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Community Kitchens:

Fostering Social Relationships, Economic Development and Access to Fresh Produce

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Executive Summary: Community kitchens can function in a variety of ways, such as collective kitchens, job-training sites, and small business incubators. These kitchens provide opportunities for fostering social relationships, economic development, and access to fresh produce.

Background

In the United States, almost 49 million residents live in poverty and over 17 million households are food insecure.¹ Increasing access to food can reduce the rate of food insecurity, improve the health of Americans, and stimulate the economy. This can be accomplished by connecting local farmers and food producers with the consumers directly through community kitchens.²

What is a Community Kitchen?

Community kitchens are public spaces that can have many purposes and uses, such as soup kitchens, job training sites, and small business incubation and development. These kitchens can provide valuable information and resources to clients, promote health and nutrition through increased access to fresh produce, equip residents with new skills, and promote a stronger economy.^{2,3}

Community Kitchen Models

Soup Kitchens

The most widely recognized model of community kitchens is the soup kitchen. A soup kitchen provides free meals to low income and homeless individuals.⁴

Collective Kitchens

A collective community kitchen is a place where individuals can gather to prepare meals, both for themselves and for their families. The food can be brought home for consumption, and the costs are shared.⁵ Locations for collective kitchens can vary and the space may be provided by an organization, such as a church or community group, or the government.⁶ Food for the cooking courses may be bought in bulk or donated by local food banks, allowing for low cost meals.^{7,8} This type of kitchen, which is open to the public, promotes building relationships with others and eliminates the stigma that is often associated with income level.⁹

School Based Community Kitchens

A school community kitchen optimizes resources by utilizing an existing public space for more than preparing school meals. This model can be adapted to fulfill the needs of the surrounding community, and might serve the purpose of working to alleviate hunger, provide job training, offer a location for food processing, and/or allow for small business incubation.¹⁰ School kitchens already contain the materials and equipment necessary for these ventures, and the community connection is often already established, making these locations ideal for involving the local community.

Advantages of Community Kitchens:

- ✓ Provides job skills training
- ✓ Stimulates economic growth and development
- ✓ Builds social relationships
- ✓ Increases access to fresh produce
- ✓ Reduces the cost of produce
- ✓ Improves nutrition

Job Training Community Kitchens

Another framework of community kitchens is the job training model. The Rhode Island Community Food Bank and the Greater Chicago Food Depository, among others, offer free culinary training programs for low-income and unemployed residents. These programs provide their students with job skills, life skills, internship experiences, and job placement assistance.^{11,12} Programs like these increase employment in the local community and directly influence poverty and food insecurity.

Small Business Incubation Community Kitchens

Kitchen incubators are shared spaces that provide patrons with a licensed commercial kitchen with the necessary equipment and tools needed to start a food-based business venture that are rented on an as needed basis. These spaces can provide small businesses, such as a new catering company, a place to get started without paying major upfront costs.¹³ One example of an incubator kitchen is the Rockingham Community Kitchen in Reidsville, North Carolina. This facility provides an inexpensive facility with a full range of equipment that can be reserved by local community members.¹⁴

Research has shown that after participating in a community kitchen:

- ✓ The proportion of people who consumed at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables daily increased from 29% to 47%.¹⁵
- ✓ Some participants, self reporting as low income, no longer needed to use charitable food assistance (e.g., food pantries) to have enough food to last until the end of the month.¹⁶

Recommendations for Community Organizations:

Recognizing the social, economic, and health benefits of community kitchens, we recommend:

- ⇒ Increasing awareness of community kitchen models and potential impacts.
- ⇒ Increasing the number of community kitchens, especially in low income areas.
- ⇒ Engaging those who have a hard time accessing food in the planning and implementation processes.
- ⇒ Establishing partnerships between food banks and community kitchens to promote low-cost meals.
- ⇒ Ensuring equal access to the use of community kitchens.
- ⇒ Promoting relationships between local farmers and community kitchens to provide local and fresh produce to be used in cooking courses and demonstrations.

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