METROPOLITAN HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES POLICY CENTER

RESEARCH REPORT

Pathways for Community Voices

Building Feedback Loops with Clients of Charitable Food Assistance

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with Feeding America

April 2018

URBAN INSTITUTE · ELEVATE · THE · DEBATE

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Steven and Victoria's family visit a food pantry in Bartlett, TX, which lies within the service areas of the Central Texas Food Bank. During times of financial instability, the pantry is a source of food and community for their family. Photo by Jessie Gladdek/Feeding America.

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Acknowledgments

This report was funded by the Fund for Shared Insight, a collaborative of funders that provides grants to nonprofits that encourage and incorporate feedback from the people they serve. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at www.urban.org/support.

We want to extend our special thanks to our partners in this work: Trisha Matthieu and Brittany Morgan from Feeding America, who supported the on-going implementation of the pilots for three years; Eileen Hyde, Jessica Jelinski, Theresa Del Vecchio Dys, Shana Alford, and Erin McDonald, who supported this work at the Feeding America national office; staff and volunteers at each of the pilot food banks in Akron, OH, including Jill Oldham, Katie Carver, Jessica Robb, Caitlin Ballinger, and Zarek Bell; and Alameda County, CA, including Jenny Lowe, Kate Cheyne, Patrick Podesta, Hailee Mertz, Nina Berman, Sue Coberg, David Amarathithada, and Kyli Gallington; and the member agencies in Akron and Alameda, including the following:

Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank	Alameda County Community Food Bank
Marie Senften-Dietz, Canton Calvary Mission **Joanna Lance**, Glenmont Food Pantry **Gary Wyatt**, He Brought Us Out Ministry **George Camiletti**, Good Neighbors **Lynette Broggini and Ann Kenski**, Lafayette United Methodist Church **A. Wallace Anderson**, Malvern Christian Care Center **Julie Carneal**, OPEN M **Sarah Ecker**, The Salvation Army Maiwurm Service Center	**Jacqueline Portillo and Clarissa Broughton**, Achieve Academy (ACCFB Mobile Pantry) **Candi Thornton**, Arsola's House **Sara Webber**, Berkeley Food Pantry **Mike Richter**, City Team Ministries **Teri Donat**, Faith Lutheran Church of Castro Valley **Kathleen Bell**, Lake Merritt United Methodist **Krista Lucchesi and Nicole St. Lawrence**, Mercy Brown Bag Program **Sivan Sadeh Feria**, Street Level Health Project **Stephanie Williams**, The Well Community Outreach **Taylor Johnson**, Tri-City Volunteers

Lastly, we thank all of the clients receiving charitable food assistance at these locations who so generously shared their time and their experiences.

Forward from Feeding America

The people we serve are at the heart of the work we do daily at Feeding America.

Feeding America and our member network are taking important steps to embrace and integrate a client-centered approach to feeding people in need and to improving the long-term food security of the individuals and families we serve. By listening to the people we serve and understanding their expressed needs, we are able to develop solutions that meet the needs of their communities and respectfully preserve the dignity of people in need—dignity in the experience a person has while being served, dignity in the quality of resources they receive, and dignity in being heard and respected as a valued neighbor. Feeding America's member food banks are leading this important commitment across the nation in their communities and among the local food pantries and meal programs they support.

Findings captured in *Pathways for Community Voices* represent one of the important approaches in which the Feeding America network has invested to gain feedback from the people we serve, with the core purpose of improving their experience and supporting their dignity. Partnering with The Fund for Shared Insight and the Urban Institute, Feeding America engaged in a rigorous process evaluation study of the client feedback loop model. Feedback loops are a methodology being used across the United States by many direct service organizations to create meaningful connections between service providers and the people and communities they seek to help. The goal of organizations that implement feedback loops is to be more responsive to client feedback, with the sole intent of improving service.

The feedback loop model that was studied across two divergent communities in Ohio and California demonstrated the shared and unique interests of people seeking charitable food assistance. From the wait time in line for food to the environment in which the food is provided, the feedback loop model and the evaluation findings allow us to understand the value of respectful listening. The report also captures the challenges of this work by reflecting on many important mistakes along the path to collecting and learning from the feedback. We see that providers must work hard to honestly internalize both positive and negative feedback and to consider unique solutions in resource-constrained communities.

As we look ahead, Feeding America will continue our commitment to placing people in need at the center of our services and of the social change that we seek. We will continue to conduct research in ways that allow us to learn about the experiences of the people we serve and support member food banks' efforts to replicate effective approaches in ways that work for their communities.

We at Feeding America deeply value the community partnerships that support this work and made Pathways for Community Voices possible; we are also grateful to the people we serve, who bravely shared their experiences with us to help us better serve their communities.

Erin L. McDonald, PhD, MPP

Vice President, The Center for Applied Research in Action

Feeding America

Executive Summary

Across the country, many nonprofits and government agencies are grappling with how best to create a culture of continuous learning to get better results. Many organizations use performance management systems to measure client outcomes, but there is a need to complement these data with short-cycle or ongoing feedback from clients that helps organizations understand how to make meaningful changes to their programs and services so that they have a real impact on clients' lives.

Feeding America (FA), the nation's biggest nongovernmental organization devoted to fighting hunger, shares this commitment to continuous learning. Nearly one in seven Americans receive charitable food assistance from FA. Its vast network of 200 food banks and their partner agencies in all 50 states and Puerto Rico serve more than 46 million families and individuals annually through 60,000 food pantries and meal programs.[1] Feeding America recently launched an effort to place clients at the center of its mission to better respond to client needs, improve client experiences, and move the needle positively on client outcomes.

Collecting client feedback in social services takes several possible forms. Organizations sometimes incorporate client perspectives in large surveys or hold focus groups in conjunction with a program evaluation, but these efforts are often costly, infrequent, and not always connected to action within the organizations. Other models include community participatory research that often sets up advisory groups of community members to define research questions and provide ongoing feedback. But because of the considerable time burden of participation, the groups assembled tend to be less than representative of constituents.

Client feedback loops have emerged in the service sector as an alternative to these models, with the goal of integrating a low-burden and inclusive *process* into organizations' everyday business. Feedback Labs, a pioneer in this space, has hundreds of business, philanthropic, governmental, and nonprofit member organizations engaged in experimentation with iterative models that collect client feedback, analyze it, reflect on it, make change, and close the loop. But there is little research and documentation about what it takes to implement successful, impactful, and ethical feedback loops.

In 2015, the Urban Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, and FA received a three-year research grant through the Fund for Shared Insight to fund a pilot, Pathways for Community Voices (Pathways), to rigorously test and document ways to integrate client feedback loops into the organizational culture of food banks and their local member agency partners, including food pantries and meal programs.

The Fund for Shared Insight research grant provided generous time, flexibility, and resources. With this support, the local Pathways teams iteratively codesigned all aspects of the process with clients, from identifying priorities, to selecting feedback methods, to refining feedback questions, to reflecting on feedback, brainstorming solutions, and finding the best ways to close the loop. This enabled deep learning about the process and its integration into organizational culture. This learning is meant to complement the valuable lessons gleaned from the Fund for Shared Insight's Listen for Good initiative, a shorter term and lower resource grant program in which grantees, including eight FA food banks, piloted short, standardized questionnaires to facilitate client feedback. Both grant programs yielded many positive outcomes for participating organizations in terms of learning to build client feedback into their practice.

Design

Two food banks led pilots in their communities: the Akron-Canton Regional Food Bank and the Alameda County Community Food Bank. With their member agency partners, these food banks provided a platform for

- testing feedback methods with clients diverse in age, race or ethnicity, and language; and
- assessing the feasibility of integrating feedback processes in networks with varied organizational capacity, from all-volunteer efforts to larger, professionally run nonprofits.

Each food bank established a member agency advisory group composed of participating member agencies to make decisions about design and implementation. Of the eight member agencies who began the process in Akron, all but one finished the three-year process. In Alameda, 7 of 10 participated for the entire pilot project.

Initially, each community established three common feedback priorities to minimize the burden on clients in the context of cyclical feedback loops and to allow local partners to develop their capacity to support the process. To select priorities, communities applied four criteria: actionability, importance to clients, change orientation, and reliability. Local partners adapted these priorities with feedback from clients and lessons learned from the process.

The research team leveraged existing literature and input from experts in community-based participatory research and feedback loops to design and test a feedback loop consisting of three phases:

- Listen: large-scale, low-burden client feedback through short questionnaires
- Reflect: small-scale discussions with clients and among organizations to interpret client feedback from the listen phase and to brainstorm solutions
- Act: addressing client feedback and closing the loop with clients about how their input was used

During the pilots, the two communities each implemented three feedback cycles, lasting 19 to 29 weeks.

Key take-aways for practitioners from the design stage:

- Organizations playing a backbone role to facilitate feedback across a network need to have significant organizational capacity to support a networked approach to client feedback.
- No prior experience with client feedback loops is needed. Client feedback can be implemented in many organizations, ranging from all-volunteer to professional settings.
- Define priorities to limit the burden on clients and allow space for the lead agency to develop capacity, but expect priorities to change as you learn from the feedback process.
- Anticipate differences in client and organizational priorities.
- Balance the advantages of light-touch, large-scale feedback models with intensive community-based models that provide valuable insights for decisionmaking.

Implementation

In the listen phase, both sites administered feedback questionnaires on paper and on electronic tablets. To create a safe space for clients to provide feedback, food bank staff and volunteers were third-party data collectors and oversaw the process at member agencies. Akron also tested incentives to encourage client participation. Local partners collected 4,299 feedback questionnaires from clients. Key findings for practitioners include the following:

- There are no perfect feedback questions. Ask clients to help you understand what the questions mean to them, and plan to make changes.

- Use time-audit studies rather than feedback measures about wait time. Subjective assessments of wait time do not mean much for low-income people, who are accustomed to waiting in many contexts.
- If you solicit open-ended information, ask general questions for the greatest response rate.
- Do not be shy about using tablets. They allow clients privacy for their responses. Most English-speaking clients are comfortable with tablets, and they increase the completeness of questionnaires.
- When clients need help, use neutral actors to solicit feedback to help overcome courtesy bias and help clients feel safe.
- Use client input to select incentives, and reflect on whether they make a difference.

In the reflect phase, each site engaged three audiences—clients, member agency leaders, and agency staff and volunteers—to interpret client data and decide on solutions. Local partners adapted reflection methods to the context of each agency, aiming to transition leadership of this process from the food banks to the member agencies. Key findings for practitioners from this phase include the following:

- If implementing feedback loops in a network of organizations, provide backbone support throughout the process.
- Prepare site-specific summaries and visuals of data from the listen phase to support reflection with clients.
- Train facilitators on how to facilitate reflection conversations, stay neutral, create space for clients to contribute, and keep the conversation on track.
- Choose public methods such as town halls when there are high levels of trust, and choose private methods such as interviews and focus groups when there is a higher need for confidentiality.
- Match methods to different types of clients. Non-English speakers might require an interpreter and more privacy. Informal, on-the-spot conversations are better for clients who can make it to agencies only during normal distribution hours or when agencies lack sufficient space to host private conversations.

- Recruit clients both in advance and on the day of reflection activities to ensure enough participation and a diversity of experiences.
- Consider providing incentives for client participation, such as $25 Visa gift cards or extra food bags, but monitor and test how much they make a difference.
- Embrace positive feedback and prepare for negative feedback. Resist the temptation to inflate, disavow, or react defensively toward negative feedback.
- Allocate sufficient time to process feedback and plan appropriate responses. Talking through these issues with peer organizations can be helpful.
- Take deliberate steps to ensure that staff and volunteers can reflect on client feedback data and offer suggestions for improvements, separately from clients.

In the act phase, the agencies implemented actions planned in the reflect phase and communicated these changes back to clients. Agencies could make whatever changes seemed most appropriate to them; in total, the agencies took 50 actions to respond to client feedback. Local agencies also experimented with different methods of closing the loop, from posters, flyers, and videos to one-on-one engagement with clients. Key implications for practitioners include the following:

- Think about how available funding to support actions shapes organizational choices. When actions are tied to purchases, organizations might be more inclined to make material, rather than operational, changes.
- Do not rely on passive methods such as posters, flyers, or videos to close the loop with clients.
- Do not forget to close the loop with staff and volunteers to include them in the process, and train them to close the loop through face-to-face interactions with clients. This method is the most effective way to close the loop.
- In settings with significant language barriers, an important first step is building organizational language capacity among staff and volunteers.
- Set aside sufficient time and resources to close the loop with clients. It takes longer than one might expect.

Impacts

Perhaps the biggest impact of the pilot was on the culture of the organizations that participated.

- Pathways for Community Voices strengthened most agencies' relationships with the food banks in both sites.
- By the end of the pilot, most agencies in Akron felt more comfortable receiving and responding to client feedback and signaled a high likelihood of changing their organizational culture and continuing feedback loops in their work.
- In Alameda, where agencies had limited capacity to communicate directly with clients, leaders were open to continuing feedback loops in some way but were less likely to say that their participation made them more comfortable with feedback or prompted changes to organizational culture.
- Both food banks plan to apply lessons learned to other aspects of their programming and strategy. Food banks are taking feedback work beyond the pilot by onboarding new agencies to client feedback loops, embedding feedback work into strategic plans and agency segmentation processes, and using the feedback model to develop and implement employee and member agency feedback surveys.

Measuring and interpreting change in client feedback was difficult because of changing questions, changing client participants, and other challenges. But the team found the following:

- All participating agencies in Akron and 9 of 10 in Alameda saw improvement in client feedback in at least one priority area.
- In Akron, changes were highly correlated with actions taken by agencies, particularly around improving client treatment.
- In Alameda, improvements in client feedback had little relation to the changes agencies implemented.

Practitioners looking to implement feedback loops should do the following:

- Expect shifts in organizational culture before changes in client feedback. Many big changes have to do with building relationships and developing greater comfort listening to and engaging with clients.

- Make sure organizations take part in multiple aspects of the feedback process, particularly reflection, action, and closing the loop. Organizations with broad participation tend to be more invested and more likely to make strides in changing their culture.
- Anticipate that measuring changes in client experiences is difficult when organizations engage in an iterative and evolving feedback process. Organizations will need reflection to sort out what changes they need and to situate those changes within the context of action, changing participation, and changes to the design of questions.

The Future of Feedback Loops

The Pathways pilot provides important insights into how to integrate feedback loops into the culture of nonprofit organizations and networks. These insights include the following:

- Integrate the culture of feedback within organizations, aligning it with organizational strategy, including people at all levels, and supporting it with existing organizational resources.
- Provide flexibility for organizations in setting individual feedback priorities, but insist on starting with a single priority to make the process manageable.
- Ensure that organizational decisionmakers hear directly from clients before establishing priorities. This will empower and impassion decisionmakers to put client priorities first.
- Reframe feedback loops as ongoing relationship building rather than data collection. Implementing feedback loops can easily turn into a transaction if people and organizations interacting with clients do not perceive it as an opportunity to build relationships and make things better together.
- Align feedback loop design with organizational capacity and readiness. Some agencies might need to recruit volunteers and staff that have the language capacity to communicate with their client base. Organizations with language capacity but minimal relationships with clients and limited organizational capacity might start with small-scale reflect-phase-like activities. Once capacity is in place, organizations could consider adding large-scale feedback efforts.
- Adjust the timing of feedback loop phases to allow enough time to implement each phase. Before reinitiating the cycle and collecting client feedback again, organizations should consider

adding a separate phase for acting on feedback and closing the loop to make sure these steps remain a priority.

- Experiment with ways to create a safe, welcoming space for clients to provide sensitive feedback. When possible, use digital methods or allow clients to self-administer feedback questions to maximize privacy. When more assistance is needed, consider recruiting “feedback volunteers” at the agency who do not have a conflict of interest as a direct service provider.
- Move to action and learn by doing. Many concepts that were transmitted or discussed during the planning period for the pilot were too abstract for local partners and did not become salient until they were in the middle of doing work. Decide on your guiding principles and priorities, and then act. Then act. Organizations learn more by doing than by planning.

The Pathways for Community Voices pilot enabled two food banks to integrate research into investments to understand issues around client feedback loops. Pathways provided an opportunity to discretely test methods for gathering client feedback and closing the loop and to reflect on what is required to move toward a sustainable feedback model that results in better experiences and outcomes for our friends and neighbors receiving assistance from social services agencies.

The Story behind Pathways

Nearly one in seven Americans receives charitable food assistance from Feeding America (FA), the nation's biggest nongovernmental organization devoted to fighting hunger.[2] FA's vast network of 200 food banks and their partner agencies in all 50 states and Puerto Rico serve more than 46 million people annually through 60,000 food pantries and meal programs.[3]

Faced with a growing demand for charitable food assistance, the FA network has intensified its efforts to "feed the line" and "shorten the line" by improving the quality and quantity of the food it distributes while simultaneously recognizing the interconnectivity of food insecurity with issues such as housing instability, un- or underemployment, and health. Achieving these goals requires a concerted effort to place the client at the center of FA's mission which, in turn, necessitates unprecedented real-time feedback from clients to ensure that the network's programs adapt agilely to client needs, improve their experiences, and ultimately move the needle positively on client outcomes.

"Clients are the experts."

Food Bank CEO, 2015

The challenge is that data collection efforts in the network do not necessarily lend themselves easily to supporting those goals. Network-wide research—like FA's flagship Hunger in America Study—has historically been rigorous, expensive, and infrequent, but food bank– or agency-level data collection is often sporadic and piecemeal because of limited resources and capacity. In addition, researchers tend to gather data that focus on the characteristics of clients and their preferences for food and services, but they stop short of soliciting the kind of direct feedback on client experiences with food programs that can drive real continuous improvement.

In this respect, the FA network is not unique. Many nonprofits and government agencies are grappling with how to best to create a culture of continuous learning. Many organizations have turned their attention to performance management systems to measure client outcomes, but there is a real need to complement this kind of data with short-cycle or on-going feedback from clients that helps organizations understand how to make meaningful changes to their programs and services.

Collecting feedback from clients usually takes the form of professional one-off focus groups or town halls or community participatory research approaches that often set up advisory groups of community members to define research questions and provide on-going feedback. However, these approaches have acute challenges in terms of scalability and sustainability. Because of the considerable time burden of participation, the groups assembled tend to be less than representative of constituents, and those people who do attend may not hear back about the feedback they provided and how that feedback made a difference. Also, these processes are heavily grant dependent because they are usually not a regular part of charitable organizations' operating budgets. Because of these data-collection challenges, opportunities are lost to build long-term relationships between organizations and the people they serve.

In 2015, the Urban Institute (Urban), a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, and FA received a three-year research grant through the Fund for Shared Insight. The pilot, called Pathways for Community Voices (Pathways), sought to rigorously test how to achieve the following goals:

- develop new ways to get feedback from clients
- use this feedback to guide meaningful programmatic changes
- communicate these changes to the client
- integrate these kinds of processes into the way food banks and their member agencies serve their communities

This report tells the story of the lessons learned from this research and the implications for practitioners trying to transform their organizations and the lives and experiences of the people they serve.

Plan

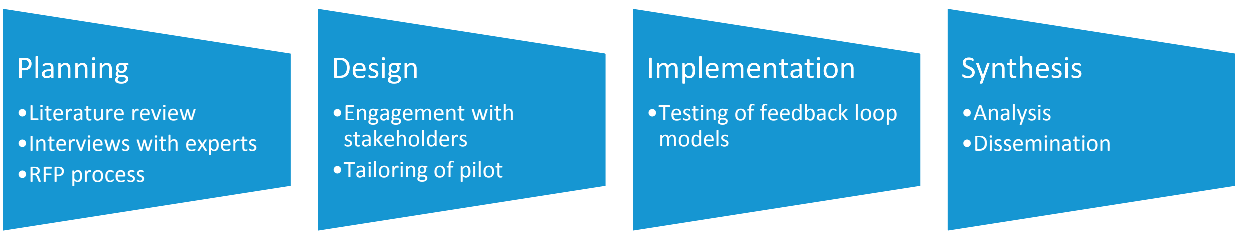
To begin the work of the pilot, Urban and FA together laid out key tasks, assembled a team of partners, and together with these partners established the processes and governance needed to support the pilots.

Laying Out the Structure of the Pilot

The pilot took place over several years and consisted of distinct tasks: planning, design and preparation, implementation, and synthesis (figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Major Tasks for Pathways for Community Voices



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Planning consisted of the upfront work needed to lay the initial groundwork for the pilot. Urban performed a literature review and led exploratory interviews with a variety of experts on community participatory research and innovative research methods to construct a substantive framework. In parallel, FA worked with Urban to recruit two partner food banks to run the pilots in their local communities.

For design, Urban and FA enlisted local partners and clients at each site to codesign the pilots by selecting substantive feedback priorities, methods used to gather information from clients, and methods used to communicate back to clients, and by deciding on the use of incentives and the length and component parts of the feedback cycle. Over the course of the pilot, all partners worked together to adapt the design with lessons learned from implementation.

During implementation, the food banks and their partner agencies tested different methods and approaches to implementing feedback loops to hear from clients in their communities (see "Overview of

Pilot Design" for a description of what these loops looked like and how they were implemented by partners). This process was iterative and informed by on-going synthesis.

For the synthesis step, food bank partners assembled their partner agencies locally to discuss lessons learned throughout the pilot and at the end of the effort (see "Establishing Governance"). Urban and FA also discussed challenges and themes during monthly calls with food bank staff. At the end of the implementation, Urban analyzed data from all aspects of the pilots and facilitated a cross-site convening in Washington, DC, to interpret the results. Urban supplemented this information by fielding a short follow-up web survey with agency leadership in each site.

Assembling the Team

Urban and Feeding America conducted a search for two food banks to codesign and implement the feedback pilots.

FA issued a request for proposals through its member grant process to recruit two food banks from among FA's more than 200 members. Applicants were asked to describe how feedback loops support their larger strategic mission as well as their capacity to oversee and provide backbone support for an experimental process in their communities. In addition, food banks needed to assemble a group of member agencies that would commit to trying different ways to integrate feedback loops into their work. It was important to both Urban and FA that the food banks and their member agencies be representative of the diversity of the FA network's clients served and organizational capacity to allow testing and refining different ways of designing and implementing feedback loops in different contexts. No prior experience with feedback loops was required.

After a deliberative process, FA and Urban selected two partner food banks for the pilot: the Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank (Akron) and the Alameda County Community Food Bank (Alameda).

Both food bank partners were large, high-performing, long-standing organizations, but they chose to staff the pilot in different ways.

Both the Akron and Alameda food banks had served their communities for over 30 years and had more paid staff than many of their peers in the FA network. Alameda had about 89 full-time equivalents in

paid staff, and Akron 65, in comparison to the median of 35 in the network. Employee retention at both food banks was also above the network average of 80 percent. In Akron, annual retention stands at 89 percent and in Alameda, it is 82 percent.[4] In addition, the Alameda and Akron food banks are very successful in leveraging volunteer support for their missions, adding roughly 48 and 25 full-time equivalents, respectively, with volunteer hours, in comparison to the network median of about 17.

Both food banks took on the same central leadership role for the pilots, coordinating all feedback collection and support activities. However, they staffed the effort in different ways. In Akron, Pathways was primarily staffed by existing leaders within the food bank, all of whom were engaged from the design to the final stages of the work. Akron also engaged an AmeriCorps VISTA fellow to provide needed back-up support to the core team. In Alameda, the food bank also designated staff to lead the effort; however, leadership of the pilot changed hands twice during the three-year pilot. In addition, the Alameda food bank relied on temporary grant-funded staff and volunteers to implement much of the work. The changing staff posed challenges for the continuity of relationships and process during the pilot and integrating lessons learned into the organization afterward.

Participating member agencies represented a wide range of organizational capacity.

Akron partnered with 8 local member agencies, Alameda with 10. An important strength of the agencies that partnered with the food banks was that they represented a realistic sampling of the range of organizational capacity in local networks in both their staffing and the volume of clients they served. The FA network includes high-capacity nonprofits that employ full-time social service professionals, but it has many more smaller community and/or faith-based organizations staffed almost exclusively by volunteers that have less access to resources and skills. The diversity among local member agencies in Akron and Alameda helped ensure that lessons learned from the pilots would be applicable for a full range of member agencies, from small, all-volunteer church pantries to professionally run, high-volume social service organizations.

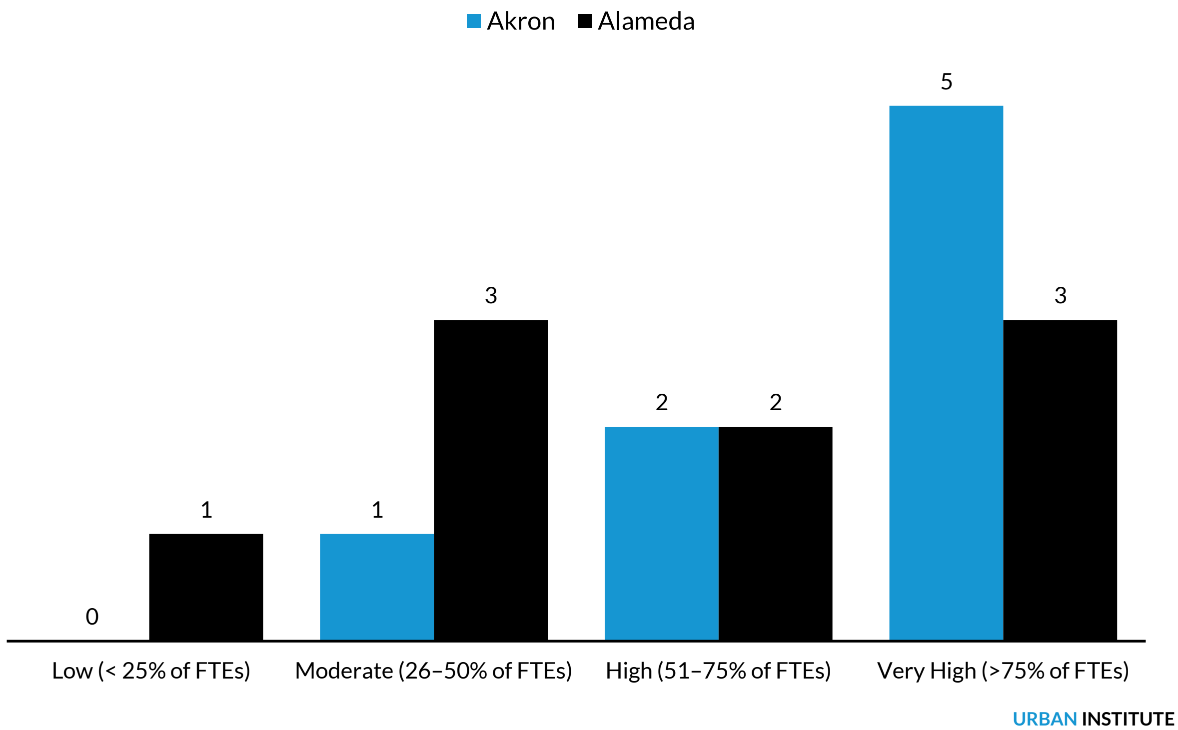
Participating agencies in both sites varied significantly in their staffing. The number of paid staff ranged from 0 to 15 full-time equivalents in Akron and 0 to 9 in Alameda. Despite these differences, the agencies that participated in the pilots generally had one thing in common: they relied heavily on volunteers to run their pantry programs (figure 2). Volunteer hours eclipsed the hours worked by paid staff in 7 of the 8 agencies in Akron and 5 of the 10 agencies in Alameda. At all participating agencies in Alameda and 7 of the 8 in Akron, volunteers covered at least 25 percent of the staffing. This issue was

particularly acute in Akron, where nearly two-thirds of participating agencies covered 75 percent or more of the hours needed to administer their programs with volunteer time.

FIGURE 2

Participating Agencies Relied Heavily on Volunteers, Particularly in Akron

Agency report of volunteer dependence



Source: Pathways web survey of participating agencies, fall 2014.
Note: FTEs = full-time equivalent staff.

The agencies participating in the pilots also varied in the volume of clients served in a typical month. At the beginning of the pilot, half of the eight agencies in Akron were relatively small and served between 100 and 300 clients in a month; only two served more than 700 clients. In contrast, more than half of participating Alameda agencies were high-volume agencies, serving more than 700 clients a month, and only two served less than 300 clients.

Local partners had limited experience with feedback before the pilot

At the start of the Pathways pilot, the food banks had some experience soliciting feedback from clients. The Akron food bank gathered client feedback about the quality of food clients received and their

perceptions of member agencies through its Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps) outreach program and through its strategic planning process. Alameda's strongest foray into client feedback on services and agencies was through its Emergency Food Helpline Program. Alameda also conducted regular food preference surveys with clients to improve the food offerings at agency sites.

In addition, both organizations had significant experience gathering more traditional data from clients through their participation in the quadrennial, national Hunger in America study led by FA. More recently, Alameda was also one of three food bank sites engaged in FA's diabetes random controlled trial. In addition, Akron has been using PantryTrak, a statewide web-based system for logging client data, in all of their pantry partners.

Participating agencies in Alameda generally had a little more experience and familiarity with asking clients questions. Half of the agencies had fielded a survey or held a community meeting. Only about one in five had conducted more structured focus groups or small-group conversations. As a result, a little less than half of Alameda agency leaders reported that clients were "very involved" in decisionmaking before the pilot.

In contrast, smaller shares of the participating Akron agencies reported that they had gathered information directly from clients: three had done surveys, two had held community meetings, and only one had conducted focus groups. Consequently, only one agency leader thought that clients were "very involved" in decisionmaking. Six of the eight agencies said clients were either "not very" or "not at all" involved.

Pilot sites' geography helped make the pilot relevant for different kinds of communities.

Although the Akron and Alameda food banks have similarly sized service areas, their geographies are very different. Akron serves eight northeast Ohio counties (Carroll, Holmes, Medina, Portage, Stark, Summit, Tuscarawas, and Wayne) and includes not only urban and suburban areas but outlying rural areas as well. In contrast, Alameda serves a single, densely populated county in northern California. These differences in population distribution meant different dynamics were required in the logistics of implementing feedback loops, which allowed communities to gauge if there were differences in effective approaches or feelings about feedback in the contexts of urban, suburban, and rural communities.

Running the pilots in Akron and Alameda helped establish the feasibility of launching and implementing feedback loops in areas with very different operating costs. Alameda, which is located in a higher-cost urban area, must spend more than Akron to deliver similar programs and services.[5]

Different demographics in Akron and Alameda allowed exploration of how to tailor feedback loops to different populations.

The differing demographics of the two communities also allowed the pilot to test which feedback methods work best with people of different cultures and languages. In Akron, charitable feeding clients were predominantly non-Hispanic white (73 percent) and black (21 percent), and almost all spoke English. In Alameda, there was no absolute racial/ethnicity majority, though the largest shares of the population were Hispanics (41 percent) and Asians and Pacific Islanders (28 percent), and two-thirds of clients spoke a language other than English at home.[6]

There were also important age differences between the client populations that have implications for the feedback pilot. For example, there might be different attitudes toward and comfort levels with using technology to collect feedback across age groups. Akron had a larger share of children under the age of 18, with 30 percent as compared to 22 percent in Alameda. In contrast, Alameda served a larger share of seniors aged 60 and older than Akron (19 versus 12 percent, respectively).

Participating member agencies anticipated difficulties connecting with clients because of cultural and language barriers as well as the intermittent nature of charitable food assistance.

In the baseline web survey, participating agencies highlighted some potential disconnects between their staff and volunteers and the people they served. Although most agency leaders at both sites said their volunteers reflected the race/ethnicity of their clientele, less than half said the same of their staff. Participating agencies also acknowledged basic communication problems, often closely connected with language needs and cultural competency. These challenges were most acute in Alameda. Only about half of the leadership of participating agencies in Alameda reported that their staffing met the language needs of clients. This share was somewhat higher in Akron, where fewer clients were immigrants who primarily spoke languages other than English.

A significant challenge to connecting with clients relates to patterns of use of charitable food assistance. At the beginning of the pilot, most agencies in both sites said that they saw most of their clients at least once a month. However, some of the agencies reported less frequent interaction, including every other month or even every six months. Clients often use charitable food assistance episodically; that is, they use it for a few months while experiencing a crisis, and then discontinue it when their lives stabilize. This intermittent pattern of use means that the population that member agencies serve is constantly changing, and agencies may or may not receive feedback from the same people over time.

Establishing Governance

Designing and implementing the pilots required a deliberate, collaborative approach.

From the very beginning, both Urban and FA committed to applying the principles of community participatory research not only to the mechanics of the feedback loop pilots, but to all aspects of the process and relationships among partners. These principles included the following:

- Building on strengths and resources within the community
- Facilitating collaborative partnerships in all phases of the research
- Integrating knowledge and action for the mutual benefit of all partners
- Promoting a colearning and empowering process that attended to social inequalities
- Employing a cyclical and iterative process
- Disseminating findings and knowledge gained to all partners

Urban and FA sought to model this inclusive and thoughtful approach with local food bank partners so that they could use it with their agency partners, who could then apply it in their interactions with clients.

Urban and FA played two main roles: (1) overall project coordination and planning and (2) training and technical assistance, particularly in how to apply best practices on protecting human subjects,

choosing sound methods for gathering information, and analyzing data. The two lead partners held conference calls with the food banks at least once a month throughout the pilot to help codesign the effort, serve as a sounding board, celebrate victories, and help brainstorm solutions to challenges.

The food banks each assembled a local member agency advisory group to make key decisions about the design and implementation of the pilot and to provide support in learning how to listen and respond to client feedback. Early on, all of the member agencies in each site signed a memorandum of understanding with the food banks to formalize their commitment to the pilot and to participation in the advisory group.

The member agency advisory groups met monthly to adapt the implementation of the pilot and reflect on what they were learning. At the beginning, these meetings took place in person. Over time, both food banks transitioned to conference calls and/or in-person meetings with a call-in option to alleviate the logistical difficulties of convening agencies located in geographically dispersed locations. Interestingly enough, these logistical issues were just as salient in Alameda, the dense urban area, as in Akron, a mix of urban and rural communities.

Although agency participation was high throughout all phases of the pilot, there was some attrition for reasons unique to agencies.

- In Akron, all eight agencies that originally committed to the pilot participated in all three feedback loop cycles, although one agency opted out of the last stage of the third cycle because of challenges in gathering client feedback in a setting where there were no set days and times for distribution.
- In Alameda, 7 of the original 10 agencies completed all three cycles. However, one agency could not participate in Cycle 1 because it lost its distribution space. Another agency left half-way through the second cycle because the agency was in the middle of a major operational change from traditional pantry to a client-choice model and did not have the capacity to continue. A third agency left in Cycle 3 because the point of contact left the agency.

Take-aways for Practitioners

- Organizations playing a backbone role to facilitate feedback across a network need to have significant organizational capacity to support a networked approach to client feedback.
- However, no specific prior experience with client feedback loops is needed.
- Client feedback can be implemented in a wide range of organizations, ranging from all-volunteer to professional settings.
- Staff transitions can pose challenges for building and sustaining relationships and instituting new processes.
- Organizations should reflect on how cultural and language mismatches between staff, volunteers, and clients will affect their ability to communicate and build relationships.

Overview of Pilot Design

Before the Pathways pilots could commence, the team had to make various big-picture decisions, such as what kinds of questions to ask and the design of the feedback loop, including its length and component parts.

In the first nine months, Urban performed a literature review and led exploratory interviews with a variety of experts on community participatory research, feedback loops, and innovative research methods to identify key design principles, construct a conceptual framework for feedback loops, and explore the pros and cons of different methodologies (see appendix A for list of key informants and appendix B for a list of references consulted for the literature review).

Next, in the design stage, Urban and FA applied lessons learned from the exploratory stage to codesign the local pilots with the food banks, their partner agencies, and clients. This stage consisted of several activities over the course of about three months. In the fall of 2015, Urban fielded a brief web survey of participating agencies to better understand the context in which the pilots would take place. Subsequently, the research team visited the two pilot sites to hold a kickoff meeting with the food banks and participating agencies, as well as to conduct separate focus groups with clients at two member agencies. The goal was to solicit feedback from all parties on pilot design elements.

After these initial site visits, Urban and FA summarized the information and brought together food bank leadership and a representative from one participating agency at each site to reflect on the intersections between client and agency feedback. Following this meeting, site leadership further discussed design options with their participating agencies and made decisions on the initial design for Pathways. During implementation, the partners continued to refine this design to adapt to lessons learned along the way.

The remainder of this section describes how the team set local priorities and designed the feedback loop.

The following three sections, “Listen,” “Reflect,” and “Act,” build on this framework to describe each of the stages of the feedback loop in greater depth, starting with a description of initial design decisions—based on the process described above—and then relating lessons learned from implementation.

Setting Feedback Priorities

Urban started its literature review and exploratory interview inquiring about how pilot sites might best select feedback questions to ask. However, very early on, it became clear that it was important to start with priorities rather than the questions themselves.

Experts stressed the importance of defining a few strategic priorities from the beginning.

From the outset, partners in both communities were eager to ask their clients many different kinds of questions. Many local stakeholders were accustomed to an annual survey approach to gathering information from clients. Because these efforts are costly and infrequent, agencies often try to maximize the amount of information on a comprehensive set of topics.

However, in the context of testing the feasibility of feedback loops, early exploratory conversations with experts revealed that there could be great value in starting with a few discrete priorities before choosing questions rather than starting by crowdsourcing questions of interest. There were two important reasons for this choice:

- **Client burden:** Low-income people have many demands on their time and resources, and asking them to offer their feedback can be burdensome and invasive. This problem is amplified by the repetitive nature of feedback loops, in which organizations often return to the same people multiple times. For this reason, it is important to minimize the number of questions asked as much as possible.
- **Organizational feasibility:** Systematically gathering, analyzing, and using client feedback requires significant organizational capacity. Demands on that capacity increase exponentially with the number of simultaneous priorities and the amount of customization across a network of organizations. For this reason, experts believed that starting with a small number of common priorities would help pilot sites new to feedback loops to start up and grow capacity.

To narrow a list of priorities, experts suggested establishing a few key criteria:

- **Actionability:** Many times trust is broken in these types of initiatives because government or nonprofit leaders solicit input on topics that they cannot or are not yet willing or able to change. Asking questions creates a reasonable expectation that issues will be addressed; when they are

not, community members can become disillusioned with the process and cease to participate. In contrast, even small changes that are responsive to feedback can help build trust and bolster long-term participation.

- **Importance to clients:** Clients are more likely to notice changes that align with the things that are most important to them. Focusing on these types of actionable priorities can yield the best results in terms of building relationships between service providers and community members.
- **Change orientation:** Service providers most commonly ask clients to describe who they are, their needs, and possibly their preferences. Clients' answers provide valuable orientation, but they do not allow organizations to gauge how their programs and services improve over time. Gaining this knowledge requires soliciting direct information on how well organizations address needs and deliver services, and this type of feedback can complement service preference questions. For example, a food pantry might ask what types of foods their clients prefer, and also ask how satisfied clients are with the types of foods they receive. This pattern of questions would enable the pantry to see change in client perceptions over time.
- **Reliability:** Feedback questions are not the best way to gather information on all topics. Some things are better assessed using alternative methods like observation or analysis of existing data. Opting for these alternative methods when appropriate can also help minimize burden on clients.

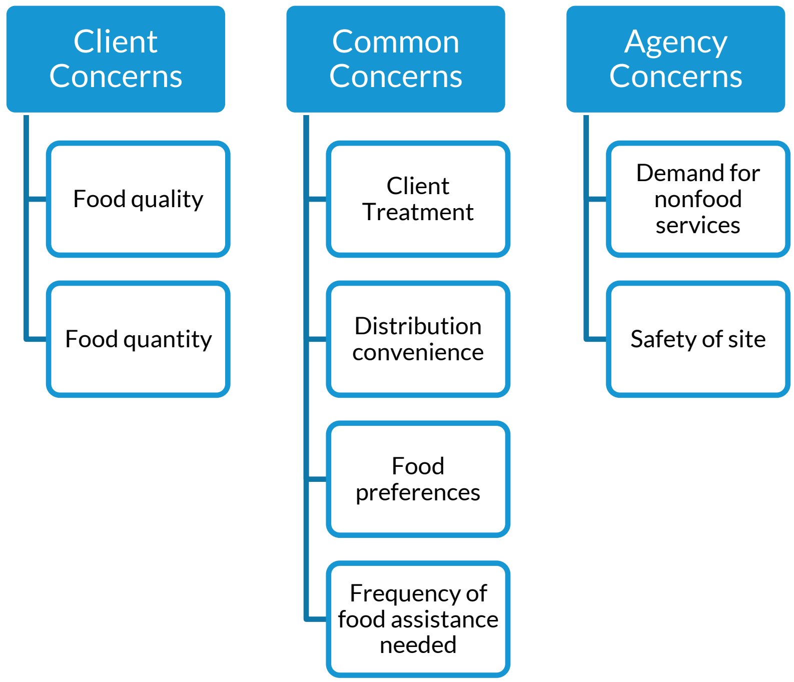
Early conversations in local communities revealed important differences in the priorities of member agencies and clients.

To help inform decisionmaking on local priorities, Urban and FA gathered input from both individual agency partners and client focus groups during local site visits. There were minor differences in themes across sites, but there were many commonalities (figure 3).

FIGURE 3

Site Visits in Year 1 Identified Common Concerns for Clients and Member Agencies

Client, agency, and common priorities



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Source: Focus groups with clients and kickoff meeting discussions with member agencies in Akron and Alameda during the design phase of the pilot, fall 2014.

In general, the most important things to clients concerned the food they received from the agencies: its quality and quantity, the types of food they could access, and how often they could access food. Clients also discussed at length their desire to be treated with respect and dignity, as well as for agencies to manage food distribution efficiently to minimize the time and discomfort of waiting.

In contrast, most agencies expressed a high level of interest in understanding client preferences both for food and nonfood services to better understand how to spend their dollars and what kinds of partnerships with other organizations to pursue. Agency leaders also expressed concern about making sure clients had positive experiences on site with staff and volunteers and with the distribution itself. Agencies in Alameda, in particular, were interested in hearing from clients about whether they felt safe on site.

Local communities initially decided on a small set of common priorities.

At the beginning of the pilot, member agency advisory groups decided on common priorities for their respective communities to make the launch and early implementation of the pilot feasible for the local food banks. Member agency groups applied the lens of the four criteria (actionability, importance to clients, change orientation, and reliability) to the identified concerns of clients and agencies.

Despite their importance to clients, issues around the food itself (i.e., quality, quantity, frequency, preferences) were not an initial focus of agencies across either Pathways site because staff and volunteers did not believe they were sufficiently well positioned to take immediate action and make changes. Agencies often do not control the food they obtain because they are highly dependent on food distributed by the food bank or other direct and in-kind donations.

Instead, food banks and agencies in both sites focused on shared concerns that were of lower priority for both clients and agencies but that seemed viable as a place to start building trust with clients (table 1). Both communities initially made client treatment and wait times a priority. Akron also focused on the convenience of the distribution (i.e., days and times), while Alameda set a priority around safety.

TABLE 1

Communities Started with Initial Priorities and Used Feedback to Adjust Them over Time

	Akron	Alameda
Initial priorities		
Client treatment*	✓	✓
Wait time*	✓	✓
Safety		✓
Distribution convenience	✓	
Added priorities		
Food quality	✓	
Communication with staff/volunteers		✓
Overall program experience		✓

*In Cycle 3, Akron asked two client treatment questions, and Alameda agencies were given the option to ask about one of the original three feedback priorities; six Alameda agencies opted to ask about wait time, and one opted to ask about client treatment.

Communities used information from the feedback loop process to adjust priorities.

Because of a desire to measure change over time, Urban generally encouraged sites to maintain some consistency across their feedback questions. However, over the course of the pilot, sites used information from their experience of implementing feedback loops to adjust their priorities.

In Akron, member agencies felt more comfortable including client food preferences and food quantity among their priorities after listening firsthand to clients talk about what was most important to them. To make room for related questions in Cycle 3, the Akron team discontinued asking questions about the convenience of the food distribution schedule and wait time. In part this decision about wait time came from struggling with how to ask valid questions about this priority and re-evaluating whether it would be more effective to understand wait time through observation or other methods. (For more detail on these issues, see the discussion on the evolution of feedback questions in the "Listen" section.)

In Alameda, the team added a priority around improving communication with staff and volunteers after observing the magnitude of language barriers during its first attempt at implementing feedback loops. Alameda also eventually eliminated the safety priority because they found that they had exhausted what they could learn from related questions, and very few agencies believed they could take meaningful action to address the issues. In its place, Alameda opted to include an overall assessment of clients' experiences at their agencies.

In addition, after growing their capacity to manage the feedback process, the food banks opted to allow agencies to ask some questions that were important to them but lay outside of the domain of common priorities. Because of the diversity of member agencies and the people they served, getting all the agencies to agree on common priorities was not easy. Many agencies had interests that other agencies did not share. Some agencies wanted to include questions that did not meet the selection criteria for feedback priorities, most notably the criterion of change orientation. Several participating agencies wanted to ask one-time questions to gauge interest in a particular program or model to assess food preferences or client needs.

The food banks found that this flexibility in choosing questions helped to strengthen buy-in among partner agencies. Leaders of these organizations were more likely to feel invested when their individual priorities were reflected. However, the process of deciding on those optional questions and customizing feedback collection for each agency was time-consuming for both the food banks and the agencies.

Designing the Feedback Loop

During the exploratory stage of the pilots, Urban compiled information about different models of feedback loops from the literature and interviews with experts. Generally, all of the models had several common elements: gathering feedback and information from clients, synthesizing information and deciding how to respond to feedback, taking action, and closing the loop. *Closing the loop* refers to either

sharing what changes will be made as a result of feedback received, or at the least, sharing feedback results and explaining why changes can or cannot be made. In practice, many models did not define each of these elements as a distinct stage, and not all models explicitly included all elements.

Two main types of feedback model emerged:

- **Large-scale feedback models:** With the ubiquity of new technology, many governments, foundations, and nonprofits have been experimenting with crowdsourcing feedback by using digital interfaces like mobile phones, tablets, and computers to push out and gather information through short online questionnaires or even social media platforms. Other organizations, serving individuals who have more limited access to these tools, have implemented a low-tech version of this model, using paper and person-to-person contact in the field or at point-of-service.
    - **pros:** maximizing flexibility and participation, minimizing client burden
    - **cons:** lack of nuanced qualitative information to help interpret data and design effective solutions, distance between organizations and clients
- **Small-scale community participatory models:** Public health, urban planning, and many other researchers doing work in local communities have long used community participatory models to inform the design and implementation of local programs and investments. Usually, this type of model takes the form of a series of community convenings and/or the formation of a community advisory board made up of local residents and stakeholders who help identify priorities, design solutions, and provide on-going feedback.
    - **pros:** deep, on-going commitment of participants; in-depth input on how to interpret local data and translate data solutions; relationship building between organizations and individuals
    - **cons:** high burden on participants, limited representativeness

Organizations or initiatives tended to use the same model for gathering information on clients and sharing information with them. In addition, most organizations tended to use a single model throughout their process, rather than combining elements of both.

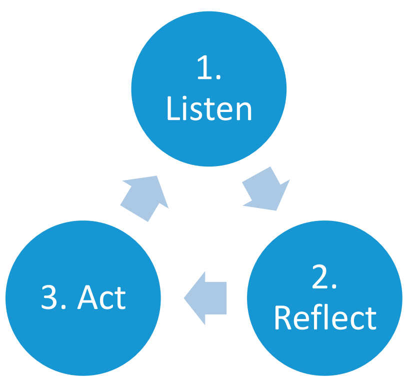
The design of the feedback loop sought to combine the reach of large-scale feedback models with the nuance of community-based participatory research models.

To take advantage of the flexibility and innovation of the pilot format, Urban used a three-stage process to combine the advantages of the two dominant types of feedback model to leverage and layer the strengths of both (figure 4).

- In the listen phase, pilot sites used large-scale feedback models to maximize participation and make the process as inclusive and low burden as possible.
- In the reflect phase, participating communities used more small-scale community participatory methods with both clients and decisionmakers to reflect on the data gathered in the listen phase.
- Lastly, in the act phase, organizations took action to address feedback and close the loop with clients about how their feedback was used by leveraging large-scale, more systematic ways to communicate back to clients as much as possible.

FIGURE 4

Pilot Sites Tested a Three-Phase Feedback Model



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Throughout the pilot, the sites recalibrated the timing of the feedback loops and the length of each stage.

After roughly defining the stages of the feedback loop, the next step was to decide on the length and duration of each stage and the feedback loop as a whole. Urban solicited feedback from the two food banks and their partners to determine what seemed most feasible and appropriate given the roughly

year and a half that they would have to implement the pilots. Both sites agreed they could complete three complete feedback loops, lasting roughly four months each, to give themselves an opportunity to test a variety of different methods and processes.

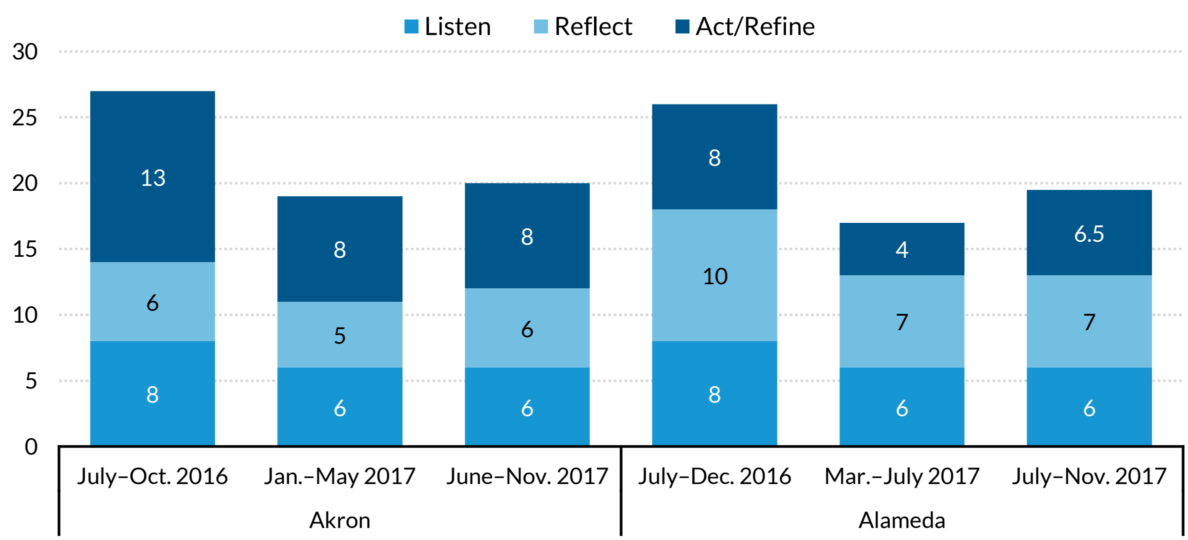
Initially, the goal was for the communities to begin and undertake the stages of their cycles at the same time so that they could learn from each other in the process. They planned to start in July 2016 and complete their first cycle before the holiday season in November and December, which is a busy time for food banks and member agencies, and to complete the other two loops beginning in January 2017. However, the Alameda team experienced major staffing transitions at the beginning of 2017 and needed an additional three months to staff and train a new core team for the pilot. As a result, Akron and Alameda ran their second and third cycles on different schedules.

Because the pilot sites thought they would need more time in the listen phase, relative to the other phases, to maximize the participation of clients at each of the member agencies, they initially allocated about two months to listen, another month to reflect, and a final month to act. However, both Akron and Alameda found that they needed to make adjustments to the timing of the stages over the course of the pilot (figure 5).

FIGURE 5

Total Number of Weeks to Complete Each Feedback Stage in Each Pilot Site for Each Cycle

Reflect and act cycles overlapped in both sites but are represented here as being distinct



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In the first feedback loop cycle, both communities found that they needed substantially more time for the reflect and act phases, which added to the total length of the cycle. Instead of the estimated 16

to 20 weeks, the first cycle took 27 weeks in Akron and 26 in Alameda. Much of this extra time resulted from the difficulty of setting up the new processes and building completely new capacity. Subsequent cycles tended to be much shorter, ranging from 19 to 23 weeks. Both sites found that they needed a little less time to listen, only 6 weeks as opposed to 8, which allowed them to spend more time in other stages, particularly act, while still cutting the overall length of the feedback loop.

Take-aways for Practitioners

- Define priorities to limit burden on clients and allow space for the lead agency to develop capacity, but expect the priorities to change and evolve as you learn from the feedback process.
- Anticipate differences in client and organizational priorities.
- When possible, seek to balance the advantages of light-touch, large-scale feedback models with more intensive community-based models that provide valuable insights for decisionmaking.
- Expect feedback loops to take longer to complete when you are first getting things off the ground.
- Plan around busy times of year that will make it difficult for your organization to engage meaningfully in the feedback process.
- Make sure to allow enough time to reflect on feedback, decide on actions, and close the loop.

Listen

The listen phase of the loop involves setting up systems to maximize participation and meaningful feedback from clients. This process involves mindfully crafting questions, testing the best methods to administer them, gauging both overall participation and the representativeness of participants, and obtaining data that are as complete as possible.

This section describes lessons learned during the pilot about this phase.

Designing the Listen Phase

Urban and FA went through several steps to decide on the methods that would be tested during the pilot. They reviewed the literature, talked to experts in community participatory research and feedback loops, engaged clients and leadership of the participating agencies in design, and then translated this information into action.

Experts emphasized the importance of gathering sensitive feedback from clients in ways that made them feel safe.

Experts shared information about a plethora of platforms that could be used to collect client feedback, including computer, cell phone, paper, and mail, each with logistical challenges for use in different service environments with different types of people.

However, before deciding on the best ways to gather feedback, experts stressed that it was important to reflect on the types of questions clients would be expected to answer and the risk or discomfort that this process might mean for them. Questions do not all have the same sensitivity. For example, asking clients for their preferred mode of contact, food items, or days and times for service is much less sensitive than asking how satisfied they are with how they were treated by staff or volunteers.

If clients do not trust that their feedback will be anonymous or confidential, then they may fear being stigmatized or treated worse should the information they share be revealed to staff or volunteers. To avoid this risk, clients may be reluctant to offer truthful answers and may be subject to *courtesy bias*:

the tendency of clients to understate dissatisfaction to avoid offending organizations that provide them with services they need.

When asked sensitive questions, clients should have some guarantee of confidentiality or, ideally, anonymity. This goal can be achieved by allowing clients to answer feedback questions on their own or by having a neutral third party (i.e., someone beyond the agency providing services) administer the questions. Client responses should never be connected with any identifying information and should be shared with agency stakeholders only in aggregate form. In contrast, on-site staff and volunteers can ask less sensitive questions without serious risk, and data can be stored and shared with less restriction.

Client-tracking systems didn't afford clients enough confidentiality, and local stakeholders thought phone, mail, or similar methods were not feasible.

Food banks and agencies weighed various options for gathering feedback by soliciting input from clients and partners during the first site visit. Some methods like PantryTrak, a client data–tracking system that Akron uses in its pantries, are efficient for data collection but offer little assurance of confidentiality. Clients were worried that other clients could easily see their responses by looking at agency computers.

Other methods like mail-in feedback cards and phone-based feedback offered an enhanced level of confidentiality but presented other challenges. Agency partners worried that they might not get enough participation if they depended on clients to voluntarily return a post card or call into a hotline. Clients voiced particular opposition to using their scarce minutes on their phones to provide feedback, and they expressed low levels of enthusiasm for the mail-in option; clients considered both options too burdensome. Agency partners also worried about the cost and logistics of using these methods to solicit feedback.

Both sites ultimately decided to test paper and digital feedback questionnaires at point-of-service.

In contrast to their opposition to the data-collection methods described above, the food banks, member agencies, and clients were all generally receptive to the idea of answering feedback questions on-site during food distribution. Gathering feedback on-site, in theory, would help maximize participation.

Some clients in both sites preferred the idea of using paper and pencil; however, most were open to using a tablet, which would eliminate the need to scan in hardcopy instruments and make for more efficient analysis of feedback data.

Partners in both sites opted to test both paper and tablet for collecting client feedback.[7] They planned to test paper during the first feedback cycle, tablets in the second cycle, and the better of the two methods in the third cycle. Both food banks purchased licenses for a software called SNAP Surveys, which allowed them to create questionnaires, produce and optically scan hard-copy versions or download the questionnaires to a tablet, analyze data, and produce reports. The food banks were eager to test the software and explore how it could help them build their capacity.

Food bank staff took the lead in facilitating feedback collection in order to create a safe space for clients.

Local stakeholders had concerns about depending too heavily on clients to self-administer feedback questions because of potential problems with age, disability, literacy, language barriers, and/or varying levels of comfort with technology.

To ensure that clients felt safe to candidly share their feedback on more sensitive priorities, local member agency advisory groups considered two options for feedback administration: peer or client-to-client participation or leveraging food bank staff or volunteers. During the initial site visit, clients expressed significant discomfort with the idea of sharing their opinions with other clients; worries included gossip or having clients who also volunteered at the same agency taking the feedback personally.

In the end, Akron and Alameda decided that food bank staff and volunteers would take the lead administering feedback at point-of-service. In addition, the food banks branded their feedback initiatives, and feedback collectors consistently wore clothing that clearly identified them as the designated feedback liaisons (see “Gathering Client Feedback” for more detail).

Rather than taking a sampling approach to feedback collection, partners opted to maximize client participation.

In traditional survey methodology, researchers use sampling to select clients (i.e., every *n*th client is surveyed) to minimize burden and make findings as representative as possible. Local stakeholders considered this approach, but they decided against it for one very important reason. Both member agencies and their clients believed sampling could promote a feeling of exclusion rather than inclusion that would be contrary to the goals of integrating feedback loops into their practice. Because local partners chose to prioritize building relationship and trust with clients, they opted to maximize participation as much as possible.

In consultation with Urban survey experts, the food banks set up a schedule to visit all of their participating member agencies once or twice on different days and times over the course of six to eight weeks during the listen phase of each cycle. Their goal was to maximize participation at each agency.

Akron tested incentives to boost the participation of more reluctant participants.

Local partners acknowledged that some clients might be more willing to offer feedback than others. To overcome this issue, the member agency advisory groups considered using incentives to encourage client participation. Incentives are commonly used in research to thank participants for sharing their feedback, and they have been shown in many cases to boost the participation of people who may be least likely to respond.

Akron opted to try incentives and measure client response rates with and without incentives within each of the cycles. In Alameda, agencies believed strongly that incentives would not be needed and that offering them to participants could cause conflict among clients. The Alameda group ultimately decided not to use incentives for feedback collection (see "Gauging Participation and Inclusiveness" for more detail on the use of incentives).

Crafting Questions

Before the beginning of each cycle, the food banks designed (and redesigned) their feedback questionnaires. These instruments included questions aligned with their priorities for gathering feedback from clients as well as other supplemental information about clients themselves. Questions

were also designed to assess how well agencies could close the loop with clients, and others were included as questions of interest of participating agencies. Most of the questions had closed-ended choice options, but in later cycles, the sites also experimented with open-ended questions. Over the three cycles, feedback questionnaires ranged between 10 and 12 questions. Because of shifting feedback priorities among agencies, the questionnaires were not identical from cycle to cycle.

In addition to setting relevant feedback priorities, it was important to develop feedback questions that made sense to clients. Working with the research team, food banks and member agencies put much thought into crafting questions that clients could understand and answer with relative ease and that would yield actionable feedback data. Before the questionnaire went into the field, sites often tested it with a few program participants and made adjustments accordingly. This testing process was especially important for questionnaires translated into other languages.

Akron found it hard to overcome courtesy bias in the design of the question about client treatment.

In Akron, one of the questions that evolved the most concerned how clients were treated by agency staff and volunteers (figure 6). Through interactions with clients during the first cycle, partners in Akron learned a number of important things about client treatment.

- First, clients may feel that they are treated well, but observe that other clients have different experiences.
- Second, clients often expressed that problems with disrespect were with only one or two volunteers or staff, and they were reluctant to rate whole programs negatively because of the actions of a few.
- Third, because there was no time reference in the question, clients had to make a general assessment over all of the times they had visited the agency and tended to gloss over bad experiences that might have occurred on a single occasion.

After trial and error, Akron partners learned that the design of a question itself might exacerbate courtesy bias. They also learned that it was important to specify that staff and volunteers were the focus of the question; some clients interpreted it as including treatment they may have received from other clients.

FIGURE 6

The Client Treatment Question in Akron Evolved Substantially

Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	
Overall, how do you feel you are treated when visiting this program? ❑ Very respectfully ❑ Respectfully ❑ Disrespectfully ❑ I don't know	**In the last month, how many staff/volunteers at this food program have treated clients poorly?** ❑ None ❑ Some ❑ Most ❑ All ❑ One or two	**How would you rate the way people are treated when they come to get food here?** ❑ 5 stars ***** ❑ 4 stars **** ❑ 3 stars *** ❑ 2 stars ** ❑ 1 star *	**How do staff/volunteers at this program treat clients?** ❑ Usually Good ❑ Sometimes Good ❑ In the Middle ❑ Sometimes Bad ❑ Usually Bad

Source: Pathways client feedback questionnaires, Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank, 2016–17.

As shown in figure 6, Akron partners made several changes to the client treatment question in Cycle 2: adding a time parameter, moving the focus toward how clients observe clients are treated in general, clarifying staff and volunteers as the focus of the question, and asking about the share of staff and volunteers who treat clients poorly to draw out issues about particular volunteers.

In Cycle 3, Akron tested additional approaches to the client treatment question. In piloting the new question in Cycle 2, they found that adding the time reference may not have added as much value as they had hoped because it excluded people who may not have visited in the prior month, even if they had had a fairly recent experience with the agency. For this reason, the food bank decided to drop the time reference. They also decided to test a similar star rating system versus a question that would ask clients about how staff and volunteers usually treat clients to see how it would perform relative to the other versions.

Feedback questions about wait time are difficult to interpret for people who are accustomed to frequently having to wait.

Both food banks used the same wait time question and made one minor change over time. It asked simply: "How do you feel about the wait time at this program?" Clients could indicate "Very short," "Short," "Seems fine," "Long," and "Very long." In talking with clients, however, Akron learned how difficult it is to ask good questions about this topic. First, people have very different perceptions of what "short" and "long" might mean. Second, it is incredibly difficult to ask this question of people who are accustomed to waiting. Clients of charitable assistance expect to wait, and often not only in the context

of a pantry, but in other settings as well—the social service office, workforce development offices, other nonprofits. Having clients say the wait time "seems fine" does not objectively mean that it is. Akron also tried to craft a question about how comfortable clients felt while waiting, but they encountered some of the same obstacles and ultimately dropped the question in Cycle 3.

To complement the feedback question, Akron staff conducted targeted time audits during all three cycles in participating agencies. In these audits, they timed how quickly clients moved through the distribution line to objectively measure wait time in different agencies. In Cycle 3, Akron opted to drop the feedback question altogether and rely on the audit instead.

General ratings of client experience worked better than the net promoter score in the context of charitable food assistance.

Local partners in Alameda wanted to measure how clients feel when they visit member agencies, and they tried different ways to ask about this topic during the pilot (figure 7).

FIGURE 7

Alameda Tried Two Ways to Gather Feedback on Clients' General Experiences at Member Agencies

Cycle 2	Cycle 3
How likely are you to recommend this food program to a friend or family member?	**How would you rate your overall experience at this food program?**
(0) Not at all likely	❑ Very bad
(1)	❑ Bad
(2)	❑ Okay
(3)	❑ Good
(4)	❑ Very good
(5)	
(6)	
(7)	
(8)	
(9)	
(10) Extremely likely	

Source: Pathways client feedback questionnaires, Alameda County Community Food Bank, 2016–17.

In Cycle 2, Alameda used a question that elicited the Net Promoter Score, a client feedback measure commonly used by for-profit organizations.[8] Soon after asking this question, the food bank and agencies learned that their clients had a vastly different interpretation of the question. Some clients were compelled to give agencies a "0 – Not at all likely" rating for several reasons: they were

embarrassed to share with family and friends that they relied on charitable food assistance; they thought a high rating would be equivalent to promoting food insecurity and reliance on food assistance among their family and friends; or they thought lines at their agencies were already too long, and encouraging new clients to frequent their agencies would only make food distribution more competitive. As a result, Alameda steered away from a recommendation rating and during Cycles 2 and 3 used simpler wording and open-ended questions to assess general client impressions.

The closing-the-loop question was the most difficult to ask.

A key differentiator between traditional information gathering and feedback loops is the commitment to close the loop. Crafting a question to measure how well agencies were closing the loop proved to be a continual challenge in both sites for several reasons.

- First, both food banks found that clients initially had difficulty understanding the concept of client feedback and were unaccustomed to being asked to provide feedback on a routine basis.
- Second, during Cycle 1, many clients were unfamiliar with the food bank and were therefore unfamiliar with the reference to the "food bank" in the question (figure 8).
- Third, depending on the level of initial outreach at agencies, clients may or may not have been able to distinguish agency communications about client feedback loops from any other program occurring at that agency.
- Fourth, clients visit agencies at differential rates depending on their level of need; some may be visiting for the first time, and others may visit intermittently. As a result, it was difficult for the food bank and agencies to be sure clients completing feedback questionnaires were ever made aware of client feedback loops.
- Fifth, feedback collectors also missed clients who spoke languages that food banks could not accommodate through translated questionnaires or interpretation.
- Finally, based on the level of assistance clients required to answer the question, the food bank and agencies determined that the question was cognitively difficult to understand.

Though local partners were still not entirely sure by Cycle 3 if they had drafted the right question, what seems essential is (1) explaining that an agency is currently engaged in soliciting client feedback on

a regular basis and (2) providing specific response options that can help the food bank understand how clients are learning about client feedback loops.

FIGURE 8

Both Food Banks Retooled the Closing-the-Loop Question Many Times

	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
Akron	Before today, did you know the food bank wanted to hear feedback from you? ❑ Yes ❑ No	n/a; *asked during focus groups*	We use input from people who get food here. Have you heard about it? ❑ Yes, from the TV ❑ Yes, from a volunteer/staff member ❑ Yes, from a newsletter ❑ Yes from other people who get food here ❑ No, I haven't heard about it ❑ This is my first visit
Alameda	Before today, did you know the food bank wanted to hear feedback from people served by this program? ❑ Yes ❑ No	Since January 2017, has this program communicated how it used client feedback? ❑ Yes ❑ No ❑ Not sure ❑ Not applicable, this is my first time here	In the past few months, has this program communicated what it did with survey information or other feedback? ❑ Yes ❑ No ❑ Not sure ❑ Not applicable; this is my first time here

Source: Pathways client feedback questionnaires, Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank and Alameda County Community Food Bank, 2016–17.

In response to challenges in developing the right closing-the-loop measure, Alameda partners also included a question to assess whether clients had noticed any changes made within programs (figure 9). This question attempted to use clients' awareness of agency changes as a proxy for their awareness that their feedback was actively informing agency programs. However, these questions did not assess how

much clients were aware that agencies were actively building client feedback loops with the goal of improving programs. Additionally, member agencies in Alameda found that clients did not always associate changes made within agencies with their feedback, and some clients did not notice changes at all. For example, one program installed new benches in its waiting area in response to client feedback, and many clients began to use these benches. However, the feedback data showed that most client respondents had not noticed any changes.

FIGURE 9

Alameda Asked Clients If They Noticed Changes in Agencies

Cycle 2	Cycle 3
Since September, have you noticed that this food program has made any changes or improvements – with regard to your treatment, wait time, or safety? ❑ No, I have not noticed changes or improvements ❑ Yes, I have noticed changes or improvements ❑ Not applicable – this is my first time	**The last survey here was done in March and April. Since then, have you noticed any changes or improvements at this program?** ❑ No, I have not noticed changes or improvements ❑ Yes, I have noticed changes or improvements ❑ Not applicable – this is my first time

Source: Pathways client feedback questionnaires, Alameda County Community Food Bank, 2016–17.

Translated questions had to be culturally accessible to clients and questionnaires reformatted to accommodate non-Latin characters.

Translation of the questionnaires was another major design challenge in both sites. Though both food banks had access to translation services for feedback questions, initial translations and question formats were not culturally accessible, and were therefore confusing, to clients. During Cycle 1, clients and bilingual feedback collectors in Alameda explained that the Chinese questionnaire had originally been translated into a formal register and Chinese-speaking clients were not sure how to respond. Akron also faced challenges in translating questionnaires into Karen, Nepali, and Burmese in Cycle 2 and Swahili in Cycle 3. They soon learned that their questionnaire platform, SNAP Surveys, did not include non-Latin alphabets, forcing staff to administer Nepali and Karen feedback questionnaires on paper. However, paper printouts proved problematic as well: Nepali and Karen characters clashed with check boxes, bullets, and other symbols. In addition, like Alameda clients, Akron clients found the questionnaire culturally inaccessible, in part because many immigrant and refugee clients were unfamiliar with the concept of a survey or providing feedback. To troubleshoot these translation

challenges, both sites learned to specifically request culturally appropriate translations. To refine translations, Alameda enlisted the help of the in-house multilingual staff members of their emergency food helpline, and Akron consulted with multilingual staff at a local refugee resettlement organization.

The most effective open-ended questions were the most general ones.

After Cycle 1, it became important to Alameda agencies to move beyond the standard feedback questions and capture more agency-specific feedback. Many agencies were enthusiastic about including open-ended questions in feedback questionnaires because they could capture more nuanced client feedback and provide an alternative or complement for agencies with fewer resources to manage the reflect phase of the feedback loop.

However, agencies understood that this option came with certain trade-offs. Taking more time to answer open-ended questions could be burdensome to clients, and compiling and analyzing qualitative data from open-ended questions could be burdensome to the food bank. In addition, if agencies wanted to ask more open-ended questions, they would need to respond to a wider scope of client feedback, either through the changes they made or through intentional communication for why certain changes couldn't be made.

Alameda chose to administer open-ended questions during Cycles 2 and 3. Despite the initial worry that open-ended questions would be burdensome to clients to complete, Alameda received a substantial amount of feedback on these questions. The burden to clients was minimized because, most of the time, the food bank staff and volunteers typed clients' open-ended feedback into tablets. The trade-off, however, was that client feedback may have been filtered by the third party's own perceptions or interpretations.

In Cycle 2, Alameda added four open-ended questions to the questionnaire: one for each of the three feedback priority questions and one asking clients to specify changes they noticed at agencies. Clients were generally willing to provide comments on wait time (29 percent), program changes (27 percent), and client treatment (25 percent). Safety was the lowest priority for clients, only 13 percent of whom responded to the safety open-ended question.

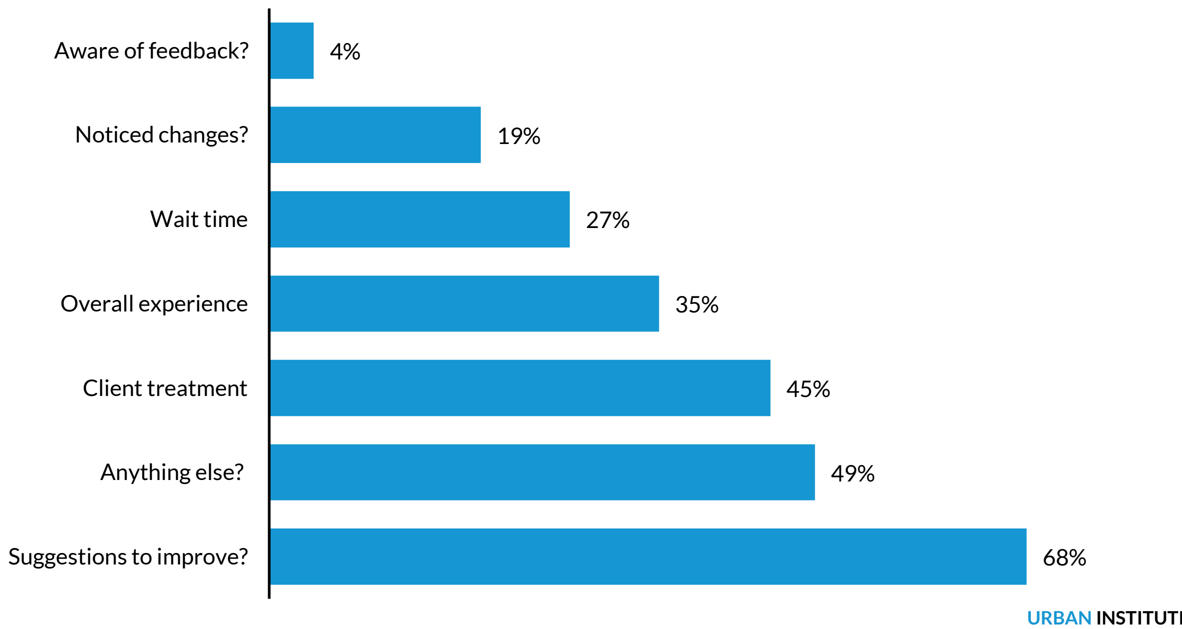
By Cycle 3, Alameda had added six different open-ended questions (figure 10), this time providing space for clients to describe their general experiences at agencies and provide suggestions for improvement. Notably, these more general open-ended questions received much greater response than the open-ended questions attached to more specific feedback questions. Overall, open-ended response

rates were higher in Cycle 2 than Cycle 3. Beyond the popularity of the open-ended questions, rising client familiarity and comfort with the client feedback process, as well as with Alameda's interview-style approach to client feedback, may also explain client willingness to answer open-ended questions.

FIGURE 10

Alameda Clients Took Advantage of the Opportunity to Respond to General Open-Ended Questions

Share of responses to open-ended questions in Alameda's Cycle 3 questionnaire



Source: Pathways client feedback data, Alameda County Community Food Bank, 2016–17.

One of the key questions when evaluating the value of open-ended questions is whose voices are most represented. In Alameda, English speakers were much more likely to provide this additional information than speakers of other primary languages. In Cycle 3, 87 percent of English-speaking participants responded to at least one open-ended question, as compared to only 64 percent of Chinese speakers and 41 percent of Spanish speakers. There was some question about how well their comments reflect what clients actually said, as many of the non-English questionnaires were administered by staff and volunteers who had to both summarize and translate feedback in a compressed period of time.

Gathering Client Feedback

As noted in "Overview of Pilot Design," Pathways set out to test two key aspects of feedback collection: mode of administration (self-administered by clients versus assisted by feedback collectors) and feedback format (paper versus digital questionnaires). By testing these methods, Pathways partners could determine both clients' preferred feedback methods and the level of effort required by the food bank and agencies to collect client feedback.

Feedback collection teams were intentional in how they approached clients, from the hours that they visited agencies to the clothes they wore on site.

Though not a key design element of the pilot, logistical planning became important for feedback collection teams in both sites to consider as they moved toward administration. Overall, feedback collectors sought to minimize disruption of agency operations while keeping the feedback collection process organized. Because every agency was different, feedback collectors had to tailor feedback collection approaches.

Feedback collectors visited agencies multiple times across cycles and during both peak and off-peak hours to ensure all clients had an opportunity to provide feedback, regardless of the time they visited agencies. Feedback collectors most often approached clients directly while they stood in the distribution line. This practice was especially effective in agencies with fast-paced distributions, small waiting rooms, or standing room only. In addition, whenever possible, feedback collectors found it useful to solicit clients before they received their food, as they were often unwilling to remain at the agency once they had received their food.

Approachability was another important factor. Feedback collection teams could break the ice with clients more quickly with a warm hand-off from agency leaders. When agency staff were not available to make an introduction, walking up to clients directly was the next most effective approach. Both sites learned this early on in Cycle 1 when they set up stationary tables and waited, unsuccessfully, for clients to approach. The pitch itself was also important. Using a statement like, "Can you take this survey? It would really help me out" could be potentially coercive to clients or elicit courtesy bias in their response. Instead, feedback collectors approached clients in a friendly, unassuming manner and always communicated to clients that providing feedback was completely voluntary.

Feedback collectors in both sites dressed in casual clothing. Though both food banks invested in certain branding materials, like t-shirts in Akron and stickers in Alameda, feedback collectors found that

clients recognized them more by their faces than by any affiliation to the food bank or client feedback initiatives. Alameda avoided using branded clothing given what they knew about the fears that uniforms could trigger for certain clients.

Most Akron clients were able to provide feedback independently, but nearly all Alameda clients were assisted.

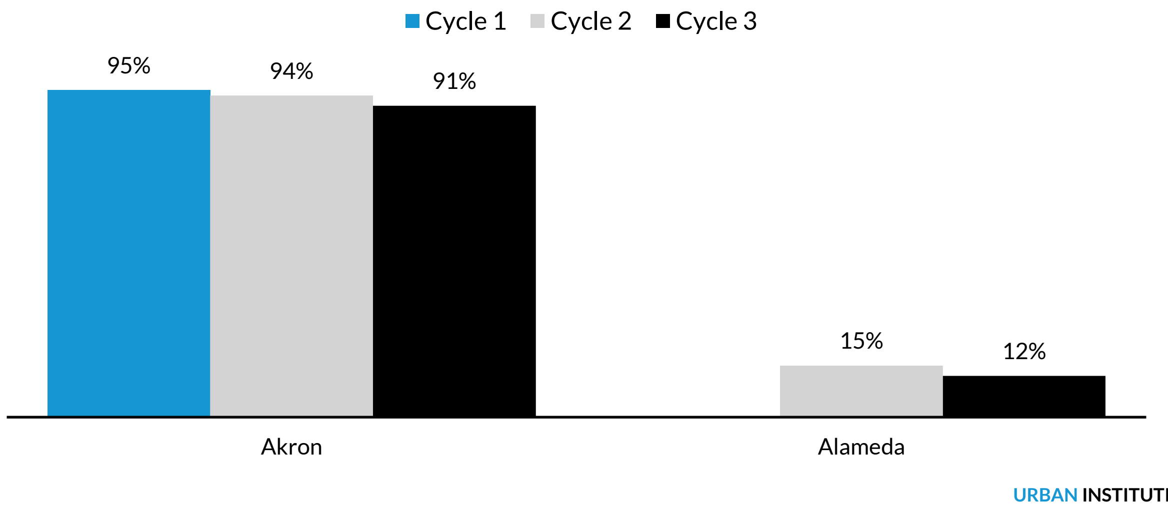
Another critical ingredient to feedback collection is creating a safe space for clients to provide candid feedback. Ideally, clients answer questions on their own, anonymously. An important complementary component is have a neutral third party to facilitate self-administration of questionnaires and/or assist clients who need additional help because of literacy, language, or other barriers.

Pathways partners in Akron and Alameda agreed that clients were more comfortable giving feedback to food bank representatives than they would have to agency-level staff and volunteers. In both sites, clients began to recognize food bank feedback collectors after repeat visits to the same agencies. In some instances, Akron food bank staff noticed that clients themselves would recruit other clients to provide feedback. Beyond building familiarity, food bank staff in both sites also found that clients viewed the food bank as a neutral third party that would keep agencies accountable to responding appropriately to client feedback.

FIGURE 11

Most Akron Clients Provided Feedback Independently, and Most Alameda Clients Were Assisted

Shares of client feedback questionnaires that were self-administered by clients



Source: Pathways client feedback data, Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank and Alameda County Community Food Bank, 2016–17. Alameda did not measure modes of administration during Cycle 1.

Most clients in Akron were able to provide feedback independently on paper and digital questionnaires (figure 11). In fact, one agency with a more unpredictable flow of clients propped up a stationary tablet for clients to complete even when feedback collectors were not on-site. This practice encouraged the food bank to place locked comment boxes at all sites after Cycle 1 to allow clients to provide feedback continuously. These actions proved only mildly effective, as only some agency leaders made them known to clients, and others never called attention to them.

By contrast, the overwhelming majority of Alameda clients in Cycles 2 and 3 were assisted by feedback collectors. Language seems to be the distinguishing factor in designing feedback collection methods. Nearly all Pathways clients in Akron spoke English fluently, but Alameda had to cater to a widely diverse language pool that included clients who spoke English, Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, Vietnamese, Arabic, Amharic, Tigrinya, Mam, Spanish, and Tagalog among other languages. Furthermore, as described in the “Assembling the Team” section of the” Plan” chapter, at least half the participating agencies in Alameda were not meeting the language needs of their clients at the start of the pilot.

In Alameda, it therefore became necessary early on to develop methods to address this language gap. Translating questionnaires into Spanish and Chinese was the obvious first step. But the team

eventually found a method that was even more effective. During site visits, feedback collectors found they were having longer conversations with clients to explain the feedback process and were naturally completing feedback forms for clients. Realizing this occurred even more with non-English speaking clients, Alameda decided to formalize these organic conversations as the feedback collection standard for all clients. This approach involved on-the-spot verbal communication, translation, and interpretation for clients who did not speak English. These methods also became critical for collecting feedback from clients with literacy challenges. However, these methods were not limited to clients with language or literacy barriers; feedback collectors also used this approach with English-speaking clients.

At first, Pathways partners were concerned that clients would be less open to offering feedback if feedback collectors were heavily involved in both completing and collecting feedback questionnaires. As noted in the "Designing the Listen Phase" section, clients expressed early on that they needed to be assured of privacy in providing honest feedback. Having feedback collectors closely involved as clients completed feedback questionnaires ran counter to that wisdom.

In practice, feedback collectors in Alameda believed strongly that clients who required assistance were still comfortable enough to answer feedback questions honestly. They found that it was relatively easy for clients to provide feedback, especially once agency staff introduced feedback collectors to clients. It remained important to clients that the food bank reassure them that their feedback would be anonymous, even if they shared feedback orally. Once these guarantees were made, feedback collectors generally found that clients were willing, enthusiastic, and thankful for the opportunity to express themselves. Alameda agency representatives also suggested that clients seemed accustomed to talking to strangers during pantry visits and that several had past survey experiences with the food bank.

In Alameda, providing assistance for client feedback became the rule, not the exception, for non-English speakers. Because Alameda modeled feedback collection after interviews and language interpretation, most clients decided not to self-administer through written forms or tablets. Feedback collectors also observed that Spanish-speaking clients were the most self-sufficient.

Most clients were happy to complete digital questionnaires, which enabled more efficient feedback collection and analysis by the food bank.

Both sites used paper questionnaires to solicit feedback in Cycle 1 and tested a digital platform with tablets in Cycle 2, though Akron opted to provide paper as a back-up due to regular Wi-Fi connectivity issues at the sites. Regardless of whether clients completed feedback questionnaires independently or

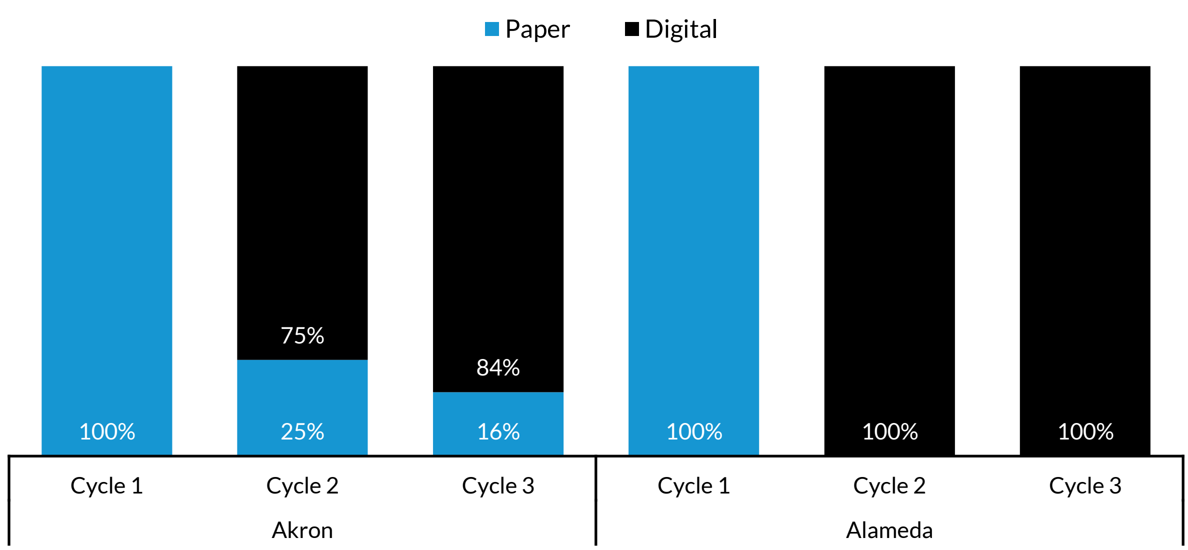
required assistance, they were generally willing and able to use digital tablets to provide their feedback, so much so that both Akron and Alameda opted to continue with the tablets in Cycle 3. Between Cycles 2 and 3, rates of digital usage increased in Akron and remained consistently high in Alameda (figure 12). Akron partners observed that only clients with limited computer literacy opted for paper questionnaires, and even then, feedback collectors were often able to convince clients to fill out digital questionnaires by offering assistance.

Digital methods were also preferred by feedback collectors at both sites. The more labor-intensive paper alternative required scanning hundreds of individuals' questionnaires and performing regular spot checks to ensure the optical scanning software was scanning accurately. Paper also limited the variety of question formats (like star ratings) and functionality (such as dropdown menus or using non-Latin characters), which affected the look, feel, and ease of use of the feedback questionnaire. By Cycles 2 and 3, Akron only used paper as a back-up method when they faced connectivity issues, which were easily overcome in Alameda by purchasing offline functionality.

FIGURE 12

Most Clients in Both Sites Were Comfortable Providing Feedback on Digital Questionnaires

Feedback responses across sites and cycles, by feedback questionnaire type



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Source: Pathways client feedback data, Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank and Alameda County Community Food Bank, 2016–17.

Gauging Participation and Inclusiveness

Pilots sites wanted to not only maximize participation but also make sure that feedback participants adequately reflected broader agency clientele. This section describes these trends as well as the efficacy of incentives that Akron tested to boost participation and ensure more reluctant clients were part of the process.

Client participation generally increased as clients became more comfortable and local partners built capacity.

One of the overarching goals of the pilot was to maximize client participation. Between July 2016 and October 2017, clients completed 2,374 feedback questionnaires in Akron and 1,855 in Alameda.

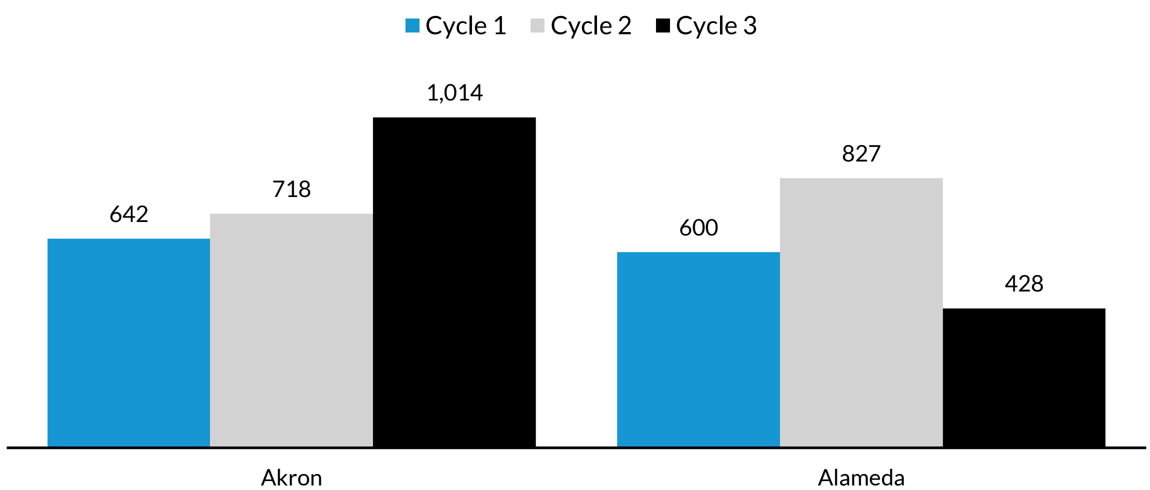
The Akron team shortened the data collection period from two months in Cycle 1 to four to six weeks in Cycles 2 and 3. Still, Akron continued to make the same number of feedback collection visits to agencies and saw a steady increase in client participation over time (figure 13).

Alameda exhibited different trends. With the introduction of tablets and the solidification of a multilingual team of staff and volunteers to collect feedback, the number of participants increased from 600 to 827 from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2, despite the exit of one of the participating agencies. In Cycle 3, participation declined to levels lower than in Cycle 1 because two additional agencies dropped out, and another shifted from a multisite to a single-site feedback collection because of logistical challenges. In addition, as evidenced by their efforts to reach non-English clients, the Alameda team prioritized quality of feedback over quantity and included open-ended questions. This emphasis meant more time was spent with each client and fewer feedback questionnaires were collected.

FIGURE 13

Client Participation Steadily Increased in Akron and Varied in Alameda

Number of feedback questionnaires collected across cycles



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Pathways client feedback data, Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank and Alameda County Community Food Bank, 2016–17.

Incentives helped boost participation in Akron.

Local partners in Akron acknowledged that some clients might be more willing to offer feedback than others. Akron offered incentives to clients across all cycles to encourage more reluctant clients to participate. Akron partners wanted to offer clients items they may not typically receive during regular distributions so that the incentive would seem more special or unique to clients. In addition, as part of Hunger in America 2014, FA discourages members from distributing donated products received for normal distribution as a special incentive because these products are not equally available and were not donated for the purpose of being an incentive. The food bank and agencies offered clients nonfood items: food bank–branded hand soap in Cycle 1 (which was readily available thanks to a local donor) and small food storage containers during Cycles 2 and 3, a recommendation made by clients during the Cycle 1 reflect phase. In addition, one agency offered t-shirts during one distribution, which proved effective. Alameda opted not to offer incentives, as partners believed strongly that incentives were not necessary to encourage client participation and could potentially cause conflict among clients.

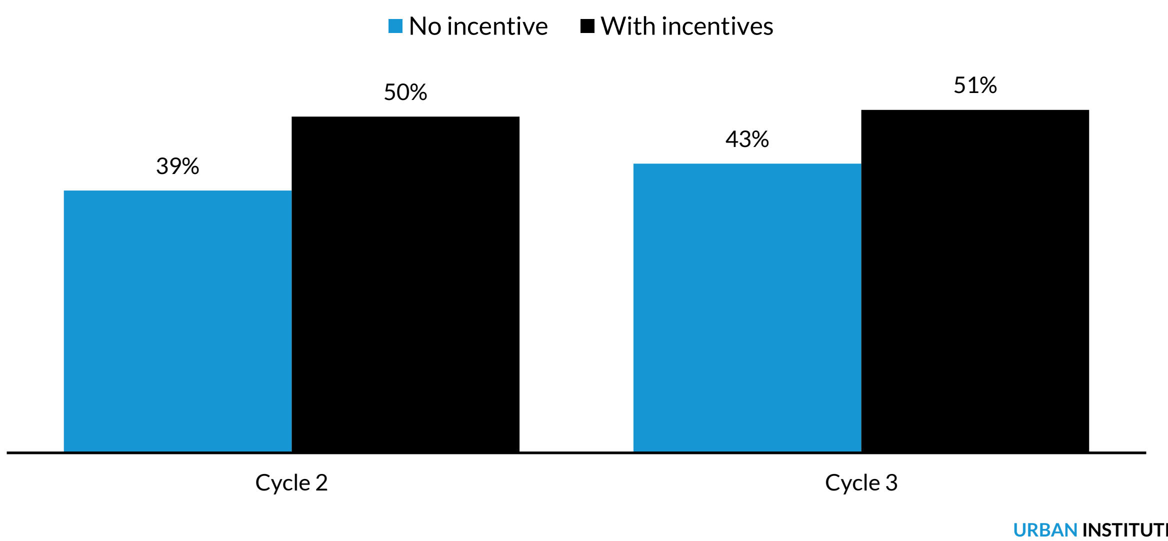
To measure the effectiveness of incentives, Akron only offered incentives during the second half of each cycle (about three to four weeks) and compared client response rates with and without incentives

within each cycle. Comparing the simple total participation numbers for the first and second half of each cycle made it difficult to see whether the incentives were effective. However, in Cycles 2 and 3, the Akron food bank team calculated response rates by using total participation and total number of clients at each distribution during feedback collection visits. This method yielded clearer insight (figure 14). Response rates increased 8 to 11 percent when the feedback teams distributed incentives. However, there was no strong evidence that incentives increased the participation of any particular demographic group.

FIGURE 14

Incentives in Akron Were Effective during Cycles 2 and 3 When Small Food Storage Containers Were Offered

Client feedback response rates in Cycles 2 and 3 by use of incentives



Source: Pathways client feedback data, Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank, 2016–17.

Even though Akron partners did not have response data for Cycle 1, they believed that the type of incentive offered made a difference. During feedback collection, the food bank and agencies found that clients welcomed reusable food storage containers much more than hand soap. In addition, clients more often interpreted incentives as a "thank you" or free giveaway from the food bank, rather than a special or exclusive reward for providing feedback. As one Pathways partner noted, "It helps build trust with clients communicates to clients that you have their needs in mind."

Partners were able to test large-scale feedback with diverse clients.

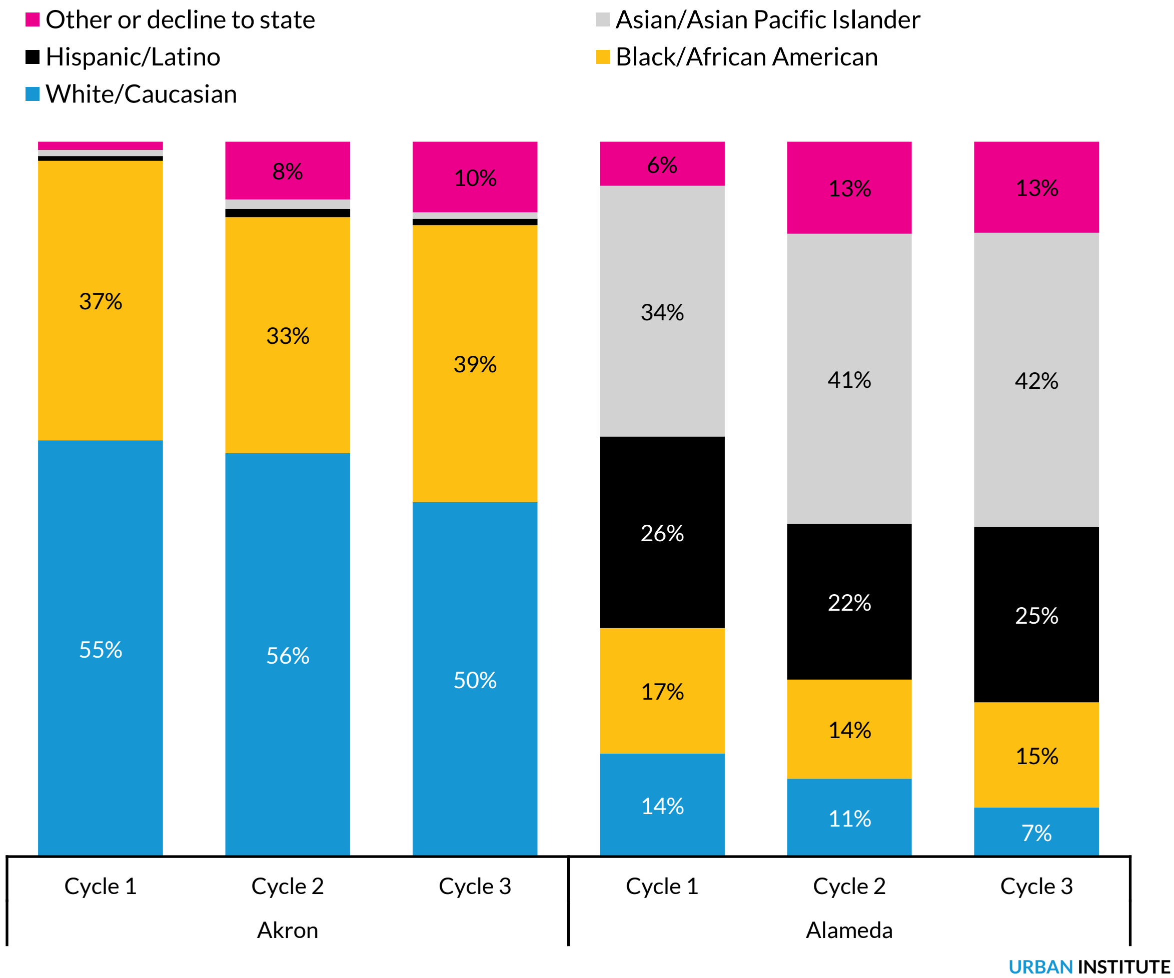
Another goal of the pilot was to ensure that clients of varying race/ethnicity felt comfortable sharing their feedback. Clients who identified as Asian/Pacific Islander (figure 15) provided a large share of feedback among Pathways participants in Alameda (40 percent), and their participation increased over time. Hispanic/Latino clients provided the second-largest share of client feedback (24 percent). By comparison, African American and white clients combined provided only one-third of all feedback, and their shares decreased over time.

Most Akron Pathways respondents were white, but African American clients made up a significant share of feedback respondents (37 percent). African American client participation increased over time while white client participation decreased.

FIGURE 15

Asian/Pacific Islander Clients in Alameda and African American Clients in Akron were Major Pathways Participants

Participation across cycles in Akron and Alameda, by race and ethnicity



Source: Pathways client feedback data, Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank and Alameda County Community Food Bank, 2016–17.

Note: The values for the areas without direct labels range from 0.6 to 1.3 percent.

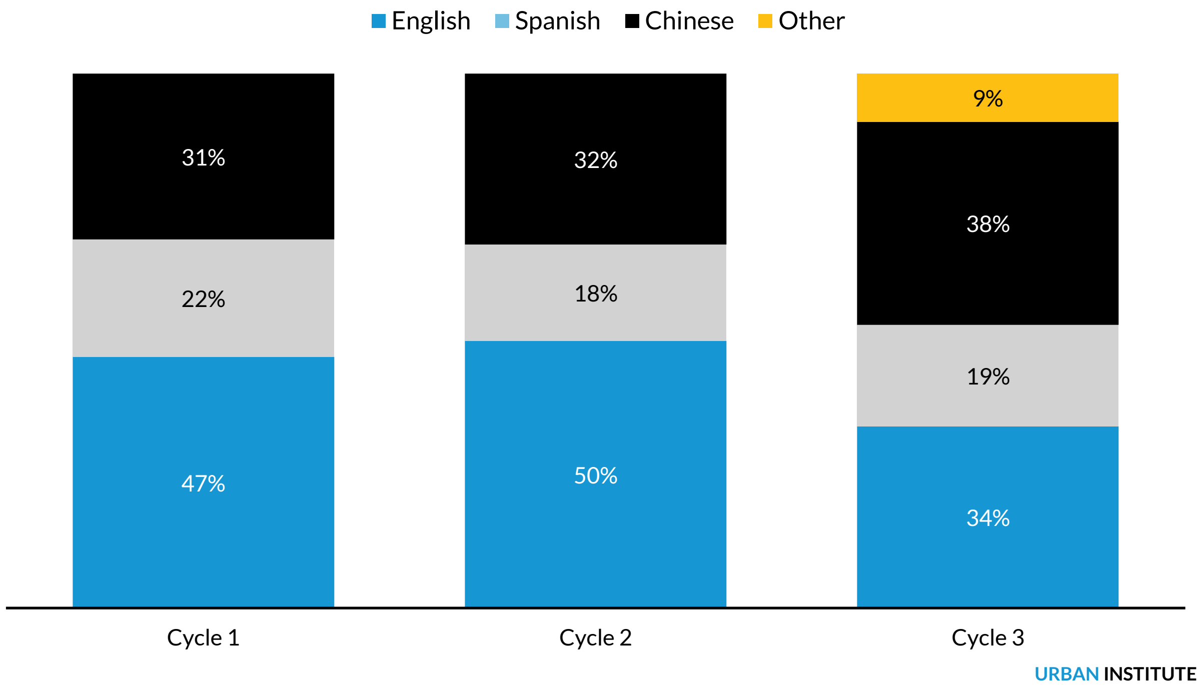
There were also interesting trends in age. Alameda received an overwhelming response from seniors (aged 65 and older), who provided more than half (51 percent) of all feedback across the pilot. In addition, the share of seniors among feedback participants increased over time. In Akron, middle-aged participants made up almost two-thirds of all feedback respondents (63.1 percent), even though they made up only 40.1 percent of the population served by the food bank. This share stayed steady over the three feedback cycles.

Design decisions helped maximize participation of language minorities in Alameda. By recruiting a team of bilingual staff and volunteers and investing substantial effort in translating feedback questionnaires, Alameda reached a much broader swath of clients than they would have otherwise. In fact, the use of Chinese questionnaires (38 percent) surpassed English questionnaires (34 percent) by Cycle 3 (figure 16).

FIGURE 16

In Alameda Participation by non-English Speakers Increased over Time

Feedback questionnaires completed in Alameda across cycles, by language



Source: Pathways client feedback data, Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank and Alameda County Community Food Bank, 2016–17.

Getting Complete Feedback Data

One of Pathways' design principles was to minimize client burden as much as possible; achieving this goal was also an important way of ensuring that the data gathered were as complete as possible. Questionnaires that are too long or complicated often encourage respondents to skip questions or stop answering altogether. We assessed to what degree survey length affected client response.

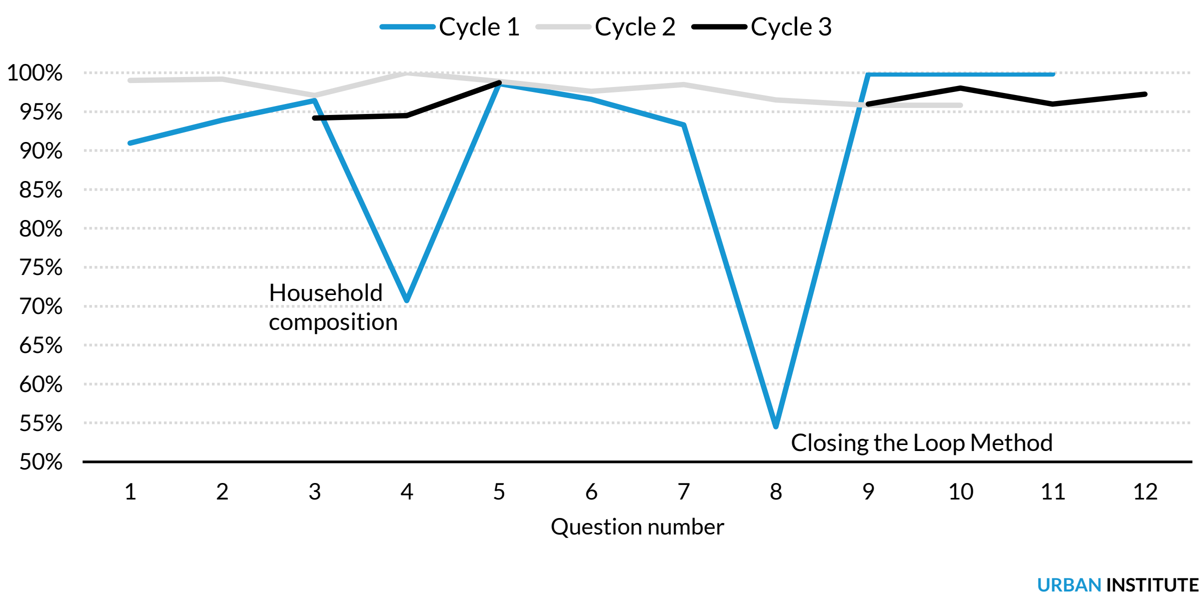
The tablet-based platform helped make sure clients did not skip questions.

Over the course of the pilot, the number of questions on the feedback questionnaires ranged from about 10 to 12. We found that the number of questions on any given questionnaire did not seem to affect clients' ability to complete the full questionnaire (figures 13 and 14). Response rates remained consistently high for feedback questionnaires in both sites. However, overall, digital administration, whether assisted or not, seemed to buffer against response issues in both sites. Clients in both sites skipped more questions in Cycle 1, when paper questionnaires were used, than in Cycles 2 and 3. In Cycles 2 and 3, when digital questionnaires were primarily used, response rates were 93 percent and above in Akron and 100 percent in Alameda (with the caveat that feedback collectors in Alameda were the ones completing most questionnaires).

FIGURE 17

Akron Clients Responded Less to Household Composition and Closing-the-Loop Questions during Cycle 1

Feedback questionnaire response rates in Akron

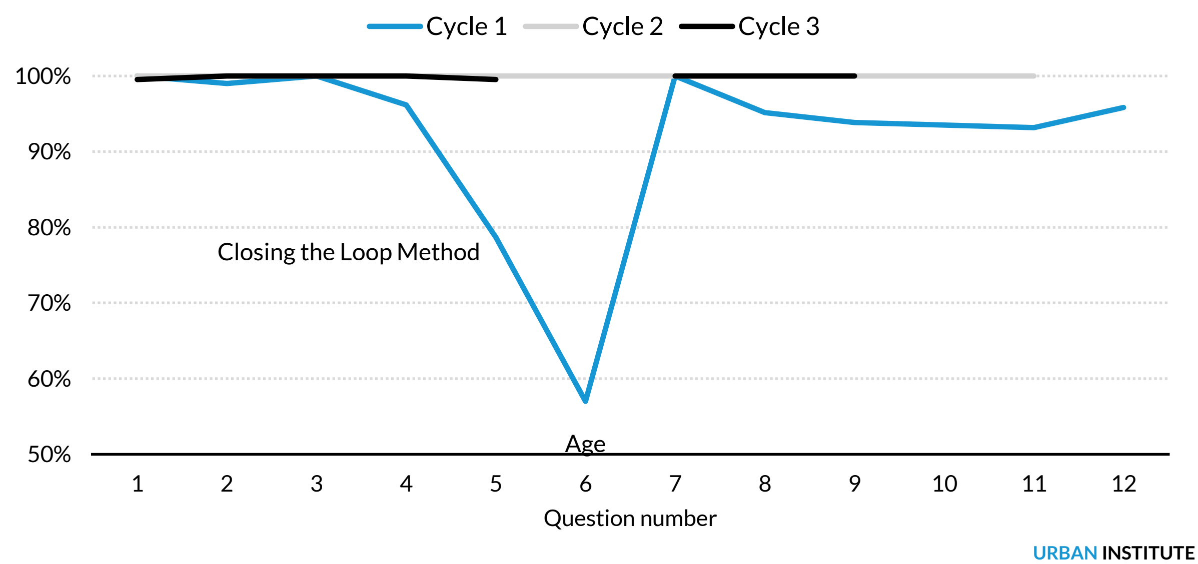


Source: Pathways client feedback data, Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank, 2016–17.

FIGURE 18

Alameda Clients Responded Less to Closing-the-Loop and Age Questions during Cycle 1

Feedback questionnaire response rates in Alameda



Source: Pathways client feedback data, Alameda County Community Food Bank, 2016–17.

Still, local partners agreed that 10 questions are ideal. In their eyes, this length was not too burdensome to clients and still enabled food banks and agencies to ask priority questions. Feedback collectors in Alameda also appreciated fewer questions, as they often felt pressured to rush through questions with clients on longer questionnaires.

Clients skipped some questions more than others, prompting changes to the questionnaires.

Despite relatively robust response rates across questions, we did identify some trends in nonresponse by the topic of the question. Both sites saw major response drop-offs for the closing-the-loop question, which attests to the difficulty clients had understanding the question (see discussion in "Crafting Questions"). In addition, Akron had a major drop in response rates for a question on household size; Alameda saw a similar trend with the question on age. Clients in Akron routinely asked feedback collectors why certain demographic questions were being asked if the overall goal of the questionnaire was to get feedback on key priorities.

After some reflection, local partners noted that age and household size are two questions that can affect the level of charitable food assistance clients may receive—thus clients were right to be skeptical about answering additional demographic questions in a charitable food assistance setting. Though both sites continued to ask about age, Alameda dropped the question on household size and Akron dropped the question on household composition.

Take-aways for Practitioners

- There are no perfect feedback questions. Actively ask clients to help you understand what the questions mean to them and plan to make changes over time.
- Use time audit studies rather than feedback measures about wait time. Subjective assessments of wait time do not mean much for low-income people who are accustomed to having to wait in many different contexts.
- If you want to solicit open-ended information, ask general questions for the greatest response rate and anticipate the need for more time to administer the questionnaires and analyze the data.
- Don't be shy about using tablets. It's a great way to allow clients privacy for their responses. Most English-speaking clients are comfortable with them, and they increase the completeness of questionnaires.
- When clients need help, use neutral actors to solicit feedback, whenever possible, to help overcome courtesy bias and help clients feel safe.
- Use client input to select incentives, and carefully reflect on whether they actually make a difference.

Reflect

After gathering client feedback in the listen phase as inclusively as possible, food banks and agencies faced the challenge of deciding how to interpret it and what action to take to make improvements. Key to this process was engaging agency stakeholders in a qualitative reflection process.

Each site engaged three audiences during the reflect phase: clients, member agencies, and agency staff and volunteers. Partners in Alameda spent 12 weeks reflecting in Cycle 1 and 7 weeks in Cycles 2 and 3. Akron partners spent 5 to 6 weeks during each cycle reflecting with stakeholders.

Designing the Reflect Phase

Experts invited communities to weigh the pros and cons of public and private methods of reflection.

Reflection methods can range from public forums like town halls and data walks to more private conversations, such as focus groups and interviews. In general, public methods assume a higher level of trust and transparency among diverse participants, while private methods are better if there is a high need for confidentiality because of lack of trust, comfort, and transparency between clients, staff, and volunteers (table 6). Private methods are also better forums for harder-to-reach individuals such as immigrants, refugees, and non-English speakers.

TABLE 6

Choosing the Right Reflection Method

	Public forum/meeting	Private focus groups, interviews, "office hours"
Assumptions	High trust, comfort between staff/volunteers/clients; low need for confidentiality	Low trust, less comfort between staff/volunteers/clients; high need for confidentiality
Facilitator	Agency staff	Food bank staff
Attendees	Clients, volunteers, all staff members	Clients, volunteers, staff members separately
Recruitment	Agency-led General flyers	Food bank–led Targeted, more specific invitations
Location	Agency public space	Private space, at agency or another location, where conversation can feel confidential
Incentives	Not necessary	May be required for hard-to-reach clients
Facilitation challenges	Consciousness about making space for clients to speak, prepping volunteers and staff to not dominate the conversation	Groups are homogeneous (i.e., all clients are of a particular type); less difficult to facilitate but may be harder to draw out people who might not be comfortable speaking up
Attendance challenges	Requires large gathering space, which agencies may not have	May be difficult for participants to travel at a new, separate time and location than distribution

To select the most appropriate reflection method, Pathways partners also needed to clarify what they learned from feedback during a given cycle and how reflection could enhance that learning. If feedback data revealed serious issues with client treatment, for example, a town hall facilitated by agency leadership and attended by both clients and staff and volunteers would not be the best venue for that conversation. Individual one-on-one conversations or closed focus groups with a neutral party would be preferable.

However, cases in which good relationships have been established between clients and agency leadership lend themselves to a more general town-hall approach. The greatest challenge in this situation is how to make sure that agency leadership maintains a neutral, open posture during the conversation, even when they have a personal stake in the conversation.

The advantage, of course, to town hall–like formats and conversations led by agency leadership is that they are scalable. Food banks are unlikely to have the capacity to facilitate their conversations across their entire network of agencies. More private methods require much more time and resource investment.

Partners aimed to empower member agencies to facilitate reflection and adapt methods to local contexts.

During the initial design phase, food banks and agencies all expressed strong interest in being part of the reflection conversations.

Although local partners recognized that reflection conversation topics could be sensitive in nature, they believed strongly that member agency staff should be directly involved for two main reasons:

- First-hand experience of learning from clients could help agencies build more personal relationships and trust and better understand how to make improvements.
- Over the long term, food banks wanted to test their ability to develop agency capacity to have these conversations as a strategy for scaling them after the pilots.

For these reasons, the plan in both sites was to transition the responsibility and leadership of reflection activities from the food banks to member agency leaders during the pilot.

To standardize reflection across agencies, Akron partners opted to conduct focus groups across all cycles. Akron believed this smaller format, unlike public meetings, would give facilitators more control over creating a safe environment in which clients could feel comfortable responding to sensitive questions. In addition, Akron partners thought agencies needed to build more trust with clients before normalizing a forum like a community meeting. Most of these focus groups were hosted on site, but several were held in nearby churches or libraries to accommodate spatial constraints or to provide a higher guarantee of confidentiality, especially for clients from agencies with poorer client treatment ratings.

By contrast, in Alameda, the food bank and agencies decided to test a variety of reflection methods across the pilot, including focus groups and brief, informal gatherings and interview-style conversations with clients in the distribution line. This diversity of approaches reflected a desire to accommodate the language and cultural diversity of agency clientele while being sensitive to the logistical constraints faced by agencies, like available space.

Reflecting with Clients

Food banks provided training and support throughout the reflection process.

Food banks in both sites supported agencies throughout the reflect phase. They analyzed the feedback data and produced agency-specific summaries for the member agency councils. They helped agencies structure conversations around their priorities. The food bank in Akron, for example, developed a detailed plan for the flow and content of the focus groups that included a series of primary and secondary questions. Their team also created infographics to communicate the quantitative feedback to clients and word bubbles with qualitative observations and comments captured during data collection to provide nuance to the feedback data.

In addition, the food banks trained agencies on how to facilitate focus groups and informal client conversations; they coached agencies collectively and one-on-one to interpret the feedback; and they brainstormed with agencies about possible changes in response to feedback.

Food banks and agencies were encouraged to facilitate the reflection conversations by using a variety of techniques:

- **manage expectations** by explaining feedback priorities and why they were chosen and being honest with clients about what was possible for change and what was not
- **stay on topic** to ensure that the reflection makes the best use of clients' time, even when they want to discuss other important issues beyond feedback topics
- **present data** in an accessible manner that all types of clients can interpret with ease by frequently using visuals like photos, videos, infographics, and charts
- **facilitate discussion** actively by preparing questions and discussion topics ahead of time and anticipating difficulties with clients interpreting the data
- **take notes** to keep track of the full discussion and designate a note taker other than the main facilitator
- **provide food** appropriate for the time of day as a thank you

Recruiting clients on the same day as the reflection event helped boost attendance, but it did not ensure the representativeness of participants.

Regardless of the reflection method used, partners in both sites found that on-the-spot sign-up and commitment during the same week, or even the same day, as the reflection event was the most effective recruitment method. Feedback collectors actively recruited during feedback collection visits, and clients' familiarity and comfort with feedback collectors made recruitment increasingly easier.

Alameda partners found that approaching clients in line was an important trust-building opportunity for both large and small agencies. The food bank and agencies in Alameda also found that clients became anxious if they were pulled out of line to participate in a structured focus group, fearful of losing their place in line or not receiving the full amount of food at the distribution. Thus, informal conversations with clients in line worked better in many settings.

Both sites were aware that relying on samples of convenience would mean that reflection conversations might not adequately represent full client populations and that the same voices might be heard every cycle. Recruiting clients spontaneously presented other unforeseen risks. During one focus group in Akron, for example, one of the clients was also a volunteer at the agency, and other clients felt uncomfortable speaking negatively about the agency in front of her.

Alameda tried to mitigate convenience sampling bias by using multiple reflection methods at agencies, like hosting a structured focus group and reaching out to clients in line on the same day. Akron attempted to recruit several weeks in advance of reflection to more purposefully assemble a group of individuals by offering participant interest cards and sign-up sheets to collect client contact information during the listen phase. The food bank used this information to follow-up with clients by phone and confirm attendance a few days before the focus group. However, these advance recruitment methods proved ineffective, as clients' schedules often changed. At one agency, none of the clients recruited in advance showed up to the focus group.

Akron and Alameda offered incentives to reflect phase participants that agencies believed were helpful in recruitment.

In Akron, where participants were offered $25 Visa gift cards, food bank focus group recruiters told clients about the incentive during recruitment. However, some agency leadership—once they were facilitating on their own—would reveal the incentive only after they confirmed attendance to avoid recruiting too many people and having to turn people away.

In Alameda, a few agencies chose not to use incentives as they believed incentives could raise client concerns about fairness, and the impromptu recruitment for reflection could suggest favoritism. For agencies that did use incentives, clients received extra bags of food (these were a separate contribution made directly by the food bank). Some agency leaders did not mention incentives until clients were in the room. Others would communicate about incentives during recruitment, preferring transparency with clients, and found that word about incentives quickly spread through the latter method. During Cycle 1, several Alameda agencies also raffled off a $25 Target gift card, which was exciting to English-speaking clients, but ineffective with Chinese-speaking clients who were not familiar with Target.

Both food banks thought that the incentives helped with recruitment, but because of the uneven way they were deployed, any difference the incentives made in total participation or the representativeness of participants could not be objectively tested.

In Akron, the food bank gradually transitioned agencies to lead reflection, but it remained present in all reflection with clients.

Akron gradually transitioned agency leaders to lead reflection by themselves. During Cycle 1, the food bank led the first focus groups at half of their member agencies independently, without agency leaders present. By initiating reflection, the food bank could set the tone for how these conversations would go during Cycles 2 and 3 and reinforce to clients that the food bank was a neutral third party to which they could safely give honest feedback.

In Cycle 2, the food bank invited agency leaders of this first group of agencies to colead reflection discussions. At the same time, the food bank led reflection with the second group of agencies, again without agency leaders present. By Cycle 3, the first group of agencies led reflection conversations on their own, while the food bank attended as note taker. Meanwhile, the second group of agencies co-led focus groups with the food bank.

In Alameda, the food bank delegated reflection facilitation to the agencies in Cycle 1, but it provided more direct support in Cycles 2 and 3.

In contrast to Akron, in Alameda the food bank began with minimal involvement in reflection but gradually became more involved across the pilot. During Cycle 1, the food bank trained agencies to conduct town hall meetings and tasked them with leading these conversations with clients on their own.

However, a few agencies did not fully understand until the training that they would be the ones leading reflection. Moreover, food bank staff discovered that reflection conversations varied significantly in quality from conversations during the member agency group meetings.

Food bank staff, through their time spent on site during the listen phase, also came to appreciate the magnitude of the language barriers in many of the participating agencies. During Cycle 1, one agency invited Chinese-speaking feedback volunteers to provide interpretation during their reflection conversations. Another agency partnered with a nearby Chinese church for free interpretation assistance. During Cycles 2 and 3, the food bank sought to scale these types of efforts to break down language barriers by training Chinese- and Mam-speaking clients to facilitate reflection themselves and leaning heavily on multilingual food bank staff and volunteers.

Agency leaders struggled to remain impartial as facilitators, but they emerged from the process much more motivated to address client concerns.

Having food banks facilitate the conversation had pros and cons. On one hand, food bank staff were better able to be neutral in the conversation, follow protocols, and create space for clients to talk. Clients seemed comfortable with having food bank staff facilitate reflection; this staffing also made it clear to clients that the listen and reflect phases were connected. On the other hand, clients could not always understand the relationship between the food bank and the agency, and they shared their fears about the consequences of providing negative feedback, like the pantry closing.

Reflection led by agency leaders varied widely in content and quality. Some agencies simply re-asked questions on the feedback questionnaires to groups of clients, while others prepared specific questions based on the feedback results. Some agencies shared feedback results with clients, while others did not. Some also had a difficult time not giving in to their impulses to avoid difficult topics or explain themselves when confronted with negative feedback or a question about agency operations. Although on-the-spot question-and-answer sessions are useful for clients, they can sometimes derail the conversation altogether.

In Akron, where the food bank always provided direct support during the focus groups, food bank staff saw their role as helping to keep agency leaders on track when focus groups went off topic or encouraging agency facilitators to explore negative feedback when it seemed they were avoiding difficult topics. Organizations with a direct stake in reflection will likely need not only preliminary training, but on-going coaching and support on how to facilitate these conversations effectively.

Nevertheless, it was invaluable for agency leaders to be present to hear clients directly speaking about their experiences. Being part of this process inspired many agency staff to commit to working on client priorities, even when these priorities seemed difficult for them to address.

Though the type of reflection activities varied, participating clients were eager to share experiences, ask questions, and offer suggestions.

Client participation during reflection varied by agency, method, and quality. In Akron, focus groups ranged from 5 to 20 people. In Alameda, focus groups ranged from 8 to 10 people, and the food bank team tried to speak with as many clients as possible in the distribution line.

Even though day-of recruitment was effective for getting people in the room, agencies in Alameda observed that clients were not always aware of what they signed up for; clients at these agencies were less engaged and had little to add to the conversation. Still, for the most part, clients were enthusiastic participants who expressed their gratitude for creating an opportunity to express their honest opinions.

Clients took reflection conversations in many different directions, often far beyond the key feedback priorities set by the food banks and agencies. They were pleased to have in-depth conversations about the feedback data, but they also capitalized on the opportunity to discuss topics that were most important to them, like food quality or childcare needs. In fact, partners in both sites noted that it was often difficult to manage the off-topic conversations because clients discussed the topics they cared most about with enthusiasm.

Clients also did not hesitate to ask questions about agency operations, and reflection conversations in both sites quickly became a forum for impromptu question-and-answer sessions. Such sessions were particularly frequent in Alameda during Cycle 1, when agencies were leading reflection conversations. For example, one agency lead mentioned that Chinese clients thought food baskets were color-coded according to the race of or language spoken by clients; their reflection conversation was the first time someone at that agency explained to them how color-coding works within the agency. Another agency lead took time to explain that food distribution hours couldn't be changed due to lower availability of volunteers after clients expressed preferences for different times.

Clients also offered many suggestions to improve programs that often went beyond the key feedback priorities in each site. In Akron, clients suggested that programs offer better volunteer training to deal with client treatment issues. They also brainstormed ways to make distribution faster and less chaotic, like a numbering system or ways to keep children in line busy. But clients were also

interested in programs that provided cooking demonstrations, new program locations, putting up a menu at meal sites so clients know what is being served, and providing café-style seating in meal areas to foster more social interaction.

Reflecting with Agencies

Food banks worked closely with agencies to improve their listening and interpretation skills.

Getting agencies to interpret feedback data was a challenge from the beginning. Immediately following the listen phase, both food banks used the next monthly member agency meeting to review the feedback results. Food banks also provided each agency with a high-level overview of feedback results at their site, which they could review privately or together with the food bank and other agencies.

Many agency leaders were pleasantly surprised about how positive the feedback was. Even so, they often focused on the most negative feedback, even when it reflected only a small share of clients. Food bank partners noted that agency partners tended to inflate or disavow negative feedback with statements like "We can't make everyone happy," "That's just the way it is," or "Only a few people feel that way." Another common agency response was reframing client feedback as "complaints" rather than useful information that could inform solutions. Still others thought that clients should be grateful for the chance to offer feedback and express that gratitude in better feedback ratings—in a word, these agencies wanted to reinforce courtesy bias. These responses, and the large variation in feedback across agencies, made it difficult for food banks to have focused, higher-level reflection conversations with the agencies that would free them from long-held assumptions to come up with effective changes.

To help support agencies in this process, food banks in both sites began working more closely and intensively with agencies to digest the data and brainstorm improvements. Alameda leveraged their agency services coordinators—food bank staff liaisons with whom agencies already had relationships—to brainstorm changes as well. Similarly, in Akron, the food bank team scheduled one-on-one conversations with agencies after reflection with clients to share key themes in the discussion and help brainstorm changes. Akron also paired off agencies based on agency similarities and encouraged them to lean on each other when they felt discouraged about feedback.

Throughout the interpretation process, the food banks tried to reinforce that receiving honest feedback is both challenging and brave and that it demonstrates to clients how committed agencies are to improving their program experiences. Regardless of the nature of the feedback, agencies and the food banks agreed that these discussions helped agencies develop a shared reality with their clients. They also believed that the pilot could become a vehicle for keeping agencies accountable to themselves for making and maintaining these changes.

Reflecting with Agency Staff and Volunteers

Though agency volunteers and staff (beyond agency leadership) are important members of the agency ecosystem, both food banks thought they could have done more to engage them throughout the pilot and especially during reflection. Both the food banks and agencies spent a lot of time refining the reflection process for clients, so simulating the process with staff and volunteers was often overlooked. There were a few exceptions when agency leaders shared feedback data with staff and volunteers during monthly meetings or weekly huddles. But the only indication to them that reflection had occurred was when they were tasked with implementing changes. By and large, volunteers were absent from the reflection process.

Staff and volunteers are the key to closing the loop with clients as well as making real changes to programs and services, but there are several challenges to involving them. Some agencies may have difficulty reaching volunteers due to turnover or varying schedules. In addition, agency staff and volunteers, like their leaders, may also have misconceptions about client feedback (e.g., “People should be happy with what they get”). As noted above, the greatest barrier stemmed from not involving volunteers in the client feedback process from the beginning so they could see the value of making changes rooted in client feedback and reflection.

Take-aways for Practitioners

- If implementing feedback loops in a network of organizations, provide backbone support throughout the process.
- Prepare site-specific summaries and visuals of data from the listen phase to support reflection with clients.

- Train facilitators in advance on how to facilitate reflection conversations, stay neutral, create space for clients to contribute, and keep the conversation on track.
- Choose public methods like town halls when there are high levels of trust and more private methods like interviews and focus groups when there is a higher need for confidentiality.
- Match methods to different types of clients. Non-English speakers may require an interpreter and more privacy. Informal, on-the-spot conversations are better for clients who can only make it to agencies during normal distribution hours or when agencies lack sufficient space to host more private conversations.
- Recruit clients both in advance and the day-of for reflection activities to ensure enough participation and a diversity of experiences.
- Consider providing incentives for client participation, such as $25 Visa gift cards or extra food bags, but monitor and test how much they really make a difference.
- Embrace positive feedback and anticipate receiving negative feedback. Resist the temptation to inflate, disavow, or react defensively toward negative feedback.
- Allocate sufficient time to process feedback and plan appropriate responses. Talking through these issues with peer organizations can be helpful.
- Take deliberate steps to ensure that staff and volunteers can reflect on client feedback data and offer suggestions for improvements, separately from clients.

Act

After reflecting with clients on feedback, the agencies next turned to action, putting changes in place and working to communicate these changes to clients. This section describes this process in the two pilots sites.

Designing the Act Phase

Food banks and their partner member agencies had complete flexibility to decide on the actions that they would take to address client feedback. Most used information from the reflect phase to make these decisions. However, they had to plan ahead of time to consider their approach to closing the loop with clients.

Experts in the field reinforced the many reasons why closing the loop is important.

Clients need to know the following:

- why you are asking them questions and how the information will be used before consenting to truly sharing their perspectives
- how decisions will be made and what their role in this process might be
- what was learned from client feedback and what the agencies are doing in response to feedback so they feel that their input is truly valued and respected
- the context and reasoning when particular changes they suggest cannot be made

Although the reasoning behind the importance of closing the loop surfaced clearly in the early literature review and interviews with experts, the best methods for closing the loop were more ambiguous. Many of the interviewees admitted that closing the loop is perhaps the most difficult part of the process, and often it is not explicitly included in feedback models. As a result, many organizations do this step informally and use the same methods they use to listen or reflect. As with the methods for listening to clients, experts recommend tailoring methods to the local population as much as possible.

Local partners tested a variety of methods for closing the loop.

Food banks and their member agency advisory groups considered different methods for communicating closing-the-loop activities with clients. As in the case of gathering information from clients, local partners explored the possibilities of using mail, voicemail, text, or email. Clients seemed most amenable to the mail option, but local partners pointed out that contact information for clients was not universally available and changed too frequently to be reliable. Moreover, the cost of mailings was deemed prohibitive.

Both clients and member agency partners preferred communication to clients at point-of-service. Charitable food programs routinely communicate with clients using flyers and postings. However, clients overwhelmingly preferred hearing from member agencies through one-on-one communication with staff and volunteers.

Akron and Alameda preferred to try a variety of methods and identify the best one over the course of the pilot.

Aligning Actions

As described in the reflect section, after working closely with the food banks and their member agency advisory boards, the agencies took action to respond to client feedback.

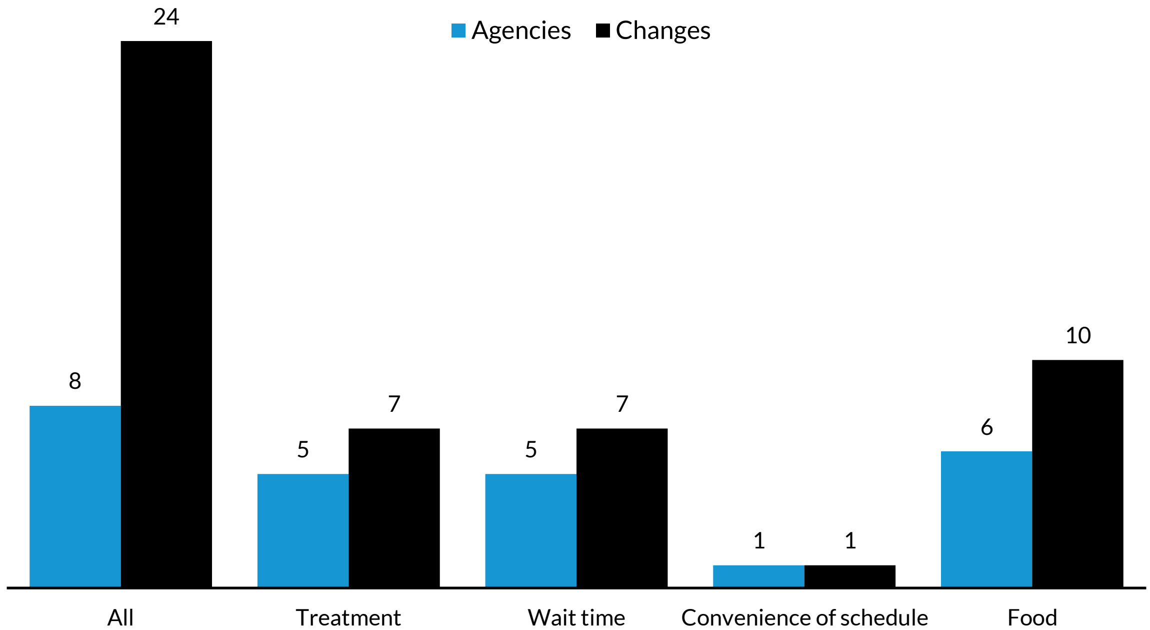
Akron and Alameda agencies took 50 actions to respond to client feedback.

Over the course of the pilot, all eight agencies in Akron took at least 1 action, and in total they implemented 24 (figure 19). A little more than half of these actions aligned with the priorities set by the member agency advisory board at the beginning of the pilot, but agencies also made 10 more food-related actions. These actions came about because of what leaders heard directly from clients in the reflect phase, which drove the introduction of related feedback questions in Cycle 3.

FIGURE 19

In Akron, Most Participating Agencies Made Changes in Priority Areas, but Food-Related Changes Were Most Popular

Number of agencies making changes in priority areas and the number of corresponding changes



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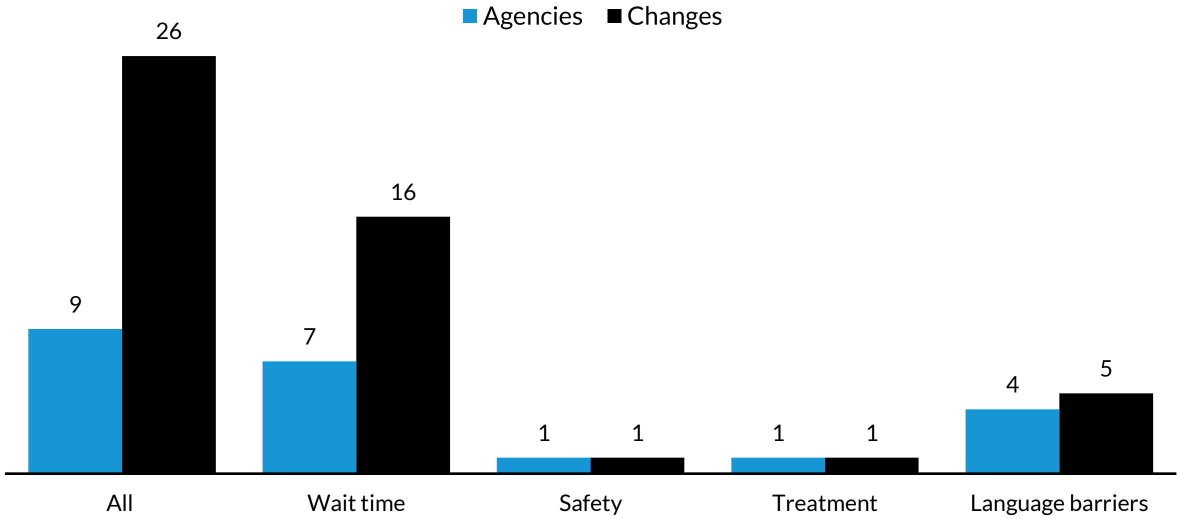
Source: Pathways web survey of participating agencies, January 2018, supplemented with food bank report when agencies did not respond (*n* = 8 participating agencies).

In Alameda, all but 1 of the original 10 agencies acted in response to client feedback, implementing 26 actions (figure 20). More than half of these actions had to do with improving wait time; another top priority was addressing language barriers between agencies and clients, a priority that was introduced in the second cycle. As in Akron, some agencies made food-related changes after hearing clients talk about food issues in reflection and realizing that at least some of these changes were possible.

FIGURE 20

In Alameda, Changes Related to Wait Times Were Most Popular

Number of agencies making changes in priority areas and the number of corresponding changes



Source: Pathways web survey of participating agencies, January 2018, supplemented with food bank report when agencies did not respond (n = 7 of nine participating agencies).

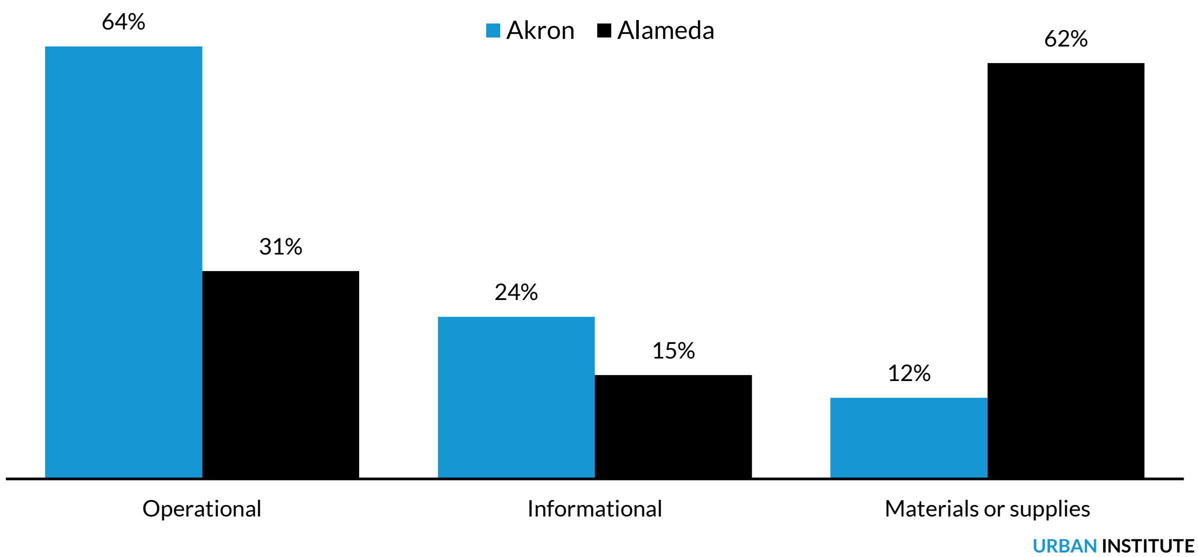
Alameda agencies were encouraged to make changes by purchasing equipment, while Akron agencies made operational changes.

Not only did Akron and Alameda differ in the type of feedback they were addressing, but the two food banks took very different approaches to their actions (figure 21). In Alameda, the food bank allocated up to $500 for each agency to support their changes. As a result, most of the actions taken involved purchasing equipment or materials. In Akron, where agencies did not systematically have access to financial resources, the kinds of actions taken usually were more operational; that is, agencies changed processes or volunteers. These trends showed up strongly in the web survey at the end of the pilot. Two-thirds of Akron agencies reported making operational changes, while nearly the same proportion purchased materials or supplies in Alameda. Agencies in both sites also implemented communication strategies to clarify topics that were unclear to clients.

FIGURE 21

Akron Agencies Favored Operational Changes, and Alameda Agencies Largely Purchased New Equipment

Share of changes of different types



Source: Pathways web survey of participating agencies, January 2018, supplemented with food bank reports when agencies did not respond (*n* = 8 Akron and *n* = 7 of nine Alameda participating agencies).

To improve client treatment, agencies made staffing changes, instituted open-door policies for clients, and trained their volunteers in structured and informal ways of managing client interactions.

Agencies took various actions to improve client treatment. Although food banks regularly train their volunteers, they realized that there was no uniform training for agency-level volunteers. As a result, the Akron food bank developed a webinar-style training for volunteers and staff that several agencies administered at their sites that covered topics including a deeper understanding of poverty, confidentiality and sensitivity, civil rights, food safety, compassion fatigue and resiliency, and conflict resolution. Agency leaders also started informally prepping the people interacting with clients through brief meetings before the beginning of distribution. To improve privacy for clients, one agency moved its waiting area chairs away from the check-in table, where clients give personal information. Another agency reported better publicizing its open-door policy for client feedback. Moreover, when circumstances were more extreme, agencies removed volunteers or reassigned them to work that would not involve direct contact with clients.

To address wait times, agencies aimed to make the wait process more transparent, make the wait feel more comfortable to clients, or decrease the wait.

For wait time, agencies took several kinds of actions. The first kind aimed to decrease the wait by adding express lanes; reengineering the registration process by using laptops or retraining volunteers; or buying more carts, tables, or other equipment to help volunteers move product more efficiently. A second kind of action was making the wait feel more fair and transparent to clients. Agencies that took this approach instituted new number systems to help clients hold their place in line or added crowd-control ropes to organize the lines. Lastly, many agencies focused on making the wait more comfortable for clients. These actions included shielding them from weather with awnings or canopies or additional rooms within the agency; providing benches or chairs for people while they were waiting; and providing games, books, and crayons for families with children. Some agencies actively worked to enhance a sense of community by providing a bulletin board for clients to use and repositioning seating in the waiting area to encourage interaction between clients as they waited.

Agencies translated posters and documents, hired multilingual staff or volunteers, or called attention to multilingual staff on site to address language barriers.

To bridge language barriers, most of the agencies focused on translating posters and other documentation into the primary languages of their clients. One agency also posted a sign out front to let people know that although frontline staff did not speak their language, other staff and volunteers were available to help. Only one agency was able to add a volunteer with additional language capacity, although other agencies and the food banks continue to look for multilingual volunteers.

Though not an original feedback priority, agencies made many food-related changes focused on providing clients with more choice in the food they receive.

Most food-related actions improved clients' food choices. One Akron pantry shifted from a traditional, preboxed model to a choice pantry model in which clients choose items from different food groups that best meet their needs. Other pantries offered more choice items and/or more requested items, which included diabetic and gluten-free products. Similarly, meal sites changed their menus, offering new items and/or some choice within a set menu. Rather than making food-related changes, some agencies

in both sites decided to more clearly explain their programs' limitations. For example, one agency explained that they could not distribute all of the meat in their freezers because it had to last for several weeks. Other agencies explained why particular items were not available, or the distinction between "best by" dates and expiration dates.

Very few agencies made changes around other feedback priorities. One agency in Akron changed the day of its monthly distribution. And an Alameda agency that offered a mobile pantry distribution where clients drive up in cars purchased safety cones and signs indicating pedestrians in their parking lot to improve client safety.

Closing the Loop

During the design phase, the two communities opted to not identify specific methods for closing the loop with their clients. As a result, both began closing the loop by using their usual means of communicating with clients, such as passing out flyers and posting information on site, as well as informal communication with clients.

The two food banks played similar roles in their communities' efforts. The food bank staff and volunteers who administered client feedback in the listen phase were often the point people for closing the loop. Communication by food bank staff was particularly the case in the early cycles in Akron, and in Alameda agencies food bank representatives were the only people with the language capacity needed to communicate with clients. The food banks also played a critical role in developing communication materials for the agencies, ranging from posters, flyers, and talking points to a video that ran on a loop on televisions in the background in Akron agencies starting in Cycle 2.

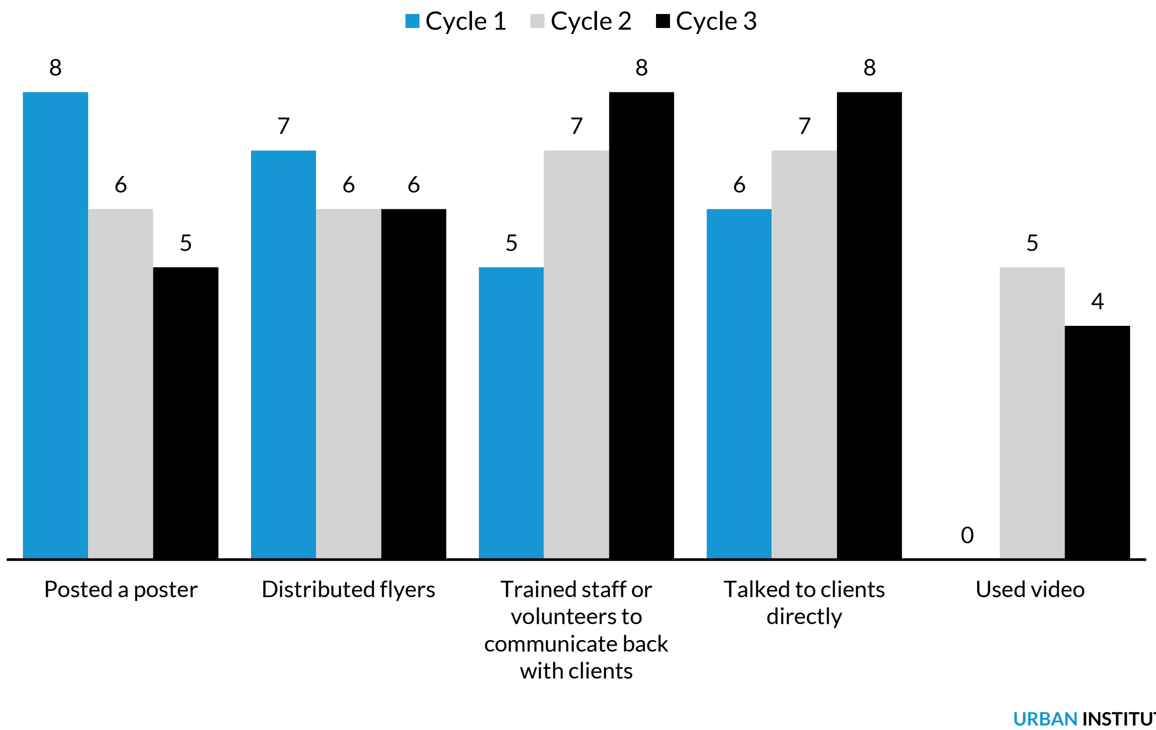
Akron agencies increased their ability to close the loop by engaging more directly with clients.

In Akron, agencies shifted their methods over time, moving away from passive methods that required clients to notice and consume information to more active methods that relied on developing the relationship between staff, volunteers, and clients (figure 22). Training staff and volunteers more deliberately was key to this transition. By the end of the pilot, all eight agencies reported implementing some sort of training to help their frontline workers close the loop and let program participants learn what feedback the agencies heard and what actions they were taking as a result.

FIGURE 22

Akron Agencies Transitioned from Indirect to Direct Ways of Closing the Loop

Number of participating agencies reporting different actions



Source: Pathways web survey of participating agencies, January 2018 (*n* = 8 participating agencies).

Along the way, feedback from clients and volunteers helped Akron continue to evolve their methods of communicating with clients. First, agency leads learned through the reflection process that either many clients had not received written materials or they did not notice or read them. Part of this lack of client engagement had to do with the design of the materials. Posters and flyers in early stages were relatively text-heavy. The food bank worked diligently with agencies to make these materials much simpler and more visually appealing.

Second, the food bank and agencies were especially enthusiastic about testing video as a method for closing the loop, particularly as it gave clients something to watch while waiting. The food bank provided all of the agencies with televisions as part of the pilot. However, Akron partners learned that this approach had difficulties. Tailoring videos to individual agencies was labor intensive, and volunteers and staff complained about the constantly repeating audio, which they said distracted them from their work. From the reflection sessions, it was also clear that clients did not always understand what the agencies were trying to communicate to them. About half of the agencies continued to use this method

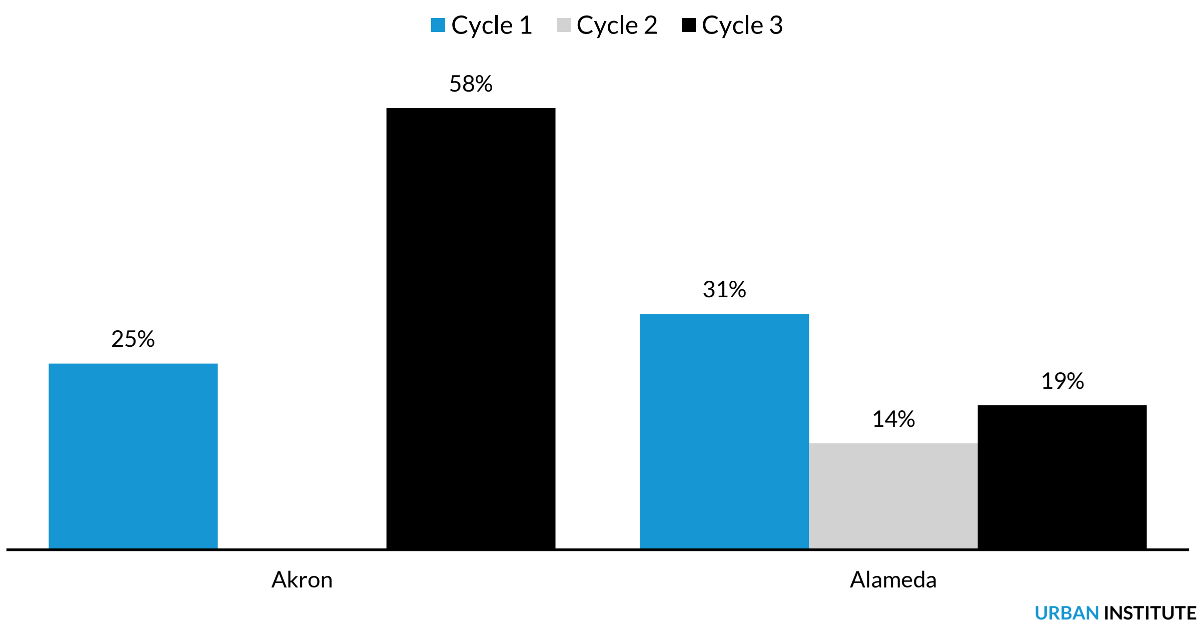
through Cycle 3, but many turned off the audio altogether and/or moved toward more simple images and messaging, much like what the food bank did to adapt the written materials.

Lastly, in reflection sessions, agency leaders heard first hand from clients the same thing that clients had shared during the design phase: they preferred one-on-one communication to other methods. The biggest challenge was involving frontline staff and volunteers in this process, who had largely been uninvolved in other parts of the feedback loop. The Akron food bank and its partners continued to work toward resolving this issue as the pilot wound down. As a result, Akron saw a measurable increase in its partners' ability to close the loop with clients (figure 23). In the first cycle, only about 23 percent of clients knew that the food bank and its partners were trying to solicit their feedback. However, by Cycle 3, about three of every five clients reported understanding how their feedback was being used.

FIGURE 23

Akron Agencies Significantly Improved Their Ability to Close the Loop during the Pilot

Share of clients reporting they were aware the food bank wanted to hear feedback from them



Source: Pathways client survey of participating agencies, January 2018.
Note: Data were unavailable for Akron during Cycle 2.

Underlying data also highlight how Akron agencies built communication with their clients. In Cycle 1, more than a third of the clients who knew about the feedback pilot found out about it through flyers or other written materials; about 60 percent from food bank or agency staff or volunteers; and about 8

percent from clients. By Cycle 3, personal connections accounted for 89 percent of successful communication, through other clients as well as volunteers and staff.

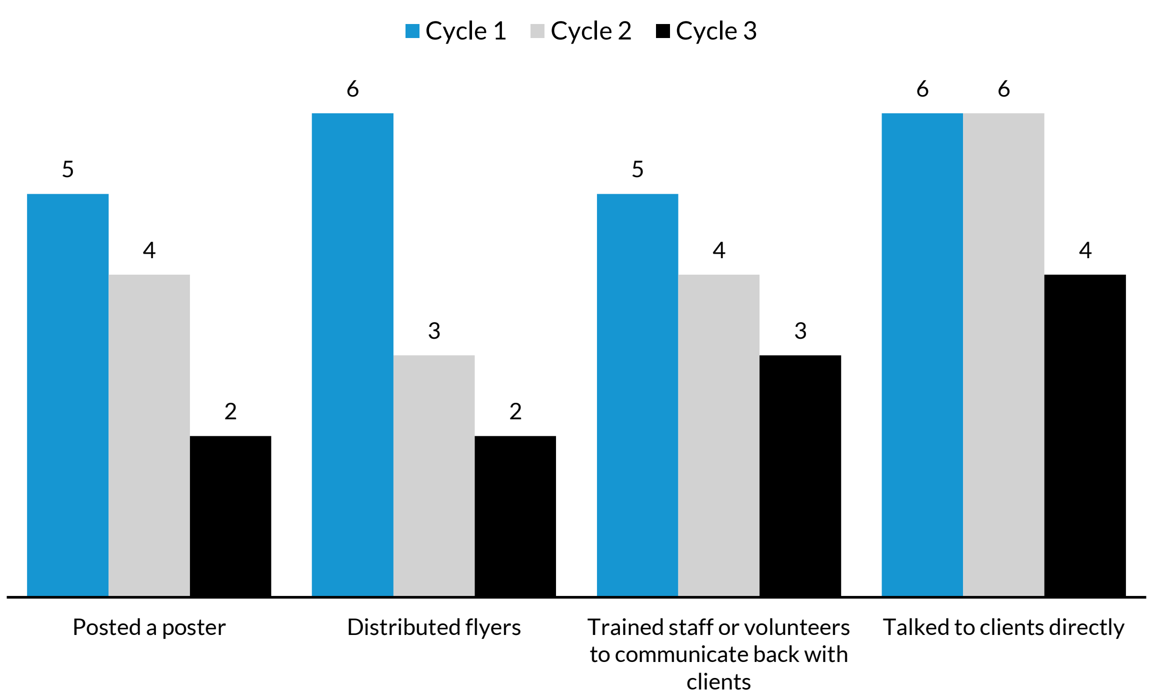
In Alameda, language barriers at the agencies made closing the loop more difficult.

Like Akron agencies, Alameda agencies generally started with a focus on flyers and talking informally to clients (figure 24). Throughout the pilot, the Alameda food bank and partner agencies heard many of the same themes that arose in Akron, among them, a strong preference for one-on-one communication. Client data from Cycle 1 bore this out. About 70 percent of the people who reported knowing that their agency wanted to hear their feedback heard about it directly from another person. Less than one in five read about it in any written materials. The food bank also identified a need for simpler, more visual communication aids, as well as materials translated into relevant languages.

FIGURE 24

Alameda Agencies Used All Methods of Closing the Loop Less over Time, but They Preferred Talking to Clients Directly

Number of participating agencies reporting different actions



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Source: Pathways web survey of participating agencies, January 2018 (*n* = 7 of nine participating agencies).

Over time, the mix of activities for closing the loop in Alameda was similar, but fewer agencies were actively involved. In some ways, this outcome may have been because of the strong role that the food bank's multilingual team played in the last two cycles. Many of the team's members were able to use their language capacity to interact with clients more effectively than agency staff or volunteers.

In general, because of language barriers and the increasing share of non-English-speaking clients who participated in the feedback loop pilot, Alameda agencies faced a particularly difficult challenge in closing the loop. In Cycle 1, a little less than a third of the clients reported that they knew that the food bank and their agency wanted to hear their feedback. Over the next two cycles, the share of clients reporting that the agency had closed the loop with them fell to 15 percent before rebounding to 22 percent.

Both food banks saw the need to dedicate more time and resources to closing the loop.

During a final convening of food banks and the research team, the food banks reflected on the difficulty of closing the loop. Both food banks believed strongly that they and their partners did not have sufficient time to be thoughtful about that part of the feedback process, and they suggested dedicating a separate phase to closing the loop with clients. This change would require actions to close the loop with agency volunteers as well, who are often in the best position to close the loop with clients.

Moreover, questions asking clients about whether the agency or food bank had communicated how feedback was used were too often abstract (see "Crafting Questions"). The food banks had difficulty coming up with a clear question, and clients had a hard time understanding and answering it. These difficulties were exacerbated in Alameda because these already difficult questions had to be translated into multiple languages. As a result, even if agencies had planned and executed the ideal closing-the-loop strategy, it is hard to say whether clients would have interpreted these questions as intended and provided actionable data on closing the loop.

Take-aways for Practitioners

- Think carefully about how available funding to support actions shapes organizational choices. When actions are tied to purchases, organizations may be more inclined to make material, rather than operational, changes.
- Don't rely on passive methods like posters, flyers, or even video to close the loop with clients.
- Don't forget to close the loop with staff and volunteers, and train them to close the loop through face-to-face interaction with clients. This method is, by far, the most effective way to close the loop.
- In settings with significant language barriers, a prior first step may be building organizational language capacity among staff and volunteers.
- Set aside sufficient time and resources to closing the loop with clients. It takes longer than one might expect.

Measuring the Impact of the Pilot

The purpose of integrating client feedback into existing programs is twofold. The intermediate goal is to transform how organizations relate to clients and other organizations, their openness to listening to clients, and the steps they take to sustainably integrate client feedback into their culture and operations. These changes can ultimately drive the achievement of the larger goal: to continuously improve clients' experiences with the services they receive through community building.

This section discusses what we learned about how the participating organizations evolved and the changes that were observed in client feedback over the course of the pilot.

Changes to Organizational Culture

In many ways, the Pathways pilot was as much about changing organizational culture at the food banks and their member agencies as it was about changing clients' perceptions of their experiences with charitable food assistance programs. To make any long-term meaningful change, cultural change must happen first to support a new way of engaging with clients and making data-driven decisions. In a postpilot survey, participating member agencies reflected on three important types of organizational culture change: in relationships, in comfort with client feedback, and in continuing to apply lessons learned from the pilot to their own practice. In addition, both food banks had the chance to reflect on these topics at the pilot's final cross-site convening in November 2017.

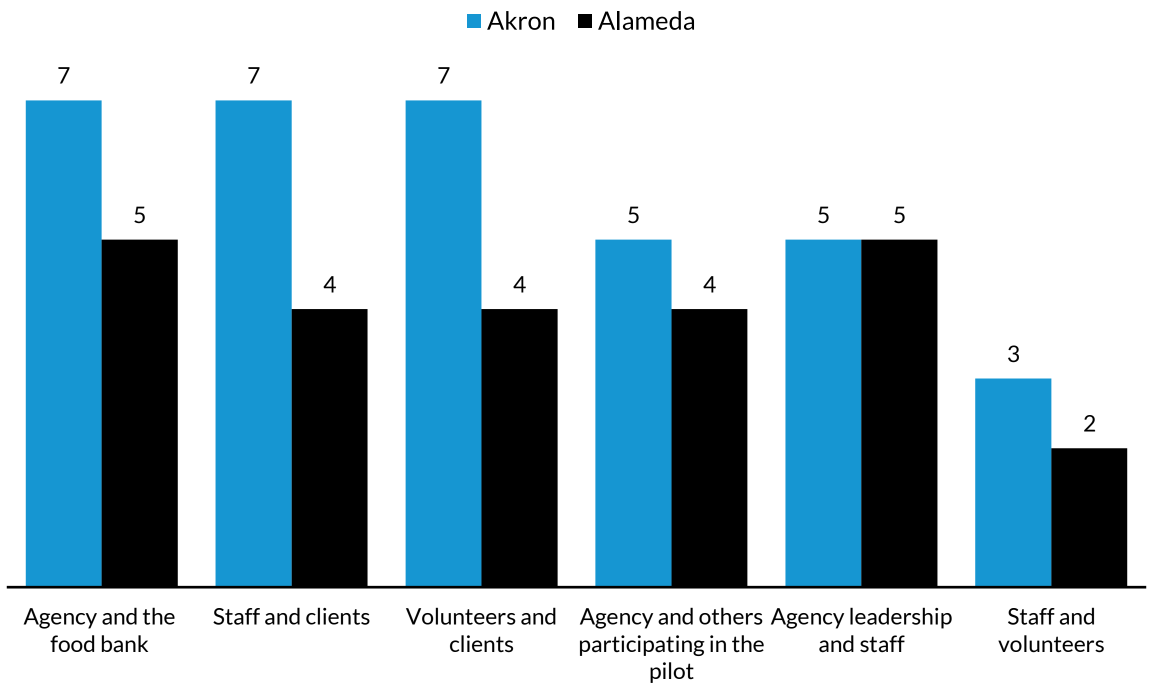
Pathways strengthened most agencies' relationships with the food bank.

The pilot strengthened many agencies' relationships with a wide array of stakeholders, particularly in Akron (figure 25). Akron agencies noted that their relationships with the food bank were much stronger, as well as the relationships between staff, volunteers, and clients. In Alameda, the most salient relationship gains occurred between agencies and the food bank as well as between agency leadership and their staff. In contrast, the relationship between agency staff and agency volunteers in both sites largely remained unchanged or was strained by the pilot.

FIGURE 25

The Pilot Strengthened Many Agency Relationships

Number of participating agencies reporting "stronger" or "much stronger" relationships



Source: Pathways web survey of participating agencies, January 2018 (*n* = 15 agencies: 8 Akron and 7 of 9 Alameda participating agencies).

Note: There were similar patterns in level of strength across the two sites.

At the final convening of the pilot, the food banks both noted changes in how they related to the member agencies. One food bank leader commented that the pilot made these relationships feel much more three-dimensional. The pilot was often the only time that food banks visited the agencies outside of compliance-related site visits. These additional visits helped the food bank get to know the agencies in different ways, as well as build language and common ground with them.

Challenges in strengthening the relationship between agency staff and agency volunteers were in some ways anticipated. Staff and volunteers were not integrally involved in the implementation of the pilot because of the relatively strong roles of the food bank and member agency leadership.

In a qualitative sense, agencies provided feedback throughout the pilot that they enjoyed the opportunity to get to know other agencies. Many found the pilot provided a collaboration opportunity they are rarely afforded. In addition, agencies felt reassured knowing that others shared their challenges with building feedback loops, even when agencies differed drastically in size, clientele, or

location (rural versus urban). However, in the final survey, not all member agencies reported that their relationships with their peer organizations were stronger than at the beginning of the pilot.

By the end of the pilot, most agencies in Akron reported increased comfort receiving and responding to client feedback.

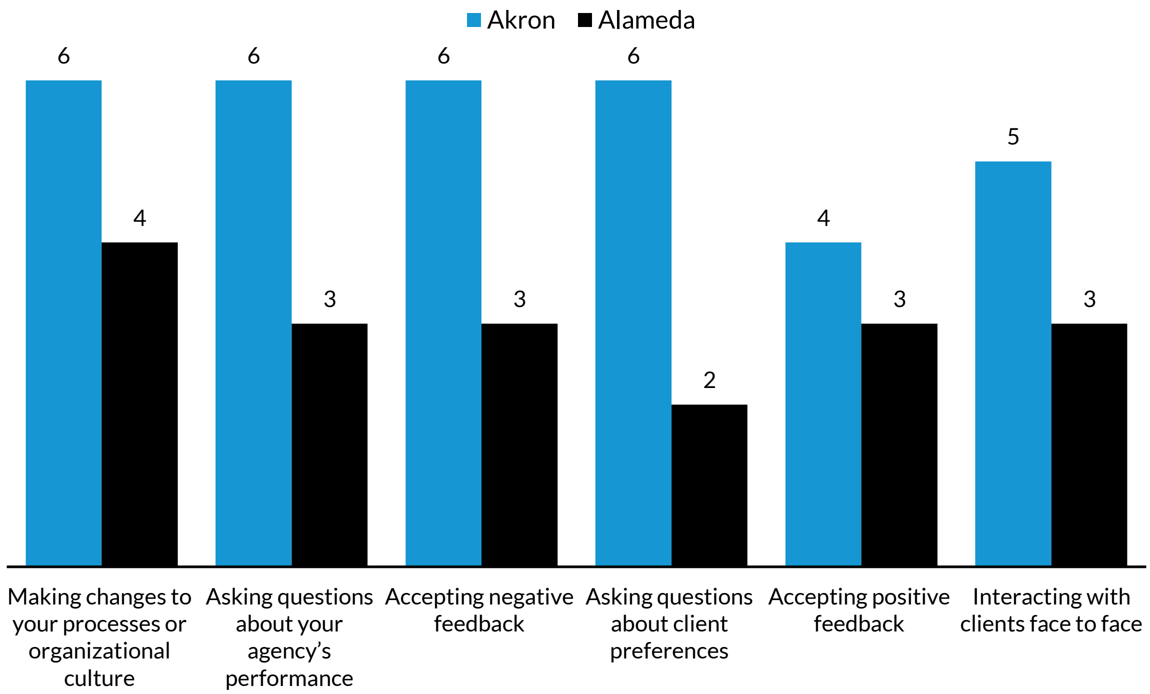
One of the goals of the pilot was to build agencies' comfort with receiving feedback from clients. Receiving constructive feedback and being open to making changes can be difficult. In Akron, six of the eight agencies reported being increasingly comfortable with asking questions about their performance and client preferences, accepting negative feedback, and making changes to their processes or organizational culture (figure 26).

This increased comfort with feedback was reflected in on-going conversations at member agency meetings. For example, many agencies that had been reluctant to ask about food quality or quantity at the beginning of the pilot began to express enthusiasm for discussing this concern. However, they found it more difficult to actually address client concerns about food. After Cycle 3, all agencies in Akron had been trained to facilitate reflection and lead focus groups, and six had actually led focus groups with minimal food bank support. Though they found it challenging, Akron agencies gradually practiced the art of listening and responding to feedback in a positive way. We also heard that agency leaders had begun to listen to client feedback informally on their own. One agency manager related how he had started sitting in the client waiting room to listen, and that eventually clients recognized him and sometimes spontaneously shared their thoughts.

FIGURE 26

Most Akron Agencies Reported Greater Comfort Engaging in Feedback, but Alameda Results Were Mixed

Number of participating agencies reporting they were "a little" or "a lot" more comfortable with different actions



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Source: Pathways web survey of participating agencies, January 2018 (*n* = 15 agencies: 8 Akron and 7 of 9 Alameda participating agencies).

In Alameda, only a few agencies thought they improved their ability to receive and respond to client feedback.

In Alameda, the results on responding to client feedback were more mixed. Of the eight agencies that responded to the postpilot survey, half reported that they were more comfortable making changes to their processes or organizational culture. In addition, two to three agencies noted improvement in each of the other domains about their comfort with feedback. There was a notable gap in the level of enthusiasm in Alameda. For most of the questions, agencies responded "a little" more comfortable, while in Akron, almost across the board, they chose "a lot" more comfortable.

In part, these differences may reflect differing levels of experiences at the beginning of the pilot. At the outset, many Alameda agencies believed they already engaged with clients a significant amount. In

addition, Alameda agencies themselves played a much less active role in the implementation of the pilot than in Akron because of the large role of food bank staff and volunteers in providing language capacity and cultural competency. Though agencies led reflection conversations in Cycle 1, the food bank recruited for and led reflection in Cycles 2 and 3 with minimal agency support.

Most agencies in both sites want to continue using feedback loops, but Akron agencies are more likely to change their organizational culture.

In addition to strengthening relationships and increasing agencies' comfort with client feedback, ultimately the pilot aimed to have participating food banks and agencies internalize and sustain, in whole or in part, the feedback process.

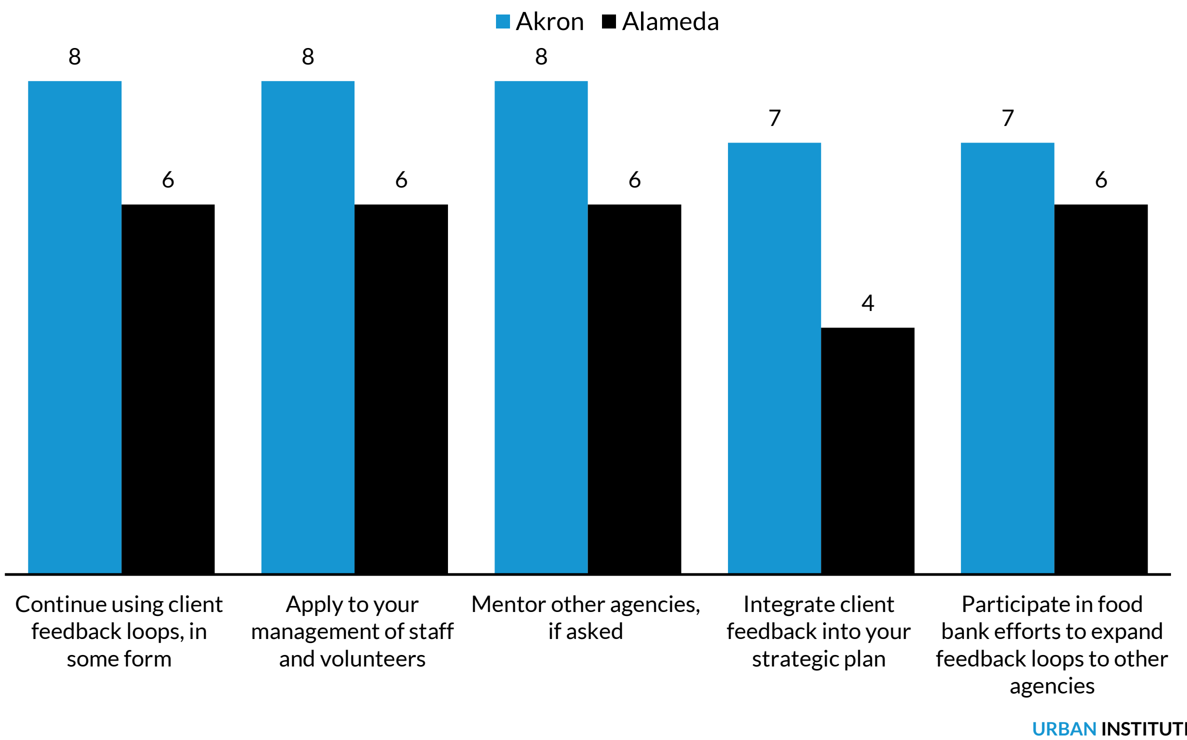
Most agencies in both sites reported they were likely to continue using feedback loops in some form, apply lessons learned to their management of staff and volunteers, and mentor other agencies in their local food bank networks who want to do this work (figure 27). However, underlying trends show an enthusiasm gap in Alameda, similar to the one noted in the section above on comfort with client feedback. Agencies in Akron generally indicated that they were "very likely" to do key things to change their own culture. In Alameda, agencies that responded positively tended to say they were "somewhat likely" to make such changes.

Differences in these feelings toward internalizing the lessons learned from client feedback may stem from the types of actions and participation that agencies had in the two sites. In Akron, most of the actions taken required agencies to make operational changes to their culture through training, staffing and volunteer decisions, and redesigning the systems that they used to distribute food. In Alameda, where most of actions related to purchasing additional equipment, agencies may not have had the same opportunity to reflect on how putting in place client feedback loops might drive changes in organizational culture.

FIGURE 27

Most Agencies Reported They Were Likely to Sustain Client Feedback Loops

Number of participating agencies reporting they were "somewhat likely" or "very likely" to continue various actions



Source: Pathways web survey of participating agencies, January 2018 (*n* = 15 agencies: 8 Akron and 7 of 9 Alameda participating agencies).

Food banks in both sites hope to launch the next generation of feedback loops in their communities.

Both food banks plan to continue their work on client feedback loops in different ways. Both sites are also considering integrating client feedback loops into their agency tiering models to incentivize agencies to establish client feedback loops to be tiered higher. They have also considered enlisting the pilot member agencies to act as mentors to the next group.

The Akron team hopes to identify a smaller cohort of agencies in a tighter geographic area to simulate feedback loops that are lower intensity to both agencies and the food bank. For agencies that may not be ready to establish feedback loops, the food bank also plans to develop a standardized menu of feedback questions accessible to their full agency network. They are currently developing a series of

foundational presentations to introduce new agencies to feedback loops and will offer smaller agency roundtable training sessions to help agencies that are collecting client feedback brainstorm solutions.

Akron also is applying the listen, reflect, and act feedback model to managing both its own staff and its relationships with member agencies. This use of the model would enhance the functionality of the employee and member agency surveys by stimulating reflection to interpret data and brainstorm solutions, making changes, and explicitly closing the loop with stakeholders.

In Alameda, the food bank is reorienting programming organization-wide to be client centered, and client feedback loops will be integral to a special project that more advanced agencies will engage in. The food bank is also considering how to better integrate its research and special project functions with its agency services functions; the hope is to help move the relationship between the food bank and agencies beyond compliance and toward continuous improvement through client feedback loops. In addition, Pathways 2.0 will feature a new cohort of agencies that will establish lower-intensity feedback loops.

Changes in Client Feedback

All of the participating agencies strove to make clients' experiences with their programs more positive by acting to address local priorities. By measuring how client responses to feedback questions shifted over time, we can roughly assess how much progress agencies were able to make over the course of the pilot.

All of the feedback questions ranked more positive and more negative answers by using four or five categories. To explore variation more easily across agencies over time, we assigned values to each of the category options (1 for the most negative responses to 4 or 5 for the most positive responses) and averaged these numbers for each agency to obtain an average rating for each measure at each point in time. We also applied a multiplier when appropriate to make sure that ratings of the same construct had the same possible range of values when a different number of categories were used during different cycles and to compare the overall distributions across measures of different priorities.[9] We used these standardized ratings to compare, when possible, changes in client feedback over time for all agencies, as well as for those agencies that took action on specific priorities.

Measuring and interpreting change in client feedback over time is challenging.

Before examining trends in client feedback, it is important to note the many limitations of this analysis.

- First, the clients offering feedback changed from cycle to cycle because of intermittent patterns of charitable food assistance use, and, in Alameda, because of changes in the participating agencies and outreach techniques.
- Second, many of the questions changed substantially.
- Third, agencies had a very short window to implement actions before the food bank teams gathered another round of feedback. As a result, many of the actions were still a work in progress and may not have been observable to clients or reflected in subsequent feedback data.
- Fourth, using agency-level data facilitates easy comparison, but it may mask underlying trends.
- And fifth, global trends in how clients respond to the feedback process may color responses in ways that are hard to fully understand. For example, with greater trust, clients may feel more comfortable sharing negative feedback, but they may also be more likely to rate agencies higher because they feel more listened to.

Another important consideration is that many of the changes may not have been visible or observable by clients. In Alameda, where the food bank tested a question about whether clients had noticed changes, only about 30 percent of the people who participated said that they had in Cycle 2, and about 40 percent in Cycle 3. Moreover, even the food banks' perceptions did not necessarily align with the changes reported by individual agencies in their postpilot survey.

With those points in mind, the following section provides a snapshot of trends in each of the two communities and serves as a starting point for discussion.

In Akron, all participating agencies saw improvement in client feedback in at least one of the priority areas.

Akron started out with three priorities: client treatment, wait times, and the convenience of agencies' scheduled distributions. At least one agency chose to make changes in each of these three domains (see "Aligning Actions" section of the "Act" chapter above). Client treatment questions were asked over all three cycles, facilitating some analysis of how agency changes between Cycles 1 and 2 and Cycles 2 and 3 might have affected client feedback. However, questions on the other two priorities were only asked

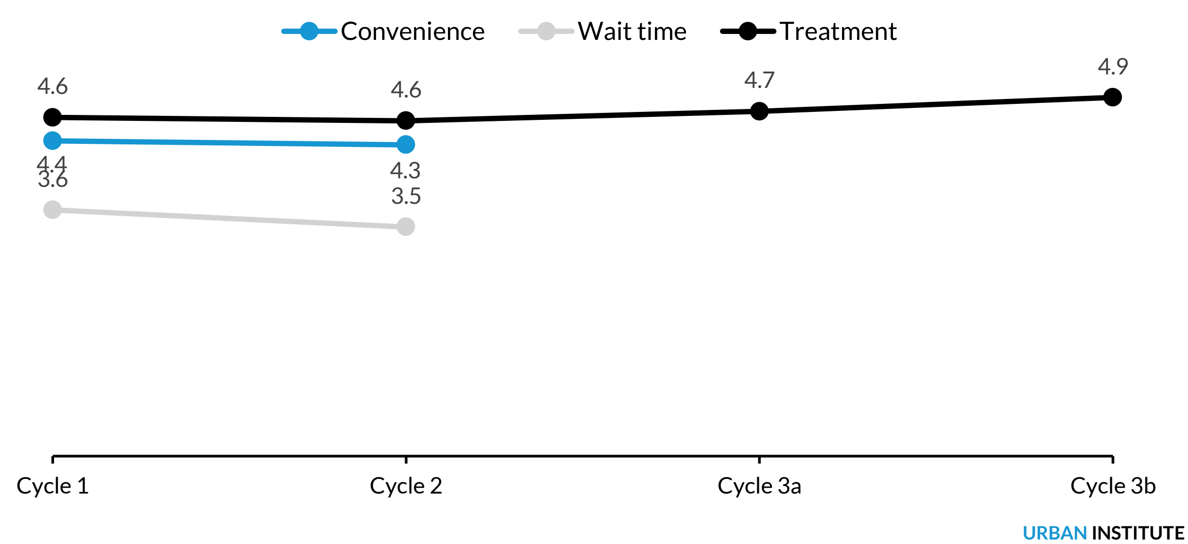
in Cycles 1 and 2, limiting analysis of related agency changes to those actions that took place between the first two cycles. Akron agencies also implemented changes that had to do with food quantity and preferences, but related questions were only fielded in Cycle 3, making it impossible to assess the potential impact of these changes.

Average client ratings of agencies were high, particularly for client treatment and the convenience of the distribution schedule (figure 28). Akron agencies averaged 4.6 for client treatment and 4.4 on convenience in the first cycle, on a scale of 1 to 5. These ratings did not change substantially over time. The average for convenience declined by only a tenth of a point in Cycle 2. Despite constant adjustments to the language of the client treatment questions, associated ratings remained static in Cycle 2 and increased by only one-tenth or three-tenths of a point, depending on which measure of client treatment was used. In contrast, average client ratings of wait time at participating agencies came in somewhat lower, starting off at 3.6 on a scale of 1 to 5. Like the other measures, these ratings did not change much over time.

FIGURE 28

Average Client Ratings for Akron Priorities Were High, Particularly for Client Treatment and Convenience of the Distribution Schedule

Mean client ratings by cycle



Source: Agency-level client feedback data, 2016-17.

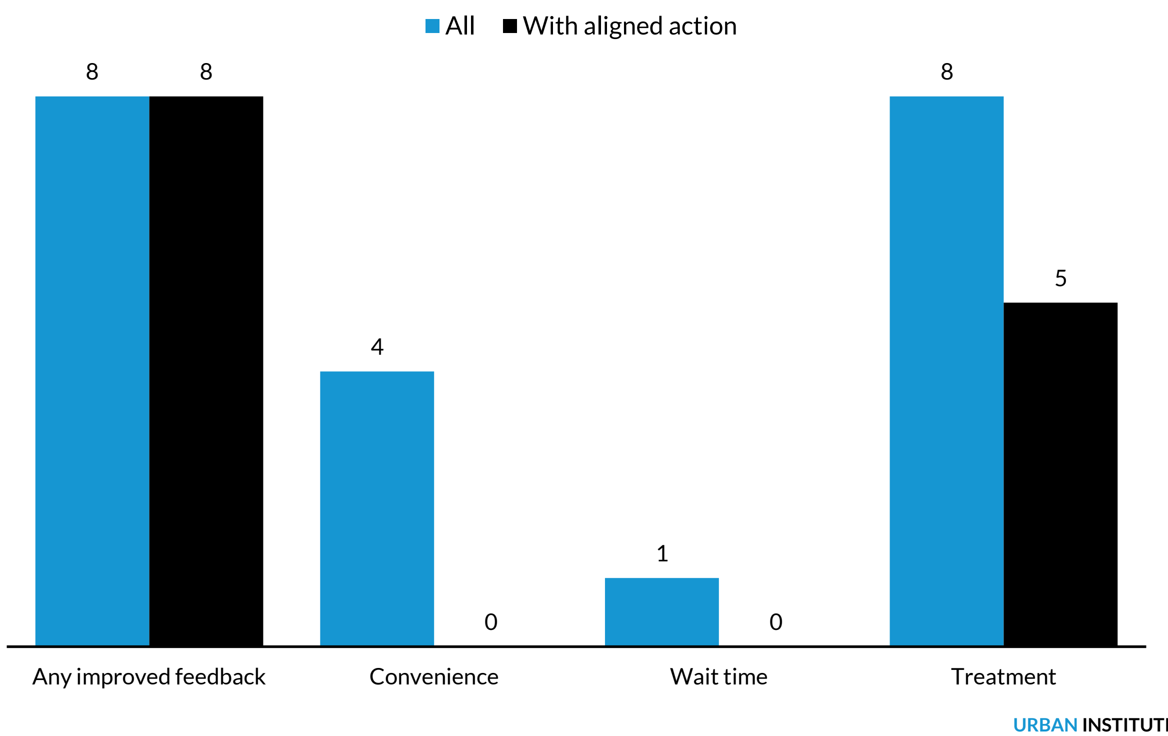
Note: Two separate questions were asked about client treatment in Cycle 3. For this reason, there are two points plotted with the labels "Cycle 3A" and "Cycle 3B."

All of the participating agencies in Akron saw improvement in client feedback in at least one of the priority areas from at least one cycle to another (figure 29). Despite their initially high ratings on client treatment, all eight agencies saw increases on these measures between at least two cycles, regardless of whether they had specifically taken action to improve clients' perceptions. Notably, these changes were visible regardless of which of the two measures of client treatment were used in the last cycle. The universality of these improvements may indicate that the act of participating in the pilots helped all agencies build good will with clients, although we note that five of the eight had taken aligned actions that may have reinforced this general trend.

FIGURE 29

Most Akron Agencies Saw Improvement in Ratings of Client Treatment, Which May Have Resulted from Aligned Actions

Number of agencies reporting improved client feedback over any two cycles, by priority and aligned action



Source: Agency-level client feedback data, 2016–17, and Pathways agency report of actions from the web survey of participating agencies, January 2018 (*n* = 9).

In contrast, four agencies saw increases in client ratings of the convenience of the distributions schedule, and one agency's wait time rating improved. However, none of these improvements happened in the context of actions by the agencies themselves. Because neither of these questions changed over

time, any changes in the ratings most likely reflect inherent issues of the reliability of the measures or mode of administration or differences in the people providing feedback from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2.

In Alameda, 9 of the 10 participating agencies saw some improvement in at least one client feedback priority.

Alameda member agencies focused on three priority areas in Cycle 1: wait time, client treatment, and safety. In Cycle 2, they added two other priorities: an overall assessment and one to address the language barriers between clients and staff and volunteers. In Cycle 3, the agencies dropped safety, retained the overall rating and language barriers, and allowed agencies to choose whether they would include wait time or client treatment in their questionnaires. Some agencies also opted to include other questions on other topics.

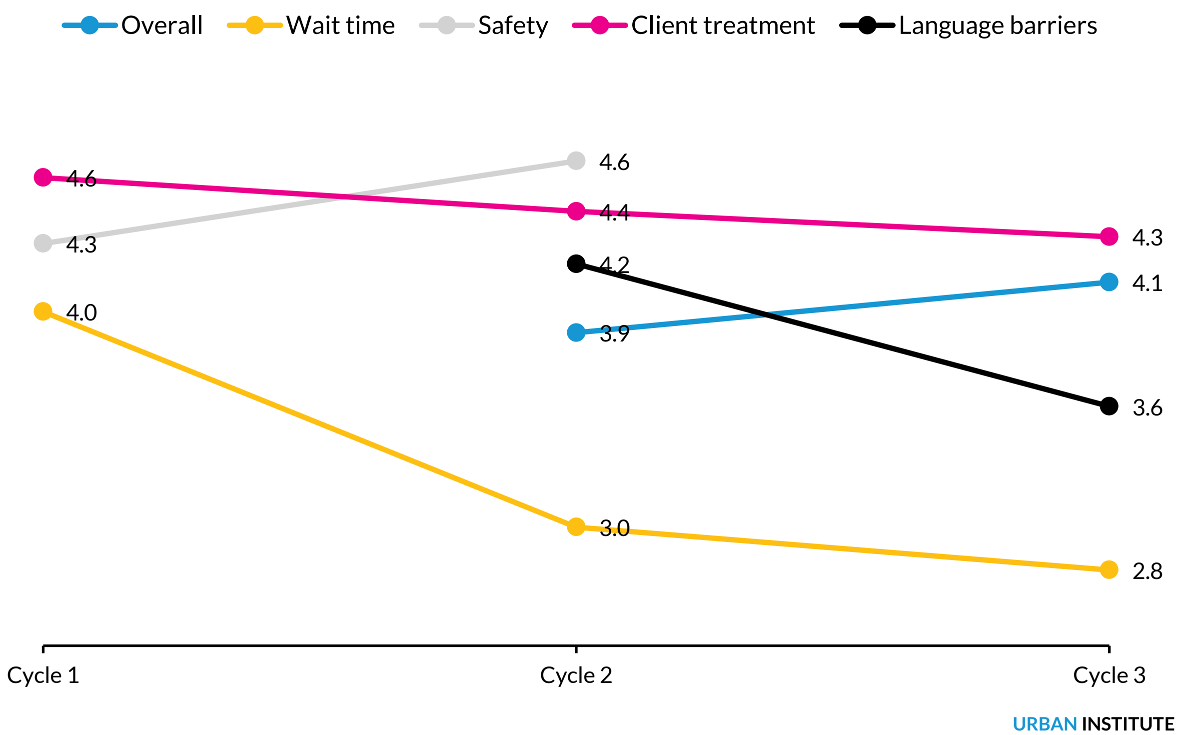
Although at least one agency took action on each of the priorities, pre- and postanalysis are limited by the timing of the questions. Differences in client ratings for wait time and client treatment can be assessed from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2, as well as from Cycle 2 to Cycle 3. However, differences in safety ratings are limited to the first window, and overall and language barrier ratings to the second.

Client ratings of agencies were generally very high, particularly for client treatment and safety, which registered means of 4.6 and 4.5, respectively, on a scale from 1 to 5 in Cycle 1, and never went below 4.3 (figure 30). Clients generally gave wait times the lowest ratings in Cycle 1. The ratings dropped significantly between Cycles 1 and 2 when the agencies adopted the same question that Akron used to assess wait time. Most other changes in average agency ratings were relatively small in size, amounting to tenths of a point.

FIGURE 30

Average Client Ratings of Priority Areas in Alameda Were High, Particularly for Safety and Client Treatment

Mean client ratings by cycle



Source: Agency-level client feedback data, 2016-17.

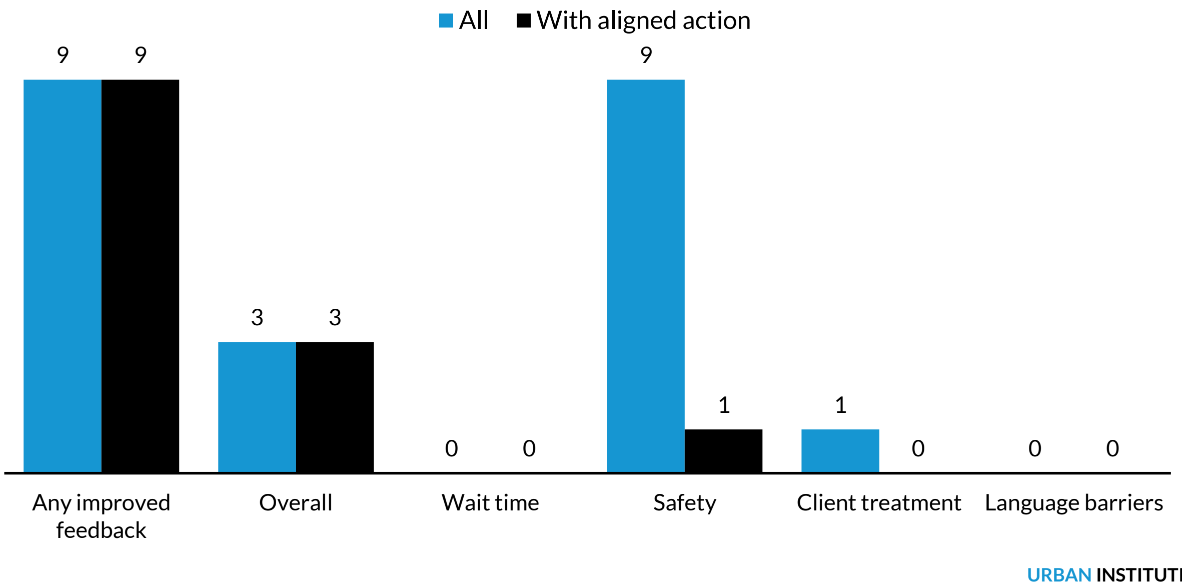
Nine of the 10 participating agencies saw some cycle-to-cycle improvement in at least one client feedback priority over the course of the pilot (figure 31). These were the same 9 agencies that took at least one action to respond to client feedback. However, only 3 of these agencies saw improvements in the overall ratings that began in the second cycle. As a follow-up, we tested to see if positive changes in overall ratings were related to the number of actions taken by the agencies, but we found no compelling relationship between these two factors.

Improvements in client ratings of safety were the most common among Alameda's priorities, with nine agencies illustrating this pattern. However, these improvements had little or no relationship with actions taken by the agencies, only one of which took any action specifically to address issues of safety.

FIGURE 31

Most Alameda Agencies Saw Some Improvement in Clients' Ratings of Safety, though They Were Largely Unrelated to Agency Action

Number of agencies reporting improved client feedback over any two cycles, by priority and aligned action



Source: Agency-level client feedback data, 2016–17, and Pathways agency report of actions from the web survey of participating agencies, January 2018 (*n* = 9 of 10 participating agencies).

One of the most interesting trends in Alameda was the absence of positive change in clients' ratings of wait time and language barriers, which were popular priorities for action among member agencies. Seven of the 10 agencies took 16 different actions to address wait time, and 4 agencies took 5 actions to address language barriers, but none of the agencies saw any positive results cycle to cycle.

Part of the disconnect may have to do with the changing demography of the clients who provided feedback in Alameda. The share of clients who spoke a language other than English increased over time. Moreover, the food bank's team became more and more adept at communicating with them. As a result, it would be natural to see the share of clients reporting difficulty communicating with staff and volunteers increase. In a similar way, the share of elderly clients increased over time; they may have been more likely to perceive the wait time to be longer.

Another key challenge had to do with how closely the questions themselves were aligned with the actions taken by agencies. For example, the question about wait time asked specifically about the length of time clients waited, but the majority of actions had to do with making the wait more comfortable rather than actually shortening the wait time itself. In a similar vein, the question on language barriers

asked clients how well they could communicate orally with staff and volunteers, but actions mostly centered on developing signage and translating written materials.

Lastly, it may be that the timing of the change in the wait time question masked the impact of actions taken by the agencies. Most of the agencies that took action on wait time did so precisely at the time that the question to measure client feedback on this priority was transitioning between the first and second cycle. Ratings across the board for all agencies dropped significantly with the introduction of the newer version. It is possible that improvements might have been easier to identify had this question been held constant over time.

Take-aways for Practitioners

- Expect to see shifts in organizational culture come first as a result of implementing feedback loops. Many of the biggest changes have to do with building relationships and developing greater comfort listening to and engaging with clients.
- Try to make sure organizations take part in multiple aspects of the feedback process, particularly reflection, action, and closing the loop. Those organizations with broad participation tend to be more invested and more likely to make strides in changing their culture.
- Measuring change in client experiences is difficult when organizations engage in an iterative and evolving feedback process. Organizations will need reflection to sort out what changes they mean and to situate them within the context of action, changing participation, and changes to the design of questions.

The Future of Feedback Loops

The Pathways for Community Voices pilot provided a unique opportunity not only to discretely test different methods for gathering client feedback and closing the loop, but also to reflect on what is required to move toward a sustainable feedback model that results in better experiences and outcomes for our friends and neighbors receiving assistance from social services agencies.

The take-aways that close each section provide tactical insights into the mechanics of feedback loops. This section describes lessons learned about the process itself and the kind of approach needed to make the cultural shift that can build and sustain feedback loops.

Integrate the culture of feedback across the organization

To move toward continuous improvement and ultimately improve outcomes for clients, organizational change needs to come first. Such organizational change requires several actions:

- **Alignment with organizational strategy.** Changing organizational culture requires thinking about feedback as a way of doing business rather than a project to implement. Ideally, the principles of feedback would be integrated into organizations' strategic plans and could be used as a complement to performance management to advance organizational goals. For example, within a food bank's agency relations team, moving from a compliance mindset to a client-centered model that includes feedback and a shared learning model could model good practice and support cultural change and client engagement at agencies.

- **Buy-in and inclusion of people at all levels of an organization.** A culture of feedback needs the support of organizational leadership, but it also need to be inclusive of staff and volunteers at all levels. One of the biggest challenges of the Pathways pilot was that there was little structured engagement of people working at the agency level other than agency leadership, and yet the success of implementing many changes and closing the loop depended heavily on frontline stakeholders who interface with clients.

- **The support of existing organizational resources.** The support of the Fund for Shared Insight was invaluable to the Pathways pilots, but its time-limited nature, by definition, threatens its sustainability. Relying solely on grant funds to implement feedback loops encourages short-term thinking as well as short-term staffing strategies. Grants may be a great resource if they

supplement institutional dollars that are used to build lasting capacity for an organization, but they should not be a substitute for institutional dollars. In addition, ongoing activities for feedback loops need to be integrated into the roles of existing staff to help ensure continuity through staff transitions.

Set priorities at an organizational rather than network level whenever possible.

At the start of the Pathways pilot, local communities were instructed to set a few common priorities to allow the food banks to build capacity to manage the feedback process. However, deciding on common priorities was difficult and often felt limiting to the participating agencies. An alternative approach would be:

- **Providing flexibility for participating organizations to tailor but simplify their priorities.** In a networked approach to feedback, leaders like the food bank may want to have organizations begin by focusing on a single priority, rather than deciding on three or four common priorities across the network, to lessen burden on the coordinating or support entity. Organizations that choose similar priorities could be grouped together for backbone support.

Start with the priorities that are most important to clients and build organizational commitment to address them.

Local partners did not initially prioritize clients' top concerns (i.e., food quality or quantity) because the food bank and agencies were not confident they could effectively address them. However, agencies found themselves gravitating toward those topics over the course of the pilots because of their direct interactions with clients. Given these insights, other communities or organizations should consider:

- **Ensuring organizational decisionmakers hear directly from clients before establishing their priorities for feedback loops.** Clients raised the same topics during the reflect phase as they did during the initial design phase when Urban conducted focus groups on site. However, it wasn't until agency leaders were able to listen to clients directly during the feedback process that they felt emboldened to address core issues like food quantity and quality. Exposing agency

stakeholders to direct client input from the very beginning may help build buy-in and personal commitment to the process.

Reframe feedback loops as on-going relationship building rather than data collection.

Time and time again, clients emphasized that the best way to communicate with them was simply by talking to them, listening to them, and being present. They generally were not interested in flyers or posters. In conventional nonprofit culture, organizations reach out to clients for an annual survey, program evaluation, or a needs assessment that serves the organization's needs but does little to build trust and dialogue. Implementing feedback loops can easily turn into a data collection or communication transaction if those interacting with clients do not perceive it as an opportunity to build their relationships and make things better together. Feedback collectors emphasized throughout the pilot that feedback collection is all about relationships and trust. These activities can support broader organizational shifts toward feedback culture.

Align the design of the feedback loop with organizational capacity and readiness.

In many ways, the model tested in this pilot was the Cadillac version of feedback loops, testing both large-scale and small-scale feedback collection from clients in the listen and reflect phases over three rapidly occurring cycles. However, organizations start off with very different baseline capacities, and the kind of feedback activities implemented should vary according to their level of capacity. Multiple entry points exist for engaging in this work.

- **Building feedback readiness.** At many of the agencies in Alameda, staff and volunteers did not have the language capacity to exchange information even about the most basic topics, and passive translation of documents was not effective in overcoming this challenge. The bilingual staff and volunteers who came to these agencies to gather feedback were often the first people with whom non-English-speaking clients had been able to communicate. This communication was important, but it did little to build relationships between agency staff and volunteers and these individuals. The first step in creating a feedback culture in these kinds of agencies should

be ensuring basic language and cultural capacity through recruiting more diverse staff and volunteers.

- **Exploratory feedback.** Organizations with minimal existing relationships with clients and limited organizational capacity might begin with small-scale reflection-like activities; that is, they could conduct regular conversations with clients throughout the year. Organizations with little space to convene clients might consider one-on-one conservations or encourage clients to regularly respond to a single open-ended feedback question on comment cards or a tablet.
- **Formalized feedback process.** Once capacity is in place, organizations could start the work of using larger-scale feedback efforts like those described in the "Listen" section and complementing them with small-scale reflection. This arrangement would allow them to start measuring their progress over time.

Align the timing of the feedback loop actions with capacity.

Pilot sites shifted the duration of the different stages of the feedback loop throughout the pilot. For example, over the three cycles, pilot sites reduced the number of weeks devoted to listening and increased the number of weeks allotted to making changes. Generally, they found there was not enough time for acting and closing the loop. In addition, partner agencies found there was not a sufficient pause between acting and reinitiating feedback loops with clients. Organizations might take the following actions to calibrate timing:

- asking the same question only after action has been taken to address the issue
- timing the beginning of subsequent feedback loops to allow enough time to implement the changes effectively and communicate with clients about the changes
- designating a separate closing-the-loop part of the feedback loop to ensure all agency stakeholders understand and communicate the process to clients

Experiment with different ways to create a safe, welcoming space for clients to provide feedback.

Third-party individuals play an important role in feedback collection. However, in practice, it is unsustainable for network leaders like food banks to support individualized processes at a large number of agencies at scale. To address this challenge, organizations might consider the following strategies:

- Assess their baseline capacity and right-size the kind of feedback loop that makes the most sense for them.
- If using a formalized feedback process, use digital methods that provide privacy for clients and are low burden for agencies. Most people can and do self-administer if language barriers are not overwhelming.
- Stagger support from the network leader (i.e., the food bank) by having them shoulder the lion's share of feedback collection in the listen phase and then transition this role to specially recruited and designated "feedback" volunteers at the agency who do not have a conflict of interest as a direct service provider. The same pattern could be used for reflection activities.

Move to action and learn by doing.

Because of the newness of this work, the pilot had an extended planning and design period of 9 months in Akron and 10 months in Alameda. Establishing guiding principles from the literature and methodological experts was necessary. In retrospect, however, jumping into implementation more quickly would have benefitted food banks and agencies. Many of the concepts that were transmitted or discussed during the planning period were too abstract for local partners and did not become salient to them until they were in the middle of doing the work. As a result, remember these basic precepts:

- Decide on your guiding principles and priorities.
- Act. Organizations will learn more by doing than planning.
- Expect to make changes as you go along. There is no one right answer or one way to do things. Organizations must determine what works best for them.

Appendix A

During the first nine months of the pilot, Urban staff led exploratory interviews with experts on community participatory research, feedback loops, and innovative research methods to identify key design principles, construct a conceptual framework for feedback loops, and explore the pros and cons of different methodologies. We extend our thanks to following individuals:

1. Jennifer Hunter Childs, US Census Bureau
2. Mariana Chilton, associate professor at Drexel University
3. Ryan Gerety, Open Tech Institute
4. Sarah Hennessy, Feedback Labs
5. Renee Ho, Feedback Labs
6. Josh Ishimatsu, National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development
7. Britt Lake, Global Giving
8. Jeff Love, AARP
9. Alex Ortega, professor of public health at UCLA, Center for Health Equity
10. Sophie Sahaf, LIFT
11. John Speicher, Cisco IVR
12. Dennis Whittle, Feedback Labs

Appendix B

During the first nine months of the pilot, Urban staff also performed a literature review on community participatory research, feedback loops, and innovative research methods to construct a substantive framework.

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Notes

1. These and other basic facts about the FA network are from Borger and coauthors (2014).
2. Throughout this report, we use synonyms for the people receiving charitable food assistance, such as clients, feedback participants, and program participants. These terms all refer to the same community members who visit food programs.
3. These and other basic facts about the FA network are from Borger and coauthors (2014).
4. Source: Feeding America's 2016 network activity reports.
5. Information on operating costs from Feeding America's analysis of environmental peer groups.
6. Hunger in America study of local food bank reports, 2014.
7. This is consistent with Feeding America's administration of the 2014 Hunger in America survey, which leveraged audio computer-assisted self-interview technology so clients could privately listen and respond to questions on a touchscreen tablet; most clients, including elderly ones, had little or no opposition to or difficulty with using technology.
8. Learn more about the net promoter score at https://www.netpromoter.com/know/.
9. Urban only had access to agency-level data. As a result, the descriptive statistics shown represent summaries of trends across agencies. Moreover, the data did not represent a random sample of clients at these locations, making more sophisticated means testing inappropriate.

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