

Mower County Food Access Co Design Themes and Principles

Access and Schedule

Food shelves are difficult to access because of limitations on transportation, hours of operation, and one time/month food access. Monthly limits also strain transportation and storage capacity further and limit access to fresh food or ready-to-eat meals.

- Must offer opportunities for working families outside of traditional “hours of operation.”
- Must offer amounts of food to support household storage ability and access to fresh food.
- Must adapt and provide targeted services to different community groups (families with young children, single adults, persons with disabilities).
- Connect proactively to sign up individuals that could benefit from food resources “where they are.”
- Need to ensure handicap accessible spaces and schedule.

Welcome: Food as Community

While it is important to have enough to eat, food creates and sustains social interactions, creating community around shared meals. Accessing food resources to support social gatherings (an extended family dinner for example) is challenging with logistical and stigma barriers. It is also important to have opportunities to support or contribute to food programs; grow or procure food - especially fresh/culturally relevant food; and to feel like supports are a “hand up” versus a “hand out.”

- Must support people in “helping themselves” and not feel patronizing.
- Must raise awareness of scope of need to normalize food insecurity and accessing resources.
- Must support family or community units versus a single individual or traditional household support model.
- Must support individual’s need for social connection (which is frequently around food across cultures).
- Offering culturally diverse recipes, cooking classes or prepared meals.

Access to Information

It is difficult to know what is available, who it is available to, when and where it is available and how to access resources. Navigation is hard, especially if you don’t have time, speak the language, or lack an advocate. Some food supports don’t provide information about how to access them or what is expected.

- Must meet people “where they are” and not require those already disproportionately impacted to navigate an overwhelming information landscape.
- Must support trusted relationships such as those that communities have with their faith communities or cultural communities to reach both volunteers and those who need food resources.
- Must be proactively offered and follow a “less-is-more” approach.
- Must recognize and support trusted advocate(s) that can share and normalize information/resources and serve as proxies to access food on behalf of those who cannot themselves.
- Identify trusted informal community liaisons to reliably connect with and communicate with stakeholders.

Choice and Autonomy

While food shelves feel well-intentioned, they are geared to general audiences. People want the ability to choose their own food based on cultural preferences, dietary concerns/restrictions, and changing situations (family and friends staying in the household for example). The amount and type of foods available are important, as well as the ability to choose service delivery model.

- Must address individual needs and preferences, especially cultural and health related.
- Must provide targeted services/support to those in “life transitions” such as leaving home as a young adult, college, having children, and retirement.
- Need family-centered shopping opportunities and selection.
- Offer a diversity of “pick-up sites.”

Dignity and Security

Food access is difficult for people, particularly children, when community members perceive a lack of food access due to neglect or inability to provide self-care. Some expressed discomfort about how to support food access in such circumstances. Others noted that, due to race or perceived economic status, it was hard to identify someone as food insecure or “in need” for food support.

- Must support people in “helping themselves” and not feel patronizing.
- Must create opportunities for “hand-ups” (those things that help people/families grow and advance) rather than “hand-outs” (those things people/families become dependent on).
Quote: “how might food become a steppingstone for a better life?”
- Must offer opportunities to contribute to food supports such as through volunteering, “pay it forward” support or other ways to participate in food supports beyond transactionally receiving services.
- Must provide more discreet opportunities for access (i.e., confidential backpack programs).
- Must not feel like an interrogation or a legal risk to “prove” need for food resources.

Storage and Preparation

It can be challenging to find ways to store and prepare unfamiliar foods. Readily available government commodities are a common example. Some cultural groups also have traditional food storage/preparation methods (for example drying foods or preserving seasonal fresh produce) that don’t translate to unfamiliar foods.

- Must consider lack of storage capacity (may only have small refrigerator or do not have a freezer).
- Must consider lack preparation equipment (such as a stove or microwave).
- Must consider lack of preparation “know how” especially if receiving unfamiliar ingredients.
- Must be willing to promote cultural food systems as an asset to the community (sharing the abundance at harvest for example).

Coordinated Support

In immigrant communities, resources can feel very “piecemeal” and often require visiting numerous food shelves (sometimes traveling around the region) to access the culturally-relevant food that makes them/their families whole. Life transitions (graduating college, moving or having additional family) makes it difficult to know what resources exist and how to access them. People don’t know where to go for information/support during or after a sudden or unexpected transition.

- Must develop programs that specifically support the full life experiences of high-risk groups (under-employed, people with disabilities, elderly people living on fixed incomes, etc.).
- Must be willing to support individuals and communities outside of traditional service areas (i.e., geographical areas such as city or county).
- Must endorse the principle that individuals and families would prefer to access food supports in their community.
- Must value the time, personal and community resources that people experiencing food insecurity invest in themselves to feed and nourish their families.