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

MSW Leadership Class- School of Social Work, College of Health & Human Services
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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 county, 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.

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 it's right here in Kalamazoo.

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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