

Kennedy Wilcox Impact Plan

Executive Summary

Introduction

Howdy, my name is Kennedy Wilcox and I am a current sophomore Animal Science major at Texas A&M University. As someone with food allergies, the lack of allergy-friendly foods offered at food pantries or served in school lunches stands out to me. Since high school, I have had a will to change what is being offered by government food programs so that children and families with allergies can also have access to safe food. Whenever I received an email about the FIELD Fellowship, I felt that this was the perfect opportunity for me to get into the food space and begin to work towards my goal.

Phase 2 Experience

During phase 2 of the FIELD Fellowship I had the opportunity to work at Brazos Valley Food Bank (BVFB) in Bryan, Texas. This was such an amazing experience that taught me so much about foodbanking and the nonprofit industry. My favorite part of the immersion was that on the last Thursday of every month, I got to help with the Madisonville Mobile Food Pantry. Getting to load boxes of food into customer's cars and seeing the looks on their faces was so rewarding! Despite how thankful everyone was, I couldn't help but imagine how I would feel if my family were to receive one of these boxes. Since I have a dairy allergy and the rest of my family has celiac disease and is therefore allergic to gluten, much of the box would be unsafe to consume. The boxes also often contain peanut butter or walnuts, and for someone with a severe nut allergy, this contaminates the entire box! While this isn't an issue for the majority of people, that doesn't mean that it should be overlooked; individuals with food allergies deserve access to safe food too. I can't imagine being put in the situation where I had to choose between starving or eating unsafe food, but sadly, people face this everyday.

BVFB "respects diversity" and "responds to evolving needs" according to the values posted on their website. The rate of food allergies in children has rapidly increased in recent years and is most common in minority populations. This is an issue that needs to be addressed! Because BVFB serves rural areas, they have a smaller customer base that allows them to be more customer-focused and meet individual needs. I believe that this would be the perfect place to

implement an allergen-free box program. And if all goes well, this could even lead to the creation of boxes geared towards different dietary restrictions due to religion or personal preference such as Kosher, vegetarian, or vegan (assuming this is a need in the community.)

Problem Statement

Brazos Valley Food Bank currently has no programs set in place to offer those with food allergies safe food to eat. With the high student population in Brazos Valley and the increasing rate of food allergies in younger populations, there is a need in the community for a program that offers safe food to these individuals.

Mission Statement: Provide food insecure individuals with allergies access to safe food!

Solution Statement: Implement an allergen-free food program at BVFB to distribute boxes of safe food to those in need.

Actions

- Collect responses on a customer-focused survey to identify the need for an allergen-friendly program at BVFB.
- Solidify viability of implementation pathways within Feeding America's guidelines.
- Implement box free from top 9 allergens for distribution; successfully get 1 box out!

Phase 2: Madisonville Mobile Food Pantry Shareback

On June 22, I volunteered with the Brazos Valley Food Bank at the Madisonville Mobile Food Pantry, and it was such a fantastic experience! BVFB hosts this mobile pantry in Madisonville, a small town about 45 miles outside of College Station, on the third Thursday of every month. This mobile food pantry offers a box of dry staples/canned goods, frozen meat, fresh produce, and bread! BVFB serves the surrounding six counties: Brazos, Burleson, Grimes, Madison, Robertson, and Washington County. Madisonville, a part of Madison County, is located in a food desert and contains a high percentage of retired, food insecure individuals. The day that I helped out with this mobile pantry happened to be the day after a major storm had occurred, and when we arrived, the power was still out across town. Upon arrival at 9 AM, there was only one small grocery store with an attached gas station that had power. No restaurants, self-standing gas stations, and very few houses had power. There were power lines down that blocked roads, maintenance crews were everywhere, trees had blown over and destroyed people's homes and businesses, and cars were stranded on the sides of the road without any gas. It was clear that we had coincidentally come at a time when the community needed us the most. Although this was my first time being here, and I didn't know any of the recipients, I was later told that there were a lot of new faces; usually, the recipients are mostly regulars. The line for the food pantry was wrapped around the building and it took us four hours to serve everyone waiting in line. While putting food into people's cars, I heard the same story numerous times about their homes being without power for over 12 hours and having nothing to eat, nowhere to store refrigerated/frozen goods, and nowhere to get food. Many people requested to pick up food for their neighbors because they were stuck at home due to having no gas or debris blocking the road. It was so rewarding to see the joyful looks on people's faces as we gave them fresh food in a time of distress; this is a day I will never forget! This experience showed me the importance of mobile food pantries and how they don't just help out food insecure populations, but also people who are temporarily struggling for a variety of reasons.



Needs Assessment

Food allergies are a rising problem, particularly in younger generations. The College Station population has a median age of 23.1 years, meaning that the rate of people suffering from food allergies is likely higher here than in other counties. Currently, there are no programs at any surrounding food banks/pantries to provide these individuals with safe food to eat.

Roughly 61% of the population in College Station consists of college students. An estimated 40% of U.S. college students experience food insecurity. On top of this, according to the Feinberg School of Medicine, “There's been an uptick in childhood food allergies in recent years, and new evidence from Northwestern shows they're also becoming more common in adults. Many of the reactions to these allergies are life-threatening.” As of 2021, “about 20 million people have food allergies in the U.S.” Currently at BVFB, all food boxes distributed at mobile food pantries contain items on the top 9 allergen list. Many boxes contain a bag of walnuts or a jar of peanut butter. For those with severe nut allergies, this contaminates the entire box of food! In instances involving individuals with less severe allergies, they must face the decision of eating unsafe food or going hungry. After all, food insecurity is defined as “the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.” There is an old motto stating, “You should be thankful for what you can get,” but at BVFB, they do not agree with this. Because BVFB is a smaller food bank, they have the opportunity to appeal to the individuals in the community. BVFB employees value helping each individual they serve to the best of their ability rather than serving the entire community the most efficiently. For example, BVFB has multiple distributions a month rather than a mass distribution once a month. While this is less efficient for BVFB, it creates a more individualized experience and is what the consumers prefer. Their mission statement is, “The Brazos Valley Food Bank unites our community to nourish our neighbors in need.” Because of the unique needs of the community and the business model of BVFB, I believe a program that offers allergy-friendly foods would be beneficial and practical to implement.

As an individual with food allergies who has had to rely on government food programs such as free/reduced lunch, I understand the struggle of accessing safe food. The “my plate” teachings that government-subsidized meals are based upon state that grain and dairy must be a part of every meal. Since gluten and dairy are two of the top nine allergens, this can be severely limiting to those with allergies. Thankfully, a couple of the dining halls on campus at Texas A&M have allergy-free lines that always contain food free from the top nine allergens, but not every student has meal swipes or reliable transportation to get across campus to the dining halls that offer this. I personally didn't have a meal plan and the only times I got to experience eating at the dining halls was when my friends used their guest swipes on me. While I only ate in the dining halls a handful of times, it revealed to me that I am not the only student with food allergies struggling to find access to safe food. The single allergen-free food line was always packed with students who had similar needs to me. Since I lived off campus, I bought all of my groceries and cooked at home, but I often had to pick and choose which foods I could afford to buy each week. Since allergy-friendly food is more expensive than its traditional counterpart, I often couldn't afford all the basics like milk, bread, cheese, pasta, etc.

Brazos Valley Food Bank currently has no programs set in place to offer those with food allergies safe food to eat. With the high student population in Brazos Valley and the increasing rate of food allergies in younger populations, there is a need in the community for a program that offers safe food to food-insecure individuals with allergies.

BVFB serves The Brazos Valley as well as the five surrounding counties: Robertson, Madison, Grimes, Washington, and Burleson. While BVFB has a large outreach program, all six of the counties they service are considered rural and therefore, don't have large populations. Because of this, they are able to distribute food in unique ways that meet the individual needs of their consumers.

Goal: Determine the need and implement allergy-friendly food bags/boxes/agency categories with appropriate products to fill them with.

- Objective 1: Determine realistic need and implementation pathway for allergy-specific distribution at BVFB.
 - KR1: Collect 30-50 responses on a customer-focused survey to identify allergy requirements for BVFB customers (all 6 counties).
 - Process-oriented sub-point: identify the ideal length of the survey and distribution format (maybe it is just verbal and checklist for employees)
 - Process-oriented subpoint: Add a question on the intake forms that states something along the lines of "Check this box if you, someone in your family, or someone you know has food allergies and could benefit from a box of allergen-free food."
 - KR2: Collect 20 responses on a customer-focused survey (College station/Bryan/A&M specific distribution)
 - Process-oriented subpoint: Tally up the totals for the six counties BVFB serves, and decide if this program is needed everywhere or just in certain counties.
 - KR3: Consolidate data and establish the need for allergen-free boxes.
 - KR4: Finalize implementation idea via 1x1 conversation with Ops at BVFB.
 - Process-oriented sub-point: reach out and set a meeting with staff
 - Process-oriented sub-point: set agenda for meeting (exact questions)
- Objective 2: Solidify the viability of the implementation pathway within Feeding America's guidelines.
 - KR1: Confirm the need for a new sorting category and/or allergy-sorting possibility within misc.
 - KR2: Create educational handouts or other relevant material for food sorters in the volunteer center. (check ingredient list, check safe replacements)
 - KR3: Post the educational handout and confirm its use
- Objective 3: Implement a box/bag/category that is free from the top 9 allergens as well as distribution logistics; successfully get 1 box out.
 - KR1: Confirm purchasing power and buy allergy-specific pallets by contacting 10 companies with existing relationships.

- Process-oriented sub-point: Contact companies to ask if BVFB can buy items in bulk by pallet for a cheaper price than retail. (if pallets are needed: this may be too much product for the amount needed)
- KR2: Identify 1 funding avenue for specific allergy-free purchasing power. (Find funding for allergen-free food items since they are slightly more expensive and will require a larger budget.)
- KR3: Distribute 1 box at BVFB or partner site. Confirm the needs of the recipient are met.
 - Process-oriented sub-point: Survey beforehand the need for allergy-free products and confirm, then hand them out!

My assessment needs to determine the necessity of allergen-free boxes in each county that BVFB serves, to what degree, and the logistics of the distribution of these boxes. My assessment should also contain a list of the items currently in each bag/box marked with which items need to be replaced and what they can be replaced with. In addition to these things, a cost analysis should also be performed to determine the cost of these boxes compared to the current counterpart so that funding can be handled.

Data needed for the problem statement:

- Estimated amount of population with at least one food allergy
- Extent of the need for allergen-free boxes in the community
- Lists of current contents in each bag/box for every food dispersal program at BVFB
- List of possible allergen-free replacements for unsafe items
- The cost of making these switches

Data Collection Plan:

- Survey consumers at upcoming distributions to determine the need for this program
- Search online for allergen-free alternatives to items and cross check them with the nutrition team to determine they are valid replacements
- Confirm with each company that we can buy from them in bulk

List of bag/box contents for various programs at BVFB and possible replacements:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1sWJGg8C5jkgoTXAIN35g_UxW5SNlgj19qWzSEAfLw/edit?usp=sharing

I know that there is a need for a program like this in the community and that one does not yet exist. I feel that it has yet to be put into place due to a lack of knowledge and advocacy on this topic. I believe that I (an individual with food allergies) can bring awareness to this issue. I need the opportunity to collect data and the connection (BFVB) to make this happen.

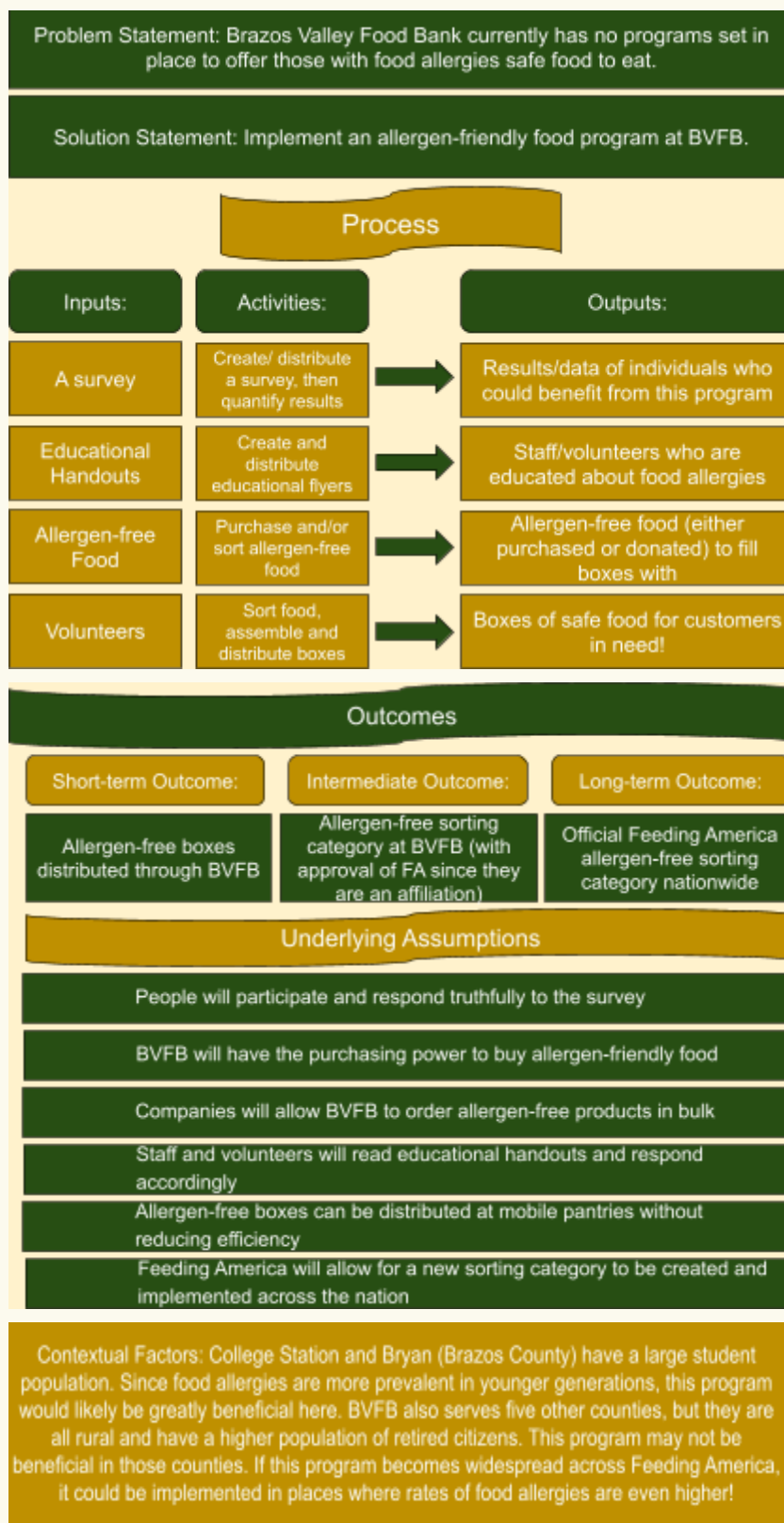
I need to first collect data on the extent of the need for allergen-free boxes in the community. I also need to conduct research on the plausibility of assembling these boxes (making sure I can

find nutritionally adequate substitutes sold in bulk at a reasonable price). I also think it could be beneficial to provide training to BVFB employees on food allergens.

Plan of Action :

- Talk to the nutrition team and Director of Operations at BVFB
 - Ask questions I have about logistics
 - Receive feedback on my idea
 - Get connected with staff members who can help me develop this program
- Attend the next mobile pantry and perform my own outreach
 - Tell folks about the FIELD Fellowship and share my plan for this program
 - Ask the consumers if they have a need for a program like this or know someone who does
 - Share my findings with BVFB
- Work out the logistics of what each box contains and do a trial run at the Madisonville Mobile Food Pantry
 - Teach BVFB employees about major allergens and how to safely serve this portion of the community
 - Order products for boxes
 - Assemble Boxes
 - Determine the best way to distribute these efficiently (and make sure no one in the community feels that they are being discriminated against- some people may think that others are getting better food than them so education and transparency are crucial in this step)

Logic Model



Results

While trying to implement allergen-free food boxes at BVFB, I faced trial and error. First, I had the idea to survey mobile pantry customers, determine the extent of need, and then based on that amount, create allergen-free boxes to distribute at the next mobile pantry. This idea was dismissed because their mobile pantries are designed to be equitable and all boxes are supposed to contain the same products. Next, I had the idea to add an allergen-free sorting category. BVFB liked this idea, but since they operate under Feeding America, those categories are regulated and adding a new one would require extensive approval. After much consideration, we decided to combine those ideas and create boxes that contain a variety of allergen-free foods for meals, but offer them to partner agencies by the pallet. This way, partners such as The 12th Can, Texas A&M's campus food pantry, can order boxes of allergen-free food as needed, but aren't stuck with it if they don't need it. Although the implementation of these boxes is not yet completed, we are underway with the project and have heard feedback from partners confirming that they could benefit from this program! I chose to share my failed ideas, because although they did not work at this specific location, they may be viable options at other food banks.

Conclusion

My hope going into the FIELD Fellowship was to change the food being served, one foodbank at a time. Through the support of Farmlink, I have been able to do just that at Brazos Valley Food Bank - and I'll actually be continuing with them as a student employee through 2024. While I am starting small, my hope is to eventually implement an allergen-free sorting category industry-wide through Feeding America. I hope that by sharing my story, I will inspire others to seek change at their local food bank so that everyone in need can have access to safe, nourishing food!

Referendum

Brazos Valley Food Bank's values and mission statement found here:

<https://www.bvfb.org/who-we-are>

Hunger statistics in the Brazos Valley found here:

<https://www.bvfb.org/hunger-facts-stats-brazos-valley>

College Station census data found here:

<https://datausa.io/profile/geo/college-station-tx>

Information on food insecurity found here:

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/>

Food insecurity statistics in minority populations found here:

<https://www.americanactionforum.org/research/food-insecurity-and-food-insufficiency-assessing-causes-and-historical-trends/#:~:text=While%20it%20is,be%20food%20insecure>

Allergy info found here:

<https://aafa.org/allergies/allergy-facts>

Food allergy statistics found here:

<https://www.foodallergy.org/resources/facts-and-statistics>

Information on rising rates of food allergies found here:

<https://www.feinberg.northwestern.edu/research/podcast/food-allergies-on-the-rise.html#:~:text=There's%20been%20an%20uptick%20in,affected%20by%20food%20allergy%20safe%3F>