



Chicago Teen Food Literacy Program

Implementation Plan

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In *Impossible Choices: Teens and Food Insecurity in America*, the Urban Institute demonstrated how food insecurity and hunger play out in the lives of teenagers in chronically disadvantaged communities (Popkin, Scott, and Galvez 2016). Conducted in partnership with Feeding America, the research found that food insecurity too often pushes teens into “expedited adulthood” and into behaviors that are at best detrimental and at worst risky and potentially destructive.

This work on teens and hunger emerged from Urban’s Housing Opportunities and Services Together (HOST) demonstration, which explored using housing as a platform for providing intensive, whole-family services to stabilize vulnerable families.¹ Urban’s HOST team first identified teen food insecurity as an issue in its Washington, DC, HOST community. Through a partnership with Feeding America, the team conducted focus groups with teens, first in the three HOST demonstration communities and later in seven diverse low-income communities across the US, to gain insight into how food insecurity affected their well-being. The findings from that exploratory research highlighted the special challenges teens faced, including the stigma of being food insecure, the weight of adult worries and responsibilities, and the pressure to engage in risky behavior.²

Urban and Feeding America also began partnering with a team in the Portland, Oregon, HOST community in 2014 to develop and pilot a teen-focused intervention to reduce the risks of food insecurity. The partnership included Home Forward, the housing authority of Portland and Multnomah County; the Oregon Food Bank; community service providers; and local teens. The project’s goals were to reduce the stigma associated with seeking food assistance, increase food literacy, and empower teens to be leaders in community change. The Portland program had two main components: a 13-session course known as the Teen Food Literacy Program (TFLP) and a monthly teen-led food distribution, known as Harvest Share, that operated much like a free farmers’ market.³

Using lessons learned and the Portland program as a template, Urban received support from the Chicago Community Trust to begin working with local service partners and teens in early 2018 to plan and pilot a Chicago Teen Food Literacy Program in the Chicago Housing Authority's (CHA) Altgeld Gardens community. Altgeld Gardens was one of the original HOST demonstration sites, and teens there reported significant challenges with food security. The Chicago program adopted the Portland project's three goals and added one of its own: to build capacity in the city to address issues around teens, hunger, and risky behaviors.

This implementation plan documents the work done with Chicago partners, with the goal of serving as a jumping off point for other partners and potential funders to adapt for future iterations. This document details the planning and pilot process as well as the program design work, which was informed by teens in Altgeld. This plan is unique to the Chicago site, and the model of the TFLP should be updated and revised as the program is refined through additional implementation.

Chicago Site: Altgeld Gardens

The Chicago TFLP was implemented in Altgeld Gardens, a public housing community. It is the CHA's largest traditional family development and the agency's southern-most public housing site. Altgeld residents are predominantly African American and have extremely low incomes. The HOST research indicated that food insecurity was an acute problem in Altgeld: in a survey Urban conducted in 2013, 50 percent of parents worried that their food would run out before they received money to buy more—a rate more than double the national average (Scott et al. 2013). And teens feel the effects of this insecurity: in Urban's earlier research into teen food insecurity and the links to risky behavior across a set of 10 diverse communities, teens in Altgeld were among the most vocal about the challenges of going hungry and feeling responsible for helping their families. Teens shared that they could not access formal jobs and reported that some of their peers were engaging in risky coping strategies (Popkin, Scott, and Galvez 2016).

Altgeld is in a food desert, and residents must travel significant distances to buy fresh food. When the program's planning phase began in March 2018, residents had access to a convenience store, where teens said they regularly purchased snack foods, and one grocery store. But during the planning phase, both stores closed. To help mitigate the effects of the closures, the CHA surveyed residents about food access and organized a bus to take residents to a Walmart to shop. Additionally, residents have access to several food pantries at or near Altgeld Gardens (traditional pantries, a soup kitchen, and pop-up produce distributions). The Local Advisory Council holds a food pantry once a month.

Altgeld also has a family support service infrastructure: the CHA's FamilyWorks program, which is administered across all public housing and mixed-income developments. FamilyWorks services include family-centered coaching and individualized assessments; case management for all resident household members; and specialized services for children, teens, and residents seeking education and employment. Altgeld Gardens is also a Jobs Plus program site, which means that specialized

employment services are available there and that some residents qualified for their rent to remain at a set price for several years.⁴

Phase 1: Planning a Teen Food Literacy Program in Chicago

In November 2017, the Urban Institute, in partnership with the CHA, Metropolitan Family Services (MFS), and the Greater Chicago Food Depository (GCFD), applied for a planning grant from the Chicago Community Trust to develop a teen food literacy program in Chicago's Altgeld Gardens. Both MFS and GCFD had already worked in Altgeld and had strong relationships with the community (see box 1 for more details on the partners and what role each has played in the project).

BOX 1

Partners in the Chicago TFLP

With Urban providing convening support, the Chicago pilot relied on three primary organizations to make the program possible:

- **Chicago Housing Authority:** The CHA manages Altgeld Gardens as part of its broader portfolio of public housing properties and engages with residents regularly. For the TFLP, CHA staff members will provide resources for on-site management and oversight through its FamilyWorks program.
- **Metropolitan Family Services:** MFS is the CHA's FamilyWorks provider in Altgeld Gardens. It facilitated a teen leadership group that tested the draft curriculum, which was adapted for the Chicago TFLP, and was involved in planning the program.
- **Greater Chicago Food Depository:** GCFD is the food bank for Cook County, and its mission is to provide food for hungry people while striving to end hunger in the community. The work is done with over 700 program partners, including pantries and pop-up food markets. GCFD will provide the food and coordinate support for the food distribution event run by teens.

Planning began in earnest in March 2018. To kick off the project, partners reviewed earlier work on food insecurity in Altgeld, as well as the planning and implementation lessons learned from the Portland pilot project. Partners agreed that the Altgeld program should build on the Portland project but with a curriculum and implementation model that reflected the needs and characteristics of teens in Chicago. Partners agreed to four key goals for the program:

- reducing stigma related to seeking food assistance
- increasing food literacy
- empowering teens to be leaders in community change
- building capacity in Chicago to address issues around teens, hunger, and risky behaviors

Partner Engagement

Regular communication with partners throughout the planning phase was key to program development. The partner kick-off meeting in March was a two-hour teleconference. Over the planning phase, partners met biweekly, either by conference call or in person if Urban staff members could visit Chicago. The meetings included updates on happenings in Altgeld, such as the hiring of new services staff members and the closing of food markets, and discussions about implementation, including the development and testing of the course curriculum and the planning of the food distribution pilot. Our first in-person meeting occurred in April 2018 and included conversations with partners and focus groups with youth. The focus of the visit was on the Portland curriculum and how to revise it for Altgeld. The second site visit took place in December 2018, and partner conversations then focused on refining the implementation and evaluation plans.

Teen Engagement

Partners took the project's commitment to empowering teens seriously and engaged teens in all aspects of planning and piloting. Partners solicited teen input and feedback on program design and materials and plans for piloting elements of the program.

On April 9–10, 2018, the Urban team conducted three focus groups at Altgeld and held a meeting with the Altgeld teen leadership group convened by MFS. Findings from the first site visit informed curriculum revisions that focused on the following areas:

- minimizing stigma associated with participation in food programming in the community
- broadening the curriculum to take into account different levels of food literacy among students
- including younger teens in the program
- emphasizing the advocacy opportunities that the program provides
- including career pathways in the curriculum and broader programming opportunities for teens in Altgeld (e.g., connections to Jobs Plus).⁵

MFS staff members recruited teens for the three April 2018 focus groups; one was for boys, one was for girls, and one was for both. Teens were offered dinner and \$25 to participate. The focus groups were intended to collect information about what teens like to eat and where they get food, whether teens help their families shop for food or cook meals, and what strategies teens in the neighborhood use to cope when they don't have enough food. Teens expressed concern about the quality of the food at local stores (at the time, the convenience store and grocery store) and the accessibility of food. They also reported helping their families shop for food and experiencing food insecurity at certain times of the month or parts of the year, as well as a lack of delivery services in the community.

Teen Leadership Meeting

Urban staff members also met with 11 teens who participated in a weekly leadership group in Altgeld facilitated by MFS. The goals of this focus group were to assess the food literacy level of teens in Altgeld and to receive feedback on topics covered in the curriculum and input on program structure. The following themes emerged:

- Teens were interested in learning how to have a voice in their food system. They felt it was important that they have the opportunity to learn to set their own meetings and agendas, and to speak directly to actors in their food system (e.g., the board of the food bank or the superintendent of their school district).
- Teens were not familiar with many nutrition topics but were very interested in learning about how foods affect the body and what is “healthy.”
- Teens were interested in learning about how food is produced, how it interacts with race and identity, and how food interacts with the school system.
- Teens were interested in teaching their peers leadership skills and applying their skills to the food system.
- Teens recommended incorporating cooking classes and field trips into the curriculum.⁶
- The teens felt that the program needed an adult facilitator and that in addition to being patient and knowledgeable about food insecurity, the facilitator should have listening skills, a desire to work with teens, and the ability to understand where the teens are coming from and what life is like in Altgeld Gardens.
- In thinking about the scheduling of the TFLP sessions, the teens felt that a weekly meeting, like they had for the teen leadership group, would be appropriate.
- The teens did not want gift cards or monetary incentives in exchange for attendance each week. They said that instead of weekly incentives, they would prefer a large monetary incentive or field trip at the end of the program to reward those who completed it.

These ideas and suggestions were incorporated into the curriculum.

Phase 2: Piloting Components of a Teen Food Literacy Program in Chicago

Partners' and teens' enthusiasm for the project was high after the April 2018 events. Urban revised the curriculum, and partners started brainstorming ideas for program design and implementation. Partners agreed that teens should pilot as much of the program design concepts as possible, namely the curriculum and food distribution event, so they would feel ownership of the project.

Piloting the Curriculum with Teen Leaders

MFS piloted the adapted TFLP curriculum with a group of teen leaders from Altgeld. Through a series of sessions, the teens worked through the curriculum and gave the following feedback:

- The group facilitator should be someone the teens can relate to, who can speak to their experiences.
- Several curriculum sections could be restructured to include more time for discussion, and different language and assumptions around “snacks” and “healthy” should be considered.
- There was an appreciation for the curriculum’s focus on developing decisionmaking skills to create actionable goals.
- Teens were interested in pursuing gardening, but Altgeld lacks dedicated space for community vegetable gardens.
- Teens wanted opportunities for field trips:
 - » One example was a trip to the food depository.
 - » Another was a trip to grocery stores to compare their food and prices. Teens expressed that they felt stigmatized when they entered certain stores, so a trip to those stores could help to overcome those feelings.

Partners also continued to engage teens about community needs, and their responses informed program design elements (see box 2). The pilot was adapted to meet teen’s schedules and needs.

In spring 2019, the curriculum was piloted with another group of teen leaders. That pilot yielded new insights into how to hone the curriculum to fit the needs of teens in Altgeld. The goal of this implementation plan and the accompanying curriculum is to be replicated and adapted in other communities. We envision the curriculum as a living document for future cohorts of teen leaders in different communities to mold to their community’s needs.

BOX 2

Asking about Risky Behaviors

In the April 2018 focus groups, participants did not talk about teens engaging in risky behaviors in response to food insecurity to the extent that teens did in 2014. To ensure that the program was sufficiently addressing needs and risks, a MFS facilitator asked teens while piloting the curriculum about the prevalence of behaviors that the HOST team had previously identified in Altgeld. The teens said those behaviors were not common. But they also said that some older teens pursued relationships to meet their needs and that those relationships sometimes occurred outside Altgeld, so they were not as aware of the prevalence of the relationships. Teens also identified stigmas and challenges around accessing food. In creating effective programs, it is crucial that teens feel comfortable accessing food programs and transporting food inconspicuously. Charitable food programs or programs that include a food service should consider distributing food in backpack-like bags, offering delivery, or hosting a companion event that features food.

Piloting Food Distribution

During the planning phase, Urban, on behalf of the partners, sought a supplemental grant from the Chicago Community Trust to allow for the pilot of a community food distribution event. In Portland, teens had implemented a “Harvest Share,” but teens in Chicago did not use the same name or branding. Planning began in October 2018. The MFS teen leaders met with GCFD to select a date and to discuss logistics and the teens’ preferences for the event.

The pilot was held from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. on December 8, 2018 in a community room at Altgeld Gardens. All community residents were invited to the event, where they had the opportunity to visit food stations and select produce and boxed goods. This structure ensured that participants left the event with foods that they wanted; receiving a preset bag of food can leave participants with food that they do not want or do not know how to cook.⁷

The Altgeld teen leadership group was responsible for organizing, running, and documenting the pilot. A teen handed out a different food at each station, worked the welcome desk, and handed out baggies of candy and cookies to guests. It was important to the teens that community members could choose what food they wanted, instead of receiving a pre-packaged set of foods. Additionally, teens wanted to add an element of “fun” to the event, playing music and handing out gift bags with themed cookies. The GCFD facilitator who helped coordinate the event with the teens reported that they were excited, eager to plan logistics, and felt a sense of ownership. GCFD solidified the details of the event and provided teens with a sample flyer to edit and customize and recipe cards for the items that would be distributed. The teens helped with recruitment, selected the food menu, and ran the day-of logistics.

On the day of the pilot food distribution event,

- about 100 households, including 158 adults and 139 children, were served during the two-hour food distribution window;
- people who received food were not required to show proof of need and could live anywhere in Cook County;
- teens kept a sign-in sheet that collected signatures from recipients, as well as their zip code and the number of people in their households (this list is held by GCFD);
- MFS provided a site manager to supervise distribution and event logistics; and
- 20 teens participated as volunteers; they were allowed to come and go as needed for other extracurricular activities.

After the event, teens gave the following initial feedback:

- They thought the event was well-organized and went smoothly from start to finish.
- They heard from residents who participated that they liked the grocery-style layout and the recipe and nutrition cards; residents told teens that they should host food events more often.
- They indicated, based on level of effort and time commitment, that they would like to conduct a two-hour food event once a month.
- They thought that to attract more teens from Altgeld, they should consider food products that are particularly appealing to teens (quick and easy meals they can make for themselves).

From December 2018 to April 2019, the teen leaders coordinated three food distributions events. The initial food event in December served 92 families, an event in March served 121 families, and the last event, in April, served 123 families. At two of the food distribution events, GCFD held cooking demonstrations to show residents how to prepare meals from available food. Additionally, residents emphasized that they liked being able to choose their food rather than have it prepackaged for them. The teens set up food stations so that it felt like residents were shopping, which was part of a larger effort to make the event seem more festive. The teens gave the March event a St. Patrick's Day theme and handed out green accessories to attendees. To attract teens to the events, the teen leaders designed flyers and used social media channels like Facebook Live.

Partners decided that teens from both the previous and current leadership groups could volunteer during the events. There was also interest among the teens in opening the volunteer opportunity to other teens in the development. Because the curriculum culminates in a teen-implemented event or action campaign, we modified the curriculum to allow for the sessions on event planning to be conducted as a half-day workshop—to serve as an orientation for teens not moving through the full curriculum.

Phase 3: Planning for Implementation

This implementation plan documents the work that the Urban team and partner organizations in Chicago completed during the pilot TFLP in Altgeld Gardens. The program is ongoing, and its timeline and plan for evaluation have not been solidified. Additional funding would be necessary to conduct an outcomes evaluation. Elements of this plan for implementation describe how partners are thinking about the future of the TFLP in Altgeld and its evaluation, if it were fully funded.

Management

The partners share management, coordination, and facilitation responsibilities. The CHA, MFS, and GCFD help support different aspects of the program, with a part-time supervisor-level staff member employed by MFS serving as the primary coordinator. As the Chicago partners continue to refine the program, the coordinator's job description will be updated. The core activities of the position are as follows:

- coordinating the food distribution events, community engagement, teen recruitment efforts, and implementation of the food curriculum
- providing oversight for the program and looking for opportunities for improvement
- serving as the point of contact and assisting with and coordinating data collection efforts for evaluation of the implementation

If program implementation and an outcomes evaluation were fully funded, Urban would continue to provide technical assistance and convening support for partners, as well as ongoing evaluation for the purposes of program refinement.

Curriculum

The original 13-session TFLP curriculum for Portland (Lipman and Thompson 2018) was adapted into a 16-session curriculum for Chicago. The curriculum is written for the facilitator to use and has an accompanying workbook for teens with areas for notes, activity details, and discussion questions. The course can take place once a week for 16 weeks, with each session meeting for 1.5 hours, or once a week for 12 weeks, with each session meeting for 1.5 hours and a half-day workshop to complete sessions 13–16. The curriculum is written assuming that there is a small amount of funding for activities, such as field trips or cooking demonstrations. The funding could also be used to provide incentives to teens for participating; for example, providing a small amount of funds per session, like \$10, could cover transportation and time for participants.⁸

CURRICULUM OVERVIEW

A breakdown of the curriculum by session is in the appendix. Below are the course's themes.

- **Session 1:** Developing a safe and healthy space for the TFLP
- **Sessions 2–4:** Learning what “healthy” means and describing how sugar and fat relate to health

- **Sessions 5–8:** Learning about food systems on a larger scale and understanding systemic factors that affect food access and choice
- **Sessions 9–12:** Learning about how teens can practice community asset mapping and find opportunities to disrupt a food system that is creating unequal food environments within a community
- **Sessions 13–16/half-day workshop:** Planning and organizing an action campaign project and thinking about the logistics of implementation, first steps, and future work

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

MFS helped facilitate a pilot of the TFLP for Altgeld’s teen leadership group. The agency expects to continue serving in a support role, providing food, bus transportation, prizes for participation raffles, and program supplies and materials. The first cohort of teens provided feedback on the initial curriculum, and as teen leaders continue to move through the program, additional modifications to the curriculum and program will be made in response to their input.

Harvest Share/Food Distribution Event

GCFD provided food and support for the monthly distribution events that were similar to the Portland Harvest Share program. Although the funding for this project covered those events, additional funds would need to be secured to continue bringing food to the site. And logistics, including a consistent location and time for the monthly events, would need to be coordinated through MFS and GCFD.

We imagine that other pilots of food distribution events would cover 12 months, with one event each month serving roughly 100 families. Each family would receive roughly four to six dry goods and six to eight fresh produce items, depending on availability.

In the December 2018 event in Chicago, families could choose from the following items:

- Dry/canned goods
 - » Quick oats (1)
 - » Beef stew (2)
 - » Chicken ravioli (2)
 - » Pasta sauce (1)
 - » Canned tuna (2)
- Fruits and vegetables
 - » Tomatoes (3)
 - » Heads of cabbage (1)
 - » Cucumbers (3)
 - » Sweet potatoes (3)
 - » Kiwi (5)
 - » Tangerines (5)
 - » Pears (5)
 - » Pineapples (1)

GCFD provided the bags for distribution; teens emphasized that providing backpacks or more stylish and inconspicuous bags may help with teen participation in food programs. Finally, although teen volunteers from the community ran the event, a GCFD staff member supported the planning and logistics, and the program coordinator from MFS oversaw on-the-ground administration and logistics.

Appendix: Teen Food Literacy Program Curriculum Breakdown

Session 1. Defining Our Space: Participants begin developing trust as a team, thinking of communal goals, and identifying reasons for joining TFLP.

Session 2. What Does “Healthy” Mean? Teens begin thinking critically about the food they eat and how food affects health. This session focuses on sugar and processed food.

Session 3. Sugar Sugar: Teens learn how sugar is related to health and how to identify whether a food has a lot of artificial sugar.

Session 4. What the Heck Is Fat? Teens learn how fat is related to health and how to identify whether a food has a lot of fat. Teens will also bond as a group and develop trust while jumping across lily pads; the goal is for teens to recognize how complex and interesting they are as individuals and how many of the assumptions they might have had about the other teens are false.

Optional Session: Cooking Demo: Teens learn some basic knife skills, how to shop on a budget, and how to cook some simple healthy food.

Session 5. Our Food System: Teens are introduced to phases of the food stream and began to explore the actors and institutions that affect the food system.

Session 6. What Is Food Insecurity? Teens learn how food insecurity is defined, talk about hunger, and brainstorm how to create a more food-secure community.

Session 7. Food Deserts: Teens further develop their knowledge of food insecurity and explore how systemic factors can limit affordability, accessibility, and availability of certain foods and affect health and equity.

Session 8. Food Choice: Teens round out their knowledge of the food system by exploring food choice, identity, and the power of teen leadership to combat systemic problems within the food system.

Action for Change Worksheet: To be completed at home.

Session 9. My Community, My Home: Teens practice community asset mapping and delve deeper into the TFLP’s purpose and goals.

Session 10. Identities and Food: Teens learn to see through assumptions, break down stereotypes related to food, and realize how their own identities are related to food.

Session 11. Our Food Justice: Teens develop their knowledge of the social, economic, and political forces that create unequal food environments within a community.

Session 12. Tying It All Together: Teens reflect on what they’ve learned so far and draw connections between all the topics covered.

Session 13. Action Campaign Goals: Teens begin strategically planning their action campaign project, creating a vision of teen food security for their community.

Session 14. Action Campaign Timeline: Teens continue strategically planning their action campaign project, by developing an action timeline and choosing their first direct action.

Session 15. Organizing Our Action Campaign Project: Teens practice working through the action steps for their first direct action and figure out how to work together without heavy facilitator involvement.

Session 16. What Do We Need to Move Forward? Teens decide what action/next steps are needed to start on their plan of action or campaign, work on those steps, and celebrate the end of TFLP training.

Notes

¹ For an overview of HOST, see “HOST Initiative in Action: Collaborating,” Urban Institute, accessed August 6, 2019, <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/metropolitan-housing-and-communities-policy-center/projects/host-initiative-action/collaborating>.

² Martha M. Galvez, Micaela Lipman, Susan J. Popkin, Priya Saxena, Molly M. Scott, and Elaine Waxman, “Impossible Choices,” Urban Institute, September 2016, <http://apps.urban.org/features/food-insecurity/>.

³ For more information on the Portland Teen Food Literacy Program, see Galvez et al. (2018).

⁴ For more information on Jobs Plus, visit “Employment Services,” Chicago Housing Authority, accessed August 21, 2019, <https://www.thecha.org/residents/services/employment>.

⁵ Ultimately, connecting elements of the TFLP into the Jobs Plus program did not occur. In future iterations of the curriculum, program leaders could investigate ways to integrate more professional or career development.

⁶ The teens in the Chicago pilot did not go on any field trips explicitly linked to food security, but cooking demonstrations were held at each of the teen-led food distribution events. In future pilots, TFLP organizers can include field trips to supplement the curriculum sessions.

⁷ Client choice food pantries allow people to pick out their own food, creating a more dignified environment and cutting down on food waste, according to End Hunger in America. For more information, visit “Client Choice Food Pantries,” End Hunger in America, accessed August 21, 2019, <https://www.endhungerinamerica.org/getting-started/client-choice-food-pantries/>.

⁸ For the pilot in Chicago, teens did not receive an incentive.

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