Participatory Evaluation of the Programs and Services of the Parkdale Food Centre

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Summary

The Parkdale Food Centre (PFC) is a community food centre in Ottawa, Ontario that offers emergency food assistance using a choice model with a focus on fresh foods. In addition, PFC offers a welcoming environment and facilitates a variety of community programs. PFC collaborated with an interdisciplinary University of Ottawa research team to conduct a year-long evaluation. The purpose of this evaluation was to examine the impact of the programs facilitated at PFC on the people who access the centre. The evaluation was conducted using a participatory Photovoice project and interviews with food centre neighbours.

Key findings from the interviews and Photovoice project highlight the neighbours' experience with PFC and how accessing PFC has impacted their diet and well-being. Neighbours described the access to fresh food, nutritional and cooking information facilitated at PFC. The welcoming environment, social interactions, and community connections emerged as important aspects of the neighbours' experience at the food centre. Suggestions from the neighbours and detailed descriptions of the findings are described in the following report.

Background

Evaluation setting and team

<u>The Parkdale Food Centre</u>: The Parkdale Food Centre (herein referred to as "PFC") is a not-forprofit organization located in the Hintonburg neighbourhood on Ottawa, Ontario. PFC provides emergency food assistance to individuals and families in the community with a focus on providing nutritious and healthy food. PFC offers a welcoming environment where volunteers meet everyone, and where clients are empowered to select their own food in a "grocery shopping" or choice food bank model. Additional programming, such as community meals, community kitchen events, cooking workshops, and advocacy programs are offered at the food centre.

Food insecurity, which involves lack of access to sufficient quantity and quality of food, or living with uncertainty about such access due to financial reasons, impacts approximately 8.3% of Canadian households (Roshanafshar & Hawkins, 2015). Food banks are typically one of the only resources available to address food insecurity in Canadian communities. Food banks emerged in Canada in the early 1980's. Initially intended to be a temporary solution, food banks have seen rising numbers of long-terms clients and have become entrenched in Canadian Society (McCracken, 2015).

Food bank use has risen steadily since 1999. In March, 2016, 863,462 people received assistance from a food bank in Canada (Food Banks Canada, 2016). Traditional methods in food banking have been criticized on several fronts: 1) their use can be stigmatizing, 2) they are dependent on donations of food and money and so food quality is sometimes questionable, and 3) they have done little to solve larger social problems such as poverty and food insecurity (Tarasuk et al., 2014). In response to these criticisms, many food banks have changed the way in which they operate. Examples of progressive changes include: providing fresh foods (including produce), adopting a "choice" or "grocery shopping" model to provide more autonomy, running community kitchens, community gardens, and other community programs. The approach at PFC aligns with these novel approaches in food banking.

<u>The University of Ottawa research team:</u> The research team was led by Dr. Elizabeth Kristjansson, a professor in the School of Psychology at the University of Ottawa. The team members included Dr. Peter Milley, a professor in the Faculty of Education, Dr. Tracey O'Sullivan, a professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences, and Aganeta Enns, a PhD student in Experimental Psychology. Support in data collection and analysis was provided by undergraduate students: Sabina Franklyn, Hannah English, and Myddryn Ellis. All research team members are affiliated with the University of Ottawa.

Evaluation approach

The evaluation was conducted using a participatory approach. We generated different types of data, including narrative (through interviews and group discussions), visual (through photos) and written (through participant descriptions of the photos). The objective was to let the PFC neighbours reflect on their experiences and tell their stories. This project included a Photovoice project (Wang & Burris, 1997) to incorporate participatory and empowering methods. Photovoice is a well-known, respected method of participatory research that allows people in a

community to photograph and narrate their experiences in interacting with social services, including defining what is beneficial, and what needs to be changed. Photovoice provides people with cameras "so that they can provide photographic evidence...to help others see the world through their eyes" (Palibroda, Kreig, Murdock & Havelock, 2009, p. 8). Participants represent themselves and what is important to them in a creative way. Photos are a good way to communicate with the public and with decision makers, as they can capture their attention and transcend language.

Aims of the Evaluation

The University of Ottawa research team collaborated with the PFC partners to examine the impact of the programs facilitated at PFC on the people who access the centre. The following questions guided the evaluation:

- How do neighbours of the Parkdale Food Centre perceive their experiences in accessing and interacting with its people, facilities, programs, and services?
 - What benefits of accessing PFC do the neighbours perceive?
 - What do they believe could be changed or improved at PFC?
- How do interactions with the Food Centre affect the lives of the neighbours?

Evaluation Methods

Participants

Neighbours in the waiting area of PFC were informed about the evaluation project through posters and in-person by two members of the evaluation team. Twelve neighbours who access services at PFC completed an initial interview. Six female and six male neighbours were interviewed, ranging in age between 29 and 61. Four participants indicated they had dependents currently living within their households and two participants were pregnant at the time of data collection. All participants were returning neighbours at PFC. The length of time since first accessing PFC ranged from approximately 6 months to 8 years. All neighbours involved in the evaluation were asked to read and sign a consent form to indicate that they voluntarily agree to participate in the study. The consent form is included in Appendix A.

Four of the 12 interviewed neighbours chose to take part in the Photovoice project. All four Photovoice participants and one additional participant who completed the initial interview, but not the Photovoice project, completed follow-up interviews at the end of the evaluation period.

Evaluation tools

<u>Initial Interviews</u>: Participants completed one-on-one semi-structured interviews at the beginning of the evaluation period. Interview questions focused on the participants' life circumstances, diet, knowledge and skills around food, physical health, mental health, and social support. Participants were also asked about their first impression of PFC, their interactions at the food centre, and how programs at PFC have impacted their lives.

<u>Photovoice</u>: Participants were invited to take part in a Photovoice project. The project took place over the course of five group meetings; these took place at approximately 1 month intervals. At the first group meeting the neighbours were provided with information on Photovoice, shared photography tips, and learned how to use the cameras provided. This meeting was for information purposes and was not audio-recorded. The neighbours were asked to take photos on their own that show their experiences as they relate to programs at PFC.

At the second group meeting, neighbours shared their photos and discussed the meaning and relevance of each photo. The neighbours continued to take photos and then shared and discussed the photos at the third and fourth meetings. During the fifth meeting, neighbours shared their final photos and decided on the three photos they each wanted to display at a photo exhibit. They discussed the text they wanted to accompany the photos and how the photos would be exhibited. The neighbours were given the choice of displaying their photos anonymously or have their names credited on the photos.

The photos and text the neighbours selected were displayed at a local art gallery in Ottawa at a fundraising event for the Parkdale Food Centre. The Photovoice participants were invited to the event. The photos and accompanying text were then displayed at City Hall in Ottawa. The neighbours were invited to the opening night of the exhibit and the photos were displayed for one week in the main hall of City Hall.

<u>Follow-up Interviews</u>: After the Photovoice project concluded, all participants were invited back to complete a follow-up interview. They were asked about how their diets, physical health, mental health, and social support had changed in the past 6 months as well as changes since they started coming to PFC. They were asked about their interactions at PFC and the impact of PFC programs in the past 6 months. They were prompted to provide any feedback on aspects of PFC that they believe could be improved. Finally, the neighbours who had participated in the Photovoice project were asked follow-up questions on what they liked and what they thought could be improved about the project.

Data analysis

All one-on-one interviews and Photovoice group meetings Two through Five were audiorecorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was conducted for the interview and the Photovoice data to summarize the data into themes. Codes were developed by two independent coders and agreed on by the research team. Codes for the Photovoice data were summarized and brought to the follow-up interviews. The neighbours were asked to read the data analysis summary and confirm whether they felt the codes were accurate, what they would change or add, or any other thoughts they had on the summary. This feedback was then incorporated into refining the themes codes. Themes presented in the Findings section below have been drawn from the combined analysis of the Photovoice and interview data.



Findings

Participant descriptions of their experience with PFC and how they perceive the centre to have impacted their lives are summarized in the follow themes.

Foods Available at PFC

Many food centre neighbours described the food they received at PFC, including the quantity, quality, and variety of foods. The food received was described as fresh and suitable for a healthy diet.



"They offer fresh fruits and vegetables and they also give you foods that are you can make instead of prepackaged. So, it's a lot healthier. And that helps you if you want to have a healthier diet." –Participant 11

"So here they make you feel like you're important to eat healthy and so every time I come here I always come back with good food" –Photovoice Focus Group 2

Participants discussed the wide variety of foods, the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables, and described being satisfied with the quantity of food received. Nine out of the 12 participants interviewed mentioned the high quality, freshness, and/or variety of foods available at PFC. Access to food at PFC was contrasted with experiences of food received at other food banks or difficulties purchasing food for a healthy diet.

"Well fruits and vegetables are really tough to get... So, when I come here [PFC], I grab as much green and as much food as I can" –Participant 2

Food Choices

Four participants compared the experience of obtaining food at PFC to selecting foods at the grocery store. This includes the experience of walking around the food centre to see what foods are available, selecting the ones you would like, and having options. Participants reported preferring the choice model to receiving pre-packed food hampers.

"I like the way we go through and pick what we want. At the other place, it was basically they made a list of what you could have and what you wanted. Somebody would go back and fill up your bags and sort of, there you go. There was always one thing that was missing." –Participant 2

"Here you can go and pick what you want but depending on the availability, you have a choice of chicken or ground turkey or ground beef so there's lots of variety" – Photovoice Focus Group 2



Nutrition Information and Cooking Skills

Information and programs on nutrition and cooking facilitated at PFC were discussed in eight interviews. Food centre neighbours discussed learning new information and skills at the programs facilitated at PFC, including the regular community kitchen programs. Participants also described learning new information through the food of the month program at PFC, recipes, and information provided by volunteers or staff on how to prepare and incorporate new foods into meals.



"I've learned a lot from this centre...I've learned how to cut an onion now how to dice the onion, broccoli, they have their unique way of cutting things. Yea, very useful." –Participant 10

"At the food bank, they're starting to do these things now where they're showing you what sort of foods you can make with the actual fruit or the vegetable, how you can incorporate it, the calories, everything, because it's so important." –Participant 7

Health among PFC Neighbours

Several participants associated accessing services and programs at PFC with eating a healthier diet. This included reduced consumption of "junk food", increased quantity and variety in fruit and vegetable consumption, and having prepared "healthy" meals more frequently. One participant discussed how these dietary changes have helped with meeting goals to reach a healthy weight.

"I'm eating more now. I used to eat once a day thinking I'm going to get fat. Now they're teaching me about eating nutritionally and I'm eating more and I'm not getting fat, I'm losing weight." – Participant 10

Food for restricted diets or diets for managing chronic conditions (e.g., Type II Diabetes) was perceived to be accessible at PFC. The choice model was also explained to be helpful in obtaining foods for restricted diets.

Welcoming Environment

The welcoming and inclusive environment at PFC emerged as a common theme throughout the interviews and Photovoice groups; it was mentioned by all 12 participants. Participants described being greeted by friendly volunteers or staff members when first entering the centre. The physical environment at PFC was described as clean, safe, and comfortable. Some expressed surprise when first visiting PFC as it exceeded what they expect out of the experience of visiting a food bank.

"I was really surprised when I walked in and it was clean with the open concept space and the big kitchen...it didn't look like a food bank, it had more of a cozy feeling to it. Most food banks are kind of, you know, in the basement of the church and a sort of stale environment. It had a very friendly, a little bit like a living room feeling a very friendly welcoming feeling so that certainly struck me. They had free coffee and a lot of food banks and don't do that." –Participant 4.



Staff members and volunteers were described as non-

judgemental, caring, and responsive to the needs of the neighbours and community.

"They didn't make me feel like I was less than a person, they made me feel like I was important and I what I was going through was important" – Participant 11

"I explained my situation and [PFC staff] was very helpful...It was really nice to come and we weren't turned away or anything, they were really understanding about it." –Photovoice Focus Group 1

The family-friendly environment, including the toys and books available, contributed to the inclusivity.

"It's very welcoming, there's spots for the kids to play, crayons, and do whatever" –Photovoice Focus Group 1

Suggestions from the Neighbours

One participant explained that long lines can build up before PFC opens. The lines can results in lengthy waits or at times the participant believed the people at the front of the line were able to pick "the best" of the food and non-food choices (e.g., personal care items) available at PFC.

"I come sometimes like 45 minutes early, but there's already up to 20 people ahead of me...and the first crowd leaves with all of it and the last is like not much. It's really just what's been picked through and what remains...So it's almost like you have to stop at 1 when you're supposed to start because it's already been going on and re-stock everything and then start again."

While the welcoming atmosphere was a positive point highlighted in the interviews, one suggested it may be too informal at times. The participant mentioned the casual atmosphere may lead to guidelines not being followed or leave the centre vulnerable for safety concerns, as described in the quotes below:

"It's something that's so good that something could happen...things like the laptops getting stolen. It's a place that people could go, because it's so easy going, that people will take advantage of that. You can easily walk behind and pretend you're this and that or a volunteer and just one day if they get a guy in there that's stronger and just muscles his way through, that's the only thing I find."

PFC as a Community Hub

Several participants discussed the role of PFC in relation to their social support and sense of community belonging. They explained the need for places in the community to meet and talk with other people. PFC was described as a place to drop-in for social interaction with others. Participants talked with their neighbours in the waiting area and explained that they felt more connected in their community because of interactions at PFC.

"I just continued to come along for the socialization right, when you move to a city, beside your



family, who are you going to socialize with? The centre's been helpful, just to be able to come here and dependable place where the hours are dependable where you can count on it being open there's coffee" –Participant 1

"There's a couple of old ladies downstairs that I've bonded with and they said the same thing. They're at home and they sit and do nothing and we have a little chat in the corner, us three talk. They're thankful and I'm thankful. It's like there's a boys and girls club here for the adults." –Participant 10

Involvement in programs facilitated at PFC, such as the community meals, emerged in several interviews and group discussions. Moreover, participants described the success PFC has demonstrated connecting with local businesses and the positive impact of these community connections. The neighbours discussed the donations received by local businesses, the presence of PFC in the community, and events or programs offered jointly by PFC and local businesses. In the quote below one participant describes the experience of one of these joint events, a breakfast hosted by a local restaurant:



"Breakfast at the Hintonburger. A great way to enjoy company with friends, eating a yummy breakfast. It's very good...I look forward to it every month. Our son and mommy dates." Photovoice Focus Group 4 Knowledge of and access to other community resources was facilitated through interactions at PFC. Information about programs, resources, and services in the community was shared during interactions with other neighbours. Information and referrals were also made available through posters and pamphlets at PFC and through interactions with volunteers or staff members.

"There's a guy downstairs [PFC] who can help with hydro, bed bugs, he can help you with that." –Photovoice Focus Group 1

"There is a cornucopia of information available for all clients. Often the food bank is the touchstone to help in areas of health, diet & community services" –Photovoice Focus Group 4

Suggestions from the Neighbours

A participant discussed the difficulties some neighbours experience carrying home their groceries from PFC. The participant discussed how useful help with transportation or access roller grocery bags [a large grocery bag on wheels] would be for those who have difficulty carrying home groceries.

When asked for suggestions, participants often responded by discussing the positive aspects of PFC they would like to see continue. Several discussed the important role PFC plays in meeting their needs and in the community. They expressed that it is important for PFC to continue offering the programs, events, and services they currently facilitate.

"I think this place should continue. You're helping a lot of people."

"I just think that the food bank has done a tremendous job...[without] the food bank I don't know how a lot of people would go about their day to day life but I'm very thankful that they have made it here because now more people have access to the services and it's not just food. So I just want people to know that the Parkdale food bank offers more than just a smile and food they offer good services and it's a good place to go especially for your kids"

Participants also discussed the need for non-food essential items, such as toothbrushes, diapers, feminine hygiene products, and toilet paper. Moreover, the importance of the additional non-food resources available at PFC, including access to laptops and books in the waiting area, emerged in the data.

"The [PFC] library has been really important to me because up until March I haven't had a library card" –Photovoice Focus Group 2

In addition to connections to other community resources or programs, seven out of 12 participants found employment, educational, or volunteering opportunities through connections made at PFC. Participants explained volunteering at PFC was encouraged among neighbours, and several explained volunteering made them feel involved and increased their social connections in the community.

"I volunteer here, now every morning or in the evening, because of the volunteering and the people that did come in, I've made more friends, people I've never even met." –Participant 10

Three participants stated they obtained employment through connections made at PFC.

"I got a job. I took up [staff]'s offer about going to school for housekeeping...I did my placement, I got \$17 an hour, I was working for [local hotel]" –Photovoice Focus Group 1



Conclusions

The participants largely described their experiences with PFC in a positive light. All expressed the benefits they have personally experienced because of their access to the food assistance, programs, and warmth of the staff and volunteers at PFC. We heard few concerns. We believe that this is because experiences are generally quite positive. Furthermore, these findings do provide evidence of the importance of the Food Centre for the neighbours. However, we believe that it is also possible that some participants may have been hesitant to provide negative feedback because they were so grateful for PFC. It is also important to keep in mind that measures were taken to ensure the data retrieved is kept confidential, the recruiting, Photovoice sessions and interviews with this small sample took place in the same building as PFC.

A few suggestions for improvement

The suggested areas of improvement that neighbours discussed primarily involved efforts to reduce long lines forming before the food centre opens and efforts to maintain fairness and safety at the centre. Exploring options to assist neighbours who have difficulty carrying their groceries home emerged as another suggestion. This may involve exploring volunteer programs to help provide transportation home for neighbours who have difficulty carrying their groceries. Another recommendation put forth by a participant was to consider seeking donations for "roller" grocery bags or other programs to assist neighbours access these "roller" grocery bags. The participants described the programs at PFC as needed resources in the community. Many neighbours discussed the positive contribution PFC has made in their personal lives or to the community and expressed it is important for the programs at PFC to continue. Some noted the increasing numbers of neighbours they see at PFC and discussed for more resources like PFC in the city.

Summary of Key messages

PFC neighbours described improved access to foods for a healthy diet, particularly fruits and vegetables. They also discussed their perceptions that access as well as the nutrition and food preparation information and programs at Parkdale contributed to improving the diets and health of PFC neighbours.

PFC is perceived as an inclusive and welcoming food centre. Previous research has linked food bank use with social stigma and shame. This has been identified as a barrier to accessing food assistance programs. PFC has demonstrated strategies that contribute to addressing to the stigma or shame associated with visiting a community food centre. Participants discussed the benefits of the welcoming, inclusive, and non-judgemental social environment at PFC. The data revealed that visiting PFC for the first time often exceeded expectations and the social environment did not create feeling of shame.

PFC programs go beyond emergency food assistance. Programs that promotes social interaction were described as important to increasing social support and building a sense of community. Connections were facilitated to other community resources, programs, or activities through information provided formally and informally among PFC neighbours, staff, and volunteers. The emergency food assistance, particularly with an emphasis on fresh foods, was perceived as a needed resource in the community. However, neighbours who took part in the present evaluation described how PFC is much more than a food bank.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Case Study of the Parkdale Food Centre

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the case study on the programs at the Parkdale Food Centre, conducted by Drs. Elizabeth Kristjansson, Peter Milley, and Tracey O'Sullivan from the University of Ottawa.

Purpose of the Evaluation/ research: The purpose of this study is to examine and report on how this program is working, what is going well and what is not and how this program is affecting the lives of the people who are participating in it. The program directors will use this information to inform and enhance the programs that they offer at the Centre. The researchers will use this information to study and share information about the Food Centre programs so that others can learn from this project.

Participation: My participation will consist of:

- 1) Four in person interviews on the topics of how the program is working and how I am feeling about the programs and about myself. Topics will include: what I find helpful and not helpful about the programs, my diet, health, and social support. The interviews will take about 30 minutes each.
- 2) A Photovoice project where I will receive training in photography, take pictures, and provide a small written statement about the significance of the photo and what it means to me. My pictures will help the researchers, the program staff, the funders and the community understand the program, how it works, what is going well and what is not working, and if and how it is affecting my life. Photovoice is a fun and unique way for me to get your message across; everyone understands pictures and enjoys discussing them. The project will involve: 1) a training and practice session, 3) two meetings in which me and my group will: discuss my pictures and those of the other participants as well as themes that arise from those pictures, and decide which pictures and writings are going to be used in the evaluation. If I do not have access to a camera, I will be provided with a camera for the study period. We will also have an exhibit of our work in in which presentations about the program are made to the public. I understand that I can decide not to participate and that it will not affect my status in the program in any way. The group sessions will take about 2 hours each. The interviews and group sessions will be conducted over a 5 month period.

Risks: The researchers have made it clear that I am here to share my views, opinions and experiences without having to divulge any very personal information or going into details that I am not comfortable sharing. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks *by allowing me to express what I want in a safe and warm*

atmosphere. If I need to talk to someone else, the researchers will direct me to the appropriate person.

Benefits: My participation in the interviews and Photovoice project will give me an opportunity to share my thoughts about and experiences related to the programs available at the Parkdale Food Centre and if/how it has affected my day to day life. The Photovoice project will be a creative and interesting way for me to show others about the Food Centre and how it is affecting my life. Sharing my views means that those involved in the program and others will gain a better understanding of how the program works. This can help program coordinators understand what is working well, and what could be improved so that they can improve aspects of the program as it goes along. My experiences and photographs will also be of interest to the people who fund the program, the general public and city officials. This research may also be of interest to other communities interested in this type of program.

Compensation: There will be snacks and drinks at each interview and Photovoice meeting. I will be supplied with a password protected memory key for the duration of the study period to transfer my pictures and writings so that the group can analyse them together. As compensation for my time and input into the study, I will also receive \$10 for each of the individual interviews I attend. This compensation does not apply to the group sessions. If I chose to withdraw from the study, I will still receive the payment for any interviews that I attended prior to withdrawing from the study.

Confidentiality and anonymity: The interviews and group sessions will be audio-recorded and transcribed by the researchers. An alphanumeric code will be used to link my name to my interview transcripts and only the researcher will know which interview belongs to which name. As there will be other participants present for the group session, keeping the sessions confidentiality will be asked of everyone, but cannot be guaranteed. This same code can be used for my Photos and writings. If I wish to have my name appear on my Photos and writings I may do so. I have received assurance from the researcher that my feedback will be presented in an aggregate way. My name or any other information that would allow me to be individually identified will not be used in the results of this evaluation without my permission. Portions of my interview may be quoted in the results, but no descriptive information that could be used to possibly identify me will be used. If I would like to review quotes that will be used from my interview, I will be given the chance to review the quotes.

Conservation of data: The audio recording and transcript of my interviews, Photovoice meetings, my photos, and my writings about these photos will be securely stored on the researcher's password protected computer and on a password protected back-up server. The data will be kept for a period of 5 years after the start of this study. Dr. Kristjansson will be the only person to have access to this computer.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the process at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without affecting

my relationship with the staff, volunteers or researchers. If I choose to withdraw, I can decide whether I want the data gathered up until the time of my withdrawal to be included in the study. If I withdraw abruptly and the researcher is not sure of my wishes, the data gathered up until my withdrawal will not be included in the study.

Acceptance: I, _____, agree to participate in the above evaluation.

*Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

I agree that my photo may be taken as part of the Photovoice project. I will be able to decide which photos of me can be used in the exhibition, other public presentations/reports, or only for research purposes. I will also be able to decide whether my photos will be exhibited anonymously or accompanied by my real name.

*Participant's signature: _____ Date: ____ There are two copies of this consent form, please keep one of the copies.

If I have any concerns about this evaluation, I can contact the lead researcher: Dr. Elizabeth Kristjansson (e-mail <u>kristjan@uottawa.ca</u>. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5

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