

*Setting The Table: Cultivating Fort Collins Community Health Through
Accessible Food Security Solutions*

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A Senior Thesis submitted to Colorado State University Honors Program.

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Website: <https://focofoodpantries.weebly.com/>

Community Flyer

Setting The Table
focofoodpantries.weebly.com

FOCO FOOD PANTRIES DO YOU NEED...

Free Food/Fresh Produce

Free Diapers/Formula/Menstrual Products

Free Cat/Dog Food

Disability Accesible Food Pantries

Visit Our Website Or Scan The QR Code

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SCAN ME!

Foundational Writing

My Honors Thesis, titled *Setting The Table: Cultivating Fort Collins Community Health Through Accessible Food Security Solutions*, seeks to address the critical issue of food security and its relationship to public health. This project involves creating a website and distributing posters to increase the visibility and accessibility of Fort Collins food pantries, ultimately connecting individuals in need to essential resources. The aim is to bridge gaps in resource access and enhance community health outcomes, particularly for underserved populations who may face barriers to nutritious food access.

Food security is a cornerstone of public health, as access to nutritious food is vital for managing chronic health conditions such as diabetes, obesity, and hypertension (Simmet, Depa, Tinnemann, & Stroebele-Benschop, 2017). Research demonstrates that food pantries can play a transformative role in public health by providing reliable access to fresh, nutritious foods (Hollis-Hansen et al., 2023). Despite this potential, many food pantries are underutilized, partly due to a lack of public awareness or perceived stigma associated with using their services. By increasing the visibility of these resources, my thesis aims to enhance both food security and community wellness.

This project is deeply personal to me. Volunteering at the FMC Food Pantry introduced me to the real-life challenges that individuals and families face when trying to access nutritious food. This experience revealed the critical need for greater awareness and accessibility of food pantry services and motivated me to develop a project that would help address these needs within my community.

Importance of the Thesis to Others

This Honors Thesis holds significance far beyond my personal academic journey; it addresses a pressing need for health equity in underserved communities. Access to nutritious food is essential to health, yet many individuals in Fort Collins face barriers to food security that exacerbate health disparities. For those in low-income and uninsured populations, limited access to healthy food can lead to an increased risk of chronic conditions, such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease (Simmet, Depa, Tinnemann, & Stroebele-Benschop, 2017). The lack of awareness or stigma associated with food pantries compounds these issues, preventing people from utilizing valuable resources.

In Larimer County, 36% of the population reported worrying about affording food over the past year, and 61.99% of uninsured individuals face food insecurity (Colorado Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2021–2023). These statistics underscore the urgency of increasing food pantry visibility and accessibility to bridge these gaps. As Simmet et al. (2017) stated, "The dietary quality of food pantry users often does not meet nutritional guidelines, impacting long-term health" (p. 570). By promoting the resources available through local food pantries, my thesis aims to alleviate some of these disparities, enhancing community wellness by making nutritious food more accessible to those in need and supporting public health as a whole.

Interdisciplinary Nature

This Honors Thesis integrates public health and social justice principles by addressing food security as a fundamental right that directly impacts community health. Public health frameworks emphasize the need to address social determinants of health, such as food access, which significantly influence health outcomes (Leone et al., 2020). Food insecurity often intersects with socioeconomic factors, creating a cycle where vulnerable populations experience

limited access to nutritious foods, which in turn increases the prevalence of chronic conditions like hypertension, diabetes, and obesity (De Marchis et al., 2019). By enhancing the visibility of food pantries, my project aims to contribute to reducing health disparities within these communities.

Food pantries play a crucial role in community health interventions, providing a consistent source of nutritious foods that can help manage chronic health issues for those without access to regular, balanced meals (Hollis-Hansen et al., 2023). The need for such interventions is underscored by alarming statistics: 58.76% of young adults (ages 18-24) in Larimer County experience food insecurity, and racial disparities are evident, with 59.31% of Hispanic residents facing similar challenges (Colorado Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2021–2023). These figures highlight the urgent need for accessible food resources as a way to promote both health equity and long-term wellness within diverse population groups.

Motivation and Goals

My motivation for this Honors Thesis stems from a personal shift in my career path. Initially, I planned to pursue pediatric dentistry, focusing on individual oral health. However, my experience volunteering at the FMC Food Pantry introduced me to the broader health impacts of food insecurity. I saw firsthand how access to nutritious food influences overall health outcomes, particularly for low-income individuals managing chronic conditions. This realization led me to shift my focus toward public health dentistry, where I can address health disparities on a community level.

The literature reinforces the importance of this perspective. Food pantries offer more than temporary relief from hunger; they have the potential to improve diet quality and health

outcomes, contributing to a community's overall wellness. As Hollis-Hansen et al. (2023) note, "Pantries have the potential to be a vital part of community health interventions" (p. 1234). My goal with this project is to leverage these insights to enhance food pantry accessibility and visibility, ultimately supporting healthier, more resilient communities through improved access to essential resources.

Process and Outcome

The development of my Honors Thesis project involved creating a website and posters to raise awareness about food pantry resources in Fort Collins. I began by collecting data on local food pantries, focusing on essential details like locations, hours of operation, available services, and accessibility options. This information formed the foundation of the website, which I designed to be user-friendly and accessible, with features that allow users to filter pantries based on specific needs such as dietary restrictions or non-food essentials. The posters complemented the website by featuring QR codes that directed people to the site, ensuring easy access for those who might come across the information in public spaces. 50 flyers were posted between Old Town Fort Collins and resource centers at the Lory Student Center on CSU's campus.

The primary outcome goal for this project was to increase community awareness and support for food pantries. By October, the QR code on the poster was scanned an average of 17 times daily, indicating strong engagement and curiosity among community members. This result reflects the value of integrating accessible information with food assistance, as noted by Pooler et al. (2018): "The integration of food assistance with accessible information significantly improves utilization" (p. 5). Ultimately, I hope this project will foster a more supportive

community environment around food security and inspire ongoing public support for these vital resources.

Techniques Used in the Thesis Process

In developing this thesis project, I employed a combination of digital design and public health communication tools to maximize the impact and accessibility of the website and posters. Using user-friendly design software, I created a website that is visually engaging and simple to navigate, ensuring that visitors can easily find essential information about food pantry locations, hours, and services. The posters featured QR codes linking directly to the website, allowing quick and seamless access for those encountering the information in public spaces.

To enhance the project's effectiveness, I researched techniques used in similar studies that address food access challenges. Studies like Simmet et al. (2017) illustrate how targeted nutritional interventions can improve food security outcomes. I applied this concept by customizing information on the website to address specific needs such as dietary restrictions and non-food essentials, tailoring resources to diverse community needs. As Cannuscio et al. (2012) note, "Visual aids in pantry resources enhance community reach and utilization" (p. 138). By combining these design strategies with evidence-based public health approaches, my goal was to make pantry resources accessible and appealing, encouraging greater community engagement.

Historical and Philosophical Context

The foundation of my Honors Thesis is deeply rooted in the understanding of health as a product of social determinants—factors beyond individual control that shape well-being. Access to nutritious food, as a key determinant of health, is influenced by a range of social, economic,

and environmental factors that contribute to disparities in health outcomes. De Marchis et al. (2019) highlight that food insecurity is closely tied to these social determinants, noting that “Access to nutritious food is a key determinant of health, influencing long-term wellness” (p. 439). My thesis aims to address this critical determinant by improving the visibility and accessibility of food pantries, which serve as essential community resources.

The importance of addressing these broader determinants is further supported by public health research, as Leone et al. (2020) emphasize the need for equitable access to resources as a means to promote health equity. This thesis aligns with the historical and philosophical shift in public health from a focus on individual responsibility to recognizing the structural and social barriers that communities face, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of health equity and well-being.

Challenges and Overcoming Missteps

Throughout the development of my Honors Thesis, I encountered several challenges, particularly in gathering accurate and comprehensive community data. One of the main difficulties was obtaining consistent information on food pantry locations, hours, and specific resources offered, as these details often varied or changed. This inconsistency required me to frequently update the website content and adjust the project timeline, which initially delayed some of the design goals.

To address these issues, I maintained close communication with pantry coordinators and regularly reviewed local resources to ensure accuracy. I also adjusted the website’s design to make it easier to update, allowing for quicker modifications as new information became available. This approach taught me the importance of adaptability in community-based projects.

As Minaker et al. (2016) state, “Flexibility in project design is crucial in adapting to community needs” (p. 490). By embracing this flexibility, I was able to create a more resilient and responsive resource for the community. These experiences underscored the value of adaptability and proactive problem-solving, skills that will be invaluable in my future public health endeavors.

Personal and Academic Takeaways

Working on this Honors Thesis has been transformative, both academically and personally. I’ve strengthened my research skills, learning how to collect and organize community data effectively, and have gained experience in public engagement by designing a project that directly supports community health. This project also inspired me to deepen my commitment to public health; in October 2023, I began thinking about food insecurity’s broader impacts, which motivated me to apply to the Colorado School of Public Health. I am now dual-enrolled at CSU as a senior pre-health biology major and a first-year Master of Public Health student with a focus on global health and health disparities.

This thesis has also fueled my career aspirations in public health dentistry. I plan to apply to dental school in June, aiming to specialize in this field. Additionally, this project inspired me to organize a dental drive for the Fort Collins community, resulting in over 100 dental care kits created for donation in November alone. “Addressing food insecurity at the community level has profound public health implications” (Amugsi et al., 2020, p. 1442), and this thesis has shown me how essential it is to address these needs within my future career.

This Honors Thesis has achieved its goals of improving food pantry accessibility and promoting community health, showcasing the intersection of public health, social justice, and digital communication. By increasing awareness of food pantry resources, this project has supported underserved populations in Fort Collins, contributing to health equity on a local scale. I take pride in the positive impact this work has had on the community and the academic insights I've gained. This experience has deepened my commitment to addressing health disparities, and I am eager to continue advocating for public health initiatives that empower communities and promote wellness.

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