

Reimagining Montgomery County's Emergency Food System

Tamela Luce 17 September 2015

Two years ago, when I first met with Stu Bush, the new Executive Director at The Open Link in the Upper Perkiomen area, I never thought that our conversation might lead to a redesign of emergency food in Montgomery County.

I had known Bush previously, but not well and his new position was reason enough for an informational site visit. The Open Link is a multi-service, community-based organization that includes a food pantry. Bush shared with me during our initial meeting that one of the operational questions he was wrestling with was how inefficient it was to acquire food for the pantry. These challenges included receiving food from multiples sources, differing rules on sharing with other organizations, varying reporting requirements – it wasn't just confusing, it was illogical.

Bush was not alone in his feelings on the inefficiency of food acquisition. It is typical for food pantries to experience highs and lows in their inventory based on numerous factors. Periodically, a food purveyor has an excess of product they cannot sell (mislabeled, over

ordered, etc.) and they call a local food pantry in the hope that they will be able to quickly off-load the entire shipment at one location. Sometimes pantries turn down these donations due to a lack of storage space or, in the case of perishable items, refrigeration capacity. With about 50 pantries in the county – including some larger pantries – the system should have been able to “metabolize” these large donations; however, there was no countywide network in place to facilitate redistributions.

We had enough food coming into Montgomery County. The challenge was to smooth out those highs and lows and get food to those who needed it. The problem was easy to articulate, but difficult to solve. Any proposed solution needed to take into consideration the unique resources and context of the emergency food system in the county.

At the time of my conversation with Bush, the North Penn Community Health Foundation (NPCHF) had just opened a new grant program to provide planning grants to agencies struggling to solve issues related to food and nutrition in their community. I encouraged Bush to apply and he received a planning grant to put together a coalition of his peers and other relevant stakeholders to explore opportunities to improve the food acquisition and distribution system in the county.

The North Penn Community Health

Foundation

Collaboration has been a successful grant-making strategy for NPCHF. Since its founding in 2002, the foundation has worked in partnership with grantees, fellow funders, government agencies and many others to achieve shared goals. In 2012, NPCHF shifted its grant-making focus to transforming systems within the safety net, recognizing that working with others is the only way to solve complex and multi-layered problems such as hunger.

While the foundation also works to address health and housing needs, NPCHF has funded a number of food and nutrition programs for years. WISE SNAC (Wellness Initiative for the School Environment: Smart Nutrition & Activity Collaborative) successfully reduced obesity in three school districts in Montgomery County. The Cultivating Communities Campaign established two dozen community gardens in the Ambler, North Penn and Indian Valley regions to supply food pantries, schools and congregant meal programs with fresh produce. The Nutrition Coalition created a regional network of food pantries in the North Penn and Indian Valley areas of the county to facilitate relationships, share information and resources, and better coordinate services for those they serve.

Hunger in Montgomery County

Montgomery County is one of the wealthiest counties in the commonwealth, which unfortunately masks much of the poverty and hunger that exists in this suburban region.

Eleven percent of Montgomery County residents – and 14% of our children – are food insecure (Center for Hunger-Free Communities, 2012), meaning they have “limited or uncertain access to adequate food” (USDA, 2014). Pantries saw a huge increase in need after the 2008 recession and those numbers have generally remained high, despite indicators of an improving local and regional economy.

Birth of the MontCo Anti-Hunger Network

Over the course of the five month planning grant, Bush convened several leaders from pantries across the county who shared his frustration about food acquisition. Also invited was the Community Action Development Commission (CADCOM), the county’s anti-poverty agency that works with government programs and food wholesalers to provide and distribute food to pantries.

Rounding out the group was Philabundance, the region’s food bank with deep knowledge of food handling, distribution and logistics.

Planning grantees had the opportunity to apply for a larger grant to implement solutions developed during the planning grant stage. Implementation grantees could receive funding starting at \$50,000 for up to three years,

provided there was demonstrated progress each year.

The collaboration worked to fully understand the problem and then brainstorm possible solutions. To this effort, a solution did not immediately present itself. The problem was just too knotty; however, participants were committed to improving the system and outlined a plan to gather more data and identify opportunities for further research.

Philabundance, with their expertise, was chosen by their colleagues to be the lead applicant. Lacking a defined strategy, this was a risky grant. Nonetheless, the foundation knew the group was dedicated and there was real potential to transform the system. In May 2014, NPCHF awarded a grant to Philabundance and the MontCo Anti-Hunger Network (MAHN) was launched.

MAHN Year One

MAHN spent its first year solidifying its structure, gathering data on the pantry system, conducting research into more efficient donation and redistribution models and creating both regional and countywide networks of food pantries.

MAHN is led by a governing committee comprised of executive directors of the county's largest food pantries, CADCOM and a representative from the county's Office of Aging and Adult Services. Philabundance provides backbone support, ensuring the work moves forward. I attend the committee's monthly meetings to offer

guidance as needed. The collegiality of the group was apparent almost from the beginning. As with any collaboration, the relationships of those around the table are foundational. Building trust and mutual respect are essential; nothing will be accomplished unless and until those relationships are formed and cultivated.

The committee researched several options to alleviate the challenges of the current distribution model. One option considered was to build or buy a warehouse in the county. While having access to a large storage facility was tantalizing, this centralized approach was immediately dismissed as too costly, both initially and long-term.

The group then turned to a decentralized "hub" model.

Under a hub model, larger organizations – typically large food pantries – collect and redistribute food to smaller pantries in the area. The benefits of a hub model are that it often does not require additional storage space and can be established at a fraction of the cost of building and operating a warehouse. Hubs need to have adequate storage and refrigeration capacity. They also need a workforce capable of taking orders from other pantries, dividing the product(s) and packaging those orders and coordinating pickups or deliveries. Costs associated with hubs are mostly in staff time, but this model can be adapted to the resources of each hub and the needs of the partnering pantries.

An informal hub has operated in Montgomery County for several years. Manna on Main Street runs a large food pantry and soup kitchen and also provides emergency financial aid, counseling, referrals and education to those in need in the Lansdale area. As a founding member of the Nutrition Coalition, Manna occasionally collects large food donations, stores them on-site and their staff contacts other Coalition members to take orders and coordinate pickups.

In order to make the hub model successful, however, pantries needed to be networked with one another. In addition to the Nutrition Coalition, pantries and soup kitchens in Norristown have been meeting for a number of years through the volunteer leadership of a faith group operating as Advocates Against Hunger. Aside from these two coalitions, there were large areas in the county where pantries in neighboring communities were not connected to one another. To rectify this, MAHN established two other regional coalitions of food pantries in the Pottstown/Upper Perkiomen and the eastern sections of the county. A fifth is beginning to emerge on the Main Line. With these regional coalitions, food pantries anywhere in Montgomery County now would be able to connect with others in their area, build relationships and share knowledge and resources.

At the countywide level, MAHN and NPCHF cosponsored a conference in January 2015, the first time all pantries in Montgomery County were invited to convene and share

innovative practices. MAHN also introduced a monthly newsletter to keep pantries informed of its work. Both the conference and newsletter have fostered greater connection: a countywide network of like-minded leaders is starting to appear.

MAHN Year Two

MAHN is now into its second year and hopes to pilot additional hubs throughout the county through which large scale donations can be redistributed.

Its first task, however, will be to study and document the model used at Manna. MAHN will need to fully understand Manna's procedures, successes and challenges in collecting and redistributing food within its regional coalition. It will be necessary to create a process map from when Manna is initially contacted about a donation of food, to when the product is received by other pantries.

This study will not only cover the logistics of handling, storing and transporting food and how Manna communicates with the other pantries in its regional coalition, but will also outline a method to collect, track, analyze and report data. MAHN will create a process to evaluate each redistribution and incorporate lessons learned.

Armed with this in-depth understanding, MAHN intends to

pilot up to three other hubs throughout the county, connecting each of them to an established regional pantry coalition. As the pilot hubs begin operations, MAHN will create a system-wide method to collect data from all of the hubs and develop a process for continual learning designed for the hubs to improve and evolve.

Undoubtedly, there are many questions to be answered: what attributes, beyond storage, refrigeration and staff capacity, would a hub need to be successful? How do we arrange transportation for pantries without access to a vehicle? What do we do when a donation exceeds the capacity of a single hub? What data systems could support this type of work? Which organization will collect and aggregate the data? There will likely be other questions MAHN has not anticipated.

Side Benefits of Collaboration

Successful collaborations often produce benefits beyond the primary purpose, and that is beginning to happen because of the work of MAHN. Pantries that source their food through both CADCOM and Philabundance currently must submit two separate reports. Due to their participation in MAHN, both organizations are looking to develop a single, unified reporting system.

Thanks to MAHN, pantries in Montgomery County are connected as never before, and that network has allowed a spark to catch fire. One pantry introduced a

researched-based client survey, which led to a myriad of benefits such as inventory adjustments based on dietary needs, expansion of hours to better meet clients' schedules and improved fundraising through client stories backed by data. As other pantries have learned of the benefits the survey brought to both the organization and its clients, many have since introduced the same survey.

The use of data to drive operational decisions is a new concept for many pantries and could generate significant changes throughout the network.

After a request from pantries at the annual conference for more networking, NPCHF invested in the creation of a peer learning circle to convene pantries quarterly. A professional facilitator works with a small planning committee comprised of representatives from pantries, CADCOM and Philabundance, to develop the learning agenda to help the network identify and incorporate best practices.

External Factors

Impending changes in the eligibility for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) , formerly known as the Food Stamp program, make this work all the more urgent. Prior to the 2008 recession, able-bodied working adults without dependents, with some exceptions, were limited to three months of SNAP benefits in a three year period. The federal government allows states and counties to waive this requirement if their unemployment

is 10% or higher or there are insufficient jobs in the region. Many areas, including Montgomery County, took advantage of this waiver during the economic downturn. In early 2016, these waivers are set to expire for regions that no longer meet the requirements, including Montgomery County which, as of June, had an unemployment rate of 4.3%, according to the latest figures available (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). The foundation has learned that estimated 1,000 - 5,000 current SNAP beneficiaries may be affected by the waiver expiration, likely putting further strain on the county's emergency food system.

On a brighter note, the commonwealth is entertaining a recommendation to establish an inter-departmental food and nutrition council to help coordinate state policy. Such a council could produce long-term benefits by creating or revising policies and regulations to better meet the needs of low-income Pennsylvanians.

Conclusion

I never imagined that that initial meeting with Stu Bush would result in an evolution of food acquisition and distribution, but two years later, I am proud to say that much progress has been made. MAHN seeks to improve the distribution of food in the safety net system:

improving the management of the inevitable highs and lows in inventory and working to ensure pantries have a steadier supply. NPCHF believes the hub model will

improve the capacity of the safety net system to take full advantage of large scale donations. It may become a model for other counties or regions.

Ensuring that we have a strong emergency food safety net is critical for those most vulnerable to hunger.

Transforming systems is not easy and cannot be done in a vacuum, but through collaborative efforts such as MAHN, NPCHF is working toward its vision that all Montgomery County residents have access to healthy, nutritious food.

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About The North Penn Community Health Foundation (NPCHF): Through grantmaking and related philanthropic activities, the North Penn Community Health Foundation works to improve the health and well-being of the community by anticipating tomorrow's challenges and offering support to plan and deliver cost-effective, outcomes-oriented programs and services that vulnerable populations in Montgomery County require to lead healthy, successful and meaningful lives. Since the foundation's inception in 2002, more than \$12.3 million has been distributed to 173 nonprofit organizations.