Stabilizing Lives

2017 White Paper

A Partnership between the

Atlanta Community Food Bank
&
University of Georgia

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Food Bank Partner Agencies
In the Atlanta & greater Metro Atlanta area

- Berean Seventh Day Adventist Church – Atlanta, GA
- Community Assistance Center – Sandy Springs, GA
- Conyers Seventh Day Adventist Church – Conyers, GA
- Covington First United Methodist Church – Covington, GA
- Emmaus House – Atlanta, GA

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RESEARCH PROJECT OVERVIEW

Starting in fall of 2016, the Atlanta Community Food Bank initiated a three-year program, *Stabilizing Lives*, that focuses on designing more holistic and concentrated services to partner agency clients to achieve food, housing, and financial security. The University of Georgia's role in this process was designed in two phases:

1. *Phase 1* – To help facilitate a participatory research process with staff, volunteers, and clients at five participating agencies to identify factors that promote food insecurity.

2. *Phase 2* – To work in consultation with food pantry clientele to place the decision-making process and methods of social change into the hands of the clientele, emphasizing the capacity of participants to identify problems, emphasize and legitimize cultural meanings, and conceptualize and implement developed solutions.

The overarching research question:
Where should the food bank invest more resources to help support households' move toward social and economic stability?

KEY FINDINGS:

- The current organization of emergency food distribution treats recipients as atomistic individuals, without recognizing or responding to their membership in family networks or their stage of the life course. Food pantry clientele, like anyone else, know themselves as members of families and social networks of care and obligation, and these connections strongly influence their food needs. They, like anyone else, encounter different nutritional and additional needs at different stages of the life course.
- Food pantry clientele draw on a diverse set of social, cultural, and human capital resources to negotiate the trade-offs of living in poverty. They possess ingenuity, resourcefulness, knowledge, and experience that could be productively incorporated into re-envisioning the social safety net.
- Results point toward a need to re-envision the current emergency food infrastructure model to more purposefully situate clientele, the food bank, and local agencies as equal partners in a re-making of the food pantry model.

This research was made possible by funds provided the Atlanta Community Food Bank to the University of Georgia.

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METHODS

Each participating agency, through the direction of the Food Bank, organized a planning team that was comprised of food pantry staff (~2), volunteers (~3), and clientele (~3-5). Planning teams were intended to function as a collective and cross-representative voice of the associated agency. Teams used the following process to facilitate conversation about factors affecting food insecurity for clients.

- *Focus Group #1* - The planning team for each agency met with UGA researchers. In this first meeting, the primary areas of inquiry and discussion included:
    - The effectiveness of agency (food pantry) practices and services to those who are food insecure.
    - Describing agency clientele, as it related to obstacles regularly faced, experiences of food insecurity, greatest needs.
    - Defining stability and identifying associated variables.

- *Photovoice* – At the conclusion of the focus group discussion, the clientele involved with the planning team were invited to participate in the photovoice portion of the project. Clients who chose to be part of this phase were asked to take pictures of places or objects that were part of their "food world." This was defined as the ways they gathered, transported, prepared, and consumed their food. Participants were encouraged to take at least one photo per day and text it to a designated Google Voice number for researcher retrieval. They were given one month to complete this portion of the project. Staff from the food bank called clients during this period to remind them to submit photos, and UGA research staff also texted reminders to clients near the end of the collection period.

- *Photo Interview* – Following one month of photo collection, client participants were provided a print out of each of their submitted photos and encouraged to describe them in a semi-structured interview with a member of the research team. During this interview, each client selected *five photos* they believed best showed their food world and provide captions for each photo. All clients also had the opportunity to select photos from a "bonus deck" comprised of a representative sample of photos from all sites. This was helpful for clients who submitted fewer photos. Clients and researchers then had an open-ended discussion about these photos, talking about the context for each and why the client thought it was important to include.

- *Focus Group #2* - The planning team for each agency reconvened for a second focus group with each agency. This meeting was divided between two main tasks:

1. *Photo Sorting and Analysis* – Each client's top photos were combined into a single collection for each agency to create a "photo deck," similar to a card deck. Each planning team member then individually sorted the photos from their respective agency in two ways:

    - *Sort #1* – Each participant grouped photos together based on perceived similarity—photos that the participant felt told similar kinds of stories (i.e., most participants grouped photos showing families cooking and eating together.)
    - *Sort #2* – Each participant grouped photos into three groups (labeled 1, 2, and 3) based on how big a role the food bank and partner agencies should play in the story told in each photo.

    Sort #1was analyzed using hierarchical cluster analysis to identify photos commonly grouped together amongst all participants at a given location. From this analysis, researchers created three to five composite photo groupings from each agency. Sort #2 was analyzed by averaging across each of photo grouping to determine which showed issues of highest priority to the food bank as perceived by the participants. Each agency planning team was shown how their individual sorts statistically grouped together. They were then asked to collectively discuss and interpret the clusters identified by the analysis and identify connections, if any, that existed between or among clusters.

2. *Qualitative themes* - Themes that had emerged from the first focus group and client interviews, encouraging participants to expand upon or refine the themes—specifically how themes were uniquely played out in the context of their respective agency.

The following is a timeline of when each phase of the data collection took place.

	January	February	March	April	May
Focus Groups #1					
Photo Submission					
Photo Interviews					
Photo sorting & Analysis					
Focus Groups #2					

RESULTS

Photos and sorting

Across the five agencies, 31 clients submitted 344 photos to the project. Of those, 14 clients submitted ten photos or more and seven submitted fewer than five photos. One client submitted 44 photos--the highest count--and five submitted only one.

The most popular subject matter for clients' photos were food shopping, preparation, and consumption. Figure 1 shows three examples, including a cooking scene at home, food purchased at the grocery store, and a mobile market food distribution at one of our partner sites.

Despite their similarities, we found these photos to be rich starting points for discussion during focus group interviews, leading to topics such as parenting issues, tradeoffs between food and other costs, transportation, and work commitments.

Figure 1: Three showing food selected by clients. Caption for left photo: "[My son] helping prepare quesadillas for dinner." Top right: No caption provided. Bottom: "This is a great value for the cost."

Figure 2: Examples of photos not explicitly about food. Photo caption (from top to bottom): "Saving money", uncaptioned, and "Mother is ready to make food."

Other photos did not directly show food, instead focused on other contextual factors. Figure 2 shows a sampling of these photos.

The photo at the top—which shows a calendar, coupons, an EBT card, and cash—was chosen by several participants to show the financial and logistical complexity of monthly food planning.

Many participants included photos of happy children similar to the middle photo to show their motivations for obtaining quality foods. The photo on the bottom was one of the few that showed a mode of transportation, which fostered rich dialogue among many participants either in one-on-one interviews or focus group discussions.

The photo groupings created in the second focus groups covered a large range of themes:

- Concerns about food quality,
- The desire to care for children and loved ones
- Strategies for stretching food dollars
- Ideas for preparing unfamiliar foods
- Education around nutrition and gardening

Figure 3 shows an example of Sort #1, in which participants have sorted photos that tell similar stories. Each of the photos in this group shows prepared foods, including multiple casseroles, a breakfast plate, and a meatloaf dinner. Although the photos themselves featured the foods as a main subject, the focus group discussion about this group concentrated on times when planning team members cooked food for larger groups. Participants voiced concerns about whether cooking foods for extended family violated policies for the federal SNAP program and how individual limits on food from food distributions made it more difficult to care for extended family members. At each agency, discussions about these groups often highlighted the active ways clients adapted to real financial or policy-based limitations in attempting to provide food for loved ones.

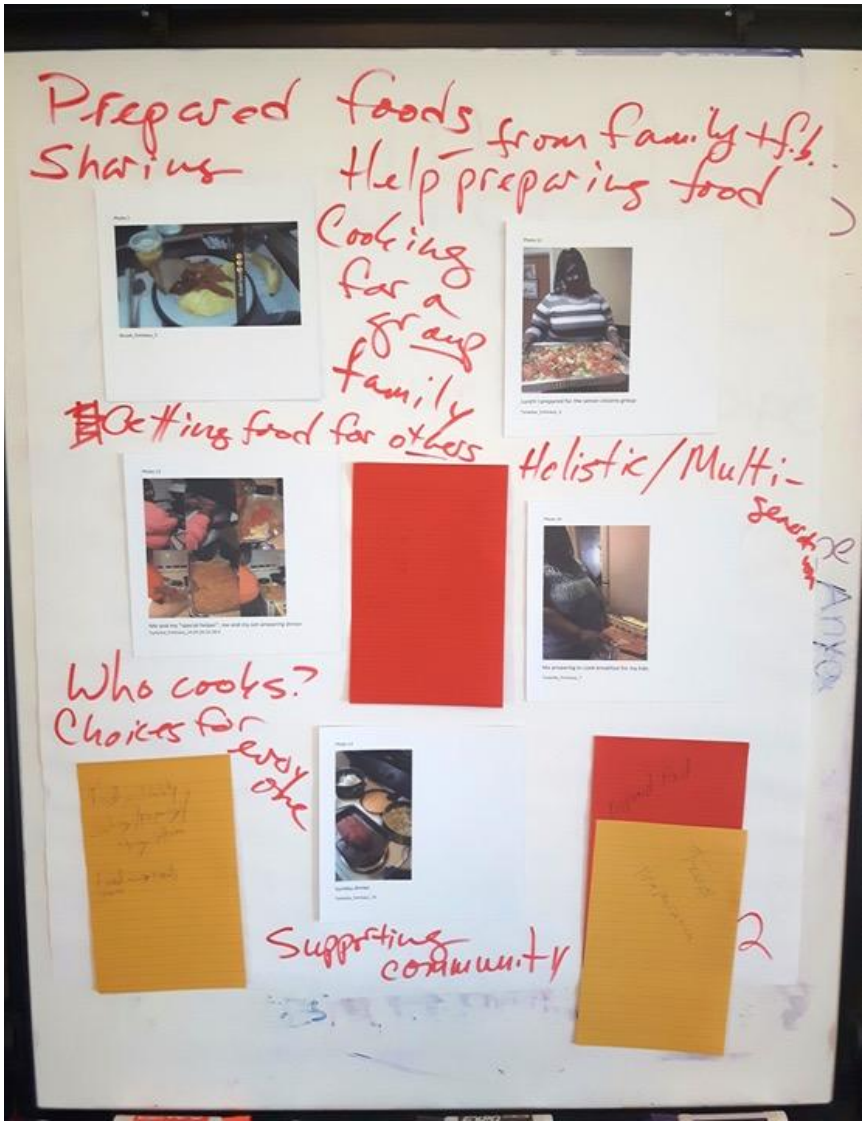

Figure 3: A photo grouping from one partner agency's focus group #2.

INTERVIEWS & FOCUS GROUPS

Over the course of this project—including all focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews—the research team engaged in constant comparative analysis of collected qualitative data across all five partner agencies. This process allowed for themes to emerge that offered a deeper insight into the current issues, needs, and opportunities available within the greater Food Bank network. The following provides an overview of each emergent theme, including a supporting quote from one of the participants.

Emergent Themes

THEME 1: Helping Others and Self

Throughout the duration of the project, clientele often shared a desire or a sense of responsibility to volunteer at the food pantry, share food with family and neighbors when they had extra (which was often a reciprocal act), offer rides to neighbors or someone they see needing assistance while en route, and offer information or guidance to friends and family on how to save money (i.e., couponing).

In addition, participating clientele (predominantly women) often talked about a desire to contribute to their family and lessen the burden. For example, they would work hard to secure enough food so family members could focus on finding a job, going to school, etc. This effort was coupled with a desire to earn enough money to pay for bills rather than having to rely on assistance to cover a bill on a given month (i.e., electricity). Sometimes they realized this could not be an option and in order to ensure family was provided for, they would turn to a food pantry or agency for assistance.

> "My first paycheck that I had got, it all went straight on bills… I barely had clothes, and I'm barely giving [my kids] what they need, so most of the things that I do, like I stretch it out, and if I have $3 to my name, I go get them clothes and shoes that's on clearance sales and stuff. I put me last at the end of the month. That's how it is." *(Focus Group #2)*

THEME 2: Dealing with Health

In all stages of the data collection, the struggle with food restrictions came up often. Such struggles were associated with allergies, diabetes, and heart conditions, which often made meal preparation more difficult and taxing. Health conditions also led to medical bills that compromised and competed for other living expenses. This was especially the case if individuals did not have insurance or Medicaid would not cover necessary items, such as medications, procedures, or higher-priced food due to dietary restrictions.

> "My son… is allergic to soy, severely, um, nuts, eggs, and milk. So, we have to alter a lot of our foods--prepare meals separately. Uh, deprive him of things, because you just can't afford it. You know, he can't have peanut butter and jelly. He could have almond butter,

> but it's $8 a jar, so he just doesn't get it… He really, really wanted ice cream. Well, they have ice cream that he can tolerate, but it's like $4 for a pint. *(Interview)*

THEME 3: Facing Complexities and Uncertainties of Life

Food pantry clientele shared on numerous occasions that it was an abrupt change in circumstances that led them to seeking additional help at the food pantry. Such changes included loss of job, divorce, or their food stamps being reduced or cut altogether. Other circumstances were ongoing, which also drove them to the pantry: struggling to get a job, or finding one but not having transportation to get to it daily, and then dealing with a high cost of rent. This resulted in dealing with trade-offs, where monthly expenses were prioritized, some getting omitted one or more months at a time. Amidst these tough decisions was a fear of judgment or stigma for going to a pantry.

> "I had even a guy on the phone who was supposed to be the social worker. Told me, well, bottom line he can't help me… this was years ago, when I, I just started. Just moved here, I was making minimum wage and I tried to get food stamps to feed the kids. And the guy literally told me over the phone that the only way that I'll be able to get food stamps is if I sell my car. And work less hours on my job. And I explained to him, I said 'If I work less hours, I can't pay my bills. And if I sell the car, how am I going to get to work?'" *(Focus Group #1)*

THEME 4: Taking Ownership, Being Creative and Finding Solutions

Even as clientele identified personal and collective obstacles, they often brought up ideas or interests they had that demonstrated a sense of ownership of these issues. For instance, they suggested developing programs that taught meal planning based on the food provided at the food pantry, food preservation, or gardening. A couple individuals demonstrated a keen sense of budgeting and couponing, suggesting they could help teach others to do the same. They also wanted to ensure that others had access to the pantry if they needed, brainstorming such ideas as a shuttle service or ride sharing.

> "I want to hear from you guys too. Like, I've had this crazy idea of like a meal prep club, and I actually was already talking to the people at the food bank about it. But it would help me, because I know sometimes working all day and like basketball practice and all these activities. At 7 o'clock, I know very well I shouldn't stop at Wendy's, but Wendy's is on the way to my house." *(Focus Group #1)*

CLIENT-INFORMED PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The four themes offer a glimpse into the daily lives of food pantry clientele, which includes ongoing obstacles and needs, as well as ideas and aspirations. As a result, the researchers compiled the data into three areas of client-informed program development: Instructional modules, resource access, and collaboration projects. Each of these areas reflect proposed ideas and interests that facilitate the vision of what a pantry could consider. Specifically related to instructional modules and collaborative projects, clients demonstrated interest to be involved in the design, development, and delivery.

Instructional Modules

Client suggestions on class or training topics:

- Growing - gardening, seed propagation
- Keeping - food storage, food preservation, unused produce
- Preparing - cooking, nutrition, healthy eating, homeopathic methods
- Managing - budgeting, meal planning

Client preferences regarding formats for learning and delivery:

- Formal / Traditional class design
- Cooperative learning (peer-to-peer)
- "Fun day" for kids (i.e., cooking competitions)
- Videos for "in-line" waiting (i.e., Tasty Videos)

Resource Access (from the agency)

- *Food-related* - recipes, seeds to grow produce, diet-appropriate food, snack/coffee while waiting in line, tastings with available food
- *Service-related* - on-site computer, referral program (client-informed), childcare, night hours at agency, others picking up food for them, transportation to and from the agency
- A*wareness* - information sharing, social media, publicizing existing programs.

Collaborative Projects

- *Agency food truck* - cooking demos, highlighting cultures in neighborhood
- *Facebook page* - involving resources/opportunities at the county, community, or neighborhood levels to encourage community sharing and resource direction
- *CSA (community-supported agriculture)* - designed for or geared toward low-income families.

CONNECTING THEMES & SOLUTIONS WITH CURRENT INFRASTRUCTURE

The current and well-known emergency food infrastructure (Figure 4) ensures that support and provision coming from the food bank is delivered to partner agencies. Agencies then distribute resources and assistance directly to individuals and families in need within the surrounding community.

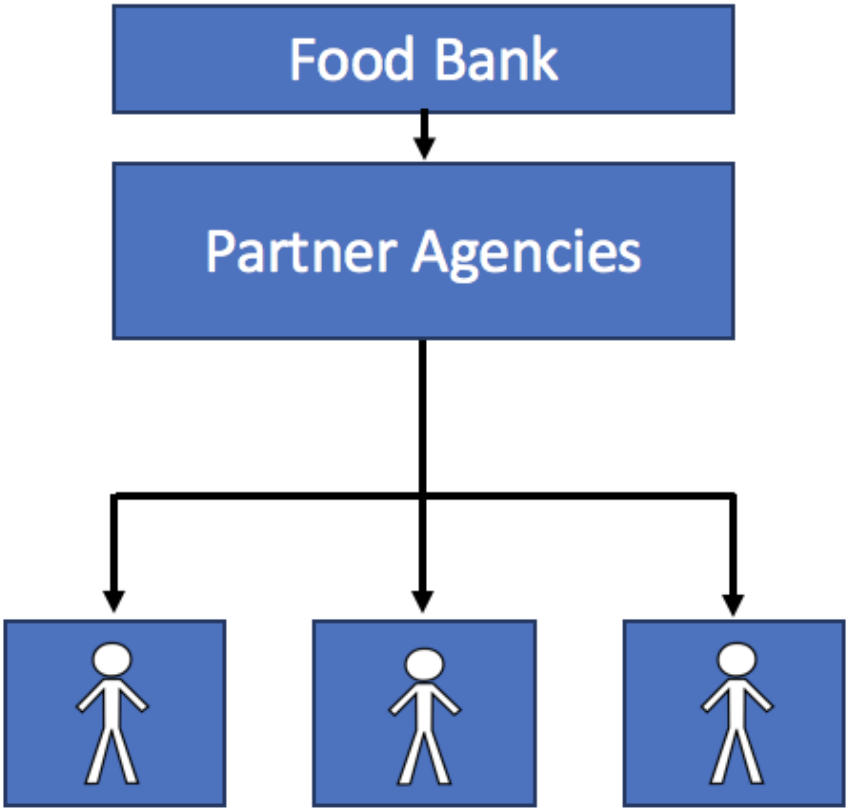

Figure 4: Current emergency food infrastructure

Based on the results from the UGA research project, the research team determined that integrating these results into the current infrastructure lends itself to a more purposeful and co-constructed approach to addressing food insecurity and overarching stability issues with agency clientele (Figure 5, p. 12). It situates clientele into the ongoing dialogue and solution-building process.

This integration then challenges the top-down approach to solution building shown in Figure 4 and places the client as a central figure in agency planning.

As the results indicated, clientele have a diverse and rich set of social, cultural, and human capital resources that lend to their daily lives varying degrees of ingenuity, resourcefulness, knowledge, and experience. Informally, and often individually, they have instituted unique

family and social networks of care and obligation. Therefore, while clientele would often negotiate the rules, expectations and policies of the food pantries and other community resources may have to depend on, they would simultaneously turn to their capital resources to negotiate the networks in which they are situated.

By purposefully opening up a space for clientele to contribute to the solution-building process, this would create opportunities by which individuals and families can more formally build capacity among themselves to address issues indirectly related to food insecurity, such as strengthening a community support network, addressing transportation access, and becoming aware of available resources.

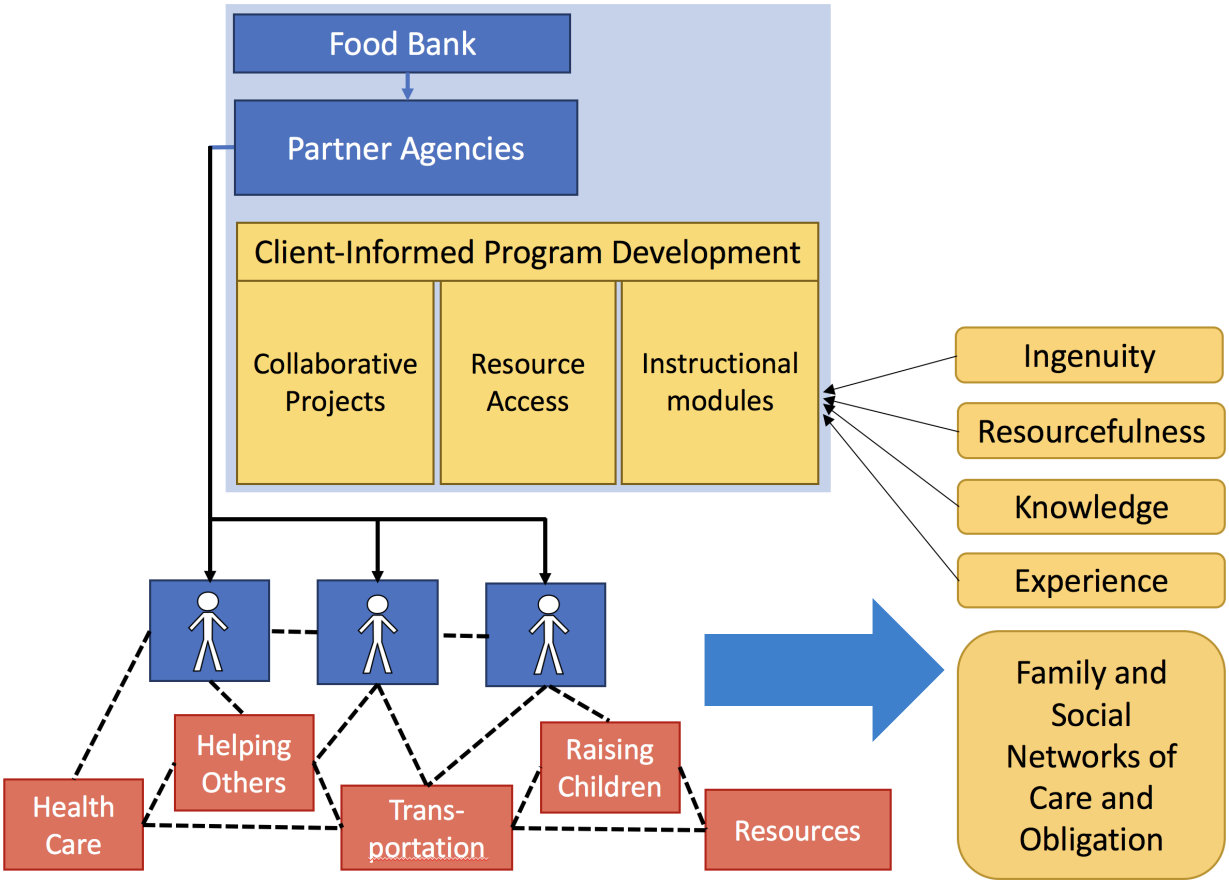

Figure 5: Situating clientele into the solution-building process of the emergency food infrastructure.

Such an integration then suggests an overall revision to the emergency food infrastructure model by situating clientele, the food bank, and local agencies as equal partners in a discussion that re-envisions the food pantry model (Figure 6).

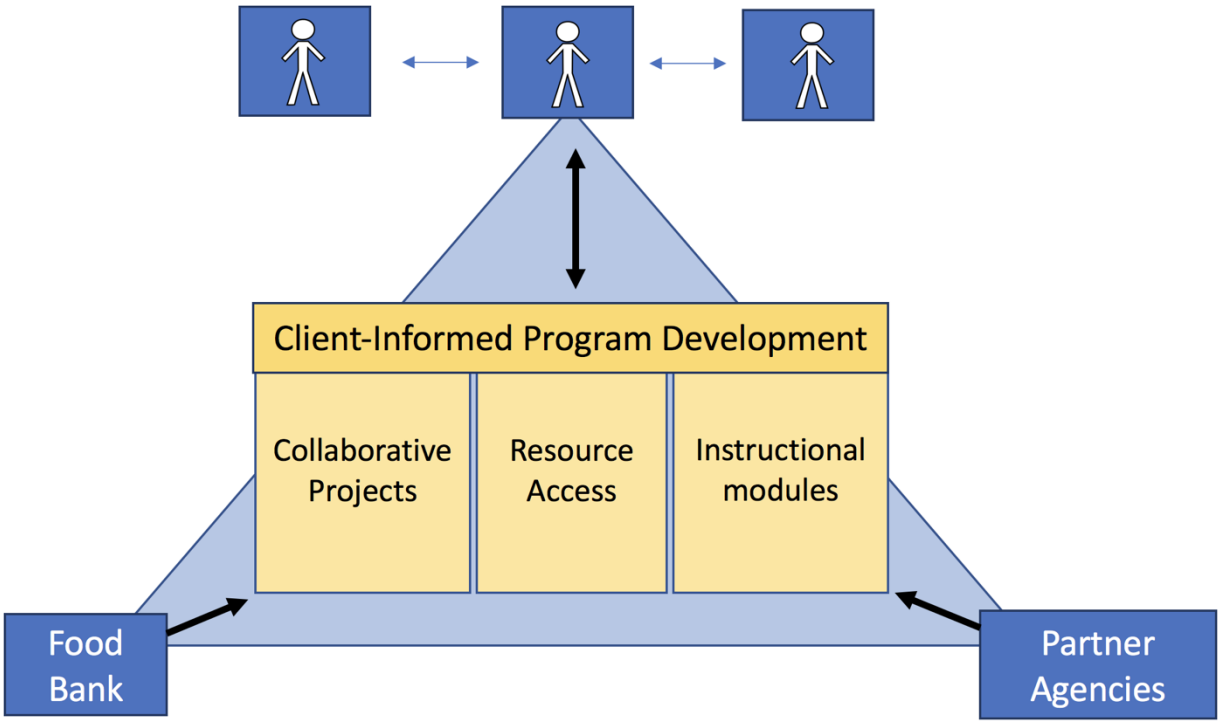

Figure 6: Re-envisioning the emergency food infrastructure with clientele, the food bank, and local agencies as equal partners

CONCLUSION & FUTURE RESEARCH

The Atlanta Community Food Bank has initiated a three-year program, *Stabilizing Lives*, to focus on designing more holistic and concentrated services to partner agency clients to achieve food, housing, and financial security. Such a focus includes re-envisioning the food pantry model. The research led by UGA was intended to offer results that would inform the development of such a model. The food bank is currently in the design phase of this new pantry by offering support to restructure and broaden capacity at select partner agencies in and around the metro Atlanta area.

Our results show that clientele demonstrate a strong sense of understanding or being aware the complex issues and obstacles they and other face on a daily basis. As a result, they are in a

constant state of negotiation within the capacity of persona experiences, ingenuity, resourcefulness, and knowledge to make ends meet. This is valuable information that, if integrated robustly, can provide guidance to food pantries to support and improve social and economic stability to the plethora of individuals and families served at each location.

While such a finding in this project is significant, we also see and accept that there are potential obstacles that affect or even hinder the development of a client-centered model. First, even if a pantry adopts this model, it will be important to:

(1) *Consider approaches and associated activities that are feasible* – We cannot expect that any location willing to move toward a client-centered model integrate methods as we did in this project (such as interviews and focus groups) to be done in as comprehensive or replicable manner as we did. Rather, there would need to be modified approaches that perhaps place more of an emphasis on volunteer and staff training that addresses directed methods for listening and engaging with clientele, ultimately bringing them into solution-building processes and activities.

(2) *Consider the capacity for sustainability over time* – It is important to recognize that it may be difficult for agencies with limited staff to find the time or financial resources to continue soliciting client involvement. Therefore, how might pantries better engage with clients who do not normally participate in planning meetings? In addition, a one-size-fits-all approach does not apply to every pantry. Therefore, a new model must be flexible. It needs to expand and contract and provide unique offerings from one location to the next, based on the needs of the individuals and families it serves. But, the question remains, how does the food pantry or the food bank address this and create a framework that allows them to instill this flexibility?

The extent of this project did not lend itself to addressing approaches that support flexibility and sustainability. Additional research that designs and tests staff and volunteer training programs, as well as a variety of methods that ensure agency clientele are at the forefront of the conversation and solution-building process is needed.

However, given the often rich social networks and individualized needs of pantry clientele, we believe that a client-centered model will produce more holistic and innovative models for empowering households in need. And, based on the evident commitment and existing infrastructure of the Atlanta Community Food Bank and its partner agencies, we believe there is potential for this to take place.

As university researchers, we were grateful to collaborate with food bank staff on this project and look forward to seeing how the results are implemented in the years ahead.