

Assessing Key Stakeholder Perceptions of the Society of St. Andrew's Western Headquarters



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The Society of St. Andrew is an ecumenical, nonprofit organization which salvages nutritious produce from U.S. farms, orchards, and produce packaging plants, and distributes it to food banks and agencies across the country which serve the poor. This study was made possible through funding from the Health Care Foundation of Greater Kansas City.

The study utilized in-depth interviews and focus groups with various stakeholders involved with the Society of St. Andrew's newly opened western headquarters. Growers, volunteers, and agency partner staff members all provided useful insights that informed the report. Consumers who utilize food pantries also provided invaluable information, and this report would not have been possible without the generous participation of these stakeholders. The staff members of two area food pantries were particularly helpful in recruiting participants for focus groups with consumers, and in providing the meeting space in which the interview team conducted those interviews.

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Section 1: Introduction and Methodology

The Context of Hunger and Food Insecurity

Hunger in the United States is a surprisingly common social problem. In 2009, 14.7% of US households experienced hunger. In the Kansas City metropolitan area, it is estimated that 88,000 households experience hunger, and as many as 66,000 different people seek emergency food each week. The recent recession and high unemployment rates have exacerbated this issue, increasing the number of citizens seeking food assistance from food pantries and soup kitchens (Mabli, Cohen, Potter & Zhao, 2010).

While hunger is a global problem, US hunger differs from that experienced in the developing world, as it typically is not the sort of deprivation that results in starvation or severe malnutrition. Recognizing this difference, the US government has established definitions that focus on food security, or “the ability to access foods which allow people to live active, healthy lives” (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.). This definition of food security also includes the idea that food must be accessed in socially acceptable ways, that is, without requiring coping strategies such as the use of emergency food suppliers, or through stealing or scavenging food.

The social welfare system in the US addresses food insecurity through several federal nutrition programs including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (also known as WIC). Despite the existence of these programs, many households are still unable to meet their food consumption needs. In response to this food gap, nonprofit entities in the US provide emergency food through a network of food banks, food pantries, and other distribution sites. However, these food banks and pantries have difficulty procuring enough fresh produce to distribute to the households that rely upon their services. Many food banks don't receive adequate produce donations, and pantries and emergency cupboards often focus on providing more shelf stable items for their consumers. Further, many US citizens live in “food deserts” without grocery stores or markets that sell fresh produce (Martin, 2011).

Society of St. Andrew West

The Society of St. Andrew (SoSA) is a national, faith based, nonprofit organization which attempts to meet these nutritional deficits by connecting faith communities, civic organizations, and businesses to opportunities to glean food left behind by farmers and orchard owners. Founded in 1979, SoSA bridges the gap between the billions of pounds of nutritious yet unmarketable food and the 49 million Americans who don't get enough to eat. They do this by targeting the two main points of large-volume food waste – farmers' fields after harvest time and packing operations where produce is prepared for shipping to markets. Since they began tracking produce donations in 1983, SoSA has provided more than 622 million pounds of produce to people in need, which is equivalent to more than 1.87 billion servings. Working through three mission-based programs (the Potato and Produce Project, the Gleaning Network, and Harvest of Hope), SoSA engages nearly 35,000 volunteers each year in salvaging and distributing produce to hungry people (Martin, 2011).

Although SoSA operates across the nation, the majority of its efforts have been focused east of the Mississippi River. To increase the volume and variety of produce available to those in need, SoSA opened its western headquarters in Kansas City, Missouri, in May 2008. SoSA West taps into new sources of produce donations from the western region and has increased the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables available for distribution through Harvesters' 620-plus agencies across the Kansas City metropolitan area. Since its inception, SoSA West donated more than 7.5 million pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables to Harvester's and its service-area partners and agencies in Kansas and Missouri (Martin, 2011).

Purpose and Rationale for the Evaluation

Despite the documented success of SoSA West in procuring and distributing large amounts of fresh produce in the Kansas City metropolitan area, one challenge that faces the agency is the need for more evaluation data. A primary outcome measure used by the agency is the amount of food distributed to food sites. Less is known about intermediate or long-term effects that the produce may have on individuals, families, or the larger community. A variety of methodological issues make conducting an evaluation of the effectiveness of SoSA West both difficult and expensive. Foremost among these

obstacles is the difficulty in tracking the end use of the produce SoSA West donates to Harvester's, and its effects at the individual level of analysis. This is quite challenging because (1) Harvester's provides produce to distribution sites which was procured from multiple donor sources, not just from SoSA West, and (2) SoSA West doesn't have direct contact with food consumers, who receive the food from distribution sites such as food pantries. This makes SoSA West somewhat different from traditional social service agencies which are more easily able to measure services or "inputs" received by consumers. After some consideration, it was determined that it is more appropriate to think about SoSA's impacts on the community's capacity to provide fresh produce to needy households. This led us to think more broadly about evaluation, and to develop a qualitative evaluation design which explores SoSA West's key stakeholders' perceptions regarding the agency's functioning and impact. A major goal of the study is to generate new ideas about possible outcome measures and research methods that would be appropriate for use in further evaluation of the agency's impacts.

Research Questions and Design

This study, conducted by Dr. Edward Scanlon of the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare, uses focus groups and in-depth interviews to explore perceptions of SoSA West held by four distinct stakeholders: (1) farmers or "growers", (2) volunteer gleaners, (3) partner agency staff members, and (4) food pantry consumers. The primary questions guiding the study include:

- How do stakeholders perceive SoSA West?
- What motivates stakeholders to participate with SoSA West?
- What are SoSA West's perceived strengths, assets, and contributions?
- How could SoSA West improve its programs to increase participant involvement and consumer satisfaction?

Qualitative methods were selected because of the open ended nature of our research questions. Focus groups were selected as our primary qualitative data gathering technique. This method allowed us to gather the greatest amount of information in the least labor intensive manner, and because the conversations typically generated in focus groups can create a climate in which "thicker" information can be developed through the

interactions that occur between group members. Because the growers are geographically disbursed across multiple states, focus groups were not an option with these respondents. Instead, we chose in-depth telephone interviews as our data gathering method with the growers. While there are some limitations to the use of telephone interviews, cost and time considerations made it impossible to travel to the farmers for face to face interviews.

Sample Selection

Early in the research planning process, we met to discuss the question: Who are SoSA West's key stakeholders? Four were selected as most important for the purpose of the study. First, **growers or farmers** are those food producers who allow SoSA West to glean produce from their fields. Second, **gleaners** are individuals who donate volunteer time in order to glean produce from fields that has been left behind by farmers as unsellable product. Third, **partner agency staff** are employees of an area food bank and food pantries who currently distribute SoSA West produce to food consumers. Fourth, **consumers** are those individuals who receive produce for consumption from food pantries in the Kansas City metropolitan area.

A purposive, non-random sample of volunteers, growers, and agency partner staff was developed through conversations with SoSA West staff. Participants were selected based upon on their degree of familiarity with SoSA West and their capacity to understand and respond to focus group questions. While volunteers, farmers, and partner agency staff were identified through conversations with SoSA West staff, consumers were identified in collaboration with partner food pantry staff due to their familiarity with this population.

A total of 29 respondents participated in the evaluation study. Six participants were recruited for the agency partner focus group, but three of these cancelled immediately prior to the session, leaving only three members. We attempted to correct for this by scheduling additional respondents for the gleaner focus group, assuming that several would cancel or fail to appear for the focus group session. However, all ten of the recruited gleaners presented for the session, so the size of this group was relatively large in comparison to the other groups. Two focus groups with consumers were also conducted, and these groups consisted of six participants in each. These interviews were scheduled by local food pantry staff members, and the sessions were held on site at the

agencies in order to increase participant comfort level and to reduce their travel costs. Finally, four in-depth phone interviews were conducted with growers who have donated produce and allowed volunteers to glean their fields and orchards.

Interview Protocol, Topics, and Format

Three separate focus group guides were developed with questions targeted to the experiences of gleaners, agency partner staff, and consumers. An in-depth interview guide was developed for our interviews with growers. In general, the guides were focused on understanding (1) how participants learned about SoSA West, (2) general perceptions of the organization, (3) strengths and positive attributes of SoSA West's operations, (4) areas of concern about SoSA West and its operations, and (5) additional thoughts that stakeholders had about improving the organization. These guides included suggested questions in each topic area, but the interviewer had latitude to deviate from the guide when it would enhance the quality or depth of the conversation. Thus, the specific follow up questions and probes were unique to each interview in the tradition of qualitative inquiry. Prior to beginning the research, the project was approved by the University of Kansas Human Subjects Committee. The guides are included in Appendices A-D of this report.

Interviews were conducted between April 1, 2011 and August 31, 2011 by the author of this report. Interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes, and were audio recorded. Informed consent forms were completed, and respondents received \$50 as a token of appreciation for their study participation. Some very basic demographic information was gathered at the beginning of the interviews. After the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed, names of the participants were changed to pseudonyms in order to protect identities for the purposes of reporting. Our final sample included a total of 29 respondents in four focus groups and four in-depth interviews.

Data Analysis

It has become conventional to analyze qualitative materials using software programs that help to code and organize the voluminous data that is gathered through in-depth interviews. We used the qualitative software program ATLAS.ti in data analysis.

Following transcription of the audio-taped interviews, the data was entered into ATLAS.ti.

Qualitative data are coded by themes. Rather than beginning with a set of codes established deductively from theoretical suppositions about the subject matter, the transcripts were coded line by line using an open coding technique to develop codes inductively. The author relied on a general inductive coding process described by Thomas and Harden (2008). After this process was completed, duplicated codes were renamed and codes were grouped into thematic families. This process of grouping codes that are related conceptually, and respondent characteristics that are shared, is sometimes referred to as “families” in qualitative analysis. For each of our major research questions, matrices were developed to aid in analysis. The matrices allow for ideas to be further developed inductively and to help organize explanatory frameworks. As themes and patterns began to emerge, the researcher met with SoSA West staff in order to understand the participant responses in light of their understanding of the organization and its mission. This triangulation process helped us to shed light on the ideas that were emerging inductively.

Organization of the Report

The report is organized to present stakeholder perceptions of SoSA West while following the movement of produce from “farm to table.” Section Two focuses on the growers’ motivations for involvement with SoSA West, and their perceptions of the organization’s operations. In Section Three, we report on interviews with volunteers who have participated in gleanings. Section Four examines the perceptions of agency partner staff who receive food distributed by SoSA West for their food bank or food pantries. In Section Five we hear the voices of those who shop at the food pantries and are the actual consumers of the produce procured by SoSA West. In each of these sections we provide some description of the respondents prior to presenting our findings. Section Six discusses those findings which suggest possible program design innovations and implications for developing more rigorous evaluation research.

Section 2: The Growers

The procurement of produce begins with the growers who allow SoSA West the opportunity to coordinate gleanings of surplus vegetables and fruits from their fields. The SoSA West growers are geographically dispersed, living in several different states. This dispersal of the farmers made it impossible to convene a focus group, so in-depth phone interviews were conducted with four farmers who have worked with SoSA West over the past 2 years. Three of the growers were male, and one was female. Two of the farmers, Kevin and Richard, are located in Kansas. The other two growers, Donna and Andy, are Missouri based farmers. The farmers grow a wide variety of produce, and two also raise farm animals. Five topical areas were explored in the interviews (1) how growers became aware of and were recruited to participate with SoSA West, (2) their motivations for deciding to participate with the organization, (3), types of produce that are donated to the organization, (4) the grower's perceptions of SoSA West's operations, and, (5) the grower's ideas about how SoSA West could recruit additional growers to participate as community partners.

Learning about SoSA West

We began the interviews by asking growers "How did you first learn about SoSA West?" Initially, most of the respondents struggled to recall the details of how they became acquainted with the organization and its gleaning program. With some probing, each respondent began to recall the details of their initial contacts. Intriguingly, each story was slightly different, suggesting multiple "points of entry" into the collaborative relationship that each formed with the organization. Moreover, in two cases, the impetus for involvement came from the grower, rather than as a response to outreach or recruitment efforts on the part of the organization itself.

Kevin, a family farmer, had been looking for a way to donate excess produce and found the organization on the internet. He initiated contact, and SoSA West quickly responded to his request for information. Richard recounted a story of a "happy accident" in which a SoSA West staff person had gotten lost looking for another farm and left a card at his farm's produce store. He thought about the organization for a week or so, and then contacted SoSA West because he found he had "gone long" on some produce and wanted it gleaned by the organization's volunteers. A third farmer had been

approached at an urban market and been told about SoSA West's mission by a staff person. Finally, Andy had been looking for a way to donate produce and contacted some local food pantries, who referred him to SoSA West.

Motivations for Participation with SoSA West

When asked "What made you interested in working with SoSA West?", the first response invariably was related to a concern about waste. As Kevin noted: "Farmers don't plant crops to watch them go uneaten; we want people to eat what we grow!" Donna also shared this sentiment stating: "We watched this thing on PBS that explained that over 50% of vegetables produced in the US are trashed because they don't fit the ideal of pretty food—so we set the goal of not wasting anything. As growers you put hours and hours into every vegetable we grow—to know that it can't go to market is ridiculous—it is good food and people are doing without!" Similarly, Andy told us that "We run a no waste farm. Everything we don't sell or donate goes to feed our chickens. It's a closed cycle—anything that could go bad we can feed to our animals."

The respondents also were concerned about the realities of hunger, and were motivated to make a difference by donating their food to SoSA West. "I can't stand the idea of hungry people...this is something I can do to help others in need. Sometimes we get caught up in our own economic problems, and we forget that other people have it worse than we do" stated one respondent.

A third motivation for working with SoSA West is the benefit of free labor that is provided by the volunteer gleaners. Despite these concerns about wasted food and low income people who struggle to meet their own nutritional needs, the cost of gleaning food that isn't able to be sold can be prohibitively high for these family farmers. It is quite difficult for small farmers to earn profits, and paying laborers to help harvest crops that won't be sold is very expensive. It is cheaper for most of these farmers to simply plow unsellable crops under the soil. Because the farmers don't have to pay labor costs for the gleaning activities, donating the produce is economically feasible for them. As Richard told us: "If I had to pay someone to come and glean these crops, there is no way I could do it. It is much cheaper just to plow it under and go on...finding out about SoSA was really great for me."

Finally, we explored the idea that growers might be motivated by the availability of a tax deduction for their donations. One grower stated that this was a “nice bonus” but didn’t feel it was an important motivating factor. Most of the others actually stated that while they appreciated receiving the documentation of the donation from SoSA West staff, they were unlikely to actually use it on their tax returns. As Richard noted “No, I don’t even earn enough to itemize...I take standard deductions, so it isn’t something that is really very useful for me...I appreciated that they took the time to give me the forms though!” While some farmers may use the deduction, it doesn’t seem to be a major motivation for participation for these respondents.

Types of Donated Produce

During the interviews, we asked growers what types of produce they had donated to SoSA West and how they made the decision to do so. Growers reported a range of donated produce, including tomatoes, potatoes, lettuce, bok choy, peaches, and sweet corn. Kevin noted that he specifically donated only sweet corn. This is notable because the extremely high temperatures of the summer of 2011 have been very hard on corn crops. This has resulted in this farmer being unable to make significant donations to SoSA West in recent months. He stated:

We plant our corn in stages so that it ripens at different time—that ensures that we will have crops to take to market throughout the summer. But the temperatures are so high that it is all ripening at the same time, and we can’t get it all harvested at once. And, a lot of my corn has just burnt up...I don’t have extra produce to donate right now. Hopefully next year will be better...(laughing) farmers always hope next year will be a better one.

The decision to donate is based on whether or not they will be able to sell the produce at market. In some cases, the produce is irregular in some way. Richard explained “Well, for example, maybe I have grown some peaches and the sheen is a little dull. They taste good, and they are good quality, but they just don’t look pretty enough to sell.” Others explained that it is difficult to sell produce that is very small. Though edible and nutritious, consumers are unlikely to purchase an undersized piece of produce. In other cases, a farmer may “go long” on a product, growing more than they are able to sell at market. “Going long” creates a surplus, and as noted earlier, this produce can be

affordably gleaned by volunteers, and so these crops may be selected for donation. As Richard explained:

Well, sometimes you find yourself long on a product. One week, you go to market and sell out of something, say, tomatoes, and the next week you think “I am never going to sell all of this—so, why let it go to waste? Better to give it to the hungry”. And, if you can’t sell it, the cost of labor to pick the produce can’t be made up—but if volunteers can glean it for you, it’s worth it.

Donna explained a somewhat more unusual situation. In her case, her organic farm had grown bok choy, thinking that there might be a strong demand for it in urban areas. However, it proved to be less popular than anticipated and she found herself with large amounts of bok choy that she could not sell. She donated the product to SoSA West, noting “There are never going to be leftover items like asparagus, or figs. Last year I thought bok choy was going to be a really hot item and it wasn’t—SoSA came down and picked it and boxed it and so it wasn’t wasted—we didn’t have to plow it under...it wasn’t a successful crop, but someone was able to eat it.”

Perceptions of SoSA West’s Gleaning Operations

A key topic for the evaluation is the growers’ perceptions of the gleanings themselves. We asked the farmers whether gleanings had occurred at their farms and orchards, or if they had simply donated produce which had already been picked by their own laborers. A few had at times donated surplus produce that they had already harvested, but typically they worked with SoSA West to arrange gleanings. Overall, the staff members are viewed as competent, friendly, and easy to work with. As Donna noted “Oh, they are just great people. Bernie (a SoSA West staff member) has become like an old friend. He comes down for the gleanings and ends up eating lunch with us. They are just great to work with...”

The gleanings themselves are perceived as smooth operations with limited problems or complications that burden the growers. During her interview Donna commented: “Things go smoothly. That is the thing about the gleanings; SoSA West just makes it so easy for you.” The other growers had similar perspectives, noting that the gleanings had few serious “glitches.” Kevin did tell us “Well, once we had some folks up

here picking corn, and some people got overheated. This is very hot work, and they had to lie down in the shade to cool off.”

Other issues were mentioned in the interviews which suggested logistical concerns related to timing. Farming is time sensitive work, one farmer explained, and when crops are ready to be picked, time is of the essence. Andy told us that he had corn ready for gleaning, but no volunteers were available to come to his farm, so he “ended up feeding it to the chickens.” Richard had a similar experience when he had produce ready for gleaning, but volunteers could not be mobilized quickly enough. He noted “I understand they are working with volunteers, I really do. But when a crop is ready, it is ready...especially something like peaches, fruits with soft exteriors...you have a very short window of opportunity before they are going to be too ripe to be edible.”

A similar logistical mishap occurred when Richard contacted SoSA West with 500 dozen ears of corn available for gleaning. He recounted that the crew that arrived had a small truck that couldn’t accommodate the produce, and no boxes to store the corn. He donated some boxes, but the gleaners left with only 50 dozen ears of corn, which was the most that their truck could accommodate. Richard was understanding about the logistical challenges inherent in arranging gleanings and the transportation of produce, but it was clear that he felt badly that 450 dozen ears of corn went uneaten.

Finally, a recurrent comment about the gleaners was repeated by three of the four growers. These farmers stated a desire to see the ultimate consumers of the produce gleaning in their fields. “It would be nice to see the people who eat the food here working in the fields” stated Andy. Donna also said “I know there are probably some liability issues, but it would be nice to see who benefits from the program.” Andy stated even more strongly: “I wish the organization could help them to become more self-sufficient. You can feed a family of four with a fairly small plot of land...it would be good to get them growing their own food.” This notion of linking food pantry clients to the process of gleaning seems to be related to a desire for connection to the consumers and, in some cases, a concern about consumer dependence and lack of self sufficiency.

Recruitment of Additional Farmers as SoSA West Partners

Our final question for the growers was “How could SoSA West find more farmers to participate in their mission?” We were interested in any ideas they might have for

finding more growing partners, and any thoughts they could share about messages that might resonate with growers. The growers suggested (1) promoting SoSA West at farmer's markets, (2) taking out advertisements in agricultural trade magazines and newspapers, and (3) finding farmers through grower's directories, such as those maintained by the Kansas City Grower's Circle, the Kansas City Community Supported Agriculture Coalition, and through both Kansas and Missouri agricultural extensions. The farmers offered specific names that for the purposes of privacy will not be included in the body of this report, but were shared with SoSA West staff. Richard offered a specific strategy for approaching growers at urban markets:

I would go to farmer's markets every day for a week in the area. I would not go when they set up, or as they meet with customers. I would wait for the end of the day when they are folding up, and then I would give them a card and explain SoSA West. I would talk to them about how I could help them when they are long on a product and how we could salvage wasted food. It might take a little while to get everyone at the bigger markets like Johnson County and Kansas City's River Market....but I would make a chart and go row by row until I had approached everyone.

We were also curious about the messages that our respondents thought would be most useful to emphasize when SoSA West staff reaches out to potential new growers. The ability to reduce hunger, the reduction of waste, and the ability to get unpaid volunteer laborers to glean fields were seen as the most important messages to send to potential partners. Donna stated that she believed the most important message to emphasize is the ease of working with SoSA West, believing that some growers might have misperceptions of the process being a difficult one.

Conclusion

SoSA West's partnerships with growers are crucial to the success of the organization's ability to procure food for hungry residents of the greater Kansas City area. Our interviews with farmers suggested that their participation is motivated by a concern about hunger, food waste, and the ability to utilize cost effective volunteers to glean produce that otherwise might be plowed under. The organization is seen as easy to work with and generally efficient. However, some difficulties with matching volunteers with gleaning opportunities in a timely fashion may create setbacks in procuring produce donations. The respondents believe that it is possible to recruit more growers as

participants in the organization's mission, and offered a variety of sensible suggestions for finding and communicating with potential new partners. In the next section, we learn more about the volunteers who donate their time and energy by participating in gleanings of these growers' fields and orchards.

Section 3: The Gleaners

SoSA West relies heavily on its gleaners, those volunteers who donate their time and energy to the organization by helping to harvest unsellable produce from the farms and orchards of the growers. In this section, we explore the gleaners' motivations for involvement with this unique volunteer activity, their general perceptions of gleanings, and their thoughts about the benefits and challenges of the work. This focus group was comprised of ten adult volunteers, each of whom had participated in at least one gleaning. Nine of the volunteers were female, and one was male. All identified as Caucasian and lived in the Kansas City metropolitan area.

During the interviews, four themes emerged: (1) recruitment occurred primarily through church and faith based networks, (2) participants' motivations were both pragmatic and spiritual, (3) gleaning was beneficial to the volunteers, often in unanticipated ways, and (4) gleaning can be a challenging activity which requires planning and preparation.

Experiences of Recruitment

The focus group began with the questions "How did you learn about SoSA West?" and "How did you learn about the opportunity to participate in a gleaning?" Respondents informed us that learning about the organization happened in tandem with learning about the opportunity to glean. Because SoSA was established by practitioners of the Methodist religion, many of the earliest outreach activities carried out by staff were in faith communities. Most often this occurred in the context of church membership or participation in some other faith-based organization. These respondents, very active in faith communities, learned about the activity through targeted emails, announcements in church bulletins, presentations at their churches, or through activities with church based clubs, such as religious women's organizations. Tammy told us:

The church I go to... I think Lisa (a SoSA West staff member) went to the mission commission at the church and through that commission an announcement was put into our bulletin just asking who might be interested. When I called they said that they needed a coordinator and so I've kind of become the church coordinator for it. So I answered a call in the bulletin and that's how I found out about it.

While most of the group members referenced learning about the organization through religious networks, others did not. These respondents did not mention religious activities, and learned instead about the organization through word of mouth, friendship networks, or publicity that the organization had generated. For example, Diana told us that she had read about it in the local newspaper:

I think it was a couple of years ago...there was an article in the Kansas City Star. I read it and then I contacted them by e-mailing Bernie (a SoSA West staff member). So, that's how I heard about it. I thought it was a great organization and a great cause.

Whether the initial awareness of SoSA West came about because of information gained through religious or secular networks, all of the group members commented on the friendliness, responsiveness, and eagerness of the SoSA West staff in reaching out to them and providing information about gleaning activities. This early engagement appears to have been a key component in helping them to pay attention to the information they received about SoSA West and the opportunity to participate in a gleaning. One participant noted “they were just so nice...they treated me like they had known me for years.” Learning about Sosa West, gaining information about gleaning, and developing initial relationships with SoSA West staff are perceived as closely interrelated processes for these participants.

Motivations for Participation

The question “What motivated you to participate in a gleaning?” produced some of the most compelling conversations in the focus group. Participants became animated and excited when responding to this topic, and built upon one another's comments with murmurs of agreement and clarification of key points. The primary motivations verbalized in the focus group included (1) religious conviction and the idea that gleaning is Biblical, (2) the immediate positive impact of gleaning, (3) concerns about the need to reduce food waste and increase healthy food access to the poor, and (4) the idea that gleaning is a “win-win” activity.

Religious convictions. A major motivation for many of the group members was that gleaning is a good match for their religious convictions. The members reported holding religious beliefs that require them to help feed the hungry. Mary stated: “Well, and Christ, one of his strong beliefs was to care for the poor and those who could not care for

themselves. There is such a sense of service....this is a way I felt I could help. Why not take on the servant role, and help provide?"

Moreover, many stated that the Bible mandates a requirement that those who own land need to leave part of the yield for the poor to glean. Martha explained in more detail that "There are stories in the Bible...that there is to be gleaning where farmers will leave things in the field around the edges so that poor people can come and have something to eat...it was an early welfare system." Bart chimed in with more detail:

That is part of the Law...Deuteronomy and Leviticus tell us that you shall not pick all of the grapes from the grapevine and you shall leave some for the strangers, for the widows, and for the orphans...we don't have the stranger, or widows, or orphans doing the gleaning, but it's the same thing....

The immediate impact of gleaning. In an era in which the economy has taken such a toll on the well-being of so many families, many of the group members report feeling powerless to have a positive impact on the lives of those who are suffering. Gleaning is perceived by the group members as a very quick and effective way to make a difference and to combat hunger.

Words such as "immediate" and "direct" were used by group members who reported being motivated to participate by the idea that people would, in short order, eat the food they would be picking. Amber noted "It is so direct... it's such a big impact with such little effort. It's so practical. Yes, very practical. You are helping the farmers. They get to then clear their field and people get to eat it. It's so practical. And it's sustainable." This was echoed by Kate:

It's immediate gratification for everybody. Like, you are getting to do something immediately and you are helping just knowing that they are going to get the produce and that it's healthy food. Like in my job, seeing so many people in need; you just know it's a success I think.

Concerns about wasted and unhealthy food. The idea that US households waste food in a society in which so many residents go hungry is another motivation for gleaning. The focus group members discussed the issue of food waste, and were particularly appalled by the idea that edible produce could be left to rot in fields and orchards. The possibility that they could contribute to a reduction in food waste served as a strong motivator for volunteering to glean.

Similarly, there is a strong appeal to gleaning because of the perception that the food often consumed by low income citizens in the US is unhealthy. Group members spoke of their concerns about overly processed foods and an over consumption of inexpensive fast food by low income people. Janice noted that she liked the fact that SoSA West was bringing nutritious food to people who rely so much on processed food, and helping to bring healthier eating habits to them. Katrina captured both of these sentiments when she stated:

I would say that when I heard about it...well I've been more concerned about people not having access to fresh foods and so there again it just makes sense to go out and get food that would otherwise go to waste. Then make sure that people who really need it can have it.

The idea that gleaning benefits multiple groups simultaneously. Another idea that emerged in the group to near unanimous agreement was that gleaning was a “win-win” situation. Respondents stated that it helped so many different people and organizations that it seemed logical to participate in gleaning activities. Respondents could not see a “down side” to gleaning in the sense that multiple stakeholders, including farmers, food distribution sites, and consumers, all benefited from the activity. When asked what she meant by win-win, Robin clarified:

It helps so many people. The farmers get their fields gleaned. Harvester's wins because they get produce. Hungry people get to eat it...and gleaning itself is fun...so everybody wins....

Benefits of Participating in a Gleaning

Perhaps not surprisingly, when asked about the positive aspects of gleaning, responses overlapped with participants' motivations for volunteering. For example, the sense of satisfaction with the immediacy of gleaning activities was mentioned again in response to the question “What did you like best about gleaning?” The benefits expressed by respondents included: (1) the excitement of immediately seeing the results of volunteer activity, (2) being part of nature and being physically active, and (3) connecting with other gleaners, while educating youth about food, hunger, and nutrition issues.

The immediacy of results. Many of the participants seemed pleasantly surprised by how much they enjoyed the activity. One respondent stated “It's fun...and addictive.” A

sense of almost disbelief accompanied the work when they surveyed their success in gleaning a field. Respondents were excited by how much they were able to glean, and by the idea that their labor had contributed immediately to hunger alleviation. Seeing the finished product helps people to feel they were making an impact, and it makes them feel good about themselves and their volunteer work. For example Jenna stated “It’s rewarding—I sleep really well after a gleaning.” Denise, who had supervised a group of participants at her church, commented:

I thought ‘this is going to be a rough week.’ But it was so rewarding when they came back and told us that we had picked something like 4,000 pounds of potatoes in 2 hours. And we filled trucks; these farmers would drive up with their trucks and we just kept filling their truck beds. That was such an exhilarating moment for them and the next day they were ready to go again.

Physical activity and being part of nature. Participants commented on the benefit of going “back to nature” with gleaning activities. Some participants, raised in smaller towns, felt that gleaning took them back to their childhood experiences. Others simply noted that the physicality of the activity is invigorating, and that they benefit from the exercise. Donna noted “It was exhilarating...just sticking my hands in the ground and not caring.”

The sense of being part of nature and engaging in physical labor were viewed as rewarding for many respondents. “Being outside” and “very hands on” were two expressions used to describe positive aspects of the volunteer work. Kristina summed this aspect of the experience by saying:

I think the physical aspect—you know, hard labor is good for you. I think people don’t realize that. We’ve become a very lazy society and when you get out and physically work so hard, you don’t realize how rewarding it is until you actually get out there and do it!

Connections with others and youth education. The volunteers were excited because being involved with gleanings allowed them to connect with other members of the community and to form new friendships. In particular, respondents noted that this allowed them to meet people from different faith backgrounds, and to learn about their beliefs while sharing their own. It also was viewed as a community-building activity within their own faith communities. Sarah, for example, noted “After the gleaning we

decided to start our own garden at church, and are growing zucchini to distribute to the hungry.”

This connection with other gleaners was also important in terms of youth development. Many of the respondents had brought youth groups or their own children along to gleanings, and they were excited about the relationships that youth formed with people from other faith backgrounds, noting that many of them later became Facebook “friends” and continue to have contact with one another. Further, the gleanings provided the volunteers with an opportunity to educate youth about poverty, hunger, nutrition, and farming. This “hands on” exposure for youth was very important to many of the respondents, who explained that they wanted their children to understand where food originates, and how much food is wasted in our food distribution processes. This youth development component was noted by Diana, who had participated in SoSA West’s Harvest of Hope:

The cool thing with Harvest of Hope is that you worked with a different church. You know two different denominations came together and we went to a different denomination every day for lunch and worked with those communities. So it was a very big learning experience in that capacity for our kids...coming together and this is such a Biblical thing to do. So that was really cool for the kids. Then just learning, they taught all week long about how the nutrition just starts depleting as the food travels across the United States and how most of our food travels at least 1500 miles before it gets to our grocery store. So the nutritional value is just gone. It really inspired our kids. We had to do short-term goals, personal goals, then a group short-term goal and a group long-term goal. Our group long-term goal was to plant our own garden and feed the hungry. So that’s what we are doing this summer. We will be gleaning our own food.

Challenges of Gleaning

While the respondents were clearly enthusiastic about gleaning, they also recognized that the activity was not without its challenges. Many of these concerns were related to the physical challenges of the job, and all were quick to point out that SoSA West had made them aware, prior to volunteering, that the work could be difficult. The perceived challenges of gleaning included: (1) exposure to sun and insects, (2) the difficulty of the physical labor itself, and (3) the time consuming nature of the activity.

Exposure to sun and insects. Exposure to the elements, particularly to sun and high temperatures, was mentioned as a difficult aspect of gleaning. This is of particular concern when some of the volunteers are elderly. The presence of insects and spiders was also mentioned as something that might be difficult for some potential gleaning volunteers. Respondents cautioned about the need to bring water, gloves, and sunscreen, and the wisdom of wearing long sleeves to prevent sun exposure. While SoSA West's recruitment messages included these warnings, some volunteers are recruited indirectly through word of mouth, and these messages may not be delivered. Annette cautioned:

I think a thing to remember is that sometimes you think that it is common sense but really it's not. It's hard to think through everything. You know they always tell you to bring something for water and gloves possibly and bug spray, sunglasses, sunscreen, and a hat. When you are out picking corn, there is no shade and some people may not understand that.

The physical nature of the work. Gleaning is hard work. Stooping, bending, and climbing on ladders were all mentioned as challenges of the activity. The work can be quite difficult as volunteers cut and pull produce from the soil, or climb to pick fruit from trees. Because the work is repetitive, volunteers report they often leave with sore muscles, and sometimes, with bruises. At times, volunteers become overheated, and in some cases have to "sit out" the activity in shade when the work proves too difficult for them. Doris noted:

I was black and blue after picking corn as you push your way through all the stalks. I had no idea that I would end up with bruises all up and down my arms and legs. It really was a lot of fun but I had no idea that I would end up black and blue.

The challenge of finding time to glean. Respondents discussed the issue of finding time to glean in the midst of busy work and family schedules. This concern was raised for two distinct reasons. First, respondents stated that SoSA West often announced gleaning opportunities which afforded little preparation time for volunteers. Further, for congregation based gleaning coordinators, this can make finding additional volunteers more difficult. The respondents did not raise this concern in a critical way, and understood that requests from farmers for gleaners surface quickly:

It is understandable because sometimes they (SoSA West staff) don't even know. I mean it's not like they keep it a secret or anything. They get a

phone call and the farmer says “okay, it is ready this weekend.” But then, there can be bad weather or anything else...I think we get the most notice we can.

Even with adequate notice, volunteers commented that one has to be aware of the time commitment involved with the activity. In addition to the time involved in the actual gleaning process, travel time must be taken into account. Participants noted that the farms are generally not located close to the Kansas City metropolitan area, and there may be significant travel time to reach a gleaning site. Focus group members noted that volunteers need to be aware of this time commitment and gas costs that they might accrue. However, members were in agreement that this is an acceptable “downside” to gleaning. As Jean noted “ That’s the nature of it... we don’t have many farms in the middle of the city. So you do have to go a distance. Like with my church if we can we try carpooling or something to try and help on that. It’s not just the gleaning time; it might take you two hours to get there and two hours to get back.”

Conclusion

Volunteer gleaners were uniformly enthusiastic about being involved with SoSA West. Religious convictions, the immediate impact of the activity, concerns about wasted food, and the ability to help multiple stakeholders simultaneously were mentioned as factors which made SoSA West’s recruitment efforts attractive to the volunteers. Once they began gleaning, respondents thought that benefits included the connections they felt to nature and the community, a feeling of gratification in seeing their impact, and the ability to educate youth volunteers about food production, food waste, and hunger. Still, the work is perceived as challenging, and respondents identified heat, insects, and physical exertion as obstacles that potential volunteers should consider before gleaning. In the next section, we report on findings from focus groups conducted with the agency partners who receive the produce for their food banks and pantries.

Section 4: The Agency Partners

After produce has been gleaned from fields and orchards, SoSA West oversees its distribution to the area food bank and/or pantries. In this section, we report our findings from a focus group conducted with three individuals who are employed in some of SoSA West's partner agencies. Two of the participants, Matt and Maggie, manage Kansas City area food pantries, and Greg is an employee of the Kansas City area food bank. The interview focused on (1) the relationship between SoSA West and the agencies, (2) the perceived quality of the produce, and (3) the respondents' perceptions of the operations and procedures used by SoSA West.

Relationships with Area Agencies

We began our interview by asking the participants to describe their agencies to us. As noted, one respondent works for the Kansas City area's food bank, while the other two manage food pantries. Food banks are organizations which serve as a distributor of donated food to area agencies such as food pantries, soup kitchens, schools, and other institutions. Food pantries are agencies which distribute food directly to the hungry, often on an emergency basis. The food pantry employees participating in the focus group utilize the food bank to secure food for their pantries.

The relationship between SoSA West and these agency partners is somewhat complicated. SoSA West donates food directly to the food bank, and in that sense is not different from any other produce donor with whom they work. However, SoSA West works more closely with the food bank than do other produce donors, and in fact occupies a donated office space within the food bank's headquarters. This creates a close working relationship between the two organizations. At the same time, it creates confusion among food pantry employees about the identity of SoSA West. The food pantry staff acknowledged that they had only recently become aware that the produce they had received from the food bank had been donated by SoSA West.

Another case of "mistaken identity" surfaced during the conversation as well. While both food pantries had actually received donations of produce that had been brought to them directly from SoSA West after a gleaning, the participants hadn't understood the source of the donations. As one respondent told us "I didn't know who SoSA was until I got here today." This issue of confusion about SoSA West's identity

appears to be related to the similarity of its name to area churches, as well as the issue of the indirect nature of its contributions to food distribution sites. One food pantry employee told us:

We didn't know you were a Society of St. Andrews. We thought you were the St. Andrew's Church in Kansas City, Kansas. Cause the guy drove up and said "Hey, I'm with St. Andrew's and here's the bananas." Then the other guy comes up and says "We just picked corn. Can we leave it with you? We are the Society of St. Andrews"...we didn't realize until just recently that one guy was with the church and the other guy was from your staff....

Benefits of Partnering with SoSA West

As the interviews progressed, we began to hear comments from the agency partners which pointed to some of the benefits of working with SoSA West. In addition to receiving produce that is of higher quality than is generally available to the partner sites, SoSA West's donations are valued because they are received at no cost to the agency, helping them to meet high consumer demands.

Perceptions of food quality. First, we were interested in hearing the focus group participants' views of the quality of the produce that they receive from SoSA West. Participants shared with us that they had received a fairly wide range of produce from SoSA West, both directly and indirectly through the area food bank. Maggie shared that "Our produce usually comes to us on skids. Right now we have onions, potatoes...oh, and grapefruit. In the past we've gotten apples, pears, cabbage, bananas, oranges...whatever is available. It is kind of amazing—both the amount and the quality."

Picking up on the topic of quality, Greg stated: "I would say 90% of the food is of very good quality—maybe not quite as good as what is available in stores, but pretty close. It comes fresh from the ground, usually, and there are no bugs in it." The other respondents agreed and stated the produce received from SoSA West is quite good, especially in comparison to that received from other donors, including the food companies which sell lower quality produce to nonprofit food distribution sites. As Maggie noted: "Sometimes what you get from the food companies is on its last leg—but not what we get from SoSA and the food bank...so the food is less likely to go to waste."

Low costs help build agency capacity. SoSA West's donations were also valued because they are received at no cost to the agencies. The agency partners patiently explained the process of procuring food to the interviewer. The food bank, which receives donations and also purchases food, provides food to the food pantries and other sites, charging them a food handling fee. This is necessary to help the food bank to defray their costs of food purchase, handling, distribution and other expenses. Because each of these sites distributes large volumes of food each month, the staff members face concerns about paying a handling fee for the food they receive from the food bank. As Matt noted: "We are paying 10 cents a pound typically...it is a great deal, best deal on the planet and we couldn't survive without it, but at the end of the month I get a bill for \$3,000 or \$4,000."

Because of the expenses faced by both the food bank and the food pantries, great value is placed upon SoSA West's donations. Unlike the shelf stable foods for which there is typically a handling fee, there is no charge associated with the produce donated by SoSA West. This increases the food bank's capability to provide food to the distribution sites, and it increases the capacity of the food pantries to "stretch their budgets" as they endeavor to provide food that is in great demand. Greg, the food bank employed noted "It has been great working with SoSA...it has increased my donor data base and there is more food coming in, and more food going out."

Produce drops which come directly from SoSA West also help the food pantries because this food is provided at no cost to them as they face increasingly high demands on their services. Maggie noted that a recent food drop of 5,000 pounds of produce was quickly distributed stating "When the truck came, people arrived immediately...it is like they know the truck is coming, somehow. And we were out of all 5,000 pounds in one day." Similarly, the agency partners were enthusiastic about the food bank's free room, a section of the food bank where they can shop and take items without charge. SoSA West's contributions are placed in the free room, and food bank staff commented that being able to access such produce is enormously helpful in carrying out their mission. Maggie succinctly expressed her appreciation at being able to receive free, high quality produce from SoSA West:

I don't know how they found us—I had never heard of SoSA West, and they just called us out of the blue, and we've gotten wonderful food from them—all I can say is that this has just been a great gift.

Needs and Concerns of SoSA West's Partner Agencies

We were also interested in learning about the agency partners' views about the way in which SoSA West conducts its operations. As we explored the respondents' views of their interactions with SoSA West, they were highly complimentary of the staff's professionalism, warmth, and commitment to their work. We learned of some general issues with which agency partners contend which could have implications for SoSA West in terms of program planning and long-term agency goals. These include the high demands for produce from consumers, the difficulty in depending on volunteers to help the partners receive food at their agencies, and the desire for a greater diversity of produce offerings.

High demands for fresh produce. A significant issue for the agency partners is the high demand they face for fresh produce. The respondents shared with us that "As soon as we get produce, it begins to go out the door." The interest in fresh foods is extremely high, and in the past year, demands have gotten even higher as the economy has worsened. One participant reported that the desire for fruit to eat is especially high; as Matt told us "vegetables are popular, but fruit is gold."

When asked to describe what specific produce items were in demand, the agency partners again discussed the popularity of fruit. Matt noted that "Grandmothers taking care of children love to have the fruit...apples, strawberries, bananas... anything like that for when the kids get home from school. And older people, people living alone, really like fruit because they don't have to prepare or cook it. That makes it more popular than vegetables. We have a lot of homeless people that hang out...so a banana or an apple helps get them through the day until we serve a meal in the evening." Maggie added: "Especially if they can take a bunch of bananas, you know, the 'hand fruit'...something that lasts two or three days. So, if it has a longer shelf life, they don't have to come back so often."

The agencies struggle hard to distribute the food equitably. One strategy they use to make certain all clients have a chance to obtain fresh produce is to place it in shopping bags along with non-perishables as a sort of "pre-packaged" collection of groceries. The

agencies also try to put produce out slowly over several days to ensure that many different agency consumers have an opportunity to receive some of it.

Despite their gratitude for the opportunity to distribute healthy produce, they also explained that getting produce is a mixed blessing for them because it creates a desire for more produce, and as Matt noted, “When they come in, they are looking around for it asking ‘where’s the produce, where’s the produce.’” Clearly, there is a high level of demand for the produce garnered by SoSA West from the agencies and their consumers. As Greg said, “We just need more farmers to work with SoSA, and people need to start growing (crops) again. We just need more of everything....the more they get, the better SoSA looks, and the better I look!”

Agency dependence on volunteers and the timing of food drops. While receiving produce from SoSA West is viewed as a great value for the food pantries, the agency staff discussed some of the logistical challenges inherent in the transportation of produce. In order to avoid delivery fees from the food bank, the food pantry employees must drive to the bank to pick up the items. For both food pantries, this occurs twice a week. One partner reported that they rent a truck for those pick-ups because it is cheaper than paying for delivery from the food bank. And, because the food pantries operate on fairly minimal budgets, they frequently rely upon volunteers to help them pick up, load, and unload parcels of produce. Volunteers, however, are not always reliable. Maggie noted:

We come twice a week to the food bank. I don’t always have the help to unload it (the produce) when it arrives. We are lucky enough to have some wonderful volunteers who help us....but my Friday guy, he hurt himself and I was like “Okay, now what am I going to do?”

Chiming in, Matt agreed with Maggie’s concern about volunteers: “Something comes up in a volunteer’s life, and you don’t want to seem unfeeling. You are leaving us in a lurch...we made plans based on the idea that you were going to be here.” This makes the occasional food drop by SoSA West staff even more valuable to the food pantries, which are saved a trip to drive out to pick up the produce. At times, though, the logistical issues surface for them when an unexpected produce drop has to be cleaned, sorted, and prepared for consumers, especially if no volunteers are available to them.

A desire for greater produce diversity. Because the agency partners were so satisfied with SoSA West’s contributions, it was difficult to probe for areas in which the

organization could improve its operations. When asked about a wish list, the partners finally stated that they wished at times that they could get more diverse produce contributions. Many of the donations are the same type of produce from different donors.

As Greg said:

Here is what can happen...If SoSA gets a load of cabbage, chances are that I am going to get cabbages from other sources. At one time it was harder to distribute, but now we have the internet, mass emails, phone calls, and before you know it, your 200 pallets of cabbage is all spoken for and picked up the next day. I guess, though I have an ambition for more variety. I wish instead of having two loads of cabbage, I had one of cabbage, and one of apples....

Maggie, however, offered an important counterpoint in the discussion, correcting the interviewer when he used the term “overabundance.” She noted “You can never have an overabundance; you want to say God’s abundance. There is no such thing because there is never enough.” Clearly, for these agency partners, any donation of produce is valued for its ability to help them carry out their mission of feeding hungry citizens.

Conclusion

The agency partners clearly value the contributions made by SoSA West, and view the staff as helpful, friendly, and competent in their work. A major concern that they have pointed out is the lack of clarity about who SoSA West is and what they do. This occurs for three reasons: the shared office space with the Kansas City area’s food bank, the indirect route of donations from SoSA West to community agencies through their contributions to the food bank, and the similarity of the agency’s name to area churches and other organizations. The agency partners view the produce itself as being of very high quality, and they value the contributions for the increased capacity it provides them to help feed hungry people on very low organizational budgets. Finally, despite the difficulty of relying upon sometimes inconsistent volunteers to assist with food pick up, unloading, and preparation for consumption, working with SoSA West is considered to be a much appreciated “gift” by these extraordinarily busy and underfunded community agencies. In our next section, we explore the perceptions of the food pantry clients who are the consumers of the produce procured by SoSA West.

Section 5: The Consumers

Our final set of respondents, the users of food pantries, are those who ultimately consume the produce that is procured and distributed by SoSA West. We conducted focus groups with consumers at two distinct food pantries. The first was located in the urban core of Kansas City, MO. This site is a religiously affiliated food pantry which is part of a larger social service center that also includes an emergency relief program, job training, and a soup kitchen. This group was comprised of six members, all of whom identified as African American. Four of the participants were female, and two were male. The average age of the members was 50. For identification purposes, we will refer to respondents of this focus group as members of Group A.

The second focus group was held with consumers who utilize a nonprofit food pantry in an inner-ring suburb of Johnson County, Kansas. The pantry provides low income consumers with clothing, emergency assistance, and some household items. This group was comprised of five female and one male respondent. Four of the group members identified themselves as Caucasian, and two members were African American. The average age of the consumers was 48. For identification purposes, we will refer to respondents from this focus group as members of Group B.

In the focus groups we sought to understand (1) the extent to which participants relied upon food pantries to meet their nutritional needs, (2) participants' perceptions of the quality of the produce received, (3) participants' produce preferences and abilities to use the produce received from the pantry, and (4) perceived benefits of produce consumption.

Consumer Utilization of Food Pantries

Our interviews began by asking questions to try to understand the context of the consumers' economic lives and the ways that they meet their nutritional needs. Because of the sensitive nature of these questions, the interviewer attempted to gently ask the respondents why they had decided to turn to food pantries for assistance. Many of the respondents shared stories of recent physical illness, unemployment, divorce, and mental health concerns. Others discussed having responsibilities for large extended families that

strained their food budgets dramatically, causing them to turn to food pantries to fill the gap between their income and their nutritional needs. Meg, who volunteers at the suburban pantry, expounded on this point:

We have grandparents caring for children. We have mothers or fathers who get on drugs. And unemployment is just growing. Younger people get out of jail and they don't have...anything. We have people we have helped for years. We just have so many needs out there....but food is the biggest concern.

The respondents shared that while they might have income from employment, cash transfer programs, or food stamps, these supports did not allow them to completely feed themselves and their families. Because of this, they turn to food pantries. The extent of their reported reliance on the pantry varied, but reports ranged from between 25% to 75% of total food coming from pantry assistance. One participant shared: "I come here at the end of the month...I just run out of money by then. I get a grocery sack of food and I can stretch that out about a week until I get paid again."

Other participants stop by the centers more frequently to see if anything has been placed on their "free tables." These tables often are stocked with food that isn't included in the pre-packaged grocery bags, and can include things such as bread and produce. Many of the participants come by the agency almost daily and pick up something they can quickly grab. "Yesterday, I got nectarines and bananas here" said DeAndre, who reports that coming to the urban food pantry allows him to access much more produce than he would be able to obtain on his own.

Despite their gratitude for the produce found at the pantries, the respondents shared that the produce is taken very quickly, and that many of them don't have fresh fruits and vegetables more than twice a week. When I asked if they had days when they felt hungry, Claudia stated: "Oh, a many a day I am hungry....and most with no meat at all." Nodding in agreement, Mark told us:

The canned goods keep me surviving. I stock up on them a great deal especially on the beans and vegetables and greens. But, it is hard to do that with produce...I try to get enough to use it without spoiling. But they really help me extend my meals....I have a lot of canned goods and I can survive on them, but that fresh produce...it just helps.

When asked how satisfied they were with their diets, the focus group members on average rated their diets at a “6” on a scale of one to ten, with ten being very satisfied. Members shared with us that they were frustrated with inadequate caloric intake, too few fruits and vegetables, limited access to lean meats, and consuming too much processed and starchy food. Most credited their access to fresh produce from the pantries as making them more satisfied with their diets, but the sporadic nature of that access remains problematic for them. Peg told us that the suburban food pantry staff was working with her in helping her to make good food choices to help her control her diabetes. She reported “The staff here tries to help me stay away from sweets and to get healthy meat and vegetables...my rating would be much lower without this pantry, I can tell you that!”

Perceptions of Produce Quality

Although it isn’t possible to distinguish the produce provided to the food pantries by SoSA West specifically, we conducted the focus groups at sites that had been regular donation sites for the organization. This increased the likelihood that the consumers, all of whom are frequent users of the food pantry, would have been recipients of produce procured by SoSA West. When asked about the quality of the produce they received from the pantry, participants generally agreed that most of the produce was of high quality. Still, they also stated that produce quality varied, particularly when they received products that didn’t hold up as well. For example, Gina, who volunteers at a pantry and receives food there, noted “We got some kale recently, and it had begun to wilt...some of the stuff that arrives especially from the commercial donors—it isn’t always so good.” Others discussed the fact that while some of the produce was not edible, there were ways to cut off bad portions to make it workable for them. Linda told us “If you get something that is starting to go bad, you can cut off a third, and eat the rest...hey, some food is better than no food!”

Some of the variation in the produce is related to when consumers arrive at the pantry, and how many people are waiting ahead of them to receive assistance. As DeAndre stated “It matters when you get here—because if you are the last of the train, then you get the bottom of the produce.” Others agreed, noting that you have to select carefully. Keysha explained: “You have to pick your fruits and vegetables. That’s because you might get some bruised; you might get a bell pepper that’s busted. If it’s

busted and I feel that I can use it, I'll take it." Patrick agreed stating: "Sometimes you gotta pick through, and sometimes you find one that isn't perfect, but you can cut around the bruise and still use it....don't get me wrong, I am happy to get it."

Produce Use and Preferences

We were curious about whether the consumers were able to prepare the produce that they received from the food pantries, and whether much of the food that they received went uneaten. When asked if they use all of the produce they take home from the pantry, the focus group members looked baffled. In both groups, the respondents replied in unison that they don't let any food go to waste, and seemed genuinely surprised that they would be asked this question. As Monica noted: "When you have very little to eat, you don't waste food...and with a big family, someone is gonna eat it."

This is true, according to the consumers, even when foods are unusual or unfamiliar to the respondents. At both groups, the consumers shared that sometimes they get produce that they have never before prepared. DeAndre said "Sometimes, when that happens, they'll put a little recipe card in there, tell you how to use it. Like when I got the bok choy, I chopped it up and put it in the salad. It was delicious!" Others agreed and stated that they had learned to like new fruits and vegetables including unfamiliar cabbages and pluots. Rachel explained that "Eventually, the food goes to someone who can use it...nothing lasts. They got jicama here, and I didn't want it, but someone said chop it up and stir fry it! Or put it in a soup...I ate it and it was just fine. And, we have lots of Asian and Latino folks who come here—people from every country of the world—so sometimes they are more familiar with some of these vegetables."

When asked "If you could get your ideal fruits and vegetables, what would you want?" the interview became difficult because, in both groups, respondents began to talk over each other in excitement. A wide variety of foods were mentioned, including berries, peaches, watermelon, cantaloupe, tomatoes, sweet corn, and sweet potatoes. People began happily discussing some of their favorite recipes, including items such as sweet potato pie. Several mentioned the need for hearty produce, such as apples and potatoes, that can be stretched into several meals and that have a long shelf life. Then, spontaneously, Linda closed her eyes, and shared a happy memory of food that had arrived at the food pantry recently:

Well, that fresh corn that came...I don't know where it came from, but I'm seventy years old and I've never tasted corn like that before. It was so good...so sweet. You know how good it was? I always share with my family and I just kept hoping that nobody came over and asked for any of it.

Finally, a consumer who volunteers at the suburban food pantry told us: "We just need more. More variety would be awfully nice, but we just need more. We have a hundred people lining up here everyday, but they would be here all day long if we could just get more fruits and vegetables on the shelves...people are really in need right now."

Perceived Benefits of Access to Fresh Produce

Because we wanted to understand why the consumers valued fresh produce, we asked "Why is access to fresh fruit and vegetables important to you personally?" The focus group members responded thoughtfully, and provided several different responses related to energy levels, general sense of well-being, digestion, weight control, and positive benefits for their children. Others noted that fresh produce simply tastes better, and, as Claudia said "it is just more pleasing to the palate!"

DeAndre talked about how he struggles with constipation, and says that he notices that when he has access to fruits, he is able to have bowel movements more easily. He told us "It helps my digestion—I need the fiber. Yeah, the fiber is good, because if I can have a piece of fruit to turn to when I am hungry, it fills that little void...and it is nice because I don't have to cook it." Mark agreed with this comment, saying, "At my age, sometimes it can be hard to have good digestion. The fiber in this produce, it helps you stay regular." Karen felt her weight control was better when she could "fill up" on fruits and vegetables as well, noting "It keeps me away from the things that aren't good for me...you know, like donuts, cakes, and cookies...stuff like that." The group laughed and responded in agreement with her statement.

A significant theme that emerged was how important it is to the respondents that their children be able to eat produce. In some cases, getting kids to eat fruits and vegetables is a challenge. Mark stated "My youngest, he just wants to eat McDonald's all the time—I try to tell him he can't eat it constantly. He will eat fruit, but getting him to eat vegetables...that's hard work." Others agreed, but noted that when their children eat fresh produce, they have more energy, concentrate better while at school, and that

their skin looks better. As Meg noted “I’d say their skin improves when they get more vegetables in them...I used to work in a hospital and we noticed that a lot of the kids who came through had a lot of acne, and they told us they ate only starchy vegetables...you need green vegetables and such to keep your system clear.”

Perhaps one of the most intriguing comments made by participants in this study was voiced by Carla, who stated that having access to produce helps her family’s emotional climate and sense of well-being. She stated “We just get along better when we have some fruit for the kids to eat.” Puzzled, the interviewer asked her to expound on this point. She shared:

The kids’ attitudes...they change. If they don’t have those things...I can’t explain it exactly, it just changes. Well, I guess, they just don’t feel stress about what they are going to get to eat. And then they have a smile on their face when they find out they have an apple or that there is something sweet to chew on. Because you know when there isn’t any money to do it, then the kids...they get awfully depressed.

Conclusion

Our focus group with consumers was enlightening, providing information about their experiences of being the “end users” of the produce procurement process. They are deeply grateful for the access to fruits and vegetables they are unable to purchase regularly with their own resources. Many of the respondents are highly dependent on emergency food assistance from local pantries, and maintaining an adequate and healthy diet would be impossible without these services. The consumers perceive the produce to generally be of good quality, and they report that what they take home does not go uneaten. They would like to have more produce and a greater variety of items to choose from, but remain grateful for what they receive. Finally, they believe that their health and vitality, and that of their children, are greatly enhanced when they are able to consume healthy fruits and vegetables. In the next section, we consider the comments of all the stakeholders, and provide a set of policy and evaluation recommendations for SoSA West.

Section 6: Discussion and Implications

In this section, we attempt to consider the most salient ideas that emerged in interviews across the different categories of stakeholders. This discussion section will first summarize the strengths of the organization, stakeholders' motivations for involvement with the organization, and the perceived benefits received from participation with its programs. Next, we consider those stakeholder perceptions which have the greatest implications for program development, and then consider ideas which are suggestive of ways the organization could enhance its program evaluation efforts.

Perceived Organizational Strength and Benefits of Participation

The qualitative data generated through our focus groups and in-depth interviews was quite rich, and produced extensive transcripts for analysis. We recounted the perceptions of SoSA West's key stakeholders by moving from "farm to table" as food made its way from growers' fields to the tables of Kansas City's needy food pantry consumers. The organization is highly regarded by growers, agency staff, and volunteer gleaners, and the produce is of great value to both the partner agency staff members and the food pantry consumers. Throughout the report, we have shared the stakeholders' excitement and interest in the mission of SoSA West. In general, the stakeholders perceive the organization to be run by competent and thoughtful staff members.

The various stakeholders, particularly growers and gleaning volunteers, also shared their motivations for involvement with the organization. Stakeholders are motivated to work with SoSA West because of their religious convictions, concerns about food waste, concerns about the poor, and because of the immediacy of the impact they are able to have on hunger. The mission of SoSA West is straight forward and easy to understand, and their message seems to resonate for others. There are many strengths on which to build the organization, and these should assist SoSA West staff in the process of recruiting growers and gleaners.

Moreover, the stakeholders perceive SoSA West as beneficial to them in myriad ways. For growers, the volunteers are a source of free labor to help them glean their fields, making donations affordable. The gleaners themselves benefit from a sense of accomplishment, a connection to nature, the ability to educate their children about hunger

and food, and the development of a sense of community. The partner agency staff members benefit from being able to afford to distribute high-quality produce to their clients. Finally, the consumers benefit from access to produce they would otherwise not receive, and they believe that it improves their health and the health and productivity of their children.

Program Development Implications

First, the high level of interest in produce from growers and consumers, and the excitement about gleaning as a volunteer activity, suggest that the demand for SoSA West's services is quite high. Given this, a major program goal for SoSA West should be the recruitment of more growers as community partners. Given unforeseen events such as recent record high temperatures, it makes sense for the organization to recruit additional farmers to maintain adequate levels of food donations. Moreover, finding more growers could address the interest in diverse types of produce voiced by both agency staff and food consumers. To achieve this, it might be useful for SoSA West to develop a formalized multi-year plan for grower recruitment, specifying action steps, targeted outcomes, and methods for evaluation of their efforts. Securing funding dedicated to such a marketing plan also seems prudent, given how essential grower recruitment will be to the long-term success of the organization. A budget for travel, phone calls, meal reimbursement, and lodging could be necessary if SoSA West is serious about making further advances into the western United States. Further, since some contacts with the organization are initiated by the growers themselves, earmarking funds for advertising could also be a useful recruitment strategy.

Second, the work of SoSA West is made more difficult due to the unpredictable timing inherent in farming. While there were surprisingly few complaints or concerns raised about the administrative practices of SoSA West staff, those which were expressed were related to difficulties with timing and coordination of volunteers, and adequate preparation for gleanings. When gleaners are not able to respond to a gleaning request in a timely manner, SoSA West staff members sometimes step in to complete the task. Developing contingency plans for gleaner unavailability might be useful.

Another logistical issue that surfaced was that of arriving at a gleaning with a truck that was too small to transport all of the produce available for gleaning. Issues such

as this seem to require a long term solution. While the SoSA West staff members have used their personal vehicles to help in such situations, this doesn't seem to be an adequate method for the resolution of food transport problems. This may be an issue for the SoSA West advisory board to consider. Similarly, some of the logistical issues identified by volunteers (such as potential exposure to the sun and insects during gleanings) could be addressed by using funds to purchase water, gloves, bug spray, and sun block as a contingency for those who did not bring these supplies for their volunteer activities.

A third issue that may need to be addressed is the difficulty SoSA West faces with name recognition. Area food bank employees who had been receiving produce supplied by the agency were not aware of the organization, and had confused it with area churches with a similar name. Moreover, because the organization donates primarily to an area food bank, the agency doesn't receive public "credit" for the food it procures. It is important for nonprofits to develop a positive reputation for the services they provide, and taking time to bring attention to their accomplishments could behoove SoSA West.

Cases of this "mistaken identity" may lessen as people in the greater Kansas City area become familiar with SoSA West and its mission of procuring produce. Still, SoSA West's name is not merely confused with that of area churches—it also is a name which doesn't really describe its mission, making branding of the organization more challenging. A name change for the organization might be very helpful, and while this would seem to be a momentous decision, it is not without precedent among nonprofits. For example, one of the largest hunger relief organizations in the country, Feeding America, was previously known as America's Second Harvest, and it continues to be a thriving nonprofit.

Program Evaluation Implications

Several themes which surfaced during the interviews generated promising avenues for the development of outcome measures for SoSA West to consider in the future. As noted, an individual level impact assessment would be quite difficult to conduct due to the complicated process of donation of produce to intermediaries. For example, studying nutritional impacts at the household level would require coordination with multiple agencies, the ability to separate SoSA West's produce donations from those of other donors, and the tracking of health outcomes over a long time horizon with a

study sample with whom consistent contact over time might be very challenging. However, three alternative evaluation possibilities emerged from the interviews with stakeholders.

First, the partner agency staff members reported during their interviews that their organizational capacity had increased due to SoSA West's produce donations. Agency level capacity building impacts could be analyzed quantitatively. This would likely require careful tracking of SoSA West's produce donations to a small subset of food pantries. With the cooperation of the pantries, SoSA West could calculate the percentage increase in pounds of food resulting from the donations. The organization could also calculate the financial value of the donated produce based upon comparable market rates. These agency level capacity building outcomes may one of the most appropriate for SoSA West to consider.

Second, SoSA West might consider exploring outcomes focused on volunteerism. While the organization tracks the number of volunteers recruited for gleanings, more complex volunteer measures might be constructed. The efforts of volunteers represent many hours of unreimbursed labor which could be translated into a financial value. However, there are potentially other impacts of the volunteerism that are social or psychological in nature, rather than financial. An outcome measure of volunteer well-being related to their gleanings, for example, might provide some compelling data about the opportunities afforded to the gleaners. Similarly, a measure of hunger and nutrition knowledge gained by youth volunteers might also prove to be a useful outcome. Finally, it might be useful for the organization to track demographic data about its volunteer base to determine whether a racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse base of volunteers are being recruited.

Third, it could be helpful for SoSA West to begin to develop some process or quality improvement measures. As opposed to outcome measures, process measures could be used to help the organization reflect on its own internal operations. This could include such things as timeliness of responses to gleaning requests, the percentage of available produce obtained at a gleaning, or the number of new grower contacts initiated each month. Paying attention to internal processes with a quality assurance program might be useful for the long-term development of SoSA West.

Conclusion

Our qualitative study of the perceptions of SoSA West's stakeholders generated useful information that can help inform program development and future program evaluation efforts. Qualitative research, of course, has limitations, and we should remember that we learned about the perceptions of only a sample of the larger population of SoSA West's community partners. Because of this, our findings should be viewed judiciously, and SoSA West staff should consider our recommendations in light of their greater contextual knowledge of the organization and its practices. Still, the respondents' comments, both positive and cautionary, do provide SoSA West staff with some important information to consider as they continue to build a dynamic organization doing so much to increase the Kansas City area's capacity to address hunger and nutrition issues.

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Appendix A: Grower Interview Guide

- **Introductions**
- **Review of confidentiality concerns**
- **Review of ground rules for conversations**
- **Purpose of the interview**
- **How the data will be used**
- **Questions from the participant**

Discussion Guide:

1. What do you know about SoSA? How would you describe it to someone?
2. Where did you first learn of the organization? (Prompts: When? Where? From whom?)
3. Did someone ask you to become involved or did you contact SoSA?
4. What made you decide that you wanted to work with SoSA? (Prompt: tax deduction, desire to feed the hungry, etc.)
5. In general, what is your reaction to the idea of gleaning and donating produce?
6. What type of produce did you donate? Was there a reason that you chose to donate that particular type of produce?
7. Did you donate produce that had already been gleaned, or did you allow volunteers to glean your field or orchard? (Prompt: Was there a reason you chose to contribute in that way?)
8. Can you describe the gleaning process?
9. Was it a positive experience for you? Why?
10. If there were problems, can you describe them?
11. Were SoSA staff easy to work with? What did they do well? What could they do differently to make gleaning a better experience for you?
12. Would you allow gleaners to work with you again?
13. If you donated produce that had already been harvested, why did you choose to do that? (Prompts: rejected produce, excess produce, etc.)
14. What produce did you donate?

15. Was your experience positive? Did SoSA cover your expenses? Was staff helpful? Could SoSA staff have done anything to make your experience more positive?
16. Can you think of things we could do to recruit more growers to help us? Where might we find more growers? What might we say to them that would help convince them to work with us?
17. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience working with SoSA?

Appendix B: Gleaner Interview Guide

- **Introductions of interviewers and participants**
- **Review of confidentiality concerns**
- **Review of ground rules for conversations**
- **Purpose of the focus group**
- **How the data will be used**
- **Questions from the group**

Discussion Guide:

1. Let's start off by talking about how you came to volunteer as a gleaner for SoSA. How did you first hear about the organization? How did you learn about the opportunity to volunteer as a gleaner?
2. What made you sit up and take notice of this opportunity—what made you decide to volunteer? Did you talk to others about volunteering before you decided? Did you volunteer with a group or on your own?
3. Why do you think others volunteered to be a gleaner? Do you know others who didn't choose to glean? Why do you think they chose not to participate?
4. Can you describe what the gleaning experience was like for you?
5. What did you particularly like or enjoy about gleaning?
6. Where there things you disliked about the experience? Would you glean again?
7. Was the process of gleaning explained clearly to you before you began?
8. Were there any barriers to participating in the gleaning for you? Are there things that staff could have done to make gleaning easier or more accessible for you?
9. Is volunteering for SoSA West as a gleaner different from other volunteer activities you have engaged in? How?
10. If you were going to tell others about SoSA West what would you tell them?
11. Do you have any suggestions for how SoSA West could recruit more gleaning volunteers?
12. Do have any other observations or thoughts that you would like to share about SoSA West or about your experience with gleaning?

Appendix C: Agency Partner Interview Guide

- **Introductions of interviewers and participants**
- **Review of confidentiality concerns**
- **Review of ground rules for conversations**
- **Purpose of the focus group**
- **How the data will be used**
- **Questions from the group**

Discussion Guide:

1. Can you tell me a little about your agency? How would you describe your mission/objectives?
2. Does the agency get fresh produce from Harvesters? How often?
3. What types of fresh produce does it get from Harvesters?
4. What is the most common type of produce available from Harvesters?
5. Has your agency ever received produce directly from the Society of St. Andrew?
6. If so, what type of produce?
7. What was the condition of the produce your agency received from SoSA?
8. How was it received by the agency's clients? Did they take it or did it spoil at the agency and have to be thrown away?
9. Do the agency's clients seek out fresh produce when it is available? What type of produce is most popular with the agency's clients?
10. Would your agency want to receive more fresh produce from the Society of St. Andrew?
11. What is the process for receiving produce? Does that process work well for you?
12. How could it be improved?
13. How would you describe your interactions with SoSA staff?
14. Has SoSA had any impact on your ability to deliver food to area clients? How?

Appendix D: Consumer Interview Guide

- **Introductions of interviewers and participants**
- **Review of confidentiality concerns**
- **Review of ground rules for conversations**
- **Purpose of the focus group**
- **How the data will be used and Questions from the group**

Discussion Guide:

1. I would like to start by getting a sense of your use of food pantries and a just a little bit about how you and your family meet your food needs. Where do you shop for food? Are there reasons—other than financial—that you come to the food pantry? How often do you come to the food pantry? What kinds of food do you get from them? How much do you rely on food pantries for your overall food needs? Are there other ways you are able to get food when you are “running short” on money? How often do you eat fresh fruits and vegetables? How satisfied are you with your diet overall? Your family’s diet?
2. Have you seen fresh fruits or vegetables at this agency before? How often do you think that the agency has fresh fruits/vegetables available?
3. Did you receive some of those fresh fruits/vegetables when they were available? Why or why not?
4. What fruits/vegetables did you receive? Where they of decent quality?
5. Were they familiar to you? Did you know how to prepare them? How did you prepare them?
6. What is your favorite fresh fruit? What kind of fruit does your family like? How often is it available at this agency?
7. What is your favorite fresh vegetable? What kind of vegetables does your family like? How often is it available at this agency?
8. Why do you think eating fresh fruits and vegetables is important?
9. Do you notice any difference in yourself or in your family members when they are able to eat fresh fruits and vegetables? Any impacts on their health? Your children’s ability to concentrate?
10. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me about the topics we have covered today?



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