

Race, Class, and Frozen Chicken: Perspectives from Philadelphia on Tackling Senior Hunger Citywide

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Brief Description:

What is our perspective from Philadelphia? That our challenge – our city's diversity - and our best practice – convening diverse stakeholders for real, honest conversations - are one and the same.

This submission was selected as part of a national challenge issued to leaders in all communities seeking new "best practices" and "best possibilities" for the future of nutrition and aging.

My relationship with Meals on Wheels programs and senior hunger in Philadelphia began only a little over a year ago. Just graduated from college, I came on board with the Mayor's Office of Civic Engagement and Volunteer Service in Philadelphia to conduct a fairly straightforward research project about Meals on Wheels programs in the city. Or at least, it started straightforward.

The goal was to get a sense of, simply, how many programs were out there serving seniors home-delivered meals, what those programs needs and best practices were, and how the resources available lined up with real need on the ground. Why? In 2011, Mayor Nutter had participated in March for Meals, the annual awareness campaign hosted by MOWAA that I'm sure many programs are familiar with. In rallying other providers to participate, one local program hit a critical barrier: beyond a couple relationships and otherwise, faceless phone numbers in directories, they hardly knew of any other programs in the city. And as soon as I started asking around, the same was the case for other programs too.

Now, to give you some more context—numbers wise, at least. Philadelphia is a city that is aging significantly – we have the highest proportion of adults over 60 of the ten largest cities in the United States, and that number expected to get higher over the next ten years. We are also a very poor city – the poorest, in fact, of the five largest in the country. 43% of seniors live at or below 200% of the poverty line. And according to the AARP's 2010 senior hunger report, about 18% of Philadelphia's seniors are food

insecure or marginally food insecure. We also have a proportionately high number of seniors that age in place, often disconnected from formal support networks and social services.

The statistics are grim – as, unfortunately, they increasingly are when it comes to senior hunger across the country - and with those numbers in the background, it was easy for my colleagues and I to guess that resources were not even coming close to meeting the need.

And so the questions began. We called up program coordinators, asking them how their programs started, where they serve, what their needs are, and how they want their program to grow. To understand how Meals on Wheels programs really work, I delivered meals with volunteers and helped in kitchen. We worked with the local Area Agency on Aging to map need based on survey questions conducted in 2010. I talked with seniors in 18 different locations, asking them about their experiences with home-delivered meals and also anything and everything food-related, visiting every demographic range possible– racial, class, language, you name it. Russian seniors told me about how much they hated frozen chicken. Chinese seniors told me how they knew the American salad in senior center meals was good for them, but how sometimes they just wanted some good Chinese rice. An African-American woman from North Philly, who lived in senior apartments on the exact same ground where the house that she was born in used to be, told me about how she volunteers at a nearby soup kitchen to help the homeless.

But overall, what these seniors shared with me were their real, daily experiences with food, not only about their struggles to cook and shop for themselves but also the headache of getting on food stamps – or worse, not qualifying – of knowing what food to buy with increasingly restricted diets - and worse, paying for it.

The result of this research was a report we published in December, which, as we started sharing it around the city with various aging services providers, community organizations, and the hunger relief and advocacy network, gave us a reason to bring diverse organizations to the table to have a citywide dialogue about those original questions: Where do our home-delivered meals resources lie in Philadelphia, and how does that line up with the need? Who is being served, who is not being served? What can we do - as a city government, as members of community organizations, and as citizens – to build overall capacity to serve seniors in the neighborhoods with the highest need and lowest number of resources? And, because addressing seniors

hunger and food needs is much more multifaceted than increasing the capacity of Meals on Wheels programs alone, what other resources would be important to better share information about to the populations in need of them most?

These were the questions taken on by a task force that has just finished convening, made up of representatives from organizations across the city [*if read in August*], with the goal of making recommendations to the City via the Mayor's Commission on Aging. Three solid recommendations emerged – one, to create a commonly shared and distributed senior hunger resource guide. Two, to aggregate service opportunities related to senior hunger across organizations in order increase partnerships with local volunteer networks. Three, to apply for an AmeriCorps VISTA project that would build the capacity of food pantries, cupboards, and other food programs in areas of highest need to extend services to homebound clients.

But the fact that we emerged with these ideas to act upon is not to say that these conversations were easy to have, or that they were always comfortable. Members of the task force came from many walks of life and organizations, from church volunteers from the poorest parts of North Philadelphia to health educators that work with senior refugees to the executive directors of national non-profits. As representatives spoke about their work, a harsh reality soon became apparent: current formalized volunteer-supported programs do not extend far into areas with the highest need primarily because their volunteer base consists of folks who are generally more affluent, generally white, many of whom harbor fears or hesitancy about delivering to clients in predominantly black and Latino neighborhoods.

I remember some of the tension, sadness, and frustration that was palpable in the room at times. The members were not only faced with feeling overwhelmed by high need and limited resources, but something perhaps even more emotionally devastating – lack of sense of citywide community and mission around senior hunger, at least, up until now. Were we not our brothers and sisters' keepers? As much as programs' intentions were to work together to meet senior hunger need in the city, if it meant partnering with new churches, mosques, with immigrant councils, would it be worth it?

And I believe that ultimately, that final solution we came up is reflective of the answer reached by this genuinely—and not always serenely— diverse coalition: Yes. It's worth it. We hope that next year's VISTA project will work between agencies to help build volunteer infrastructure on neighborhood-based levels in areas of highest need. The plan is to work with our local Coalition Against Hunger, Area Agency on Aging, and the City together – and dozens of neighborhood-based pantries, feeding programs, and

community leaders – to build capacity across several different neighborhoods at the same time by connecting existing programs and supporting the growth of new ones.

So, what is our perspective from Philadelphia? That our challenge – our city’s diversity - and our best practice – convening diverse stakeholders for real, honest conversations - are one and the same.