

Community Engagement at Work: A Service-Learning Project With Kalamazoo Loaves & Fishes

MSW Leadership Class- School of Social Work, College of Health & Human Services
Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo MI 49008

Social Work 6430 Leadership Class; Katrina Goodall, Pamela Jenkins, Cheryl Lynn King, Jacob Lisak, Jennifer Malone, Becky Mullins, Douglas Schroeder and Christina Smith

Introduction

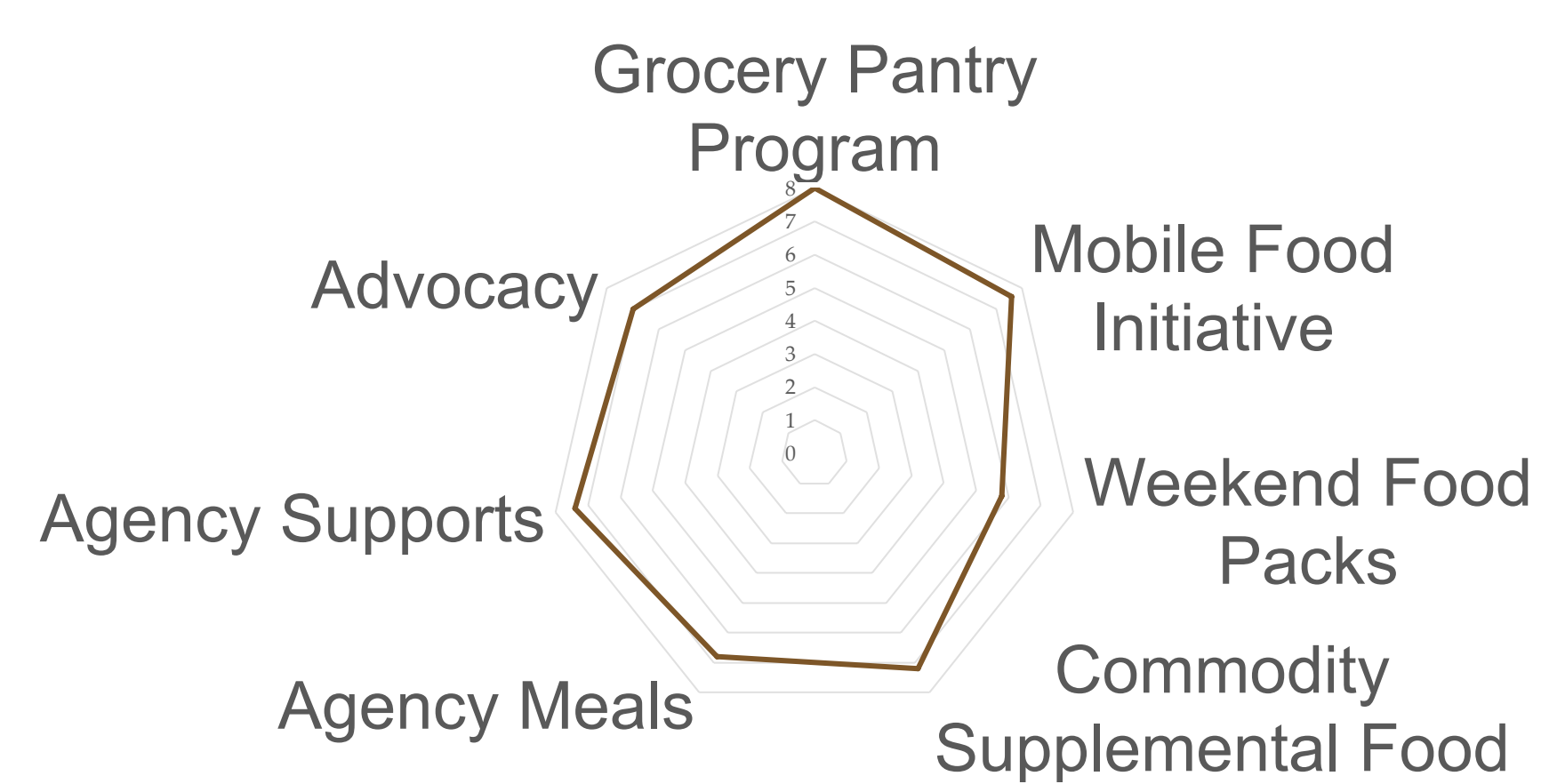
What's it like to not be able to identify where your next meal will come from? If you'll be able to have access to a fresh vegetable this week? Or, how creative can one be with a pound of rice, some eggs, and applesauce? Food insecurity. It's very real; and it's right here in Kalamazoo.

This service-learning project conducted by the SWRK graduate-level "Leadership" class partnered with Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes—the key community provider of food programs. The goal was to identify how hunger and food insecurity are defined across the country, in Kalamazoo, and whether there is a sense that the organization's products and services are believed to ameliorate food insecurity for Kalamazoo residents.

With hunger, and with food insecurity, there is not room for error. Thousands of our county's kids, adults, and families count on Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes to be their safety net.

Let us do what works, and raise awareness of food insecurity issues in Kalamazoo County.

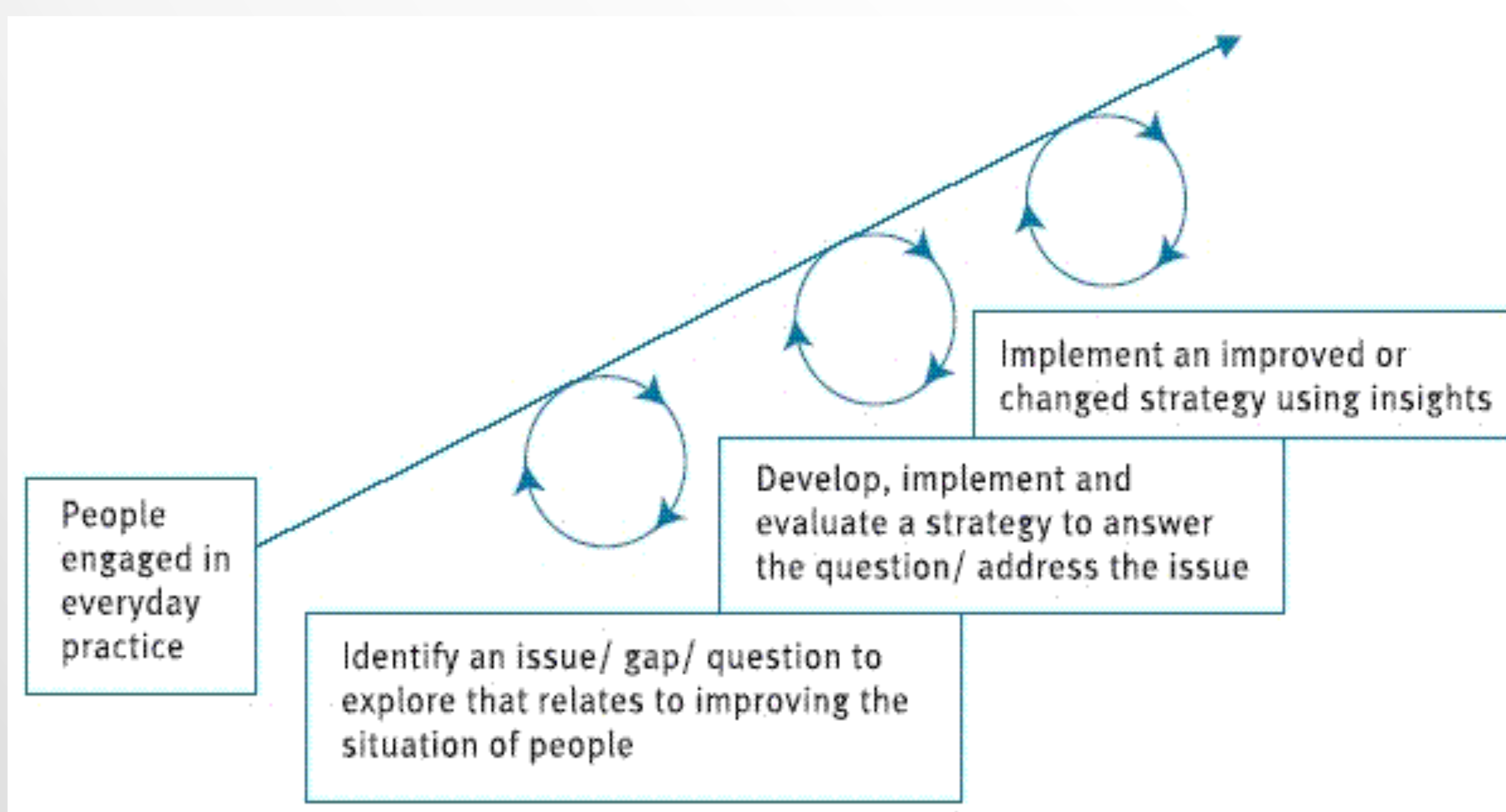
Gap Analysis of Staff's Perceptions of Effectiveness of Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes Programs



—Effectiveness of Programs on a scale of 0-10 (0 is not successful at all and 10 is highly successful)

Methods

Multi-level sampling was utilized to establish the severity of hunger and food insecurity in Kalamazoo County. Data was collected from the following groups and key informants: Kalamazoo Loaves & Fishes Staff, Participant-Observation experiences, Board president interview, and "Radar Chart"/Gap Analysis of staff's perceptions of the agency's effectiveness of its programs.



Project Description

Contact was made to establish a community partnership with Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes to identify their organizational development needs. Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes wanted to know what program initiatives were effective and which were not—as well as national metrics on the definition of hunger and/or food insecurity. Researchers were also participants in a local food pantry's distribution of food. Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes serves 600 households a month or 800-900 individuals daily. On average every impoverished individual in Kalamazoo County misses eight meals per week.

The beginning steps of this project included researching definitions and indicators of food insecurity by organizations such as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Center for Disease Control (CDC), Food Research And Action Council (FRAC), and Feeding America. Research was also done on Southwest Michigan, pinpointing rates of food insecurity county-by-county. Community organizational initiatives were also researched, by Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes (KLF), including the Grocery Pantry Program and Weekend Food Packs.

This data was used to create two different logic models which lay out our findings in an efficient spread; one of the logic models is meant to be used professionally by Loaves and Fishes, the other one is meant to be used by members of the community. Additionally, various employees of Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes were interviewed on the perceived effectiveness of their programs. The responses were plotted on a "Radar Chart", which shows the differences between "as-is" versus "desired states" in programming initiatives.

Finally, researchers worked volunteer shifts at Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes, participating in both the distribution of food from the pantry as well as answering phones in the call center. These volunteer shifts aided researchers in being mindful of how the program itself works, as well as how the program may benefit from the project as a whole.

Partnerships such as these help to bridge the gap between practice and research. This is a form of Participatory Action Research known as Empowerment Evaluation, which reviews program strengths and outcomes.

Literature Review

The standard college education experience typically consists of completing pre-requisites, completing courses towards your major, and finishing an internship. This experience is now becoming less of the standard since the incorporation of service-learning within college curricula. Service-learning gained popularity in the mid 2000's as an adjunct to traditional classroom teaching.

Service-learning is defined by the United States Department of Interior (2014) as "a teaching and learning strategy that integrates community services with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, introduce possible careers, teach civic responsibility, and strengthening communities".

On a national level, Prentice & Robinson (2010) found, when using specific learning outcomes attainment as a measure for academic success, the results of this study on community college students and faculty show support for the connection between service-learning participation and increased learning. In Michigan, service-learning is showing improved outcomes for the student and community residents. The long standing Adolescent Diversion Program at Michigan State University found service-learning is key to enriching students' educational outcomes. The research outcomes of this project clearly demonstrated that the amalgam of service learning, community collaborations, and systematic interventions can yield positive outcomes at several levels (Davison, Jimenez, Onifade & Hankins, 2010).

Service-learning enhances students' abilities to: 1) apply critical thinking skills, 2) improve problem solving abilities, 3) develop leadership characteristics, 4) promote informed decision making, and 5) how to effectively collaborate and communicate by working towards real-world community solutions (Retrieved from www.generationon.org/educators/programs/schools/why-service-learning).

Conclusions and Implications

Data collected provided a snapshot of food insecurity in Kalamazoo and the disparity of the definitions of food insecurity around the country. This project serves as the starting point for Kalamazoo Loaves & Fishes to further evaluate their programs and services to meet the needs of the residents of the community. Due to time constraints, the methodology was limited in its execution, but still provides valuable information for programming.

Implications: 1) one national standard on the definition of hunger and food insecurity should be developed so that accurate data can be generated, 2) consistency in service delivery at the food pantry should be maintained, and 3) perceptions of effectiveness of programs should be considered for review by Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes leadership.

Findings

Data was collected by:

- Phone Surveys
- 1:1 Key Informant Interviews
- Participant-Observation Experiences at the food pantry

According to the United States Census Bureau 17,354 or 14.7% of United States households were identified as experiencing food insecurity in 2009 (US Census Bureau 2012).

In addition, a meta analysis of federal and community organization definitions of hunger and food insecurity was conducted. Findings identified a lack of clarity in the definition of hunger and food insecurity, as well as a disconnect between the organization's operations and consistent service provision to its clients.

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Contact Information

Barbara Barton, Ph.D., MSW, CBIS

College of Health and Human Services,
School of Social Work

Barbara.Barton@wmich.edu



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