

FOOD PANTRY BEST PRACTICES

Centering Client-Choice, Dignity, and Equity

Knoxville, TN



PREPARED BY LANDY LIN

In collaboration with
The Bill Emerson National Hunger
Fellowship
and
The Wesley House
Community Center



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Introduction



The Wesley House Community Center was founded in 1907 by three United Methodist Women's groups. The Wesley House's initial goal was to provide childcare for the women who worked at nearby Brookside Mills.¹

They currently serve three communities in Knoxville: Lonsdale, Beaumont, and Mechanicsville.

- Lonsdale
- Beaumont
- Mechanicsville
- Wesley House Community Center

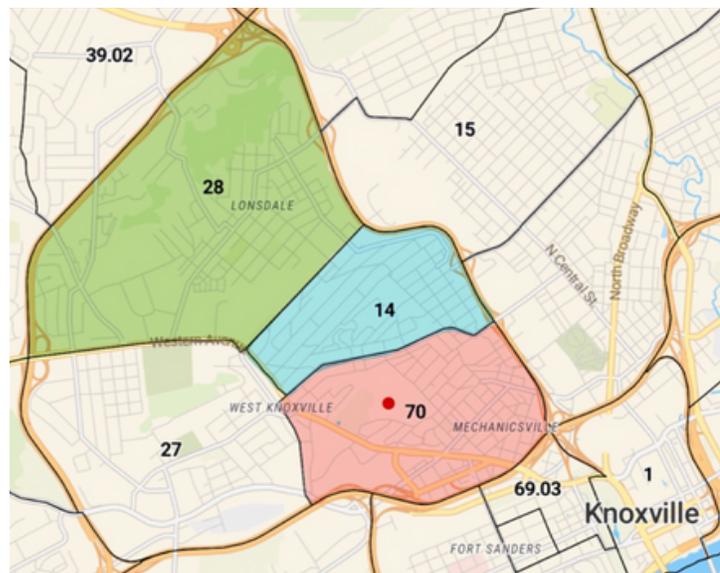


Figure 1: map is based on US 2020 census tract data²

Programs

The Wesley House has provided childcare for over 115 years and continues to expand, create, and alter programs as community needs change. The After School Program is for K-8 students and has expanded into a summer program as well, making it a year-round community program. The Wellness in Senior Education (WISE) program was created in the 1950s for seniors experiencing social isolation. The WISE program hosts weekly lunches, BINGO games, and other activities at the Wesley House or other partner organizations.

The Food Pantry was established in 2020 as an emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Families across the United States were experiencing increased food insecurity, and the Wesley House saw this as an emergent need in the community. What began as a conversation quickly turned into an established pantry. The growth of the pantry is evident in the fact that it provided 15,657 individuals with food and other essential necessities in 2022.

The Wesley House is one of many organizations in the community that is actively working to provide members with the "spiritual, emotional, and educational resources needed to thrive."³



The original Wesley House building (1907)⁴

Historical Communities



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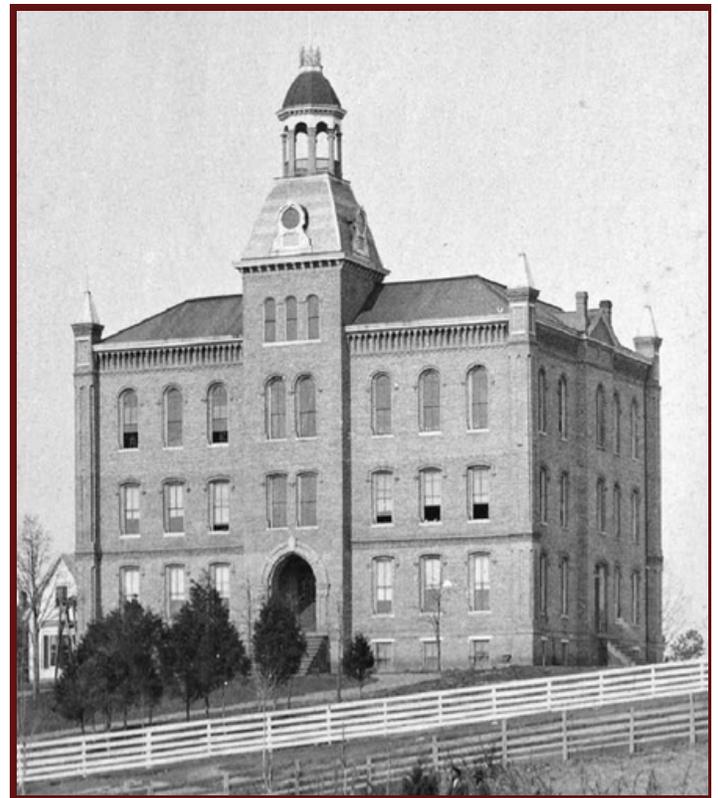
Lonsdale

Lonsdale is located northwest of downtown Knoxville and officially became a part of the city in 1917. William Ragsdale owned much of the land in the area in the late 19th century; "Lonsdale" was named by combining his name and his mother's maiden name, "Lonas."⁶ He created the Lonsdale Land Development Company, which eventually established the Lonsdale Mill Company.

Mechanicsville

Mechanicsville was annexed into Knoxville in 1883. The community was largely made up of Welsh immigrants and African Americans who worked in the local mills and factories.

The Wesley House Community Center is located in the heart of Mechanicsville. The current building was once the Laura Cansler Elementary School, named after Knoxville's first Black teacher. The Community Center is also located next to Knoxville College, a Historically Black liberal arts college that was founded in 1875. While the physical campus is no longer operating due to funding issues, the College continues to offer online degrees. Mechanicsville was once the site of a thriving Black community in Knoxville.



McKee Hall at Knoxville College, 1876 ⁷

Population

Knox County: 478,971

Per Capita Income: \$36,450

Persons in Poverty: 12.1%

Knoxville: 190,740

Per Capita Income: \$29,277

Persons in Poverty: 21.3%

Knox County and Knoxville Race & Ethnicity

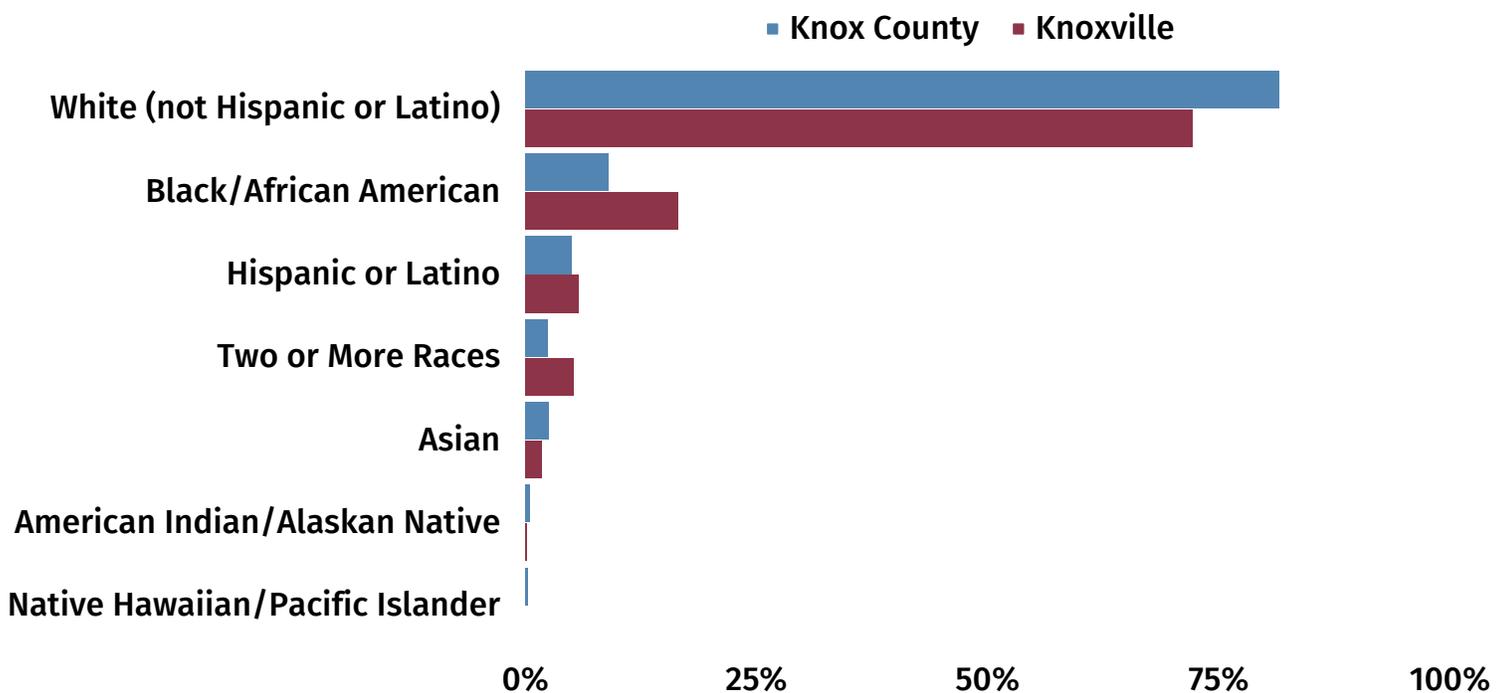
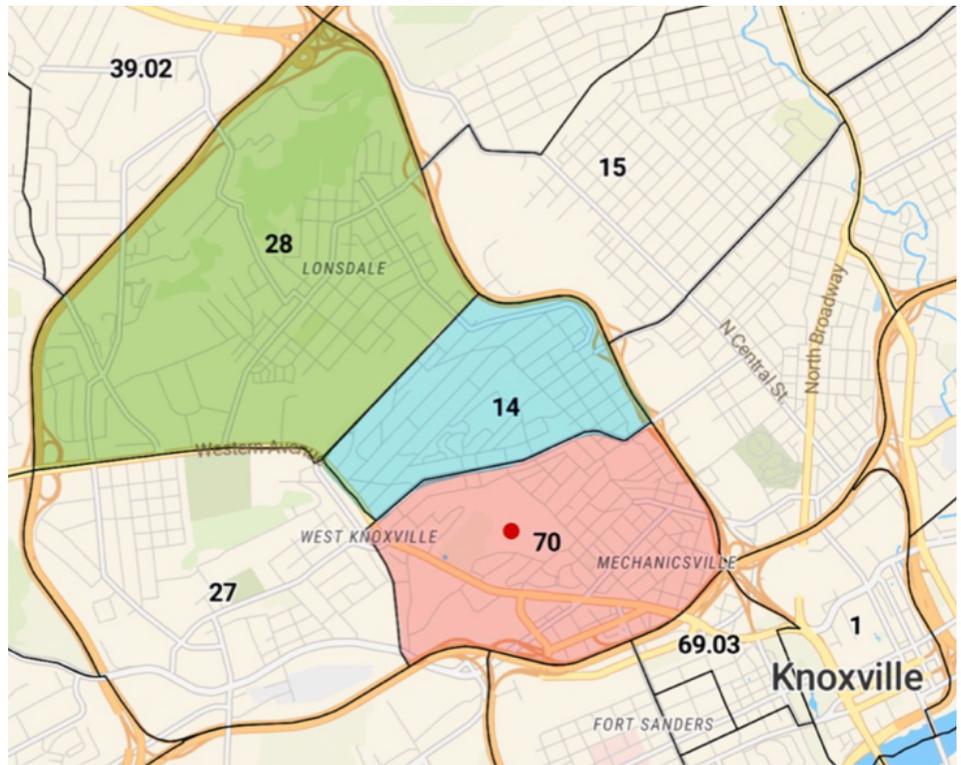


Figure 2: data from US Census 2020⁸

Demographics & Income

- Lonsdale
- Beaumont
- Mechanicsville
- Wesley House Community Center



*Communities are from US 2020 census tracts and do not 100% reflect historical boundaries

	Mechanicsville	Beaumont	Lonsdale
Black/African American	45.11%	26.71%	36.10%
White (Non-Hispanic)	39.13%	40.03%	32.59%
Hispanic or Latino	8.07%	26.76%	24.24%
Foreign Born Population	2.21%	5.06%	11.62%
Individuals with a Disability	15.61%	25.03%	18.51%
Per Capita Income	\$16,377	\$9,816	\$16,998
% of People in Poverty	35.63%	45.70%	25.14%

Figure 3: data from US Census 2020 ⁹

The Effects of Red-Lining

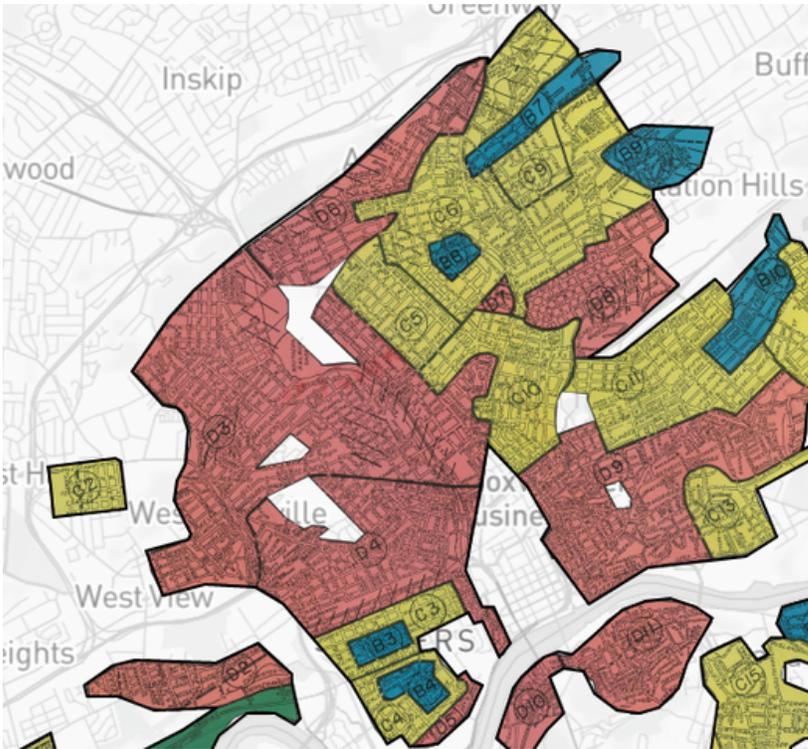


Figure 4: map of HOLC grades of Knoxville neighborhoods in 1939¹⁰

The Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC) graded Knoxville's neighborhoods in 1939. The grades ranged from "best" (shaded green), "still desirable" (blue), "definitely declining" (yellow), to "hazardous" (red). The HOLC assigned scores based on the area's expected mortgage security and the community's investment value. This process is known as "red-lining."¹¹ The racial and class makeup of a neighborhood also impacted this decision. Mechanicsville, Beaumont, and Lonsdale were all deemed "hazardous." Families began

to move away from the city and into the suburbs. Today, there are four public housing properties in these neighborhoods. Western Heights, the largest complex of the four was recently given a \$40 million *Choice Neighborhoods* grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD); the revitalization plan includes building more affordable housing units and mixed-use spaces.

Food Insecurity

The USDA categorizes these three communities as low income and low access, where 33% of residents live more than 0.5 miles away from the nearest grocery store.¹² This area of Knoxville has been negatively affected by government implemented practices, such as red-lining and urban renewal. Conversations with residents who used the Wesley House food pantry revealed that they felt "neglected" and "ignored" by the rest of city. The USDA defines food insecurity as, "a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life," but listening sessions with food pantry clients show that the definition is more complex in reality.¹³

An Ongoing Food Apartheid

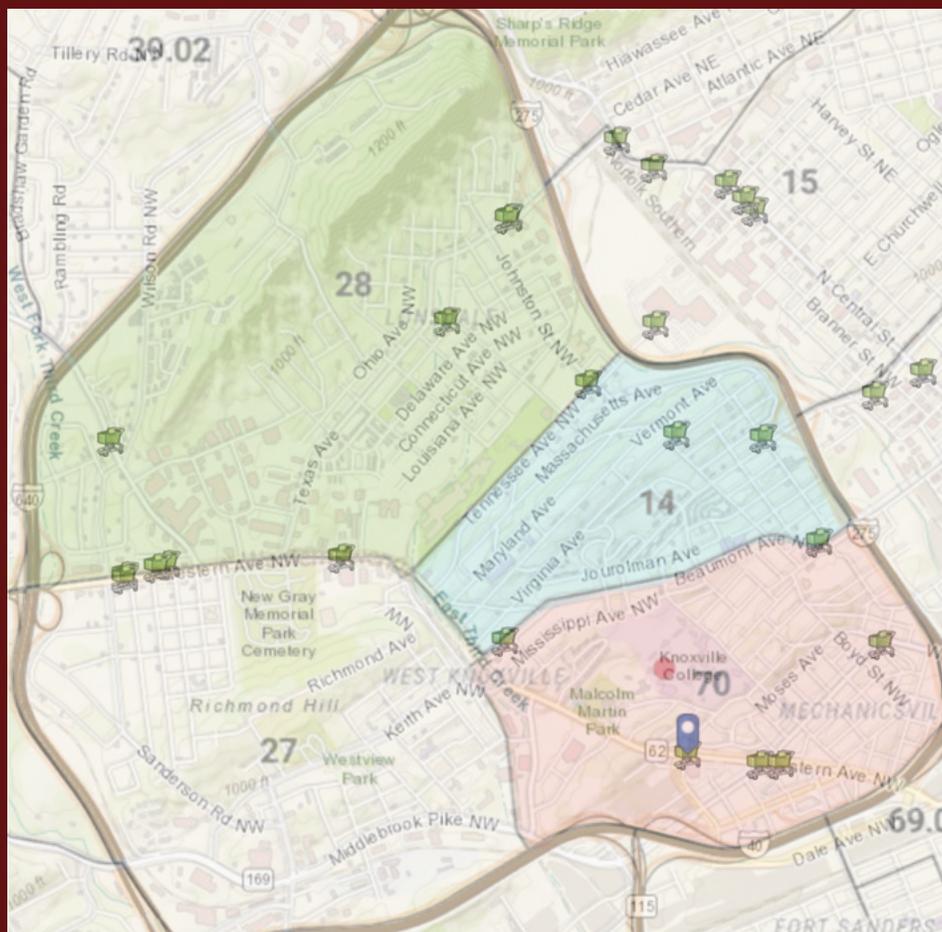


Figure 5: map of retail locations that accept SNAP (2023)¹⁴

In 2020, Feeding America assessed that 11.4% of people in Knox County were experiencing food insecurity.¹⁵ Furthermore, 45,920 individuals, or 9.6% of Knox County received benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in 2020.¹⁶ Figure 5 shows the 16 retail locations that accept SNAP. Only 1 of the locations within the three communities is a grocery store (Food City, marked by the blue arrow); the other 15 are various convenience stores and gas stations. Access to fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as other nutrient-dense foods, is therefore limited.

Rather than use the term *food desert* to describe the limited access to grocery stores in this area, this report will use *food apartheid* instead. Food justice activist Karen Washington coined the term, defining it as a:

"[look] at the whole food system, along with race, geography, faith, and economics...to [get to] the root cause of some of the problems around the food system. It brings in hunger and poverty."¹⁷

This framework is a less passive approach to fighting hunger in communities that are lower access and lower income. Mechanicsville, Beaumont, and Lonsdale are in a food apartheid due to decades of legislation.

Objectives

The Wesley House actively works with the community to identify assets and helps to work toward a shared vision of the future. While most of this report has focused on the Mechanicsville, Lonsdale, and Beaumont communities in Knoxville, the Wesley House's services and support reach further than that. The food pantry is one of the few in Knoxville that is open Monday through Friday, and thus, receives clients who are not from the immediate community.

This report seeks to better understand the state of anti-hunger efforts in Knoxville, connect with community members to generate and implement solutions, and provide recommendations for a best practices guide to a food pantry that is centered on client-choice, equity, and low-barrier by maintaining client dignity and privacy.



Methodology

Observations:

- **Operations:** I observed the food pantry's current practices and day-to-day operations by spending most of my time in-person at the food pantry. The goal was to better familiarize myself with the Wesley House Community Center, the pantry, and the immediate communities. I worked alongside volunteers and had the opportunity to become a familiar face for clients.
- **Existing Data Collection & Assessment:** I observed the process of logging clients and helped with collecting data on the demographics (the Wesley House only asks for household size with a breakdown of individual age groups). I also collected anecdotal data on how far people were traveling to use the Food Pantry

Connecting with Other Community Organizations:

- I met with and learned from 10 other non-profits that were also actively working to reduce hunger and poverty in Knoxville
- These site-visits provided further context and created space for collaboration

Surveys and Listening Sessions:

- I conducted 9 surveys (5 in English, 4 in Spanish) with pantry clients
- The surveys are part of a larger assessment from the United Way of Greater Knoxville on food insecurity and health in Knox County
- The surveys also doubled as listening sessions; this report will not include statistics from the surveys since the larger assessment has not been analyzed, but will include anecdotes

Literature Review:

- I researched existing food pantry best practices for other organizations
- I furthered explore what a *client choice* pantry means and looks like when implemented

Community Resources



"Second Harvest Food Bank of East Tennessee, a member of Feeding America, has worked to compassionately feed East Tennesseans experiencing hunger since 1982. They are leading the effort to compassionately feed East Tennesseans experiencing hunger & engage the community in the fight against hunger."¹⁸ The Wesley House receives a majority of its pantry stock through Second Harvest's Food Rescue program. Partners can also bulk-order food items directly from them at a discounted rate.

Cokesbury United Methodist Church provides different services to any community members who may need them. Their Fig Tree program offers showers, laundry service, hot meals, and internet access. Alongside that, they also operate the Manna House food pantry.¹⁹



"Hope Kitchen is more than food boxes and a soup kitchen. We serve love, compassion, dignity and hope. Our mission is to ensure that each person's body and spirit is nourished so that they can focus on moving forward and finding stability along the way."²⁰ Their food pantry currently provides clients with pre-made food boxes based on household size.

FISH Hospitality Pantries operates four locations in Knoxville. Their mission is "[to] ensure that all of our neighbors have the nutritious food needed to thrive and to form authentic relationships across religious traditions, ethnicities, and economic circumstances."²¹ Their pantries do not require identification.



The United Way of Greater Knoxville is one of the leading non-profits fighting hunger in Knoxville. "Today, United Way is working to bring people together to create lasting change that will improve lives in our community." It is a citizen's action organization, local, and invests "donated money in programs focused on health, education, and financial stability."²²



Community Resources Continued



Centro Hispano is the "leading resource both for East Tennessee's Latino community and for East Tennessee regarding the Latino community." They promote education, workforce development, youth and family engagement, and other community-strengthening initiatives.²³

BRIDGE "provides opportunities for refugees to rebuild their lives after suffering persecution so that they may become productive, contributing members of the community."²⁴ They offer case management, an employment program, the Refugee School Impact Program (RSIG), and foster community connections.



Food, Faith, and Futures. "The vision of the Knoxville Dream Center is to empower volunteers and continually seek out community partnerships in order to consistently reach Knoxville's most vulnerable and impact their lives with the life-changing message of the gospel, in both word and deed."²⁵ Every Wednesday evening, they serve hot meals, provide dental services, and have clothing and other supplies for Knoxville's houseless individuals. They also have a mobile food pantry (food truck) that services 9 communities year-round.

"The mission of Helping Mamas is to connect helping mamas to mamas needing help."²⁶ Helping Mamas provides baby supplies and menstrual products. They also offer a mobile program,



Beardsley Community Farm is located next to the Wesley House Community Center. It is located on land that was once Knoxville College's farm. They provide the Wesley House food pantry with fresh fruits and vegetables when in season. They provide space for people who want to produce culturally relevant produce and access to education on gardening.²⁷

Community Contributions from Observations, Listening Sessions, & Surveys

Barriers:

Transportation and Safety:

Many clients cited transportation as a barrier to accessing food. These conversations were more concerned with general access to food, rather than access to healthy and fresh foods. While there are multiple convenience stores and discount retailers, such as Dollar General, there is only one grocery store (Food City) that sells fresh fruits and vegetables.

Those who had their own vehicles cited gas costs as a factor in how often they shopped, and where they shopped. Others relied on family, neighbors, and friends for carpooling, and thus had a limited shopping schedule. Lastly, there were clients who walked or biked as their main means of transportation. Safety became a larger issue for those who walked and/or biked as their main means of transportation. The Food City is located directly off a major road in this area of Knoxville, and the sidewalks were built directly next to it. People also said that sidewalks would randomly end and they would have to walk on the road. Furthermore, some clients shared that their ability to walk was affected by a health condition which made accessing food even more of a challenge.

Limited Grocery Stores:

As aforementioned, the only grocery store that sells all household goods is a Food City. This already limits the variety of fresh produce that is offered; however, conversations with clients revealed that the produce selection that is available is either limited or not desirable. The fresh fruits and vegetables that are being sold are more expensive than people believe they should be and are not always fresh.

Health Concerns and Cost of Living:

Almost every client that I talked to was living with a health concern or had a household member who was. The most common conditions were diabetes type II and any cardiovascular disease. There were also a number of people preparing for or recovering from various surgeries. These diagnoses meant there were recommended diets to follow, often filled with fresh fruits, vegetables, grains, and proteins. Many of these clients were also on a fixed income (usually social security or disability benefits), which made it more difficult to budget for diet-appropriate foods while also combatting rising living costs.

Community Contributions from Observations, Listening Sessions, & Surveys

Vision and Ideas:

Grocery Store Options:

People want to see more grocery store options in Mechanicsville, Lonsdale, and Beaumont. They talked about the overwhelming shopping options for "junk food," compared to stores for affordable fruits and vegetables. Many said that they drove to the nearest Walmart supercenter or Kroger when they needed a wider variety of items. People also wanted to have access to affordable store options like Aldi's, along with access to bulk stores like Sam's Club and Costco. Some clients also wished to see locally owned markets that catered to different cultural cuisines and sold more than just snacks.

Businesses:

When asked about ways of reducing hunger in Knoxville, some surveyees suggested that attracting more businesses to the area would help generate community wealth. These communities once had their own arts centers, family-owned restaurants, and other businesses. People want to see a future where this is possible.

Safer Communities:

Walkability was flagged as a major safety issue for people who wanted to go to Food City. Surveyees also talked about wanting the area to feel more like a community, where their children can play outside and they can get to know their neighbors better.

Mobile Pantries:

Mobile pantries were also cited as a solution for people who had limited access to existing food pantries (transportation barriers, limited hours of operation, or general mobility issues). People wanted to see more pantries that could deliver food to households or meet them where they are at.

"Healthy Options" and Plant-Based Foods:

Surveyees and clients talked about wanting to see more produce at the pantry and the local grocery store. They believe that the produce that is available at the store is not always fairly priced. Some even talked about wanting to see more plant-based food options at the pantry.

Defining *Client Choice*

This report is centered on best practices that create a client-choice pantry which protects privacy and maintains dignity. A client-choice pantry is modeled after a grocery store to simulate as close of an experience to one as possible. People can shop the shelves without assistance and are not forced to take items they do not want. This method can eliminate food waste in the pantry and respects people's decisions to say no. People who use pantries are human beings first, and all human beings deserve to eat foods that they enjoy.

Best Practice Recommendations

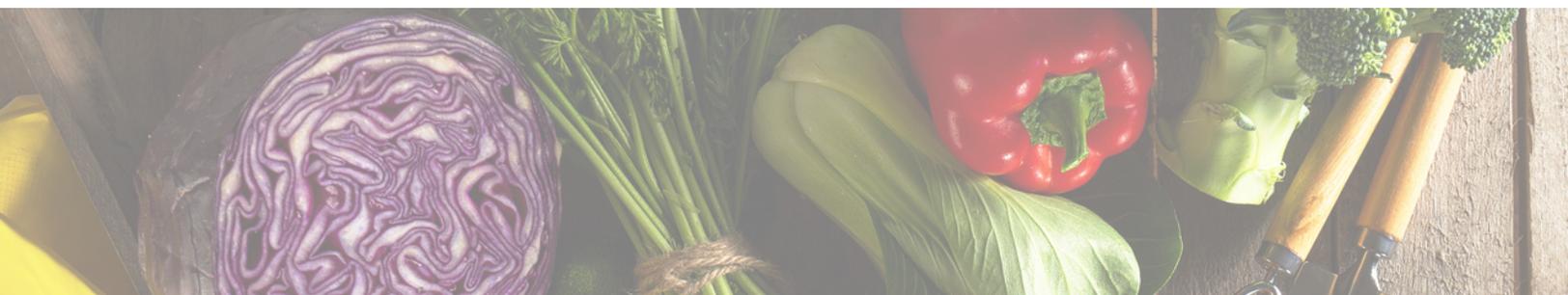
1. Use a Low Barrier Entry Process
2. Ensure Adequate Staff Capacity
3. Create a Strong Volunteer Network
4. Have a Policy Sheet
5. Clearly Communicate and Label
6. Operate with Accessible Hours
7. Stock with Community Pantry Essentials
8. Provide a Resource Sheet
9. Address Food Waste and Unfamiliar Foods
10. Create a Method for Clients to Provide Feedback

Recommendations:

1. Using a Low-Barrier Entry Process:

The Wesley House Food Pantry does not require proof of identification, address, or household size. Many pantries require clients to verify their identity, sometimes even asking for the social security numbers of all household members. This process is typically used to create appropriately sized pre-packed food boxes for varying household sizes or to set limits on how many items an individual may shop for. The local food bank, Second Harvest of East Tennessee, does not require partners to collect identification information, just phone numbers and names if there were ever a recall on an item. The Wesley House also does not set a limit on how often a client can use the pantry. Pantries can set visit limits according to their capacity to keep the pantry stocked.

It is recommended that pantries not require an identification verification process to protect client privacy. This also allows clients who are undocumented or do not have identification cards (largely seen with houseless clients) to shop at the pantry. The client log should require information as requested by the food bank that is donating food. The sample client log below shows a way to collect data while maintaining privacy. Data on unique daily visits and total household size (divided into three age groups) are sufficient for weekly and monthly visitor reports. If multiple visits from one client need to be recorded and differentiated then the client's surname and birthday may be recorded. The goal is to be as minimally invasive as possible for privacy and dignity.



Daily Log

Date: 01/23/2023		Day of the Week: Monday		
Unique # of Clients	Total Household Size	17 and under	18-59	60 and above
1	5	2	3	
2	2			2
3	3	1		2
4	7	5	1	1
5	1		1	
6	4	2	2	
7	12		10	2

Weekly Log

Calendar Week: 01/23/2023 - 01/27/2023					
	Total # of unique clients (households)	Total # Individuals	Total # of 17 and under	Total # of 18-59	Total # of 60 and above
Monday	7	34	10	17	7
Tuesday					
Wednesday					
Thursday					
Friday					
Weekly Totals					

Monthly Log

Month: January					
	Total # of unique clients (households)	Total # Individuals	Total # of 17 and under	Total # of 18-59	Total # of 60 and above
Week					
Monthly Totals					

Recommendations:

2. Ensure Adequate Staff Capacity:



The Wesley House has one full-time staff member who oversees the pantry. The pantry also has daily volunteers who dedicate anywhere from 2-7 hours of their day. Many pantries rely on volunteers to ensure smooth day-to-day operations. It is recommended that food pantries be adequately staffed to account for all the moving parts. People are needed to

unload food donations (which can range from private donations to large-scale food rescue trucks from food banks), sort through items, stock the shelves, and maintain a welcoming environment for clients.

3. Create a Strong Volunteer Network:

Cultivating a strong and sustainable volunteer network is a potential solution to food pantries that need more staff members. The Wesley House hosts and welcomes volunteers from all over Knoxville, however, most of the volunteers are nursing students from the University of Tennessee Knoxville. Pantries should allot volunteers based on their capacity to host. The number of volunteers per day depends on the pantry's unique needs. For example, the Wesley House needs the most people on Tuesdays because that is the day Second Harvest's food rescue truck delivers its products. Volunteers should also receive trauma-informed training, understand that hunger does not have one "face," and welcome everyone regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, language, age, or appearance.

Recommendations:

4. Have a Policy Sheet:

Client-choice food pantries are recommended to have clear expectations and policies for the pantry. While flexibility is necessary, clients expect a degree of consistency when they walk in through the door. A policy sheet should be in multiple languages; it should state limits on specific food items (if any) and rules for respecting those sharing the space

5. Clearly Communicate and Label:

Food categories should be clearly labeled in multiple languages, depending on the communities that the pantry services. Clear labels mitigate confusion around food products that may be new to some people. While a client-choice pantry allows people to shop for the items that they personally want to eat, there may be limits on items due to limited supply. However, in my experience, people only take what they need. If there are limits to any items (such as a can of beans or bags of rice), that should be clearly communicated with a label above the products.

6. Operate with Accessible Hours:

Food pantries should strive to operate on a consistent schedule that best serves the immediate community. The Wesley House pantry is open Monday through Friday from 7:30 am to 4:00 pm. The consistency and accessibility of the hours are the most important. It is recommended that pantries be open on the weekend for at least one day a month for those who cannot shop during the week. This can increase accessibility.

Recommendations:

7. Stock with Community Pantry Essentials:

What is considered an essential pantry item can vary from community to community. Surveys and conversations with clients showed that the most requested items are ready-to-heat meals and products that can create cost-efficient dishes.



Popular Foods:

- Milk (Whole, 1%, 2%)
- Eggs
- Meats: chicken, ground beef and turkey
- Dairy products: butter, cheese, yogurts
- Fresh produce and fruits: onions, tomatoes, herbs, greens, oranges, apples
- Bread and tortillas
- Flour: white, masa, corn flour
- Nonperishables snacks: granola bars, crackers
- Canned goods: legumes, vegetables, soups, proteins, fruits
- Peanut butter
- Pasta & Rice
- Pasta sauces
- Sandwich meats

Household Essentials:

- Diapers for all ages
- Pet food
- Laundry detergent
- Dish soap
- Toiletries (toothpaste)
- Paper towels
- Toilet paper
- Hand sanitizer

Recommendations:

8. Provide a Resource Sheet:

The Wesley House Food Pantry also provides non-food items, such as household essentials and pet food when in stock. Clients may be in need of other services that a food pantry cannot give. A resource sheet with local non-profits and contact information in multiple languages would help bridge other gaps people may be experiencing.

9. Address Food Waste and Unfamiliar Foods:

Food pantries are oftentimes a second chance for foods that would go straight from the grocery store to the landfill. The Wesley House receives 90% of its stock from the Second Harvest Food Rescue program. Items, such as bread, sandwich meats, and dessert products are typically guaranteed. However, the rest of the donation is more randomized and depends on what the grocery stores were choosing to donate. Shown below are 2-liter cokes, cocoa bombs, collagen powder creamer, and restaurant-size bags of onions. It is recommended that a pantry only stocks items that clients would enjoy and that it can safely store. Clients should never feel forced to take an item just because it's at the pantry. The last image depicts gourds that were donated by Beardsley Community Farm. The gourds were unfamiliar to many clients and were consequently left untouched in the pantry. My recommendation for unfamiliar foods in the pantry is to include recipe cards for people who want to try the products.



Long Term Goals and Recommendations

All pantries should take the time to evaluate how they are working with the community and if that can be improved. Each pantry serves a unique community and the longer-term recommendations below are for the Wesley House Food Pantry:

- Strengthening the mobile food delivery program
- Directly partnering with local grocery stores to diversify stock and to have more culturally appropriate items for clients
- Continuing its work to be part of an equitable food system in Knoxville

Knoxville has a strong network of non-profits who are working to end hunger and poverty. A food pantry is only one piece of the current solution. The Wesley House provides several essential services, which shows that the issue is about more than food and hunger. This report provides best practices for a food pantry that best works with clients by centering client choice, privacy, and dignity. Hunger, as a human man rights issue, does not exist in a vacuum. The lived experiences of community members that I've gotten to know reveal the complexities of where we are today. Hunger is a human right. Everyone deserves easy access to foods that support a healthy lifestyle. This *food apartheid* did not occur by chance; it is a result of centuries and decades of policies that continue to marginalize already-underserved communities. The recommendations in this report would allow the Wesley House to better support its community members.

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