

Key Food Security and Nutrition Issues Faced by Clients Participating in the ¡Más Fresco! More Fresh Program

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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

The Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition (www.centerfornutrition.org) is an independent non-profit research institution. Food security is one of our focus areas and we have experience conducting research, evaluation, and development of measures in food security and related topic areas.

In December, 2020, we interviewed people participating in the University of California San Diego Center for Community Health's (UCSD CCH) Healthy Food Access programming. The purpose of this document is to provide feedback to the UCSD CCH staff about key findings. We hope this information can be helpful to the staff and can serve as a token of our gratitude for allowing us to speak with their clients.

WHO DID WE TALK TO?

We interviewed ten people who were experiencing food insecurity who participated in the UCSD CCH's Healthy Food Access programming.

In terms of demographic characteristics, interviewees were 31-45 years old (n=4), 46-59 years old (n=5), and one who was 60+ years old. The majority were women (n=8), and most were Latino/a (n=7). Further, six interviewees had children in their household. Five interviewees spoke English and five spoke Spanish and were interviewed with the assistance of a translator.

WHAT DID WE FIND?

We asked interviewees to describe the main factors that shaped their experience with food insecurity and ability to provide healthful foods for themselves and/or their family. Interviewees described how they conceptualize food insecurity for themselves, hunger coping strategies they utilize, challenges with eating fruits and vegetables, and finally, thoughts on UCSD CCH programming and ideas that UCSD CCH could implement to further help reduce food insecurity in their community.

1. Food Insecurity Conceptualization and Coping Behaviors

Speaking with the interviewees, it was abundantly clear that a lack of monetary resources contributed to them going hungry and being in a state of food insecurity. Interviewees described having to rely on non-monetary resources in order to get by, most notably, social support, knowledge/skills, and benefit programs. The following paragraphs will describe various hunger coping strategies, skills needed to navigate the system, barriers Latino interviewees mentioned regarding food access in their community, challenges to eating fruits and vegetables, and thoughts for future UCSSD programming.

Interviewees noted there was a constant need to think about finances or ways they could get enough food for them and their families. Developing methods to make money stretch, bargain shopping/couponing, eating less, and most basically, having a plan when it comes to shopping were paramount in keeping food on the table for interviewees. Budgeting on a low income is challenging and major stress comes with it; one interviewee described this as “part of a full-time job of feeding myself is budgeting.” Another interviewee noticed her bank account dwindling and resorted to intermittent fasting, not because she chose to for health reasons, but because she needed to cut her meals to get by financially. Similarly, another interviewee stated that due to her special nutrition needs, she’s been forced to cut meals from 3 times a day to once per day because of limited availability and access to the foods she needs.

Cooking skills are definitely needed when it comes to preparing good, healthy meals as described by interviewees. Some picked these skills up once they had children and used it as a way to provide for their children. Others picked up skills out of necessity, utilizing whatever they had, such as microwaves to cook raw vegetables. “I think that it is important for someone to know how to cook, 100%. It is cheaper, it is healthier and it's nicer to eat something that is a home cooked meal.”

To get by and avoid going hungry, interviewees discussed how they had to learn to navigate the system. One interviewee said, “Fortunately, every month we're getting by, between all the different help that we get. I mean, I can't tell you that we're great, but thank God, we haven't skipped a meal, my kids haven't gone without food.” Another strategy described was having the knowledge and awareness of what’s out there that can help get the resources that are needed. “The help that might be offered, for example, like you say, through programs that might help you pay bills or getting help to go to the food pantries and they get informed or me looking for information about the programs that are available. I think that that's how a family that succeeds gets to that point looking for help programs, food banks in order to get by.”

Resources such as SNAP (CalFresh), WIC, SSI, disability, and especially during the height of the pandemic, free food from school which also provided meals for family members were helpful for families who were low on money or suffering job losses. It is to be noted, that some interviewees stated they had access to some of these services at different points in their lives, but if they made too much money at any point, they did lose some benefits which was described as adding additional challenges to budgeting and getting the food they need. Other

barriers to the utilization of resources pertains to immigration status, which will be described in further detail below.

Attending food banks or asking for help seemed to be a challenge for many interviewees. One interviewee when asked why they chose not to go to a food bank stated “I don’t like to beg and I don’t like to complain, so I know how to go hungry. I know how to go hungry for weeks or months.” For some interviewees, getting over the stigma of seeking help or going to a food pantry was a real gamechanger. “I don't know why, I put a stigma on it because I just thought, it's a pantry. They're giving out free food. I shouldn't have to show up there. But, I did it. And once I got over that, then I was just fine.”

For most interviewees, it was extremely important to have at least some social support, whether it be friends, family, neighbors, etc., to help ease the burden of food insecurity. Being “on an island” or “isolated” adds to the difficulty of finding resources needed to stave off hunger. Some interviewees found it was hard to ask for help from friends and family but once they did, they were able to make ends meet better financially and with food, with one interviewee stating, “I was kind of silent about a lot of things, so, I definitely should’ve asked for help before I dug myself into a hole.”

Conversely, one interviewee was confident in their abilities to find resources, but noted how they also share with others who are in need, stating, “I’ll see that, oh they give food here or they do this there. And I share that with the people at work...I tell my customers who need it.” Another interviewee said, “when I have seen my neighbors facing certain issues I have shared and sometimes I think, well, in my case, it's just myself and my neighbor might have a baby under his or her care, or maybe an elderly person. So sometimes I share the food, the little food I have because I know it's something that they need more than I do sometimes.”

In general, the Mas Fresco participants recognized the challenges they’ve faced throughout their lives and how due to their situations have had to accumulate skills and savviness to keep themselves and their families from going hungry. Even though interviewees could manage their hunger, they felt like they were just scraping by in order to feed themselves or their family, and don’t really get to enjoy any other perks in life beyond basic necessities. “we always found a way, I mean without luxury, but to have enough to fill your belly...but I'm the kind of person that thinks that belly first and then whatever you can after.”

2. Additional Food Access Barriers Faced by Some Latino Households

As described in the demographics section, seven of our interviewees were Latino/a, and five were done through the use of a translator. While not mentioned by all interviewees, employment and access to resources were mentioned most often as barriers to having adequate money. One interviewee stated that being without immigration documents makes it exceedingly difficult with regards to finding quality employment. “If you don't have documents, you have to take what they give you, because you need it. Those who are documented, who are

legal, they have the certainty that they can find work anywhere, and then they can demand getting paid better.”

When trying to access resources, interviewees described running into situations where the only people that work at these different organizations are English speaking-only with no translators on staff. One interviewee described their situation calling 2-1-1 in an emergency situation where she needed assistance right away, and being connected to multiple organizations that only had English speaking employees so she wasn't able to get the resources she needed. “I have told people I don't speak English that much, my English is a little, that's what I would say and they a lot of times tell me that they do not have an interpreter or a translator. So sometimes I get lucky and I have found people that have been nice enough to help me but in other cases they just hang up on me.”

One interviewee said they refused to apply for additional benefits they qualify for because it may impact their immigration status down the road in fear that they would be considered a “public charge,” which could delay or negatively impact their citizenship application.

Latino/a interviewees also felt a lack of social support from neighbors and friends. One interviewee described the feeling of isolation in their own neighborhood and how not knowing many of their neighbors has been a major challenge, as they described when they lived in Mexico as knowing everyone and having much more social support. “And so then you can be there for them, if not financially, at least to provide moral support or give advice and vice versa, you know, they can help you out within the same sentence. So, I think that it would be very useful if we had closer relationships with them.”

3. Barriers to Eating Fruits and Vegetables

When it came to eating fresh fruits and vegetables consistently, affordability was the number one barrier mentioned by interviewees. Eating healthy was described as “expensive” and if they were struggling with money, healthfulness was the last thing on their mind, opting for whatever food they could find at the cheapest price to feed themselves or their families with one interviewee stating, “so when I would have to budget I couldn't get all the food that I would want. I had to kind of get like rice or noodles. So, I wasn't really getting all the nutrients that I should have been getting as a human.” Lack of access to healthy foods was another barrier, with food pantries being described as not having fresh fruits and vegetables, poor quality, or just the fact that they had to wait in long lines to even get food from the pantries was a challenge. One interview mentioned, “When they give you a bag, like today, I got a bag which was spaghetti and rice and stuff, and I cannot eat those anymore.” And when they could get the food they wanted, they mentioned how food needed to be eaten quickly before it went bad, “with the food banks the issue many times is that we have to use everything very quickly because they are about to expire. So, they'll go bad soon if you don't use some, especially fruits and vegetables.” Another access issue described was not having quality grocery stores nearby, which led to transportation being an additional obstacle, with one interviewee stating, “And then shopping's not easy. Some markets are hard for me to get to. It's like a major operation to go”. Interviewees spoke about not having a vehicle being a problem, and some described public

transportation as unreliable or too much of a hassle, especially when it came to transporting groceries.

4. Thoughts on ¡Más Fresco! More Fresh Programming

UCSD CCH's **¡Más Fresco! More Fresh** program was often mentioned by interviewees as being a lifesaver when it came to budgeting and accessing fruits and vegetables, as one interviewee said, "when you're on a budget without a program like Mas Fresco to include all, it's just harder to budget." Many interviewees in general had great things to say about Mas Fresco and noted the simplicity of signing up as well as building personal relationships with UCSD CCH staff, which helped ease any psychological barriers to using the program. Another interviewee who was a student at the time noticed she wasn't getting the proper nutrients from her school's food pantry and found Mas Fresco which helped her afford the fruits and vegetables she desperately needed to balance her diet.

While interviewees weren't specifically asked about how UCSD CCH could expand their programming, they did offer suggestions on how the burden of food insecurity could be eased in general, which UCSD CCH could potentially look to implement. The following are a summary of interviewee suggestions:

- A. Provide a one-stop-shop for resources and information. It was clear from the interviews that information about governmental and charitable assistance was piecemeal and primarily spread through word of mouth. While participants mentioned 2-1-1 as a source of information, this did not seem adequate given that information is still primarily spread via word of mouth and some resources or programs may not have Spanish speaking staff available. Perhaps a central location online through the UCSD SSH website or materials onsite with information about federal, state, and local governmental and charitable assistance programs and eligibility criteria could be helpful.
- B. Offer skill-building classes. Interviewees discussed the importance of certain skills in being able to cope with food insecurity. These included financial/budgeting skills, cooking/food skills, and job skills. While the participants we interviewed reported that they had good cooking and budgeting skills, they felt that others in their situation lacked these skills. Also, our interviewees conveyed that even though they had job skills, they sometimes had trouble with job applications online due to technological or language barriers and this limited their job prospects; so perhaps UCSD SSH could teach their participants how to find quality jobs and assist them in applying for those jobs.
- C. Help clients build social capital and foster agency. It was apparent that having a social support system was beneficial to receive help from friends, family, and acquaintances when food and money gets low. Perhaps providing opportunities for clients to meet each other, make friends, and begin to build social capital could be beneficial. This can include providing participants a way to take back some control of their situation such as

being involved in decision-making committees, participating in advocacy efforts, and serving in volunteer roles within UCSD SSH. Interviewees recalled times when they were in neighborhoods where everyone looked out for each other and having a sense of comfort and would welcome that in their current neighborhoods.

- D. Provide transportation or meal delivery options. Many interviewees expressed difficulties they have regarding finding transportation to grocery stores. Whether it be due to lack of having a vehicle, less than stellar public transportation options, or health issues making travel much more challenging, having a service that could bring food to them or even getting a ride to and from the store would be extremely helpful.

CONCLUSION

While many of the barriers interviewees faced are complex, systemic, and difficult to change – likely requiring long-term concerted efforts – several more immediate issues became apparent that UCSD CCH might be able to help them with. Based on the interviews, we have described some potential approaches that UCSD CCH might consider to help food insecure individuals. However, it should be noted that these are based on a limited sample and we are not knowledgeable of the extent of the current food security efforts underway in the San Diego, CA area. Therefore, these recommendations are preliminary in nature and should only be considered after accounting for current initiatives as to not duplicate efforts.