



Reflection on Service Learning and Social Determinants of Health through the lens of COVID-19

Learning Community 10

In partnership with Our Daily Bread

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Introduction

As medical students and future physicians, we are uniquely positioned to understand the impact of social determinants of health, the extent to which these factors are interconnected and self-propagating in terms of their effects on a patient's mental and physical health, and ways to combat the health inequities that arise as a result. We are also empowered with the privilege to help advocate on behalf of underserved and disenfranchised communities and ensure they receive the health services they deserve.

Our Learning Community's experience working with Our Daily Bread showed us how the power of community and coming together could overcome great challenges, but also how much more work is left to be done. Below we discuss some the challenges Our Daily Bread and the community it served faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, the underlying factors that led to development of these challenges, and what we learned about addressing food insecurity in this vulnerable community.



“The plight of the elderly and the mentally ill continued to be a deep concern for me...hearing and watching the difficulties...was the real driving force.” Ruth “Cookie” Vogelpohl, founder of Our Daily Bread

The Impact of COVID-19 on Our Daily Bread's Mission and Operations

Our Daily Bread's mission is "to provide stability and hope to guests in need, by offering meals, hospitality, and services in a safe, respectful environment located in Over the Rhine." Each aspect of that mission was challenged during the pandemic: the demand for its services skyrocketed, food availability became scarcer, volunteer hours dropped, and social distancing guidelines made it difficult for patrons to gather and find community. These challenges multiplied as other food banks, soup kitchens, churches, and shelters throughout the city faced similar constraints.

One major pain point was that Our Daily Bread's leasing contract with nearby Findlay Market restricted their ability to operate on weekends. Typically, patrons were able to find alternate sources of food, but many of those other institutions reduced operating hours during the pandemic, especially weekend hours. Our Daily Bread quickly pivoted to providing their guests with portable food packages that contained nonperishable foods to provide guests with food over the weekend. However, these meals lacked variety and were high in sodium. Many guests also had no way to open many of the cans that were donated because they lacked easy open pull tabs. The pandemic forced us to find a creative solution by providing the guests with can openers. They are a resource that many of us take for granted, but were a necessity for guests that allowed them to not only access more varieties of nutritious food at Our Daily Bread, but be able to visit other food banks/kitchens for their canned food products as well.



Volunteers and employees taking attendance and handing out hot beverages at the reception desk.

Social distancing guidelines also limited the number of volunteers that could be on premises at any given time, forcing Our Daily Bread to limit the number of available volunteer slots. Many of Our Daily Bread's volunteers were older and faced particularly greater risk during the pandemic. At many times they had to opt to only have employees physically present. While this was done in order to lower exposure risk to workers, volunteers, and patrons, it placed greater stress on the organization in order to maintain their food output and other services in the face of rising numbers of patrons at its doors. Consequently, Our Daily Bread had to adapt and develop new protocols efficient enough to serve the increased numbers of patrons despite less volunteer labor. Our LC was able to volunteer and conduct our community project in small groups of 3-4 students and see firsthand how Our Daily Bread adapted to carry out their core mission and serve their patrons.



Volunteers assembling weekend snack bags.

Despite reduced operating hours, the employees and volunteers operated like a well-oiled machine with very little downtime. They prepared to-go boxes in an assembly line with each volunteer performing a dedicated task at their station, either prepping vegetables, serving food, packing snack bags, transporting food, or running the door. This was perhaps a different style than their pre-pandemic ways. Volunteers that could not be at the main location were able to take boxes of supplies home to prepare in the safety of their own kitchens and later brought them back to Our Daily Bread for delivery to the patrons. Unique solutions such as this were critical to serving patrons with the same high standards despite rising demand. As we worked with Our Daily Bread, witnessing their flexibility and how they faced each new challenge head-on, we were left inspired. When we are physicians, to work with such a positive and persevering non-profit again would be a privilege.

Impact of COVID-19 on the Community and Our Daily Bread’s Clients

Our Daily Bread has been a critical social services provider in the Over-the-Rhine community since being founded in 1985. The majority of its clients were experiencing homelessness and were disproportionately affected by COVID-19 compared to others. During shutdown and quarantine periods, those with stable living situations were able to shelter-in-place with greater ease and were not as severely impacted by the closure of businesses and reduced availability of social services. Those experiencing homelessness struggled to meet their basic needs of food, shelter, and sanitation during those difficult times. While anecdotal conversations with patrons provided us with a rough understanding of the population we were serving, our Learning Community conducted a more comprehensive needs assessment in order to better identify opportunities for future service.

	Number	Percentage
Age Groups		
8-17	1	1.0%
18-29	11	11.1%
30-39	15	15.2%
40-49	25	25.3%
50-59	27	27.3%
60-69	11	11.1%
70-79	4	4.0%
80-83	1	1.0%
Gender Identity		
Man	68	68.7%
Woman	21	21.2%
Prefer not to respond	10	10.1%
Racial Identity		
Black or African America	61	61.6%
White or Caucasian	24	24.2%
Prefer not to respond	14	14.1%

Figure 1. Demographic information of surveyed Our Daily Bread Patrons

The most notable of these changes was the displacement from shelters and transitional living spaces that no longer had the capacity to house this population due to the pandemic. The effects of this change were twofold. First, it forced people to live in high contact environments. Second, it left the homeless population without access to facilities for basic handwashing and hygiene. When combined together, the result was greatly increased risk of obtaining and transmitting the virus. The population served by Our Daily Bread traditionally has lower rates of health literacy and the impact of this disparity was magnified through the challenges brought forth by COVID-19.

Guests' Duration of Time Experiencing a Lack of Food

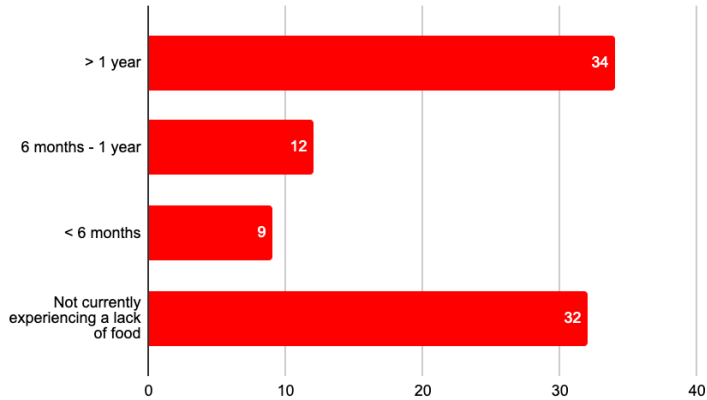


Figure 2. Food Insecurity Among Our Daily Bread Patrons

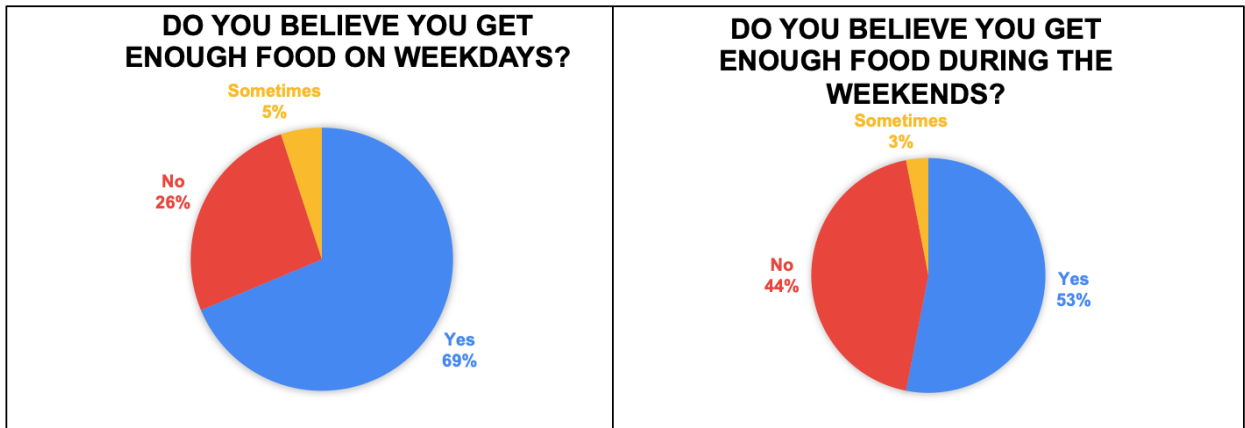
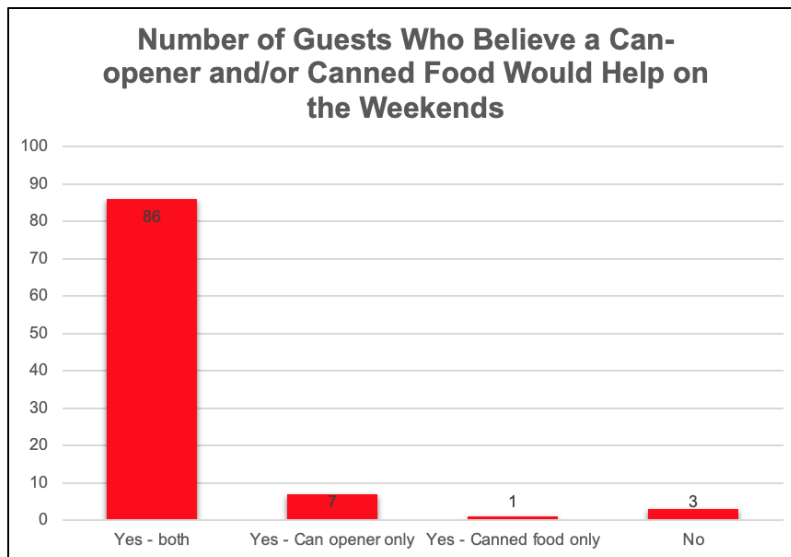


Figure 3 (above), 4 (below). Weekend Food Insecurity Among Patrons



OBD Guests' Current Living Situations

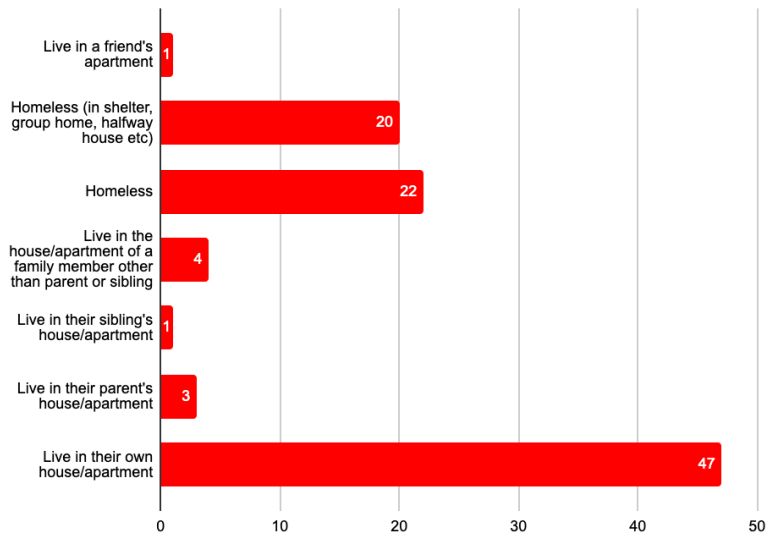


Figure 5. Housing Insecurity Among Our Daily Bread patrons

While not all of the patrons of Our Daily Bread were experiencing homelessness, they were also substantially impacted by the disruptions that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to their lives. Their increased stability in regard to living situations did not insulate them from service interruptions from charities, food pantries, and other service organizations that assist the most vulnerable members of society. Many of these organizations temporarily closed or offered reduced hours during the height of the pandemic, which affected all of the guests utilizing their services. Our Daily Bread had to adjust their procedures due to the pandemic, such as not letting their guests inside the building for a place to eat in order to reduce the possible chance for the virus to spread. While the guests still received the basic nutrition provided by Our Daily Bread, they were not able to have a warm place to eat, a community to enjoy the food with, or access to some of the other assistance that was provided before March 2020.



Members of Learning Community 10 volunteering at Our Daily Bread

How Can We Advocate for ODB and the Community It Serves?

When determining the best approach pertaining to students' and physicians' ability to help advocate on behalf of Our Daily Bread's patrons, we have decided that there are three key points upon which we can act to ensure our efforts are worthwhile. First, it is our desire to ensure a sustainable source of food resources for the patrons of Our Daily Bread. In order to do so, we hope to create a food drive within the University that would allow us to gather donations from students, faculty, and others for years to come. Next, we want to set up a free clinic or medical services van that can come to Our Daily Bread's location and do wellness checkups for its most at-risk patrons. Finally, we hope to obtain resources to offer mental health screenings for the patrons at Our Daily Bread to ensure those who need help can get it. It is our belief that through implementing these efforts we can better ensure the continued health and wellbeing of the patrons of Our Daily Bread.

The permanent employees of ODB have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic in order to serve the increased demand of meals throughout the weeks and weekends for patrons. In the face of this huge rise in demand for meals, they've risen to the deed and increased their daily meal output by 3-4 times even with fewer volunteers than normal: a precaution to mitigate exposures to COVID-19. As a medical community that is largely vaccinated and dedicated to serving others, we as students can organize food drives within our community while also recruiting volunteers now that Our Daily Bread is increasing its operating capacity. Volunteer recruitment and food drive activities could be garnered through increased participation by medical school interest groups and other campus organizations. We hope to later expand our efforts to the larger student body and establish a precedent to help meet the ever-demanding need of canned foods and volunteers to Our Daily Bread.

Many of the guests of Our Daily Bread do not receive adequate medical care, nor do they have the access or opportunities to receive help when they need it. The development and implementation of a mobile clinic would best serve the patrons of Our Daily Bread. While ODB offers help with a multitude of social services, one area that is needed by this community is medical resources. Having the on-site clinic will make medical care not only accessible but would also encourage the patrons already present at ODB to take a moment to get the help that they may need. This resource would be able to offer education, mental health resources, vaccinations, and physical screenings to ensure the disadvantaged patrons have an opportunity to receive medical care. The key advantage to this mobile clinic would be the association with ODB and the trust that it can help foster between this group and the medical providers.

