Involving people and the community to improve food access

Participation represents a means for people to actively engage in the ownership and ongoing development of programs and resources that they use or would like to use. Participation can take many forms and, in the context of food insecurity, encompasses all ways people can be involved in the day-to-day operations, tactical decision making, and strategic planning around improving food access.

In order to understand preferred forms of participation for people who experience food insecurity in Boulder, Boulder Food Rescue (BFR) conducted participatory design workshops. In these workshops, people who self-identified as food insecure participated in a series of activities to articulate their ideal visions of what it would look like to participate in improving food access.

The workshops were structured around using notecards to communicate and prioritize ideas for preferred forms of participation. Each notecard represented a different person, place, goal, action, or thing related to food access in Boulder. For example, there were notecards labeled with the name of each food pantry and there were notecards with the different actions people could use in participating such as "engaging in one-on-one conversations" and "writing down their thoughts." Participants used these notecards to construct scenarios describing their ideal participation experience. The scenarios told a story of who would be involved in the experience, what actions they would take, where the interactions would take place, and what tools they would use to complete their actions (see Appendix A for an example of the scenarios). After constructing scenarios, participants ranked the cards within each category. For example, they ranked all of the different potential actors based on the priority for working with them to improve participation opportunities (see Appendix B for an example of the prioritization for one category).

We hosted the workshop series twice - once in English and once in Spanish. In total, 6 people participated in the two-day design workshop in English and 16 people participated in the workshops hosted in Spanish. Each day of the workshop lasted around 2 hours, so in total participants committed 4 hours of their time. The participants were people with a diversity of ages, housing situations, physical ability and family structures. At the beginning of both days of the workshop, we shared a meal together. Food was primarily prepared and provided by BFR. In addition, on the second day of the workshops conducted in English, several participants prepared food to share with the researchers and other participants.

Through these workshops, we found that there are a diversity of forms of participation that people envision. There was no one size-fits all. Instead, there were a range of participatory experiences that people preferred. Some scenarios were brief, intermittent forms of participation like completing feedback cards at food pantries, sharing recipes for how to use the food available at the pantry, or translating documents and resources into different languages. Other scenarios represented more extensive involvement, such as attending interactive workshops for a few hours at a time, serving as a bilingual volunteer or interpreter to help people when they visit the food pantry, or researching information and developing ideas to change policies.

Our findings suggest that organizations who work to improve food access should offer a range of different forms in which people can participate. These should include opportunities that are

varied in terms of the time required, the level of commitment (participation on a regular basis vs one time/intermittent participation), the location (e.g., from the home, on-site at program offices, at another site in the community), and the activities (e.g., sorting food, talking to friends or other community members to raise awareness of resources, having one-on-one conversations with program staff).

Although there was diversity in how people could envision themselves participating, there was a strong, consistent belief that there should be transparency around the outcomes of their participation. Participants wanted their feedback to be used to create change and wanted to know what action was taken based on their involvement. Many participants felt like the input they already provided, such as through surveys or interviews, was not being used. This was very frustrating. Organizations who work to improve food access should be accountable not just for creating opportunities for participation, but also for ensuring participation has impact. Not only that, but programs also need to create feedback loops where they transparently communicate how feedback is used and inform people about the outcomes of their participation.

One of the major findings of our work related to the strong desire participants held to share their skills, knowledge, and experience. Participants wanted to actively contribute and be involved in creating a better, more responsive food system. Folks were especially interested in volunteering and were frustrated around the policies many food organizations held that prevented them from volunteering if they used services there. We also found that people who have experienced food insecurity have deep knowledge and experience to share, which they gained through their lived experience navigating the food system. This expertise is invaluable to food access organizations and policy makers. In addition, participants were excited about the idea of directly sharing their expertise with others who are experiencing similar challenges with food access.

Based on the findings from the workshop, we identified a set of action items that represent the next steps towards creating the ideal participatory structures envisioned by participants. The attached table describes each of these actions. We envision that it can serve as a starting point for creating a more participatory, inclusive food system in Boulder.

Appendices

Appendix A. Scenarios create by one of the groups during the workshop.
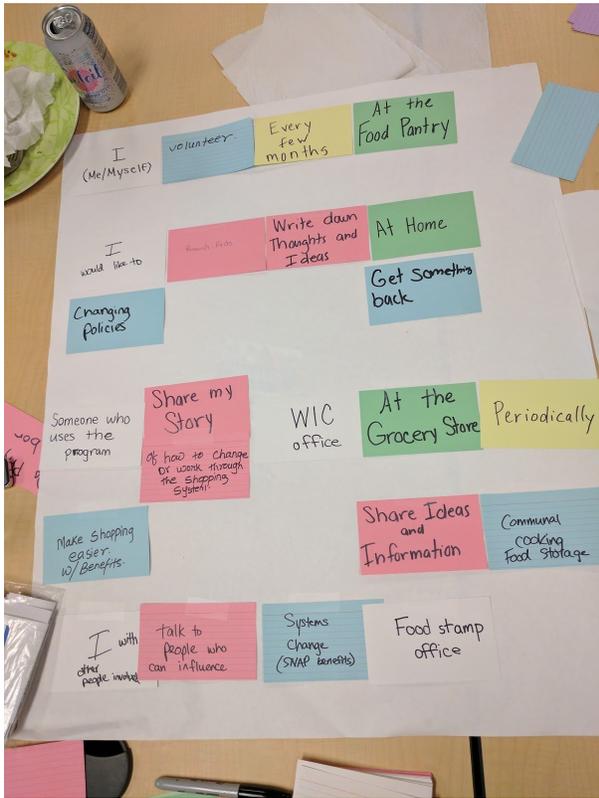
Appendix B. Prioritization of different "actions." Participants created similar prioritzations for all the categories - actors, goals, locations, tools.