COMMUNITY LINKS
A Collaborative Model Point of Entry Program

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Community Links is a model point of entry program born out of a collaboration between Syracuse Jewish Family Service and the food pantry at Temple Society of Concord. Its goal is to connect pantry patrons to existing human services that can reduce their dependence on emergency food. The Community Links worker functions as a case manager, without the negative stigma frequently attached to "official" case managers. By following up with clients regularly the worker is able to encourage and redirect them as needed, ensuring that they receive the assistance they need. The Community Links program is an easily replicable model.

As Jews, we are commanded to care for the needy and the stranger. We are told, "Do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger, or the poor man" (Jeremiah 7:10). The Torah teaches that caring for the poor is not a matter of charity, but of justice, or tzedakah. In Jeremiah 22:3 we are instructed, "So said the Lord: Perform justice and charity, and rescue the robbed from the hand of the robber, and to a stranger, an orphan, and a widow do no wrong, do no violence, and shed no innocent blood in this place." Those who perform their obligations toward the poor will be rewarded. As it says in Psalms 41:2, "Praiseworthy is he who looks after the poor; on a day of calamity the Lord will rescue him." Indeed, God informs us that poverty is only a temporary condition: "For the needy shall not be forgotten forever, neither shall the hope of the poor be lost to eternity" (Psalms 9:19).

While Jews have a long history of supporting hunger relief programs, few Jewish organizations in the United States provide direct relief to hungry people in our own country. The America's Second Harvest (A2H) network includes approximately 26,300 food pantries, 76 percent of which are operated by faith-based agencies affiliated with churches, mosques, synagogues, and other religious organizations. The number of Jewish organizations participating is relatively small. This low participation may be due to denial of the existence of food insecurity in the Jewish community and the insufficiency of kosher food through USDA emergency food distributions and donated foods obtained through the Second Harvest program.

POVERTY, HUNGER AND FOOD INSECURITY IN AMERICA

The United States produces enough food to feed every American and to export food to assist in feeding people around the world. Despite the abundance of food resources, however, food poverty is a growing domestic issue and a significant concern for social service providers. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA, 1999) reports that 10 percent of all U.S. households, representing 19 million adults and 12 million children, were "food insecure" because of lack of resources in 1999. Of the 10.5 million households that were food insecure, 3.1 million suffered from food insecurity that was so severe as to be classified as "hungry." Five million adults and 2.7 million children lived in hungry households.

When most Americans think of hunger they have visions of the extreme deprivation suffered by subjects of photojournalism. Emaciated bodies and swollen bellies are the hallmarks of starvation. Hunger in America has a different look and a different definition. When hunger in America is discussed, people are usually referring to the recurrent and involuntary lack of access to sufficient food due to poverty or constrained resources, which can lead to malnutrition over time. Often termed food insecurity, it is the lack of access to enough food to fully meet basic needs at all

times. Hunger is physiological in nature and may be defined as the uneasy or painful sensation caused by the lack of food.

Poverty rates in 2000 continued to reach record low levels for some populations (U.S. Census, 2000), dropping from 11.8 percent in 1999 to 11.3 percent in 2000, virtually matching the record low set in 1973. Family households maintained by women with no husband present experienced a 4.0 percent increase in real income between 1999 and 2000, to $28, 116, but this was still significantly below the national average. Other types of households experienced no significant change in the median household income. However, according to the Children's Defense Fund (2000), the incidence of child poverty rose in full-time working families.

Despite the drop in poverty rates, the demand on emergency food programs continues to increase. A study conducted by America's Second Harvest (2001), the nation's largest organization of emergency food providers, estimated that 23.3 million people annually participated in emergency food programs, including 21.3 million pantry users, 1.3 million kitchen users, and 0.7 million shelter users. Among all households served, A2H classified 71 percent as food insecure using the U.S. government's official food security scale. This included both clients who were food insecure without hunger and those classified as food insecure with hunger.

Indicators of food insecurity and hunger have both quantitative and qualitative elements. In food-insecure households the food does not last and there is not enough money to buy more. Food-insecure households are not able to afford balanced meals. Clients in food-insecure households are more likely to cut the size of meals or skip meals because they cannot afford food. Fifty percent of adults who participated in the A2H (2000) study, approximately 4.6 million households, reported that in the past 12 months they ate less than they felt they should because there was not enough money to buy food. In the same study 12.4 percent of clients with children said their children skipped meals because there was not enough money to buy food, and 14.9 percent said their children were hungry at least once in the past 12 months because they could not afford to buy food.

Emergency food programs serve a broad cross-section of households in America. Approximately 45 percent of clients are white, 35 percent African-American, and the remainder are from other racial and ethnic groups (America's Second Harvest, 2001). The largest group of those receiving assistance are children. Thirty-nine percent of the members of households receiving food assistance are children under 18 years old. Eleven percent are 60 or older. The majority of households (39%) receiving food assistance have at least one employed adult. Only six percent of those receiving aid also receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), while 8 percent receive General Assistance.

Everyday many hungry Americans make difficult choices among the essentials of living. Nearly half (45%) have to choose between paying utilities or buying food. More than 35 percent choose between buying food and paying their rent or mortgage. Almost a third (30%) must choose between paying for food and paying for medicine or medical care (America's Second Harvest, 2000).

Many of the consumers at emergency food pantries participate in government-sponsored food assistance programs. Among households with school-aged children, 65 percent participate in the federal School Lunch Program and 50 percent participate in the School Breakfast Program. Participation in the School Breakfast Program set records last year, with more than 6.5 million low-income children nationwide served daily by the program (FRAC, 2001). Fifty-two percent of households with preschool children participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). However, only 30 percent receive Food Stamp Program benefits, although likely many more are eligible to obtain them.

THE COMMUNITY LINKS PROJECT

Food pantries are increasingly serving members of the working class, including many former welfare recipients who have left the

welfare rolls as a result of national welfare reform. Many food pantry consumers are in need of additional services, but lack the skills and knowledge to get connected to the human service delivery system.

Onondaga County is home to 83 emergency food pantries and 6 soup kitchens that are members of the Food Bank of Central New York, a certified affiliate member of the A2H network of food banks. Seventy of these programs also are part of the Interreligious Food Consortium, a network of faith-based pantries. The number of individuals served at emergency food programs has shown a slow, but steady increase over the last 3 years, attesting to the rise in food insecurity among individuals and famlies in the community.

In a survey of local emergency food providers the majority agreed on the following points:

- The demand for emergency food is increasing.
- They are serving more families, more working people, and more people who have never before used an emergency-feeding program.
- Almost no one requesting emergency food needs *only* food—the vast majority of individuals and families who have a need for emergency food also need assistance with other issues, i.e., housing, employment, education, domestic violence, substance abuse, and more. Many programs exist in Onondaga County to meet those additional needs.
- Most emergency feeding programs depend on the labor of already burdened volunteers.
- Most volunteers do not have the skills or knowledge to research the programs available to clients, make referrals, and follow up on the results.

The Community Links pilot program began and continues at the Temple Society of Concord food pantry as a partnership between the pantry and Syracuse Jewish Family Service (SJFS). The food pantry at Temple Concord is the only emergency food program at a Jewish facility in an 110-county central New York region.

Community Links is a model point of entry program. Its goal is to connect food pantry patrons to existing community human services that can help reduce their dependence on emergency food. Information and referrals are provided free of charge on a drop-in basis, and follow-up appointments are available. The Community Links worker is on-site during the 2-hour period the pantry is open each Friday afternoon. Consumers in need of additional appointment times may see the worker at the SJFS main office, at the food pantry on a subsequent Friday, or at a mutually agreed-on time and place.

The most important role of the Community Links worker is brokering, or referring consumers to community agencies for services. The actual referral involves a two-step process: assessing the client's problem and needs and providing the link between the client and the intended service. For the process to work effectively the worker must know when to refer, how to refer, where to refer, and how to develop the referral. The referral process does not end once the referral has been made, but continues with systematic follow-up. It is important to know whether the client connected with the referred service, whether the service was effective, and whether the help received matched the worker's assessment of the problem. The success of each referral is monitored by a follow-up telephone interview. In some instances, when clients do not have access to a telephone, referrals are followed up by letter.

In a program evaluation study conducted in July 2001 the typical food pantry patron identified three service needs in addition to emergency food. Community Links participants have been referred to over 44 existing programs in Onondaga County, and the list keeps growing. Consumers are referred to both public and private not-for-profit organizations. Many of the services requested are available from Syracuse Jewish Family Service, and patrons are connected to the SJFS worker and/or program that can help them. Among the most popular requests are help in obtaining furniture and household items, as-

sistance in applying for government programs such as Food Stamps and Medicaid, and help in obtaining employment and child care.

A consumer satisfaction survey conducted at the Temple Society of Concord food pantry indicated that the level of consumer satisfaction is high. Ninety-nine percent of program participants said their overall impression of the program was excellent. Over 99 percent said they were *always* treated with respect and made to feel welcome. Over 90 percent felt they had received the assistance and direction they needed, and, perhaps most important, 100 percent said they felt comfortable coming back for more help in the future.

Based upon the overwhelming success of the pilot project the Community Links program is now expanding. A $10,000 grant from Mazon has enabled the Community Links project to begin operation at a second food pantry in the Kennedy Square apartment complex. Both the Temple Concord and Kennedy Square sites are located in the eastern quadrant of the City of Syracuse, in neighborhoods that have few community resources. Plans are currently underway to expand to four other food pantries that serve south and west side neighborhoods. Service recently began at Temple Beth El, a local Orthodox synagogue that does not have a pantry, but has a large number of aging congregants in need of multiple services. The Temple Beth El site provides an additional access point for member of the Jewish community and increases SJFS's outreach to Jewish elderly.

THE COMMUNITY LINKS PROCESS

Most food pantries require a short intake process that asks patrons to document their identity, residence, and household composition. The USDA requires that consumers provide a declaration of income in order to receive commodity foods. Patrons at Community Links pantries meet with the Links worker on their first visit to the pantry. The worker assists them in completing the paperwork required to receive provisions.

The Links worker also does a comprehensive needs assessment that includes screening for special health concerns or medical problems. Patrons who are pregnant, lactating, or have a child under age five are given information about WIC, the federal Women, Infants and Children special nutrition program. Households with children aged four and five are given information about local Head Start and pre-kindergarten programs. Parents are also encouraged to have all children receive recommended immunizations. The worker asks each client if there is a specific goal the client is working on right now and how Community Links can help him or her achieve that goal.

The Community Links worker tells each patron that information is available to assist him or her in many other areas of their lives. Each client is provided with a list of 22 available services, including assistance with basic needs (food, clothing, shelter), access to medical and/or mental health services and medical insurance, educational or vocational training, child care, legal services, and information about eligibility for public benefits. On hand are applications for a variety of public benefits such as TANF, Food Stamps, and WIC as well as information about Child Health Plus (a New York State-sponsored health insurance program for children who are not Medicaid eligible). Also available are brochures from most of the human service agencies and health services programs in the county. The worker has bus schedules and bus maps for all public transportation routes, bus tokens, and a cell phone. When a client is willing to accept a referral the worker can facilitate the connection by assisting the client in making an appointment and providing the client with the means to get there.

WHY COMMUNITY LINKS IS SUCCESSFUL

Most information and referral programs assume that clients have the ability to identify a problem, call for help, communicate the problem to a stranger, write down a phone number, make a follow-up call to the resource provided, recognize whether or not they have obtained the help needed, and, if not, persist and follow-

up. Frequently, patrons of emergency feeding programs lack these basic skills. In many cases, consumers cannot easily verbalize the issues they need help with, do not have telephones, or are quick to abandon the search for assistance once they hit a barrier.

By connecting repeatedly with consumers through the food pantry, the Community Links worker establishes a rapport with them and gets to know about their issues and their lives. The worker functions as a case manager, without the negative stigma and suspicion frequently attached to "official" case managers from the Department of Social Services or other formal programs. Clients perceive the worker as a resource, and many have brought family members, neighbors, and friends to meet the Community Links worker to ask for guidance and information. In fact, some clients come to access the Community Links resource even when they are not in need of emergency food. By following up with clients regularly as they use emergency food services, the worker is able to encourage and redirect clients as needed, ensuring that they do finally receive the assistance they need and want.

CONCLUSION

The Community Links program is an easily replicable model. Most communities have food pantries at faith-based organizations operated by volunteers. The majority would likely welcome the addition of professional staff that could serve clients and help them reduce their dependence on emergency food programs. Community Links is also an effective method of building bridges between Jewish agencies, non-Jewish agencies, and the general community. Often, non-Jewish human service workers and non-Jewish clients believe that they are not eligible for services from Jewish agencies. Community Links can also be a means of identifying and serving needy Jewish clients, many of whom are separated from the Jewish community because of their poverty.

In a time when financial resources for human service agencies are becoming increasingly scarce, many funding sources are looking toward collaborations as a cost-effective way to deliver services. Additionally, programs that increase the use of existing services, rather than duplicating existing services, are highly desirable. An important part of the human service professional's responsibility is to work within the context of the human service delivery system and the client's environment. The Community Links program enables the worker to act as a catalyst in a complex world of formal and informal networks. The worker is not only a gatekeeper but also a planner and developer in response to community needs. In this way, we as Jews fulfill our obligation that we are responsible, each for the other.

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