

The Power of Community: Neighborhood Food Pantry Gets a Client-Centered Makeover

Summary

The Urban Food Equity team at the Center for Community Health in the Altman Clinical and Translational Research Institute at University of California, San Diego works to increase the number of local food distributions offering health-focused, trauma-informed, and client-centered food assistance services in San Diego County. We accomplish this goal by providing free capacity building services and resource development to 10 food pantry sites annually, utilizing intervention strategies and best practices from the Nutrition Pantry Program.

We completed a client-centered makeover of the food pantry and garden spaces at Imperial Beach Neighborhood Center (IBNC) in Imperial Beach, California in 2022. IBNC serves low-income and unhoused individuals experiencing hunger and nutrition insecurity. We utilized intervention strategies in nutrition education, inventory and waste reduction, environment, community connections, and pantry policies and procedures from the Nutrition Pantry Program to create a new trauma-informed, dignity-first, client-choice pantry that reflects the values of IBNC and the Imperial Beach community. We also revitalized IBNC's abandoned garden to transform it into a food producing space to harvest fruits and vegetables for clients. We assisted IBNC in the development of an operations manual to define policies and procedures to sustain their new food distribution spaces and systems. We connected a partnership between IBNC and Feeding San Diego to improve the quality and quantity of food sourcing for their clients. IBNC now hosts a client-choice pantry 4 days a week and harvests from their new garden to supplement their fresh produce availability. After the makeover, IBNC distributes 7,000 pounds of food monthly (775% increase from year prior) and serves 870 clients monthly (270% increase from year prior).



New Welcoming Artwork in the Pantry



UC San Diego Youth Advisory Council Members Helping Revitalize IBNC's Garden

Background

Nearly 1 in 4 people in San Diego County (23%) experience nutrition insecurity, as estimated by the San Diego Hunger Coalition in December of 2022 (San Diego Hunger Coalition, 2022). Nutrition insecurity occurs when a person is unable to provide three nutritious meals for themselves and/or their families. In 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic began, many people became newly nutrition insecure for the first time. Imperial Beach is a majority Hispanic/Latino city of approximately 26,000 people located in San Diego County's South Bay region. In December of 2022, approximately 29% of Imperial Beach's population experienced nutrition insecurity (San Diego Hunger Coalition, 2023) and 13.4% of Imperial Beach residents were living in poverty in 2021 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

We enrolled IBNC to participate in our Nutrition Pantry Program in 2021 to support them with client-centered intervention strategies to create a health-focused food distribution and ancillary services. At the time of program enrollment, IBNC offered their clients a monthly mass food distribution with prepackaged food bags. IBNC's leadership was interested in reimagining their indoor and outdoor spaces to improve utility and function of their operations, and also to offer a client-choice pantry space, which is considered the gold standard of best practices in food distribution services. They also wished to revitalize the abandoned garden on their property and explore the possibility of growing fresh food for their clients.

Focus Areas of Achievement



Nutrition
Education



Inventory &
Waste
Reduction



Environmental



Community
Connections



Pantry Policies
& Procedures



*Avery Cramer, Founder and Executive Director of
San Diego Co-Harvest.*



*John Griffen-Atil, IBNC Director & José Griffen-Atil
Providing Lunch for Volunteers.*

Process

In February 2021 we completed a Healthy Food Pantry Assessment and Client Needs Assessment with IBNC leadership to gather baseline data about the food pantry's reach, needs, assets, and operations to inform an action plan to create health-focused policy, systems, and environmental changes IBNC could benefit from and sustain. During the initial six months of working with IBNC, we focused on identifying and understanding their needs and assets, building a relationship, and addressing nutrition education goals that required minimal training and investment. After six months, we outlined a phased pantry and garden transformation plan to assist them in making substantial changes. With a budget of \$9,000 and the support of a community-centered landscape architecture and design firm, Studio Nectary, we developed a detailed project plan for a pantry and garden makeover with five distinct phases that were accomplished in six months.

TIMELINE	PROJECT ACTIVITIES
Phase 1 June - July 2021	Built trust and completed value planning activities with IBNC leadership. Established partnerships needed to complete and sustain project. Researched applicable municipal code and permitting for building and use restrictions (no permitting required for this project), took photos and measurements of pantry and garden spaces to create a detailed scope of work for design consultant.
Phase 2 Aug - Sept 2021	Hired community design consultant, developed initial project designs for pantry and garden spaces based on IBNC feedback and needs, hosted stakeholder input sessions and gathered client feedback on designs, created and revised a detailed budget. Met with consultant and project partners to determine project feasibility within budget and trim project areas where needed.
Phase 3 Oct - Nov 2021	Created task and supply lists and purchased supplies. Created preparation task list of tasks to be completed prior to volunteers arriving to work on scheduled community build days. Planned agenda activities and logistics for work stations (e.g. painting, shelving installation, signage installation, garden bed weeding and soil prep, rain barrel installation) for two community build days. Conducted volunteer outreach and engagement with IBNC's network and other local non-profit organizations and resident/youth groups. Completed in-depth planning work and communication with design consultant and project team. Confirmed committed in-kind resources and services from IBNC, San Diego Co-Harvest, Second Chance Youth Garden, and UC San Diego Youth Advisory Council.
Phase 4 Dec 2021 - Jan 2022	Hosted two community build days to complete improvement tasks in the pantry space (indoor) and the garden space (outdoor). Hosted volunteers, local artists, and urban agriculture advocates. Created a punch list of remaining tasks and touch-ups and completed those tasks after the build days the following month. Developed a garden management and maintenance plan with San Diego Co-Harvest and IBNC.
Phase 5 Jan - Feb 2022	Completed post project Healthy Food Pantry Assessment and Client Needs Assessment with IBNC leadership (one year after baseline assessments). Completed a maintenance and sustainability plan with IBNC leadership.

Results: New Client-Choice Pantry

These are the pantry space and operational outcomes as a result of our work with IBNC over the course of one year:

- IBNC's new client-choice pantry space operates 4-days a week and allows clients to shop directly from newly installed shelves.
- The pantry now offers clients fresh seasonal produce grown onsite.
- New pantry coordinator's duties include maintaining and building food sourcing relationships and improving pantry operations.
- IBNC has a new food sourcing relationship with Feeding San Diego to increase the quality and quantity of food offered to clients.
- We helped IBNC develop a new operations manual based on best practices and guidelines from the Nutrition Pantry Program.
- Lakisha McZeal, Community Food Project Manager at the Center for Community Health, received the Imperial Beach Mayoral Community Award for the pantry makeover project and was featured in the Mayor's annual State of the City Address (Center for Community Health, 2022).



We are letting them choose their items like a grocery store experience. This way, not only do they receive items they like, but I believe it gives them a feeling of dignity and love from the fabulous volunteers who assist them... I'm feeling thankful, grateful, and blessed to be a part of this community. This is just the beginning and I'm looking forward to the future! -Debra Benson, IBNC



Before: Underutilized Storage Space



After: New Client-Choice Pantry

Results: New Garden Space Available to Grow Food for Clients

These are the garden space and food production outcomes as a result of our work with IBNC over the course of one year:

- San Diego Co-Harvest became IBNC's committed urban agriculture partner to maintain garden, harvest, distribute, and replant crops seasonally.
- Existing garden space was refreshed and 100 square feet of new growing space was added.
- 7 raised garden beds are available for local community members to grow their own food.
- IBNC now grows food to provide directly to their clients in their client-choice pantry.
- 265-gallon rainwater collection system was installed to improve irrigation and sustainability of the garden space.
- San Diego Co-Harvest contributed \$500 in pest control and irrigation systems to ensure thriving seasonal harvests from the garden.
- New benches were installed in the garden for clients, community members, and IBNC staff and volunteers to rest and relax outdoors in nature.

San Diego Co-Harvest has harvested and distributed **over 200 lbs of fresh produce** for IBNC clients and other food insecure community members.



IBNC Staff Harvesting Produce Grown for Clients in New Garden Space.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Everyone deserves the right to eat nutritious foods that meet their cultural and dietary needs. Everyone deserves the ability to access food in a way that preserves their dignity and reduces the stigma associated with hunger and nutrition insecurity. We're proud to have partnered with IBNC and commend their commitment to excellence in trauma-informed, client-centered food distribution services. IBNC's new pantry and garden spaces, as well as their operational improvements, have uplifted their identity in the Imperial Beach community and allowed them to better promote resilience, understanding, and dignity for their clients experiencing hardships. Our work with IBNC equipped them to make significant changes and achievements in nutrition education, inventory and waste reduction, environmental, community connections, and pantry policies and procedures. IBNC's Healthy Food Pantry Assessment score increased by 5 points after one year of participation in our program, including all makeover-related changes.

Sustainability is the most important factor to consider when embarking on an intensive makeover project of a pantry or other community-based food access location. As we've learned with previous makeover projects at our grocery retail sites, it's critical to only make the changes the site operators possess the capacity to sustain. For example, IBNC already had plans to create and hire a new staff position to meet their operational demands. The changes we helped them make required more hours of operation for the new client-choice pantry and new duties in food sourcing, garden activity, and relationship management with multiple new partners. Our ability to introduce and broker a partnership between San Diego Co-Harvest and IBNC was also critical to the success and sustainability of this project. Based on staffing capacity and IBNC's operational demands, we understood garden maintenance would be a lower priority for the organization. This is consistent with what we've observed in previous makeover projects with grocery retail sites that have included plant and garden elements. New storefront plants typically were no longer watered, weeded, and maintained beyond 6-9 months after a makeover. Factoring in these lessons learned and candid conversations with IBNC, we sought the support of San Diego Co-Harvest, whose mission is to make healthy food affordable and accessible in all communities. As an agricultural non-profit, they establish and maintain micro-farms throughout San Diego County and distribute harvested produce back to the community. They were mission-aligned and available to meet the garden needs of IBNC. Additionally, we guided IBNC in developing an operations manual to help them document and train staff and volunteers on their policies and procedures to ensure long-term sustainability.

We offer these final recommendations: 1.) Seek out partnerships with mission-aligned organizations, 2.) Establish clear communications channels with all parties involved, 3.) Encourage open and frequent communication to build trust, understanding, and agreement of roles, responsibilities, and expectations from the start, 4.) Focus on making sustainable changes, 5.) Prioritize local and values-aligned community connections and input.



Volunteers and Local Artists



*Lakisha McZeal Accepting 2022
Imperial Beach Mayoral Community Award*

References

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Partners

[Feeding San Diego](#)

[Imperial Beach Neighborhood Center](#)

[Nutrition Pantry Program](#)

[San Diego Co-Harvest](#)

[Second Chance Youth Garden](#)

[Studio Nectary](#)

[UC San Diego Youth Advisory Council](#)

About the Authors

Lakisha McZeal is the Community Food Project Manager on the Urban Food Equity team at the Center for Community Health. Lakisha manages our work with food pantries, providing capacity building services and best practices from the Nutrition Pantry Program. Under her leadership, the Center for Community Health has expertly served 33 food pantries across San Diego County from 2020-2023. Lakisha is also a board member of two community-based food access non-profit organizations in San Diego County, San Diego Co-Harvest and Project 1:1.

Elle Mari is the Director of Urban Food Equity at the Center for Community Health. She is the founder of our Urban Food Equity programs and projects that are grounded in a community asset-based framework to promote food justice. Since 2014, Elle has led capacity building services and support, community-based research, and academic-community partnerships to serve food pantries, farms, farmers' markets, neighborhood grocery stores, residents, and youth to improve food access opportunities in San Diego County.

To learn more, please visit [Urban Food Equity](#)

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