



OUR HOUSE FOOD PROGRAMS: INITIATIVES AND STRATEGIES



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Note: Throughout this report I refer to exhibits that have been removed from this work sample to adhere to confidentiality requirements within the organization. However, the exhibits are fully explained in the narrative.

INTRODUCTION

This report examines historical food programs at Our House in order to determine successful practices, understand challenging aspects, and identify opportunities for improvement and/or expansion. Information collected during interview sessions during June, 2016, with Our House staff, volunteers, and residents form the basis for this report. The report demonstrates how food programs comprise an important part of the overall resident programming at Our House. Additionally, the report assists readers in connecting food program outcomes to the Our House mission statement and to the organization's 2015-2020 strategic plan vision statement. Report exhibits provide ideas for transforming opportunities into effective and successful food programs.

In addition to feeding residents on a daily basis, food programs at Our House can potentially help with two important food-related societal concerns: healthcare and food costs. In the US, 34% of adults and 17% of children are obese, rates that have been steadily rising.¹ Obesity-related chronic diseases, like heart disease and Type II diabetes, respectively, cost the US \$108 billion² and \$322 billion³ per year. The World Health Organization (WHO) links poor diet to obesity-related chronic diseases.⁴ The National Institute of Health (NIH) analyzed US eating habits over the past five decades, as reported in national nutrition surveys.⁵ The NIH found that most people eat 2/3 of their meals at home now, a steady improvement since the 1990s. Yet, the amount of time spent cooking continually decreases, especially for lower income

¹ Ogden, C., Carroll, M., Kit, B., & Flegal, K. (2014). Prevalence of childhood and adult obesity in the United States, 2011-2012. *Journal of the American Medical Association*. 311(8), 806- 814. doi:10.1001/jama.2014.732

² Heidenreich, P., Trogon, J., Khavjou, O., Butler, J., Dracup, K., Ezekowitz, M., et al. (2011). *Forecasting the future of cardiovascular disease in the United States: a policy statement from the American Heart Association*. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/dhdsp/data_statistics/fact_sheets/fs_heart?disease.htm

³ Centers for Disease Control. (2016). *Diabetes*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/media/presskits/aahd/diabetes.pdf>

⁴ World Health Organization. (2005). Fruit and vegetables for health. Retrieved from: http://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/publications/fruit_vegetables_report.pdf

⁵ Smith, L., Ng, S., & Popkin, B. (2013). Trends in US home food preparation and consumption: Analysis of national nutritional surveys and time use studies from 1965-1966 to 2007-2008. *Nutrition Journal*. 12(45).

individuals, indicating that most foods consumed at home are still processed or packaged. The study also reports that cooking at home is associated with increased produce and whole grain intake, improved overall health, and decreased Body Mass Index (BMI). BMI is a weight to height ratio used to determine underweight and overweight conditions.⁶ A lower BMI is associated with better health. Small modifications to existing Our House food programs could ensure that residents eat health-supportive foods and learn to make healthy lifestyle choices.

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates that the cost of eating healthfully for a family of four is \$200 per week⁷. The Harvard School of Public Health estimates that diets rich in fresh produce, fish, and nuts costs \$1.50 more per person per day than diets rich in processed meats, packaged foods, and refined grains.⁸ These food costs represent national averages, factoring in communities with much higher costs of living than that found in Central Arkansas. Still, at this time, eating healthfully does appear to cost more than eating processed and packaged foods. Food programs that teach how to shop for nutritious food, prepare healthy meals, *and* stay within monthly food budgets could contribute to improved financial stability for Our House residents.

The challenges and opportunities identified within Our House food programs offered excellent, real-world scenarios for research and discovery. The solutions recommended by this report acknowledge limited resources, short-term resident stays, and limited instruction time, as described by Our House staff and administrator, yet they offer the organization ideas for modification and expansion. The proposed plan recommended within this project has been unanimously approved by Our House administration and has received full grant funding from an outside foundation. In September, 2016, an additional VISTA (Volunteer in Service to America) was allocated to Our House to head the food programming modification and expansion initiative.

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⁶ National Institute of Health. (2016). Calculate your body mass index. Retrieved from: http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/education/lose_wt/BMI/bmicalc.htm.

⁷ Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. (2016). Official USDA food plans: Cost of food at home at four levels, U.S. average. Retrieved from: <http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/sites/default/files/CostoffoodApr2016.pdf>

⁸ Harvard University. (2016). Healthy vs. unhealthy diet costs \$1.50 more. Retrieved from: <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/healthy-vs-unhealthy-diet-costs-1-50-more/>

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BACKGROUND

Our House is a shelter for the working homeless in Little Rock, Arkansas. The nonprofit organization’s mission statement succinctly states goals for homeless residents and clients. The statement also offers a glimpse of Our House’s unique approach to reducing homelessness in

Central Arkansas. Brief background information demonstrates how, over time, Our House consistently upholds and expands upon its mission statement:

Our House empowers homeless and near-homeless families and individuals to succeed in the workforce, in school, and in life through hard work, wise decision-making, and active participation in the community.⁹

In 1988, Our House opened as a 40-bed emergency homeless shelter in downtown Little Rock under the direction of founder Joe Flaherty. Three years later, Our House established a Family Housing program at the former Veterans Administration (VA) Hospital campus in southeast Little Rock. The new Family Housing Program met an important community need as identified by the Arkansas Interfaith Conference, the United Way of Pulaski County, and other interested community agencies. In 2005, community donations funded an 80-bed emergency shelter on the VA campus, consolidating Our House family and emergency housing into one location. During the same 17-year period, Our House developed job skills training programs and provided free childcare to working homeless parents.

Current Executive Director Georgia Mjartan joined Our House in 2005 and identified child and youth out-of-school-time programs as a priority. She initiated licensed after-school and summer programs designated for homeless children and youth. In 2014, the newly-constructed 19,000 square foot Children's Center opened, tripling Our House's capacity to offer licensed child and youth development programs to homeless children. Our House job skills programs work to prepare every adult resident for full-time employment. Recently in 2016, the newly-renovated, state-of-the-art Career Center opened on the Our House campus. The Career Center provides job training skills, job search help, financial literacy classes, and life skills training for over 600 adults each year.

Our House's success at helping homeless families consistently receives national recognition. The Our House model is replicated in other non-profit organizations throughout Arkansas and in 39 other states. Beyond its own campus, Our House builds the social service sector of Central Arkansas with programs such as Potluck Food Rescue and Harmony Health Clinic. Potluck Food Rescue rescues nearly five million pounds of excess food per year from restaurants, food stores, schools, hospitals, and farmer's markets. The organization distributes the rescued food to those in need, including Our House residents, via community food programs. Harmony Health Clinic, conveniently located across the street from Our House, provides free medical and dental care to uninsured, low-income individuals in Central Arkansas.

HISTORY OF FOOD PROGRAMS

⁹ Our House. (2015). Strategic Plan: 2015-2020.

Our House serves 1,800+ homeless and near-homeless individuals and families per year, promoting success in work, school, and life. Centered around self-sufficiency and job training, Our House aims to lift people out of poverty with a two-generation (adults and their children) approach. With this goal in mind, adults learn financial literacy and general job-acquiring skills; they also train in information technology, office administration, caregiving, landscape and maintenance, or food service. Pre-school children and school-aged youth receive quality academic, art, and physical education in the shelter's licensed child development center. Unique living arrangements, such as individual family dorms, round out the total-person approach taken at Our House.

While job training and skills programs promote financial stability, food-related challenges potentially prevent Our House residents from achieving total economic independence. Obesity-related ailments such as pre-diabetes, diabetes, or cardiovascular disease affect adult residents' ability to learn, work, and care for their families. According to medical research, the risk of becoming obese, in general, doubles for children with obese parents.¹⁰ Additionally, obese children are four times as likely as non-obese children to be obese as adults, predisposing them to a lifetime of chronic disease.¹¹ From an economic standpoint, current Our House residents and former residents now living independently risk depleting their monthly budgets with costly fast food and packaged meals. Many Our House residents may not possess basic skills or knowledge needed to shop for healthy food, prepare nutritious meals, or manage a food budget. These issues indicate that eating habits and other food topics merit consideration when assessing the overall success rate of Our House programming.

Throughout its history, Our House has addressed food-related challenges faced by residents with various programs involving food and meal donations, kitchen safety and cooking classes, and community gardening. Each initiative seeks to better equip Our House residents for life after the shelter experience, teaching transferable skills to adults and children. To date, all food-related efforts at Our House have successfully achieved intended goals, and many programs produced lasting positive outcomes. For example, approximately 40% of dinner meals at Our House have been donated and served by the same churches or organizations for at least five years. This ongoing positive outcome ensures food availability for residents and maintains important community relations. As requested by the Our House team, taking an historical look at the shelter's food-related programs provides an informative basis for ongoing planning and evaluation. Specific challenges and opportunities arising from past and current food programs are detailed in separate sections of the Food Program report.

¹⁰ Whitaker, R., Wright, J., Pepe, M. Seidel, K., Deitz, W. (1997). Predicting obesity in young adulthood from childhood from childhood and parental obesity. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 337, 869-873.

¹¹ Whitaker, R., Wright, J., Pepe, M. Seidel, K., Deitz, W. (1997). Predicting obesity in young adulthood from childhood from childhood and parental obesity. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 337, 869-873.

Food and Meal Donations

Our House provides meals and food to residents and Central Arkansas Family Stability Institute (CAFSI) clients. A combination of donated prepared meals, donated food items, and purchased food supplies comprise food initiatives at Our House. Volunteers, community partners, shelter supervisors, and job trainee cooks collectively feed residents as Our House places high priority on consistent daily meals. The availability of regular meals allows adult residents to focus on learning skills, securing employment, and earning wages instead of searching for food. Regular meals also benefit younger residents, nourishing them during important physical, mental, and emotional developmental stages. Our House also diligently works to connect residents with local and governmental food assistance programs.

Shelter residents live communally and eat up to three meals per day in the shelter dining hall. Shelter meals come from a variety of sources:

Dinner – Churches, synagogues, non-profit groups, individuals, and businesses prepare meals and provide volunteer servers on an annual basis. Volunteers choose a day, such as the third Tuesday of each month, to prepare, deliver, and serve dinner to shelter residents.

Lunch – Local businesses provide community outreach opportunities by volunteering employees to prepare or purchase and serve lunch to shelter residents. Lunchtime partnerships between local businesses and Our House typically last for one year and occur once per month on a designated day. On days when no outside food is provided, the job trainee cook creates lunchtime meals from food items available at the shelter. Community partners like Ben E. Keith Foods, Whole Foods Market, Fresh Market, and Heifer Village donate fresh produce, chicken, eggs, and other food items. Local farmers' markets also donate leftover produce. Biweekly shopping trips to Sam's Club funded by monetary donations supplements donated food.

Breakfast – The shelter supervisor prepares breakfast from food items available at the shelter or from bagels donated by the locally-owned company, Morningside Bagels. Individual and business donors also provide breakfast items on a one-time or monthly basis.

Family House residents do not eat in the shelter dining room. Instead, they purchase food with employment earnings or with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or other assistance program benefits and prepare meals in a shared kitchen.

The Family House is ten, dormitory-style room facility that allows families, including fathers and male teens, to live together. Family House rooms are available to residents who have lived in the shelter for at least three months, have petitioned for family house residency, and who pay a reduced monthly rent. In addition, to purchasing food, this group also grows food in the community gardens and receives discounts at local farmers' markets. Family house residents

may also choose produce from farmers' market leftovers after listening to brief nutrition presentations.

In 2012, Our House created CAFSI to help Central Arkansas families at risk of becoming homeless to avoid homelessness. CAFSI clients live in the Central Arkansas community and face one or more obstacles to maintaining stable housing. Our House case managers connect CAFSI clients with community food sources like Green Groceries, a local church food pantry that receives all natural produce from a local network of farmers. Additionally, CAFSI clients occasionally receive take-home food when they attend educational programs at Our House.

Food Classes

Three Our House kitchens are available for cooking demonstrations and classes – one in the Children's Center, one in the Learning Center, and one in the Family House. Several classrooms also have hotplates for small-group, single-dish teaching. Individual volunteers and other non-profit and for-profit organizations teach Our House residents nutritional lessons while engaging them in hands-on cooking activities. Each type of volunteer conducts unique learning experiences:

Individual volunteers – Individual volunteers typically provide food and teach simple kitchen safety concepts while the learning group prepares a meal. For example, the instructor may introduce safe knife and cutting techniques as Our House residents chop peppers and onions for a Mexican-themed dinner. Recipes and leftover food go home with participants, adding incentive to sign up for another class.

Non-profit volunteers – Non-profit volunteers, from The Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, for instance, use *Cooking Matters* curriculum to integrate US Department of Agriculture (USDA) nutrition guidelines into daily meal preparation practices. *Cooking Matters* teaches Our House residents how to make their own dinner plates resemble the recommendations made by MyPlate.gov. MyPlate. Gov is sponsored by the US Department of Agriculture and focuses on food portion and nutrition guidelines. The recipes introduce tasty vegetables, spices, and textures not always considered in daily meal planning. Participants learn to create a variety of meals at home, to prepare shopping lists, and to choose healthy food options based on nutrition guidelines.

For-profit cooking classes – For-profit cooking classes, such as those from SPORK, a childhood nutrition program taught by the locally-owned company, Kids Cook! Are funded by food and wellness grants awarded to Our House. SPORK curriculum includes nutritional talks for parents and cooking fun for kids. In 2015, Our House youth made kale chips, barbecue sauce, pasta dishes, and salads to share with their parents. At the conclusion of the course, youth participants created a recipe book for their home (and future home) kitchens.

Gardening

Three community gardens grow on the Our House campus. The main Our House garden was originally built in raised beds along the fence line at the southeast border of the campus. Because there was no buffer between the garden and driveway, youth residents could not safely participate. The garden was later moved to its current in-ground location behind the Family House. Generous donors funded two gardens near the Children's Center. The primary garden is planted and tended by Our House youth residents. Children's Center teachers use the garden and its produce as inspiration for science lessons, cooking projects, and life skills training. Harvested produce is eaten by the youth residents or sold at local farmers' markets. The other garden is a children's sensory garden where youth learn about nature firsthand. Garden teaching and learning programs at Our House range from individuals sharing their own gardening experience to more formal gardening curriculums. Three examples provide an overview of the range of gardening programs at Our House:

Experienced Gardeners – In terms of gardening, Our House never lacks for experienced and passionate green thumbs. Administrators, staff members, and VISTAs all contribute time and expertise to Our House gardens. VISTAs are individuals who volunteer through the AmeriCorps Volunteer in Service to America program. The VISTA program, established in 1965, was recommended by John F. Kennedy as a way to fight poverty. Shelter residents, family house residents, and youth residents help plant and maintain the gardens, as well. Local and national businesses donate seeds and other gardening equipment, lending support to residents who desire to grow their own food. More recently, three middle school students proposed to build a hoop house that would extend planting and harvesting into cold weather seasons.

Our House Summer Garden Program – Developed by an Our House VISTA, *Our Garden* (OG) (Exhibit A) uses the garden as a springboard into conceptual learning. Designed for one teaching session per week during a nine-week term, OGP lessons use simple garden topics to teach science, environmentalism, Spanish and more. Our House youth learn to identify recyclable items, design garden space, and create a compost pile. SGP infuses fun into each lesson with activities such as salsa preparation and water game relays.

Alice Waters Edible Schoolyard Curriculum – Renowned California chef Alice Waters created an edible schoolyard at a Berkeley middle school in the late 1990s. Her book, *Edible Schoolyard: A Universal Idea*, integrates academics with gardening and cooking wholesome food. An Our House director led this program during one summer and youth planted, cultivated, harvested, and cooked from the edible garden.

Historical Summary

Not surprisingly, eating habits and other food activities can affect how well Our House residents can achieve economic independence. In support of this concept, Our House consistently pursues healthful meal and food donations and better access to food assistance benefits.

Additionally, food classes and garden programs teach residents important food lessons and healthy living skills to use at Our House and in their future homes. While many past food programs have produced favorable outcomes, close examination of specific processes and practices provide excellent information on which to build. Furthermore, continued growth of the Our House campus and population creates opportunities to modify existing food programs and implement new programs. Practical application of a retrospective analysis of this kind uses historical outcomes to inform future success. Fortunately, in this case, Our House has a rich program base ready to support future food programs.

CHALLENGES

The number of residents and clients served by Our House grew exponentially throughout the past decade fueling the need for added programs. Food programs at Our House, in particular, developed along the way as community donation support increased, public food assistance policies changed, and volunteer initiative opportunities emerged. While each of the three Our House food program areas—food and meal donations, food classes, and gardening—logged many successes, the programs also experienced a few challenges:

Food and Meal Donations: *Repetitive Meal Menus* – Feedback participants described how meal content potentially affects shelter resident morale and health. Our House receives meal donations from individuals and organizations throughout Central Arkansas. Because coordinating meals among donors is difficult and time consuming, meal volunteers often unknowingly prepare the same meals several days in a row. For instance, in the past, Our House residents have eaten lasagna four nights during one week. While residents are grateful for donated meals, repetitive menus detract from the pleasure of eating. Also, many shelter residents have health issues that fare better with lower starch meals. When faced with preparing food for 80 or more individuals, most volunteers choose high-starch menus to stretch food donation budgets and to “fill up” residents.

Food and Meal Donations: *No Lunch at Work* – Shelter residents eat lunch in the shelter dining hall when they are on the Our House campus. However, shelter residents are responsible for purchasing (with employment pay) or packing (with food obtained with food assistance benefits) their own lunches for the workday. Our House strives to help new residents find full-time employment as soon as possible. Often, a new resident will land a job before food assistance benefits begin. These residents may work all day without lunch unless an Our House staff member can find transportable food items in the shelter’s donation pantry.

Food and Meal Donations: *Uncoordinated Take-Home Food* – CAFSI clients at risk of becoming homeless do not always have reliable sources of food. Our House provides supplemental take-home food to CAFSI clients on an as-needed, as-available basis. According to feedback participants, food staples such as mashed potato flakes, canned

or fresh produce, or grain products needed to create balanced meals are not always available.

Food Classes: *Volunteer Dependency* – Our House attracts excellent community volunteers to lead food and kitchen skill classes. Despite the enthusiastic intention of volunteer instructors to teach for an extended period of time, unforeseen outside circumstances take priority over the food classes. Therefore, in the past, food classes at Our House occur only when and if volunteers are available. Compounding this challenge, most volunteers develop their own food class curriculum. So when volunteers leave, the curriculum leaves too.

Food Classes: *Complicated Curriculum* – In addition to individually-developed curricula, food class volunteers may also teach from an established curriculum, such as the No Kid Hungry national hunger relief campaign’s *Cooking Matters*. Feedback participants found curriculum like this too detailed and complicated for the basic needs of Our House food class audiences. In addition, many of the curriculum recipes contain ingredients not readily available in all food stores.

Gardening: *Inconsistent Help* – Successful food harvests at Our House depend entirely on staff, volunteers, and residents having time to consistently work in the gardens. As of summer 2016, no one is specifically designated as a garden coordinator. Also, a quick review of staff, volunteer, and resident daily schedules shows very little free time available for garden work. Feedback participants showed great interest in continuing to have garden plots available as a source for fresh produce, a method to connect with nature, and an opportunity to educate adults and children.

Gardening: *Lack of Training* – If Our House had a garden coordinator and if residents had time in their schedules to garden, feedback participants expressed concern about the lack of gardening training. If a resident has only 15 to 30 minutes to work in the garden two days a week, for instance, how will she or he make the most of that time? Currently, residents rely on staff or volunteers to share a quick gardening lesson “on the fly.” Without a lesson, otherwise interested residents miss a great opportunity to garden.

Gardening: *Non-Integrated Curriculum* – Education classes centered around gardening concepts, such as ecology or environmentalism, primarily take place in the child and youth learning programs at Our House. Feedback participants report that children and youth enjoy garden topics, but they easily become disinterested in the slow-moving growth cycle of plants. Also, many children view garden time as work (v. play) time. Over the years, staff and volunteers have tried various approaches to teach gardening. However, today, gardening remains a daily lesson instead of an integrated part of daily life. Furthermore, feedback participants suggested that adult residents could also benefit from gardening concept education in addition to garden task training.

OPPORTUNITIES AND IDEAS

As requested by the interviewer, feedback participants shared challenges about and offered suggestions to current Our House food programs. This feedback from those who know Our House best helped in the process of identifying an array of opportunities for improvement and expansion. Our House already has excellent food programs in place, which give any proposed modifications and expansions a high likelihood of success. Challenges identified in the three areas of food programs at Our House—food and meal donations, food classes, and gardening—have corresponding opportunities and ideas:

Food and Meal Donations: *Coordinated Meal Menus* – Individuals, businesses, and community organizations donate prepared meals to the Our House shelter, providing a significant portion of the food consumed by shelter residents. Feedback participants identified duplicate meal menus and high-starch meals as two food program challenges. An updated Meal Program webpage (Exhibit B), a new Meal Planning Guide with recipe suggestions (Exhibit C), and a simple Meals Calendar using a program such as teamup (Exhibit D) would help meal donors prepare a variety of meals that meet the nutritional needs of Our House residents. Additionally, the Meals Calendar may help manage the high volume of communications flowing into the Program Support VISTA's office.

Food and Meal Donations: *Lunch-to-Go Program* – New Our House residents, who begin a job off campus before Supplemental Nutritional Benefits (SNAP) begin, often work all day without lunch. A Lunch-to-Go program would provide these residents with sack lunches during this initial time period, usually about two weeks. Food donors could easily support this program by providing enough food items, like bread, lunchmeat, and fruit, to fill a certain number of sack lunches. Donors would access the updated Donated Food Items webpage (Exhibit B) and schedule food item drop-off on the Meals Calendar (Exhibit D). Lunch-to-Go vouchers would be provided to new residents, who obtain a job early, when they sign up for SNAP. Voucher recipients would also be required to listen to a brief nutritional summary and accept a laminated card with healthy food choices and shopping tips (Exhibit E).

Food and Meal Donations: *Take-Home Food Box Program* – CAFSI clients at risk of homelessness greatly benefit from any supplemental food shared with them by Our House. Feedback participants described how coordinated food staple donations would allow Our House to provide balanced meal ingredients to CAFSI clients. A Take-Home Food Box program would help food item donors know exactly what to donate to support this group. Donors would access the updated Donated Food Items webpage for this program (Exhibit B) and schedule food item drop-off on the Meals Calendar (Exhibit D). CAFSI clients would most likely access Take-Home Food Boxes at an Our House learning program. The laminated food choice and shopping cards (Exhibit E) would be included in the food boxes.

Food Classes: *Ready-to-Teach Curriculum* – Food class scheduling mostly depends on volunteer initiative and availability because the curriculum is provided by volunteers or an outside organization. When volunteers are not available, food classes do not occur. If Our House could provide simple and easy lesson plans, then Career Center staff could recruit from a larger pool of volunteers. In other words, food classes would be scheduled on a regular basis and volunteer instructors would use pre-selected lesson plans that require little or no pre-planning. Transitioning to this method requires a special project volunteer group to select simple-to-teach/learn lesson plans from existing curriculum available at no charge from the USDA and the non-profit organization Campus Kitchens.

Food Classes: *Simple Curriculum*

Complicated food class curriculum is difficult to teach and even harder for participants to learn. Many outside organizations offer excellent pre-established food class lesson plans, but feedback participants claim these curricula do not meet the basic needs of Our House residents. USDA websites, SNAPEd-Connection.gov (Exhibit F) and myplate.gov (Exhibit G), and campuskitchens.org (Exhibit H), offer simple nutrition and kitchen skills lesson plans, such as how to read food labels or make a shopping list. The websites also provide clearly-written health information, like how to add healthy fats to the diet, and cooking and life skills activity guides. Food class participants would most benefit from lessons that teach how to select, purchase, and prepare simple and nutritional meals for themselves and their families.

Another, more technology-based, curriculum idea involves touch-screen, interactive learning. Recent research confirms how touch-screen learning may offer advantages over traditional teacher-student learning. In one such study, a group of low-income, Spanish-speaking individuals with little or no technology experience found touchscreen nutrition lessons easy to use and easy to understand.¹² Intuilab, a low-cost monthly fee subscription site, allows users to create interactive programs from documents and other media. The creation process requires no coding, so most technologically savvy individuals could easily accomplish the task. A simple nutrition or kitchen skill lesson plan could become an interactive activity and accessed by tablet or other touchscreen device.

Gardening: *Designated Garden Help* – Dedicated and passionate staff, volunteers, and residents work to fit gardening into their already busy schedules. Although offering fresh produce to residents is a priority at Our House, other jobs and tasks necessarily take priority over garden work. Some residents work on campus as job trainees. Could

¹² Thompson D., Joshi, A., Hernandez, R. Jennings, J., Arora, M., & Ellen, J. (2012). Interactive nutrition education via a touchscreen: Is this technology well received by low-income, Spanish speaking parents. *IOS Press, 20* (3), 195-203.

these individuals potentially provide garden help? According to feedback participants, the Our House resident job trainees, including the cook and groundskeepers, have minimal time to spare. Furthermore, even if the job trainees' schedules were adjusted to allow time for gardening, most may not possess the cognitive ability to manage or lead a gardening program. On a positive note, Our House may receive an additional VISTA during the next 12 months. Our House management is considering designating the new VISTA as a Food Program Support VISTA. An ideal solution to this challenge, the Food Program Support VISTA could establish and manage a garden program, helping residents learn to grow their own food.

Gardening: Gardening Training – Feedback participants unanimously asked for a simple way to teach gardening skills and tasks to residents. The training should be easy to teach and learn, efficient in methods, and fun so that residents value the time in nature and the fruits of their labors. Several Our House staff are avid and experienced gardeners, but they need curriculum to share their knowledge. The Friendship Gardens, Inc. offers a free gardening guide (Exhibit I) that could support garden teachers at Our House. Additionally, local gardening teacher, Nathaniel Wills, from Pulaski Heights Elementary School in Little Rock, offered to train an Our House gardener one morning per week. Mr. Wills also suggested Our House gardeners spend time working in other community gardens in Central Arkansas to broaden their knowledge.

Gardening: Daily Life Garden Curriculum – Teachers use the Our House Children's Center gardens to teach gardening skills and gardening concepts. Students learn by doing, yet most still view the garden as a lesson and not part of daily life. A garden curriculum integrated into campus life at Our House would help children and adults learn important concepts, such as water conservation and recycling. Former VISTA, Rebecca Stover, created a nine-week gardening curriculum, *Our Garden* (Exhibit A), for children. This curriculum, along with the USDA's *Dig-In* (Exhibit J) gardening curriculum, teach lessons and skills applicable to all ages. The proposed Food Program Support VISTA and a special project volunteer team could work to transform curriculum into daily life programs at Our House.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES AND IDEAS SUMMARY

By design, this report examined historical and current food programs at Our House to determine what works, what does not work, and what modifications or expansions are needed. Using feedback from Our House staff, volunteers, and residents, primary challenges were identified and opportunities and ideas were researched and suggested. Figure 1 summarizes the challenges, opportunities, and ideas for Our House food programs:

FOOD PROGRAM	CHALLENGES	OPPORTUNITIES AND IDEAS
Food and Meal Donations	Repetitive Meal Menus	Coordinated Meal Menus
	No Lunch at Work	Lunch-to-Go program
	Inconsistent Take-Home Food	Take-Home Food Box program
Food Classes	Volunteer Dependency	Ready-to-Teach Curriculum
	Complicated Curriculum	Simple Curriculum
Gardening	Inconsistent Garden Help	Designated Garden Help
	Lack of Gardening Training	Gardening Training Program
	Non-Integrated Curriculum	Daily Life Curriculum

Figure 1. Our House Food Program Challenges, Opportunities and Ideas.

FOOD PROGRAM PLAN CONCLUSION AND STRATEGY

The Vision Statement within the Our House Strategic Plan, 2015-2020, outlines financial, educational, social, and physical goals for homeless and near-homeless adults and children helped by Our House. Beyond the obvious physical benefits provided, food programs also affect outcomes in the other three general goal categories: financial, educational, and social. Effective food programs help residents learn to manage food and lifestyle budgets, protecting their hard-earned nest eggs from costly, unnecessary purchases. Basic nutrition lessons help parents prepare nutritious breakfasts and lunches, so that they and their children find success in school. Healthy lifestyle choices improve confidence levels in both personal and work-related social settings, improving chances for success.

From the perspective of the Vision Statement, food programs at Our House merit diligent attention to ensure that residents achieve and maintain the overall goal, economic independence. With so many well-developed food programs already in place, the suggested modifications and expansions could conceivably be integrated into the Our House culture during the next 12 to 24 months. This timeline estimate depends entirely on available human and financial resources, but, in theory, the ideas should produce success or at least open pathways for future success.

Exhibit K shows a suggested food program strategy in a mind map format. Within each food program area-food and meal donations, food classes, and gardening-action steps are numbered by priority (1 is highest priority). Exhibit L presents the action steps in list form. The two visual tools may help in planning and strategy sessions, while expanded information within the body of this report will provide specific details for action. Exhibit M offers a link to the Food Program Strategies and Initiatives slide presentation. Investing time, effort, and resources into improved food programs directly benefit residents during their time at Our House and later when they live independently. Improved food programs also benefit Our House staff by streamlining processes, improving workflow, and creating opportunities for organizational growth. Finally, improved food programs benefit the Central Arkansas community by continuing to support the successful outcomes achieved when Our House offers a “hand up instead of a handout.”