations that can help further their work. Nonprofit status, incorporation, state sales tax exemptions and 501(c)(3) federal tax-exempt status are also addressed.

THE VOICES FOR FOOD: *FOOD PANTRY TOOLKIT*

The *Voices for Food: Food Pantry Toolkit* focuses on the food pantry. Food pantry directors, clients, and volunteers all have a responsibility to voice their ideas, observations, needs, and desire to create change. If these voices are disregarded or absent from food system conversations, meaningful progress toward food security will not truly happen. The ideas and experiences of people who experience food insecurity firsthand must be taken into account. The Voices for Food project will demonstrate the value of linking the community to food pantries and their clients.

Specifically, the MyChoice food pantry model will be used to give pantry clients the chance to choose the foods from the USDA MyPlate food groups (see Figure 3) that they and their families need or prefer. This model helps create a trusting environment in which pantry clients can talk with volunteers and staff about their dietary needs and preferences.
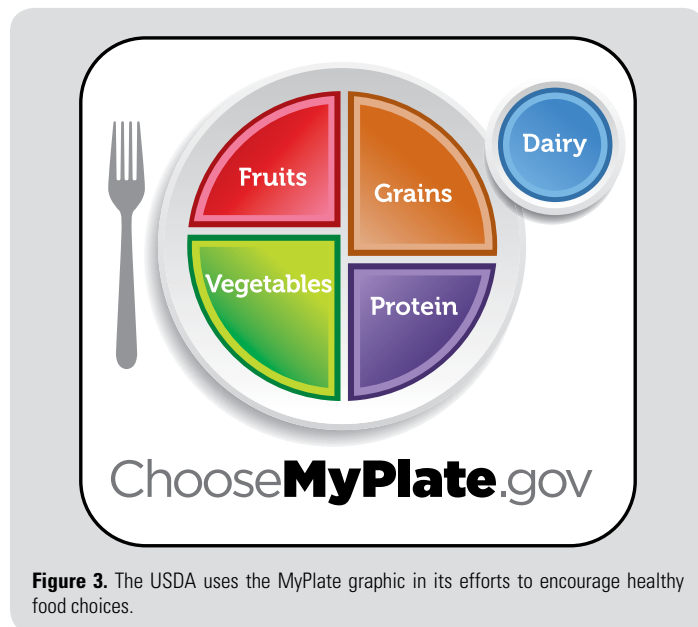

Figure 3. The USDA uses the MyPlate graphic in its efforts to encourage healthy food choices.

- **MyChoice Pantry Scorecard:** Before getting started, the *MyChoice Pantry Scorecard* should be completed. This practical scorecard serves to measure progress and initiate goal setting when transitioning to *MyChoice*. It should be completed periodically to continue to monitor progress and set goals.

- **The *Voices for Food: Food Pantry Toolkit*** – This two-part guide is designed to help food pantries move to the MyChoice guided client-choice model of distribution. It also helps food pantry volunteers learn to be Voices for Food Ambassadors – trained champions for nutrition in their homes, food pantries, and communities.
  - **Part 1. Guided Client-Choice: MyChoice** – The MyChoice model aims to promote the health and food security of pantry clients by allowing them to choose foods from each food group available at the food pantry so they can provide a balanced diet for themselves and their families. MyChoice is designed to increase the interaction between food pantry volunteers, staff and clients, and to foster relationship building. Recommended practices for pantries transitioning to a MyChoice model and a Frequently Asked Questions About MyChoice are also provided in Part 1.
  - **Part 2. Voices for Food Ambassador Training** – Intended for food pantry personnel, clients, and food council members, this training provides instruction on nutrition, food safety and cultural competency. Participants also learn how to effectively promote nutrition and be proactive about their food concerns, preferences, and needs. Once trained, Voices for Food Ambassadors become champions for nutrition in their homes, food pantries and communities.

SUMMARY

The Voices for Food materials - The Food Council Creation Guide and the Food Pantry Toolkit will equip communities with tools to provide education and support in the areas of food systems, food councils, collaboration, nutrition, meal preparation, food safety, resource management, guided client-choice pantries, and cultural competency. These tools are meant to improve individual and household food security through community engagement and the use of MyChoice practices in local food pantries. Using these tools and training opportunities will help ensure that strong relationships and "voices for food" are in place to build positive and sustainably healthy communities.

REFERENCES

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Figure 1 adapted from Colasanti, K., Cantrell, P, Cocciarelli, S., Collier, A., Doss, J., Edison, T., et al. Michigan Good Food Charter. *C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems at Michigan State University*; Food Bank Council of Michigan; Michigan Food Policy Council, East Lansing, MI, 2010.