



Identifying Barriers to Food Security in Santa Clara County Supportive Housing Sites

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Introduction

Although Silicon Valley is one of the wealthiest areas in the nation, 19.3% of people are food insecure.¹ Some of the most vulnerable people to food insecurity are residents of supportive housing (SH) sites, which shelter unhoused people. For these individuals, food insecurity persists at approximately three times the expected level.² Within Santa Clara County (SCC), the rate of food insecurity among supportive housing residents is unknown. This gap in data is instrumental in ensuring that the local food system is not leaving the most at risk behind. Recently, nonprofits that provide food for SH sites in SCC have experienced budget cuts as a result of the “Big Beautiful Bill,” which has shifted funding within the food system away from these organizations.³ With the recent implementation of SB 13838, which places food providers in the role of food recovery organizations (FROs), it is important to understand how their recent loss of funding and their responsibility as food recovery organizations have been successful or unsuccessful in supporting the wellbeing of the supportive housing residents they serve.

Research Questions

1. What is the food security status of supportive housing residents in SCC?
2. How do food suppliers address food insecurity for housing residents?
3. What are current barriers to creating a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable food system?

Methods

1. Semi-Structured Interviews (n=10)

- We interviewed:
- 5 food supplier directors.
 - 3 supportive housing managers.
 - 2 community partners.

2. Director and Manager Surveys (n=5)

- We emailed food supplier directors and supportive housing managers links to initial and follow-up Qualtrics surveys.
- 5 food supplier director surveys were completed.

Data Analysis:

- Google Sheets: Initial rounds of interview and survey coding.
Bar charts of Resident Survey quantitative data.
- Dedoose: Subsequent rounds of interview and survey coding.

3. Resident Surveys (n=18)

- We printed and delivered paper surveys in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Vietnamese to 3 supportive housing sites.
- We also delivered anonymous drop boxes and flyers created in Canva with QR codes to a Qualtrics survey.
- Paper surveys were collected after 1-2 weeks.
 - 18 surveys were completed.

Figure 1: Data Collection Methods

Acknowledgements

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Reference
1 Bacon, C.M., Baker, G.A. The rise of food banks and the challenge of matching food assistance with potential need: towards a spatially specific, rapid assessment approach. Agric Hum Values 34, 899–919 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-017-9783-y>
2 Parpouchi, M., & Somers, J. M. (2019). Beyond housing for homeless people: It is crucial to remediate food insecurity. American Journal of Public Health, 109(4), 535–536.
3 County and Joint Venture Silicon Valley Pilot New Ways to Share Surplus Food with Affordable Housing Residents | Public Health | County of Santa Clara. (2025). <https://publichealth.santaclearacounty.gov/news/news-release/county-and-joint-venture-silicon-valley-pilot-new-ways-share-surplus-food-affordable-housing>

Q1: Food Security of Supportive Housing Residents

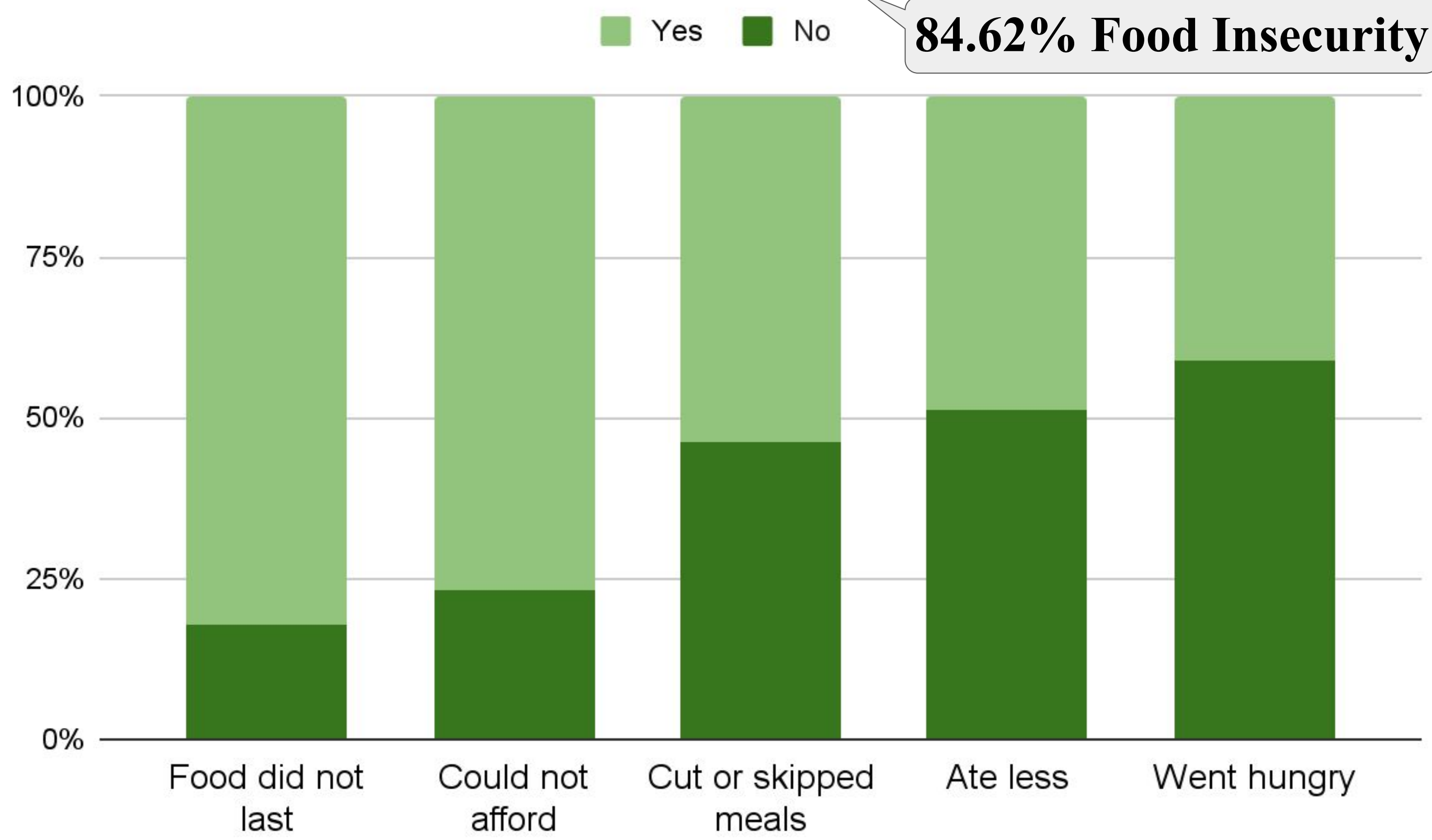


Figure 2: Housing Resident Food Insecurity Assessment (n=18)

source: resident surveys

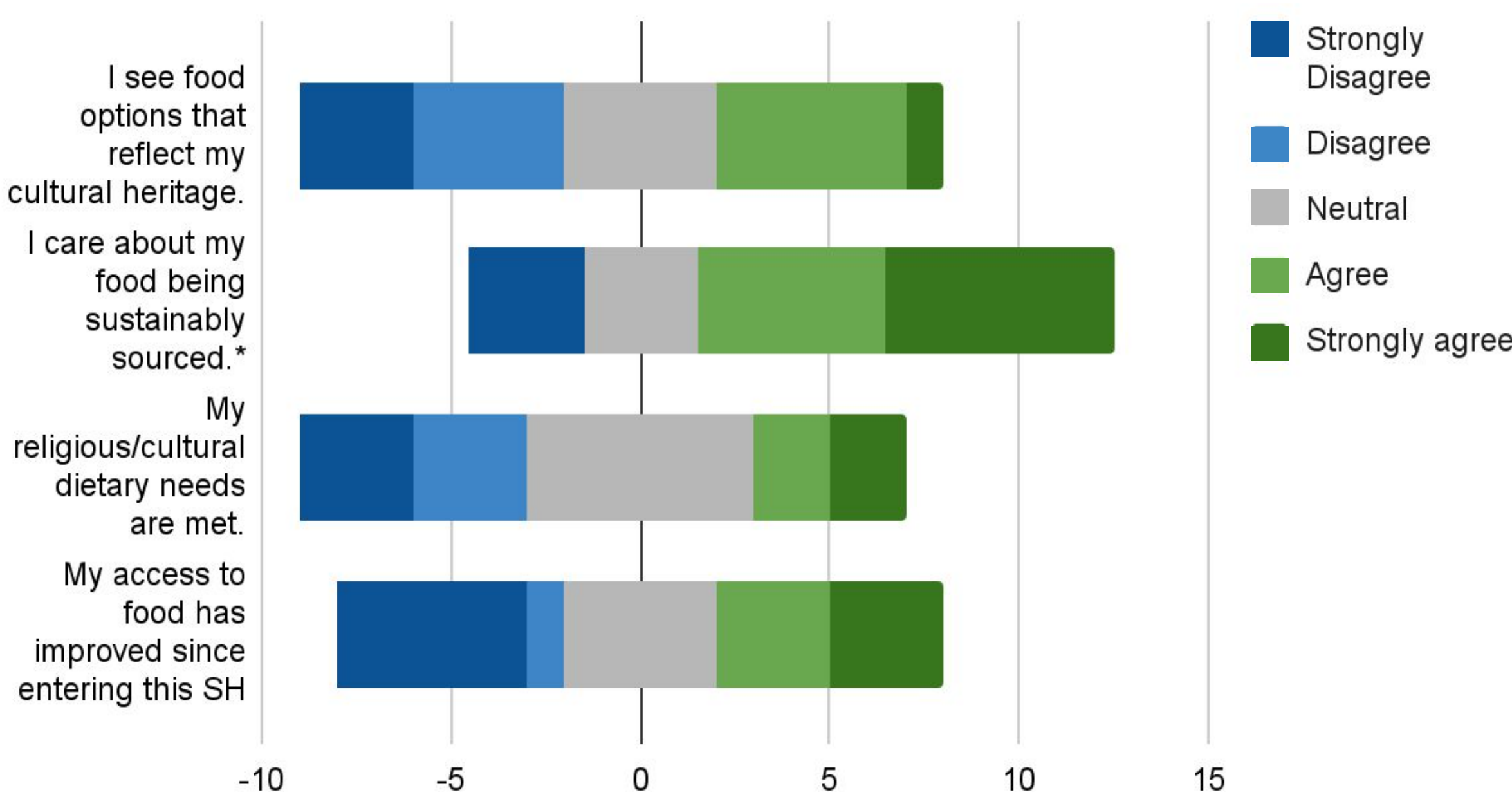


Figure 3: Supportive Housing Resident Attitudes to Meals Served (n=18)

source: resident surveys

Q2: Food Suppliers Addressing Food Insecurity

Table 1: How Food Suppliers Address Aspects of Food Security (n=5)

Category	Implementation	Quotes
Cultural Relevance	Lower	“If they have the doctor's note and everything, then we'll try our best to accommodate”
	Higher	“Housing advocates and on-the-ground partners provide valuable, ongoing feedback on the food being delivered, including preferences, cultural relevance, and dietary needs.”
Nutrition	Lower	“Not a certified dietitian, but I did have plenty of nutrition courses”
	Higher	“We consult a dietician frequently as an integral part of our meal planning and recipe development process.”
Meal Satisfaction	Lower	“We don't. Other than the Senior Nutrition Program, because that's a state-regulated program that requires that”
	Higher	“Our nutrition team and our programs team are very intentional around that. About once a year, we do a preference survey in multiple languages.”

Sources: 5 interviews and 2 surveys with food suppliers

Q3: Resilient, Equitable, Sustainable Food System

Table 2: Barriers to Food System Goals Per Stakeholders (n=10)

Category and Frequency Counts	Summary of Key Takeaways
Barriers to Resilience	[F] FROs as Safety Net for Assistance Programs – When resources like SNAP are cut, providers see a massive spike in demand, stretching food providers thin (Freq = 2). [C + H + F] Does Not Address Causes of Food Insecurity – Current food system models do not address underlying causes of food insecurity (Freq = 8).
Barriers to Equity	[F] Recovered Food Variability – Recovered food makes it difficult to plan menus and ensure accommodations can be made (Freq = 4). [F] Lack of Compensation – Food providers struggle to be compensated by housing sites for the meals they provide (Freq = 5). [H + F] Limited Staff and Facilities Bandwidth – Limited staff and resources make it difficult to execute every step of the food system (Freq = 7).
Barriers to Sustainability	[F] Food Rescue Inefficiency – Improperly packed food and too large of quantities of one kind of produce sent to food providers makes food inedible or impossible to incorporate into meals (Freq = 5). [F] Reliance on Purchased Food – Lack of certain recovered foods in mass amounts and reduced food from Second Harvest has driven many food providers to purchase most of their food (Freq = 4).

Sources: 5 interviews with food suppliers [F], 3 interviews with housing managers [H], and 2 interviews with community partners [C]

Conclusions

- 84.62% of surveyed residents are food insecure and 31% strongly disagreed that their food access has improved since entering a SH site.
- Food suppliers do not all have consistent methods for gauging the cultural and dietary needs of those they serve.
- Recovered food planning inefficiencies and Second Harvest’s scaled back operations have created a reliance on purchased food. This limits the funding available to food suppliers, alongside some housing sites not being able to pay full meal costs despite county funding.
- Stakeholders voiced that current food system models do not address underlying causes of food insecurity, such as housing insecurity, poor mental health, and low income. Both SH managers and food providers identified that a lack of funding alongside limited staff and facility bandwidth as two of the largest barriers in the food system.

Recommendations

Incorporate the diverse needs of all stakeholders by creating collaborative grant writing opportunities between government agencies, food providers, housing sites, small businesses, and local farmers while ensuring effective communication methods (e.g. monthly meetings).
Connect housing sites to funding for commercial kitchens, communal food pantries, and small businesses that can serve diverse food, which will reduce the cost associated with meal delivery.
Implement routine assessments at housing sites that measure the food security, dietary needs, cultural relevance, and meal satisfaction of residents. Evaluate how food providers are taking resident responses of all ages into consideration while providing consultation from a registered dietician and/or nutrition team.
Connect food suppliers to recovered food resources including food rescue contract opportunities, new food hub pilots, and streamlined methods for distributing surplus food and resources amongst providers (e.g. [foodrecovery.org](https://www.foodrecovery.org)).