

Sharing Resources, Building Partnerships: A Project to Increase Awareness of the YMCA's New Healthy Living Pantry

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Abstract

With four large food deserts in Buncombe County, the importance of providing food for those who are in need of temporary food assistance is evident. The mission of the YMCA is “To put Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind and body for all.” In order to carry out its mission, the YMCA seeks to partner with community organizations to partner. The Healthy Living Pantry is committed to providing temporary food assistance and is unique because it provides fresh, locally-grown produce to clients in the Asheville area. The main goal of this public service project was to contact and inform community organizations about the Healthy Living Pantry and other resources in the community. These efforts will increase recognition of the Healthy Living Pantry as a valuable resource for those receiving temporary food assistance. Being part of this particular project allowed me to use information from courses such as Health Parity and Nutrition and Lifestyle, as well as information from psychology and mass communication courses. My interpersonal skills along with my background in Health and Wellness Promotion proved to be extraordinarily useful when speaking with community members about the Healthy Living Pantry. One important lesson for me was learning about how community organizations work, which revealed the challenges they face in responding to calls regarding the Healthy Living Pantry. For example, after contacting over 50 churches, I heard back from about 20 churches. I learned that this is how most churches and other organizations work, and I began to understand that it was actually a great success rate. This project has been important on a personal level because it has provided me with an opportunity to help have a role in putting an end to food insecurity in this community.

Key Words: Temporary Food Assistance, Food Deserts, YMCA Healthy Living Pantry

Origins of the Project

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines a food desert as a “low-income census tract where a substantial number or share of residents has *low access* to a supermarket or large grocery store” (USDA Economic Research Service 2012, under “How is a food desert defined?”). Though the term “food desert” is relatively new, the Food Trust provides a good example from a town in Pennsylvania. “The nearest grocery store was a 20-minute bus ride away. The neighborhood corner stores were filled with unhealthy, and often expensive options.” This results in obesity in adolescence and adults alike. The rate of chronic disease, such as heart disease and diabetes, is higher in these areas defined as food deserts.” The Food Trust’s research shows that the impact of your neighborhood, including income level and location, on one’s food choices is exponential. Further, improving access to food in low-income neighborhoods yields positive outcomes for the residents. (“Learn about Food Access”)

Here in Asheville, a conversation about local food deserts among a few YMCA Directors led to the development of the Healthy Living Pantry. Within a month of the conversations, the YMCA of WNC opened the Healthy Living Pantry at the Youth Development Center on Beaverdam Road in November 2013 in response to the lack of knowledge about nutrition and hunger among a large proportion of the population in Buncombe County. The focus of the Healthy Living Pantry is to work towards putting an end to the food deserts and food insecurity in the Asheville community by providing healthful foods for those in need of temporary food assistance.

Partnering with MANNA Food Bank, the Healthy Living Pantry was put into place within a month of the idea being pitched. The Pantry has now, after four months, served over 200 families. As the Pantry grows, there is hope of putting into place opportunities for nutrition education by partnering with Inter Faith Food Shuttle and Share Our Strengths: Cooking Matters and Shopping Matters. Having the opportunity for families to enroll in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) will allow for the advancement of families out of needing temporary food assistance from pantries and hopefully put them back on their feet. The SNAP system runs on the amount of gross monthly income compared to the net income and assets of a family. This is a service that the Pantry currently does offer, but there will be more of a push to enroll the clients in it as the Pantry progresses.

SNAP is an incredible program because it does provide families that are not able to make ends meet with food. Participating in SNAP for about six months was associated with an improvement in food security. SNAP was associated with a decrease in both the percentage of households that were food insecure and the percentage of households that experienced very low food security. This generally holds for child food security as well (SNAP and Food Security).

Though I never understood the SNAP program until I started working with the Healthy Living Pantry, it is a program that assists people and food pantries to acquire food in ways other than buying it from the store or from private food drives. “Federal law provides the basic eligibility rules for SNAP. There are two basic pathways to gain financial eligibility for SNAP: (1) having income and resources below specified levels set out in Federal SNAP law; and (2) being “categorically,” or automatically, eligible based on receiving benefits from other specified low-income assistance programs” (“Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Overview”).

The Healthy Living Pantry is different from the typical pantry because it has a focus on putting healthy, whole food on the table of those who need temporary food assistance. The Healthy Living Pantry ensures that sodium levels are low and highly processed foods are not going out of the door. High sugar and empty calories are non-existent in the pantry because the shelves are full of fresh produce, bread and other nutrient dense foods. Other pantries will take whatever they can get in a sense that high sodium, highly processed foods are given to clients and fresh produce is few and far between. The Healthy Living Pantry wants no part in that, and instead is interested in building healthy community, socially and physically.

In conjunction with the Healthy Living Pantry, the YMCA will be launching a mobile feeding site April 12, with the debut being at Healthy Kids Day. This will be a food bus with a full kitchen and benches inside. This will be used for cooking and nutrition demonstrations while being on wheels and having the capability to deliver food, specifically fresh produce, into food deserts and other neighborhoods and communities that are in need of food assistance.

The focus of the Healthy Living Pantry is to serve the community with healthful foods such as fresh produce, good quality meats and other foods with low sodium and low fat content. Typical food pantries end up serving foods that are high in sodium and low in nutritional value. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is a program in which people in need of food assistance can access food at no cost, typically through food pantries and other sources of assistance. Often times these programs provide foods that are filling but not always the most nutritious options. “An increased prevalence of overweight and obesity for adults on government-funded nutrition assistance, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), has been observed” (Simmons, Shannon, et al.). Since this is the case, the primary goal of the Healthy Living Pantry is to partner with and use food from SNAP but also bring in local foods so that they are balancing higher sodium foods with foods of high water content and more nutrient dense foods.

I was brought onto the team a few months after the Pantry started serving the same families consistently. Originally, I was working with the Healthy Living Pantry as an intern, and this project came as a result of that relationship. This was the perfect way for me to be involved with the advancement of the Pantry in the community. Cory Jackson and Nicole Coston asked me to expand the reach of the Pantry. Their passion for feeding the community with nutrient-dense foods, and my passion for serving the community on all sides created a perfect combination. “Providing healthy food assistance that improves diet quality without contributing to excessive intake remains an important public health

goal.” (Kohn) We are here to improve people’s quality of life, improve the community and to love people. This is precisely where my passions intersected with this line of work. It brings me great joy to serve people and to ensure that people are leading a healthy and happy life. Combining that joy with working with the Healthy Living Pantry, I was able to enjoy every bit of the work I was doing.

Having in mind the services that SNAP provides and knowing that there are a lot of churches in the area with active congregations and some with community gardens, we knew that the enlisting churches should be the next step. Many churches take the approach that “it is about the belief that the food we eat is both God’s gift in response to our need and God’s invitation for us to share this gift of life with others. Participating in efforts to feed and defend the hungry is accepting God’s invitation to love Christ in our suffering brothers and sisters” (Whelan). Having been brought up in the church, I feel as though there is a need for loving ones neighbor and being involved in projects such as the Healthy Living Pantry. Being familiar with the interworking of a church, I thought that my familiarity and openness with my own faith would allow me to connect with church leaders in a positive and encouraging means. My task was to compile a list of the churches in the area and then to see which of those churches would be willing to be active in providing donations, monetary assistance, resources, and volunteers. Through my involvement, we hoped that more of the project would really take shape and get underway.

Methods and Work Undertaken

The goal of this project was to establish partnerships within the community, specifically with the local churches, in order to gain monetary, food, and volunteer resources immediately and in the future.

The first part of this project involved the compilation of list of church contacts. I spent a lot of time on the computer locating and communicating with churches in Asheville. I used mostly Internet resources but also did have churches in mind that I had either passed on the road or had heard about from other people. Compiling all of the information that I had found on the churches, including the name of the church, location, contact person, phone numbers and e-mail addresses, was the biggest part of the project. This database is completely new to the Healthy Living Pantry. It did not exist prior because Cory and Nicole have a lot of other responsibilities at the Youth Development Center and at the Healthy Living Pantry and perhaps overestimated the power of early word of mouth. They had not budgeted time for a lot of advertising, but once the word had not quite gotten out as they had hoped, they knew it was time for someone else to undertake the compilation of future resources and recruit for immediate resources.

Once I had the list in order, I sent out an e-mail to all of the churches asking for a meeting time. (See appendix for a sample of the e-mail.) Once the e-mail was sent, it was waiting time. I waited for about a week before I started hearing back from churches. Some of the responses were negative, and others were very positive. From there, I was able to sort the database between who had responded and who hadn’t and then who was willing to work with us and who was not. Many of the churches that were not willing to partner with us were already involved in multiple other organizations and felt the

importance to dedicate all of their efforts into those whom they had been a part of for a while. Stretching too thin was a concern of many churches. Then I started to send out the flier that I had made and was able to talk more in-depth with church contacts who were willing to get involved.

The appendix includes the letter that was sent via e-mail to all of the churches in the database. This letter was written and revised over about a week to ensure that the YMCA was being portrayed as it has always been portrayed; as a gracious community center and member. As responses to this e-mail letter came in, I sorted the responses into negative and positive responses. Also, if they requested a meeting, I would add that to their information.

When meeting with churches, I would bring them fliers and sit down and explain what we did and how we did it. By the last few times I met with churches, I had it down to a science; down to an elevator speech.

That elevator speech went like this, “Hi, my name is Lisa Riggsbee, and I work with the YMCA. We recently opened a Healthy Living Pantry at the main Youth Development Center over on Beaverdam Road. We are a food pantry that provides food to people who are in need of temporary food assistance. With that, our focus is on putting healthful foods on the table. That includes fresh produce, good quality meats, canned foods, and other food that you would typically find in a food pantry. This is a huge endeavor, and we need the help of the community. I am not sure what that looks like for your congregation, but any way you are willing to help us would be great. Whether that is sending volunteers to us, doing a food drive, doing a penny drive, really anything you are willing to do, we appreciate.”

After the meeting, I would then record how many fliers were dropped off, how the meeting went and then forwarded any information Nicole needed. She would then get in contact with them to see if they had further questions and to follow up about doing a food drive.

Through the process of editing the initial email response, I learned how to more gracefully request a meeting or express a need. I also learned that it is very different than sending a personal e-mail in a sense that it was not just my voice that was being used but the YMCA’s voice. As I became more comfortable with responding to the e-mails that were coming back, it became easier to use language that was professional but still personal.

Creating the flier was a bit more challenging than drafting the e-mail. The YMCA, similar to many large corporations, requires all of their documents to have a consistent look. They are very particular about how their logo looks, who can use it and where it is can to be placed on a page. Nicole and I worked on the flier together to get the wording just right, and then we sent it to Will Long and to Cory to ensure that we were following all of the rules of the YMCA. After that process was checked, and we were given the go ahead, we printed about 50 copies. Those were given out within the first two days. We then printed 250, all of which, by the end of my time with the YMCA, were distributed to local churches.

Ties to Academia

The experience with the YMCA Healthy Living Pantry gave me insight into how the information I have been exposed to through lectures and textbooks works in the real world. This project allowed my passion for ending hunger and shrinking the need for temporary food assistance to connect with the tools and knowledge I have developed through the courses I have taken in the Health and Wellness Promotion and Mass Communication departments.

Health Communication provided me with a solid base of how to communicate with people through oral and written means. Orally, I learned how to be professional and what it looks like to be able to deliver a message that is convincing and interactive. Creating advertising materials as well as other visual aids allowed me to put what I used in Health Communication in to real life to reach real people.

Taking a course on Health Parity allowed me to learn about food deserts, global health and health equity. This was the first exposure I had ever had to the idea of food deserts, and the true need for fresh produce in the homes of those who are not able to access it or who cannot seem to make what little money they have for food stretch far enough to purchase meals full of produce and healthful foods. This knowledge allowed me to better articulate what the Healthy Living Pantry stands for and gave me the tools I needed to inform others about the issue of hunger in our own community. This project made the issue of food disparities real to me. By seeing the people for whom food insecurity was a reality and being able to hear their stories of struggle for what they lost and appreciation for what they have, I was truly able to get a better grasp on the food insecurity in my own backyard.

With my background in Health and Wellness Promotion, I am well-versed in nutrition, including My Plate. My Plate's recommendations are:

- Vegetables: eat 2 and a half cups every day
- Fruits: eat 2 cups every day
- Grains: eat 6 ounces every day
- Dairy: get 3 cups every day
- Protein: eat 5 and a half ounces every day.

US Department of Agriculture. *MyPlate*

My Plate replaced the outdated Food Pyramid, and it is revamped making it more colorful and is interactive online. The Healthy Living Pantry is set up to reflect the My Plate guidelines. With the knowledge I had gained in Nutrition and Lifestyle about basic nutrition as well as My Plate, explaining to churches why our focus is on healthy living was a lot easier than it would be without that training. When I could explain how healthful eating affects attention, well being, and mood, people who may not know as much about My Plate and other nutrition information were able to better relate.

Learning a lot of life lessons while spending time with the YMCA of WNC has been beneficial. I was in a position where I was meeting with people in the community and

given the responsibility to uphold the credible name of the YMCA and that was important to me and to those I was representing. I learned a lot about how to be professional and create lasting relationships with community members.

Relating to people on a surface level was nice, but really being able to learn about the church leaders in the community allowed me to gain insight into the different churches' missions. Whether they were a mission-minded church or more evangelical, all of the churches did care about the people in need. I also learned about how to care about people in a professional setting and that a lot of people care about the community but often times do not know how to get involved. Being able to meet people where they were and offer them opportunities to serve their community and really make an impact on people's lives was a large part of what made this project so enjoyable for me.

Challenges Faced and Responses to those Challenges

One of the main challenges in this project was getting in touch with church leaders. Often times, churches have one e-mail account for every ministry and minister, which is typically checked once or twice a week. The slow communication resulted in confusion and mismatching schedules. This was matched with my morning classes and pastors wanting to meet in the morning, in most cases. A lot of times the confusion of communication and scheduling would result in exchanging of phone numbers and the pastor or other church leader's personal e-mail address. This was handled by presenting a lot of times that I could meet as well as a phone call or two from me to the pastors in order to set up meetings.

Another difficulty was the level of involvement of churches in simply listening to what the Healthy Living Pantry is. Understanding that churches get contacted frequently about donations, financially and materially, as well as getting asked to send volunteers, it is hard to even have an ear to talk to sometimes. I was in a unique position because I was simply asking the church to put us on a resource list and to allow us to keep them in our records in case they were interested in doing a food drive or sending volunteers to us in the future. I was not asking for an immediate donation or favor, which is what they were used to. After I could get through the wall that many churches put up when talking to organizations, it was easy to invite them to participate in the work that the Healthy Living Pantry was doing.

William Whelan, when talking about the mission of the church and the calling to end hunger, said it best as, "It is about the belief that the food we eat is both God's gift in response to our need and God's invitation for us to share this gift of life with others. Participating in efforts to feed and defend the hungry is accepting God's invitation to love Christ in our suffering brothers and sisters." (Whelan) Being brought up in the church, I knew that missions and serving one's neighbor is highly regarded in the Christian faith.

With the YMCA being a Christian organization, we figured that there was no better place to start forming partnerships in the community than through churches.

Results

The YMCA's Healthy Living Pantry now has a database of churches that have, for the most part, been visited and are on board with helping the Pantry in any future endeavors. These churches are also equipped with fliers and brochures to give to people when referring them to us.

Since this is the first step for the Healthy Living Pantry's partnerships, we had a low expectation of meeting with three or four churches, which actually resulted in meeting with ten churches.

Fifty churches in the Asheville community were contacted. Of those fifty churches, I heard back from twelve churches. Of those twelve churches, four were willing to do food drives, one was willing to donate all of the produce from the Children's Garden and five put us on their resource list or put our flier up so that their congregation could see it. These meetings and e-mails helped form a relationship with the churches. Two of the churches asked us to add them to our resource list. One of the churches has a soup dinner every Monday that they are trying to get the word out for. The other church asked us to work with them to promote their food drives and community garden.

The highlight of my project was that Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church is donating all of their produce from the Children's Garden indefinitely. This is a new garden for the church, but both parties were thrilled about the partnership and encouraged to know that hard work on both ends is going to serve the members of our community. This was an unexpected outcome was highly celebrated by all of us.

When I first talked with Nicole Coston about what needed to be done, she didn't know where to begin. They had not yet reached out to the community as they had hoped and that was where my assistance was most needed. Coming from a church background, this project put me into my element and allowed me to link my past experiences with this one. Leaving the Healthy Living Pantry with a list of community contacts and a database of resources to be used in the future is encouraging for the future of the Healthy Living Pantry. This list of resources shows that they are not taking on hunger in Buncombe County alone. Instead, they have churches that are willing to send people their way as well as support them in the future.

Sustainability

This project was unique in a sense that these resources that I have compiled will allow the Healthy Living Pantry to use and to add onto as long as the Pantry exists. Some of these resources will be lasting partners that will allow the Pantry to stay up and running. These resources include churches that have agreed to donate food quarterly, monthly or

periodically. This list has a lot of potential because if they do not change it at all, these resources would be great to have readily available. If they expand the list as the Pantry's reach expands, that will give them the opportunity to get more of the community involved.

This resource will also allow for ideas to be bounced around in an open and friendly environment. As long as the Pantry and its workers keep the line of communication open with these churches and organizations, there will be a great relationship among the community involving the hunger and food deserts of Buncombe County. Being willing to partner with other organizations in Buncombe and the surrounding counties and sharing ideas and resources could do this. There are a lot of panels that are forming around this topic that any food pantry or other organization looking to reduce hunger in the area would benefit from. These relationships will be fostered by interns, service learning students and Nicole. Through consistent communication, the Healthy Living Pantry will be able to keep partners updated on what is going on, be able to pass along information about the Pantry's growth and concerns such as when they are running low on food.

The benefits of my work with the YMCA Healthy Living Pantry include the use of the flier, the email and the database for future interns and employees. These are materials that will be of great use by future workers so that they will not have to reinvent the wheel, per say, but they will be able to make things work more efficiently and be able to move forward as the Pantry grows and expands.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this project creates a good baseline and platform for a more detailed and more extensive database of organizations for the Healthy Living Pantry to partner with, creating a bigger base of clients and a larger pool of donors and volunteers in the future. This resource will allow the Pantry to shape their services to more effectively serve their "target population," which is anyone in the North Asheville area in need of temporary food assistance, especially those in food deserts.

From this experience, I have been given the opportunity to tie a lot of my coursework into a real life situation. Using my knowledge of food deserts and food insecurity from Health Parity: Domestic and Global Contexts, I was able to explain to churches and organizations about the origins and the detriments of these situations. Nutrition and Lifestyle provided ample background information for me to talk to people who may not have any background in nutrition.

This information allowed me to explain why having nutritious foods on the table is so crucial to the health of people of all ages. Health includes not only physical but also mental and emotional health, which is essential for all people but specifically the growth of kids and teenagers. Health Communication provided me with the tools to effectively communicate with people just person-to-person but also how to communicate with people on a bigger scale resulting in marketing materials, such as fliers and brochures.

Being involved in the service-learning program as provided me with incredible experience in the community and with people that I have been able to have lasting relationships with. This university has done an incredible job promoting community service and has allowed me to dive deeper into my education by giving me ample chances to have real experiences with agencies that have been active in the Health and Wellness Promotion field.

The Healthy Living Pantry has given me a better insight into how Health and Wellness Promotion and more specifically Health Communication, the field of my choice, really works. It is my hope that the Healthy Living Pantry will continue to serve the Asheville community long after my work has ended. I also hope that they will continue to put fresh produce on the tables of those in need of temporary food assistance as they strive to shrink food deserts in the Asheville area by promoting a strong local food system, a stable nutrition education for kids and a happier, healthier community for us all.

This project has helped me focus my future career goals. Working in the health field was always a dream of mine has been shaped by my experience in school and in the community. My education has provided me with an opportunity to seek out opportunities in the health field that do not include clinical work. Through education, I have been given the opportunity to work in the community to really see what it is like to work in the non-profit, prevention type role. I had never thought about doing work in the non-profit sector until my sophomore year when I took Health Communication and Health Parity. These two classes really allowed me to explore two things that have always been my passion-- writing and people. Being given the opportunity to work and gain experience involving writing and people was a dream come true while working with the YMCA.

While doing this work, I have been able to connect with a lot of influential and supportive people in the non-profit/health field. Talking with those people and seeing the passion that they have for their work gave me a lot of inspiration and advice for my future work in the field. Connecting with the community and sharing my passion for serving people along with influencing the health of people in need of food assistance has really put pep in my step about my career. It has given me confidence that this is the field I want to go into and the contacts with community members, church leaders and other organizations that will be beneficial for me in the years to come.

Dear Pastor,

Around Thanksgiving, the YMCA of WNC opened its first Healthy Living Pantry at our Beaverdam location to offer much needed food assistance to our community members. While working with the YMCA Youth Development Center, I have been given the opportunity to develop marketing materials for the pantry to further the reach our community members who are in the greatest need. We open the doors to our pantry every Wednesday from 5 until 6pm as well as make personalized appointments for those who are unable to visit during this time.

We know that the startup of a food pantry is no easy feat and this is why we are reaching out for your help. Our pantry has continued to grow in the past two months and has been able to serve over 125 families in this time. We would, however, like to allow for continual growth. We have outstanding resources that we would like to share with our community members. Central United Methodist would be able to assist us greatly by letting your members know who we are and what we do. This can be done by inserting our flyer into your church bulletin or adding us to a contact list of community resources. Knowing that there is help in the community is easy, but locating that assistance can sometimes be a daunting task for some. We believe that providing this information to both your organization members as well as your community participants will help those in need find the assistance they have been searching for.

We would also like to offer this service to our current participants. We would enjoy the opportunity to provide our participants with your information so they may have the opportunity to take advantage of your resources as well. This will allow our community members to receive food assistance for more than just one night a week and will hopefully be providing other types of support so that we are able to holistically serve their needs.

We would be happy to meet with your organization to answer any questions you may have. Please feel free to contact us at any time with questions or concerns.

Best,
Lisa Riggsbee

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FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT®
FOR HEALTHY LIVING
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

HEALTHY LIVING PANTRY

YMCA OF WNC

If you or someone you know are in need of temporary food assistance, please consider visiting the Healthy Living Pantry at Beaverdam

We provide food such as:

- FRESH PRODUCE
- Canned Vegetables
- Dried Beans
- Dried Pasta
- Canned Fruits
- Frozen Meats
- Dried Rice

WHEN: Wednesdays
TIME: 5:00pm - 6:00pm, or by appointment
LOCATION: YMCA OF WNC YOUTH SERVICES CENTER
201 Beaverdam Rd.
Asheville, NC 28804

For appointment contact Nicole Coston: (828) 775-7081 ncoston@ymcawnc.org

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