



How Five Food Bank Communities are Listening and Learning Together



Acknowledgments

Feeding America

Authors: Shana Alford, Kelli Chavez, Trisha Matthieu, Brittany Morgan

Additional Contacts: Theresa DeVecchio Dys, Jessica Jelinski

Akron-Canton Regional Food Bank

Caitlin Ballinger, Katie Carver Reed, Jill Oldham,
Jessica Robb

Alameda County Community Food Bank

Kate Cheyne, Mike Fenocketti, Jenny Lowe,
Hailee Mertz, PJ Podesta, Allison Pratt

Gleaners Community Food Bank of Southeastern Michigan

Rachelle Bonelli, Bridgett Lomax

Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma

Effie Craven, Katharine Morgan, Cari Ogden,
Deanna Wasson

Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties

Amy Kaiser, Bruno Pillet

The Urban Institute

Somala Diby, Molly Scott, Rob Santos

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Throughout the network, we make good-faith efforts to ask the people we serve¹ about their needs and satisfaction with services they receive and programs in which they participate. This is typically done by conducting occasional surveys, community needs assessments and program evaluations.

However, based on feedback from the network, we realized it is not commonplace to ask the people we serve for their feedback on an ongoing basis. Additionally, it is seldom that we follow up to let them know what we learned from their feedback, whether we made changes to services and why. Yet, the people we serve have an important perspective that can help us further enhance our program and service strategies.

To begin addressing this issue, **five food banks received grants through the Fund for Shared Insight to test feedback loops as a method for gathering input from people served.**²

Teams at the Akron-Canton Regional Food Bank in **Akron, OH** and the Alameda County Community Food Bank in **Oakland, CA** have been working with staff at Feeding America and the Urban Institute on a three-year pilot called *Pathways for Community Voices*.³

In addition, through the same national funder's *Listen for Good* grant, matched by local foundations, teams at the Gleaners Community Food Bank in **Detroit, MI**; the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma in **Oklahoma City, OK**; and Second Harvest Food Bank in **San Jose, CA** have also been gathering input and feedback from people who visit food pantries in their communities.

We have already learned a lot from the pilots underway. Given the current level of network interest in authentically engaging the people we serve, we are sharing early insights about this collective body of work before the grants conclude.

GOAL

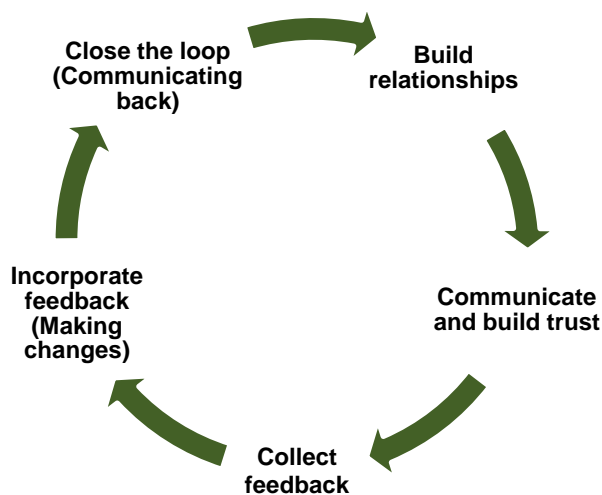
The goal of collecting ongoing feedback from the people we serve is to **gain their insights and perspectives** in order to continue improving the services we offer.

What is a Feedback Loop?

A feedback loop is a framework used to guide the process for collecting input from the people we serve. The key steps in the loop emphasize relationship-building, collaboration, transparency and accountability.

Feedback loops ask individuals to share their opinions and experiences with service providers on an ongoing basis. After asking for feedback, agencies use it to make changes and then **"close the loop"** by sharing with respondents what actions have been taken.

By closing the loop, food banks demonstrate their commitment to acting upon what they heard and opening the door for future feedback.



¹ Throughout this brief, we use synonyms for the people we serve, such as pantry guests, food program visitors, program participants, etc. These terms all refer to community members who visit food programs.

² [Fund for Shared Insight](#) is a collaborative effort among funders that provides grants to nonprofits who encourage and incorporate feedback from the people we serve.

³ [Urban Institute](#) is a Washington, D.C.-based think tank that conducts research and offers evidence-based solutions to pressing social and economic problems.

Each phase of the feedback loop guides food banks and agencies as they explore program and systems improvements. Although a loop is designed to be cyclical, activities may happen concurrently.

The following sections summarize how the five food banks described above have been implementing each phase of the loop along with initial insights and learning experiences.

I. Build Relationships between Food Banks and Agencies



While many food banks do serve people directly, the vast majority of direct service is done by our agency partners. Because of this, building strong relationships with agencies and engaging them in a common goal has been a critical first step for the pilots.

Food banks executed this step by examining the following internal factors:

- **Organizational commitment** – A demonstrated policy or strategy in place that elevated the importance of gathering input from people served.
- **Existing relationships** – Staff or teams who have regular contact with agency partners, such as staff from agency relations, nutrition education or other field-support positions.
- **Capacity** – The time and resources needed to build agency relationships, train staff and volunteers, collect feedback, analyze results and communicate.

Each food bank strategically chose a cohort of 8-12 partner agencies to conduct feedback loops based on two key criteria: a) strength of existing relationships, and b) diversity of people served, programs and areas. A few examples of how pilot food banks applied these criteria are:

- **Akron, OH** – Assembled eight agencies in an **agency council** to advise the pilot and serve as feedback sites representing both rural and urban counties and grocery and meal programs.
- **Detroit, MI** – Selected nine food bank pantries participating in a close-knit **Healthy Pantry Initiative** where they are moving to choice, increasing available perishables, introducing nudges, and asking for feedback about the changes.
- **Oakland, CA** – Convened 10 agencies throughout its dense, urban county in the Bay Area to advise the pilot through an **agency committee** and serve as feedback sites. They represent the language diversity in the area.
- **Oklahoma City, OK** – Chose 12 **Food and Resource Centers (FRCs)** as sites for feedback collection. The FRCs are partner agencies that offer access to healthy food through expanded hours and days of operation in a shopping environment, and case management-style assistance with referrals to support programs.
- **San Jose, CA** – Is collecting feedback at its 10 **Family Harvest** direct distribution sites where people are served by food bank volunteers.

“We have been promoting the Healthy Pantry Project as being trailblazers, early adopters. When we visit, it’s a “rah-rah” event to get volunteers on board. At the last quarterly cohort meeting, it was really embraced and the agencies were aligning.”

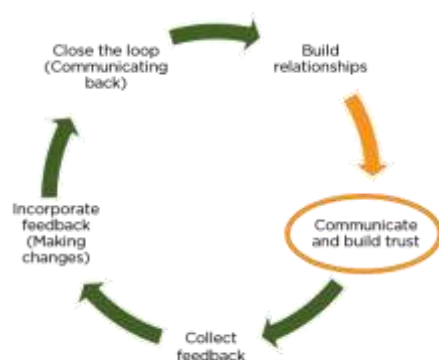
- Rachele, Detroit



Early Insights

All pilot food banks are learning that both **internal organizational factors** and **strong agency relationships** are key inputs in a successful feedback initiative. Additionally, asking partner agencies or distribution sites for their input **at the beginning** fosters a shared purpose and better division of roles and responsibilities. For instance, an Oakland agency director shared that she felt more trust and comfort with the project when she knew there was a dependable contact at the food bank. Furthermore, agencies participating in the pilot reported that the connections and trust they have built **within their cohorts** has been invaluable.

II. Communicate and Build Trust



A food pantry culture that promotes open communication and relationship-building can lay the foundation for establishing trust. When trust is established, it is more likely that feedback will be honest and genuine. While some staff and volunteers may already have rapport with guests, others may not. They can seek to build this rapport and trust over time by actively and genuinely engaging guests.

In addition to building relationships to promote candid response, it's important to offer guests a channel for providing anonymous feedback. Food bank staff are working with partner agencies to achieve these goals. Agency staff and volunteers are creating more open and welcome environments by directly telling people that their input is welcomed, needed and will be used. They are also ensuring that people have a safe space to provide feedback, whether to a third party (like the food bank), in a more private location, or via a comment box. Below are a variety of ways pilots are working to build trust:

- **Posters/flyers** – Some pilots have displayed posters and flyers to let people know they will be collecting feedback on upcoming days.
- **Written FAQs** – A few food banks provided agencies with Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about the feedback pilot to share with volunteers and clients. Others left information about the pilot in food bags for guests.
- **Translations** – Resources are being translated in some cases, so that guests who speak another language, such as Spanish and Cantonese, are aware of the initiative.
- **Verbal announcements** – When visiting agencies, food bank or agency staff often make an announcement about collecting feedback or introduce themselves as feedback volunteers to groups or individuals.





- **Branding and consistency** – In most cases, staff and volunteers collecting feedback wear food bank t-shirts or nametags and dress casually to appear more approachable. For example, the team in Akron created a recognizable brand for their initiative that they’re calling “Voices.” The logo appears on questionnaires, flyers and food bank t-shirts. Katie, one of the project leads, remarked that, *“using the same core team has been helpful for building client trust.”*

Early Insights

Although staff and volunteers may perceive written materials as effective for spreading the word about feedback opportunities in busy and low-resource environments, pantry guests are sharing that **written notices are often not getting their attention**. In particular, non-English speaking or low-literacy guests have been **less likely to learn about feedback collection** when teams relied on printed materials alone.

“It was extremely helpful to have volunteers present who could speak the language of the survey. It seems obvious but it can be difficult to accomplish when working with so many different sites.”

- Amy, San Jose



During this pilot, staff and volunteers collecting feedback are learning that face-to-face communication is preferred, when possible, to not only explain the feedback process to people, but also to **answer their questions**. This experience was emphasized by bilingual staff and volunteers. Additionally, face-to-face communication **builds rapport** which may help some community members grow more comfortable with providing their opinions.

III. Collect Feedback



Communicating and building trust lays the groundwork for the next step in the loop, which is to request feedback. Together with agency partners, food banks are using both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather data.

At some sites, food bank staff, including AmeriCorps VISTAs, visit an agency in teams of two or more to collect feedback. At other sites, trained volunteers from the food bank, especially ones who speak languages other than English, visit the agency. At some agencies, like those located farther from the food bank, staff are being trained to directly collect feedback.

The volunteer and staff teams at the pilot food banks have been using a variety of methods to collect feedback including:

- **Paper questionnaires** – In the first round of feedback in Akron and Oakland, community members provided their feedback on paper forms. At both sites, the teams trialed a software program called **SNAP Surveys** to scan and tabulate paper responses, minimizing the need for data entry. In San Jose, volunteers **translated** non-English, open-ended responses onto the paper surveys immediately after data collection. Their project coordinator then entered all data directly into **Survey Monkey**.

- **Tablets** – Sites have also used tablets to collect feedback, although some find them unsuccessful due to **lack of internet** access at pantries. To overcome connectivity issues, the feedback team asks for agency **WiFi** (if available) or uses **mobile hotspots**. When using tablets, guests either complete the online form themselves using the **touchscreen** or people on the feedback team **facilitate an interview** and complete the form together with the individual. One benefit of using tablets is that responses are **submitted directly** to the food bank through Survey Monkey or SNAP Surveys. Some vendors offer an offline collection mode for an additional fee.
- **Feedback cards** – The Akron team has provided **pre-paid postcards** and **locked comment boxes** onsite at each agency to provide guests with the opportunity to provide additional comments.
- **Focus groups, town halls and interviews** – After food bank staff review initial questionnaires, they organize qualitative activities to learn more and better interpret the data. Some food banks have invited guests to **focus groups** they have led. In other cases, agencies are being trained to facilitate their own focus groups or town halls, or hold **one-on-one conversations** with guests while they are in line.
- **Multiple languages** – To ensure guests who do not speak English have a chance to provide feedback, interpreters are being employed (both food bank staff and skilled volunteers) and written materials have been translated and distributed. Primary languages spoken across the sites include **Spanish, Cantonese, Vietnamese** and **Arabic**.
- **Incentives** – Many food bank staff are also offering guests incentives to see if that increases response rates for questionnaires. Some items include **t-shirts, food storage containers** and **water bottles**. Cash or gift cards were provided as honorariums only for those participating in focus groups.

The topics where food banks and agencies are currently requesting feedback include:

- Are people at the agency treated respectfully by staff?
- Are current distribution dates and times convenient?
- How long is the average wait?
- How long will their food last?
- What is the agency doing well?
- Where can the agency improve?



Early Insights

Food banks are learning that the methods used to collect feedback matter, ranging from how people are approached, what questions they are asked (and in what language), and how they are offered support to complete the form by feedback volunteers.

Tablets can be successful and allow guests to have **more privacy** when completed on their own. Additionally, data transmitted from the tablet can be quicker to analyze. However, paper forms have been preferred by some pilots and **needed as backups** for individuals who prefer to complete a paper survey

and at locations with technology constraints. Furthermore, it has been important for **a staff person or volunteer to be available** to help facilitate an individual's completion of the questionnaire as needed. To ensure feedback is sought from people who may not speak English well or at all, interpreters and **accurately translated materials** are proving to be helpful.

Due to the limitations of close-ended survey data, it has also been valuable to request **open-ended comments** and facilitate **in-depth conversations** with pantry guests when feasible. By directly speaking with the people we serve, food bank and agency staff can hear clear recommendations and communicate the value of the feedback process. As PJ in Oakland explains, *"This is what really highlights for agencies the value of communication with the whole community. It builds community and effective service."*

Feedback in Action in Akron...

*After pantry guests shared in focus groups that they often **don't have ways to store leftover food**, the team in Akron decided to begin offering **storage containers** as incentives for future feedback cycles. They turned out to be a great success, with one guest sharing that hers were now being used to keep food in her freezer!*

IV. Incorporate Feedback and Make Changes



In order to demonstrate accountability and transparency, one of the most important stages of the loop is when staff and volunteers use it to make tangible changes to programs and processes. When change is not feasible, they will communicate the reason. By responding to feedback in a timely fashion, the food bank and partner agency can illustrate their serious commitment to improving services.

In order to make changes, food bank staff first review the information that guests provide and then work with agencies to brainstorm improvements. For example, in Oakland, the team offered each agency a small stipend and the ability to work with their agency relations coordinator and find improvements to execute.

Below are descriptions about the types of improvements that both food bank and agency staff are making based on what they are learning from pantry guests.

- Volunteer training** – Food bank and agency staff are learning that agency volunteer training is key. As a result, they are developing more robust volunteer trainings to include modules on **cultural sensitivity** and **customer service**. As Amy in San Jose shares, *"Regardless of the distribution process, volunteers (the lead, in particular) can make or break a client's experience."*
- Environmental changes** – With feedback from guests on wait times, comfort and safety, food bank and agency staff are modifying their

"Our community members are experts in the services they utilize. The feedback loop process is about engaging guests and inspiring agencies to design inclusive programs that work."
 - Hailee, Oakland



spaces to create a sense of community and a welcoming environment for sharing information. Examples of environmental changes include adding a **kids' corner** to entertain the children of waiting guests and providing **covered awnings** to help shield guests from sun and rain while in line. In Oakland, the Faith Lutheran pantry requested and received **donated benches** built by a local Boy Scouts troop for older guests or guests with special needs to sit.

- **Distribution changes** – Agency staff are changing the way they distribute food. Some examples include moving toward **food choice** rather than pre-packed food, offering a **number or ticket system** for intake, posting **menus** of the food that will be served at meal programs, and offering **food preference sheets** for guests to indicate their dietary considerations.
- **Non-food services** – Some sites are using guest feedback to guide what other services they could be offering beyond food distribution.
- **Changes to the way food banks request feedback** – Food banks are learning how to modify the way they solicit input, which includes how they recruit volunteers with specific **language capabilities**. Additionally, food banks are modifying how they approach pantry guests to request feedback and how they can ensure that people have **privacy** if desired. Finally, they are **rephrasing their questionnaires** to best capture concept and meaning.

Feedback in Action in Oklahoma...

*Food & Resource Centers across the service area offer access to healthy food and referrals to additional support resources. Through feedback from people served, however, they learned that **dental health is in high need**. As a result, the Regional Food Bank is now **partnering with the Oklahoma Dental Foundation** to address that need.*

Early Insights

Some sites have reported that conversations about feedback can be difficult, especially if some of the feedback is not positive or agency staff are **not ready to hear and act on suggestions** from pantry guests. Therefore, food banks are learning how to best **support partner agencies** in interpreting feedback and determining what to do next.

“As a result of feedback, we are putting together training to develop the “Resources” piece of the FRC model to address topics like conversational interviewing, removing barriers, active listening, building trust, asking open-ended questions, how to train volunteers, and how to build up community resources.”

- Katharine, Oklahoma City

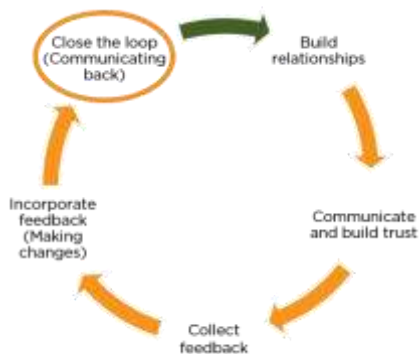


For example, when feedback is not positive or negative feedback only comes from a small number of people, then agencies may not be sure what to concentrate and how to appropriately address the issues. Another example is when feedback is overwhelmingly positive. In those cases, it may be unclear whether guests are genuinely satisfied or if a **courtesy bias**⁴ may prevent some respondents from providing critiques.

The food bank's role as a **more neutral** third party has been helpful in providing guidance to agency staff who may have **different interpretations** about what they hear, influenced by personal relationships and experiences. They are hosting **small groups** or **one-on-one conversations** with their agencies to encourage them to share their reactions and plan a response.

⁴ A courtesy bias describes when respondents' answers may be artificially high because they do not want to say anything negative about a service they are receiving.

V. Close the Loop: Communicating Back

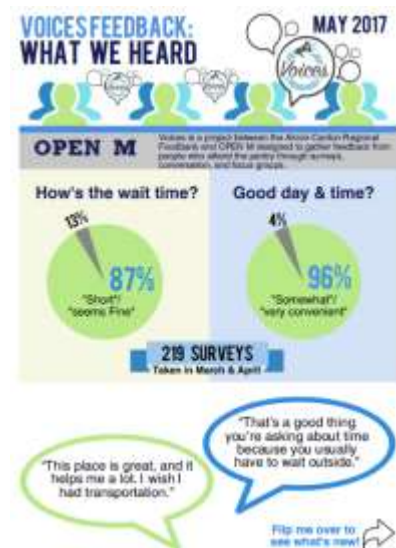


This last phase, “closing the loop,” is what differentiates feedback loops from other input-gathering methods. By closing the loop – communicating results and the actions that will be taken – food banks and agencies can demonstrate accountability to the people they serve.

After collecting feedback, it is important to not only make relevant changes based on input received, but to also communicate the changes with those who provided feedback. Even when changes cannot be made, it is important for people to understand the reasons why so that they feel their feedback was taken seriously.

The food bank pilots, agency staff and volunteers are closing the loop in a variety of ways:

- **Between agency staff and people served** – Food bank staff are helping agencies communicate what they learned by using **posters** and **flyers** with easy-to-interpret **infographics**, a prerecorded **video**, a **slideshow** about the questionnaire results and via **word-of-mouth**.
- **Between agency staff and their volunteers** – Recognizing the value of volunteers in building relationships with guests, agency staff are sharing results with volunteers via **email**, **one-on-one**, or in **small group meetings** to ensure everyone has the same information.
- **Between food bank and agency** – To maintain their close working relationship, food bank staff discuss feedback results and brainstorm actions with agency staff in both one-on-one and group discussions.



Early Insights

The teams carrying out feedback loops are learning that “closing the loop” with guests in an authentic way can be **challenging, but rewarding**. One challenge is that individuals visit food distributions at different rates, meaning that staff may not be able to close the loop with the same people who provided feedback. However, despite this, some staff have found that talking to people about feedback they received from other pantry guests and related actions taken, while requesting additional feedback, has contributed to **relationship building** and people’s **willingness to participate**.



Conclusion

In this brief, we have shared early insights about how five food banks, along with agency partners, are implementing feedback loops with the people they serve. Although the specifics around feedback loops vary, at the core of this work we have learned that **building strong relationships and capacity at partner agencies are key to successfully making change.**

The act of asking and sharing feedback has **strengthened relationships** between food banks, agencies, volunteers and the people we serve. Food banks are engaging agencies outside of monitoring and compliance, which has created a new connection. **Peer-to-peer relationships** are also blossoming within agency cohorts by allowing diverse organizations to build a trusted network of individuals to turn to for support and resources. Guests at food distributions share that they **appreciate being asked for feedback**, which can create a sense of trust for more agency-guest partnerships in the future.

“We want to emphasize that we are creating a system. We are very focused on the process.”

- Jill, Akron



Internally, food banks are also **building capacity** to engage in this work. They are learning how to create high quality questionnaires, manage new software and technology, conduct focus groups, and facilitate collaborative meetings with their agency councils. These activities can build safe spaces where staff can gather and learn from honest feedback and feel supported to make changes. Another result is that agency staff are **building new skills** and learning how to receive and respond to feedback from the people they serve. In addition, **volunteers are being recognized** for the critical role they play in all aspects of the feedback loop and the person-provider relationship.

Finally, one of the biggest takeaways from the experiences of these pilots may be that through the process of designing and implementing feedback loops, **food banks and agencies are learning from each other and from the people they serve, which is beginning to influence their cultures and environments.** As this paradigm shift accelerates, we can leverage the power of the feedback loop by listening, learning and acting together to ensure we are truly meeting the needs of people who come through our doors each day.

Next steps for network members interested in this work

- *Consider how these concepts can be embedded at your food bank and into existing efforts.*
- *Foster a culture of openness and learning between the food bank and agencies.*
- *Allocate staff time and resources to gathering both quantitative and qualitative feedback.*
- *Attend ACPN 2017 or future network webinars on this topic to hear from the ongoing pilots!*