"Feeding the community: the food center model in urban areas"

Food security in urban areas has become a major topic of concern and affects those of lower-economic status most severely. Food security is understood as the access that members or communities have to foods in order to meet dietary requirements (Pinstrup-Andersen, 2009). However, the idea of food security has evolved to include the type of foods that people are consuming. In dense urban areas of lower-economic standings, it has become more common for food deserts, or the lack affordable nutritious foods, to appear (Cummins, 2002). With the known negative health comes related to lack of access to healthy and nutritious foods, food security is a topic that must be addressed in these urban areas. In Winnipeg, Canada, those most at risk of food security tend to be racialized and marginalized groups (Indigenous peoples, newcomers, immigrants and refugees). The NorWest Community Food Centre (NorWest) is a community-based food cooperative that uses a food center model, as opposed to a food bank model, to address issues of food security in the largest Manitoba Housing community in the province. The model tackles issues of local and immediate food insecurity by providing free foods to community members, while simultaneously addressing larger issues of food security and social inequality by offering advocacy services and programs. As the center has only opened its doors in February 06, 2015, it provides a strong case-study example of how to operate a sustainable community food center in a low-income and developmentally stunted area.

This dynamic model differs significantly from a food bank model, which tends to provide band-aid solutions for protracted issues. NorWest operates as a community center that offers access to clean, nutritious foods, a community garden, cooking classes, advocacy and outreach programs and much more. It functions both as a service provider and as a community safe space. NorWest’s model addresses both the immediate problems posed by food insecurity and the broader context of social injustice by training local advocates to act on behalf of the community and help members within the community.

As this food center model is adaptive and bases its programming on needs of the community, the garden is currently in the early stages of creating a traditional medicine garden for the cultural practices and needs of its First Nations, Inuit and Metis members (and will be open for any community members who would like to access it). NorWest also offers a farmer’s market to community members by buying foods in bulk and then sells produce back to the community at cost, allowing members who are at a lower socio-economic level the opportunity to purchase healthy, wholesome foods that would not be affordable otherwise.
This model uses evidenced-based solutions to deal with issues of food security in the Inkster neighborhood in Winnipeg that tailors programming to the needs of community members.
