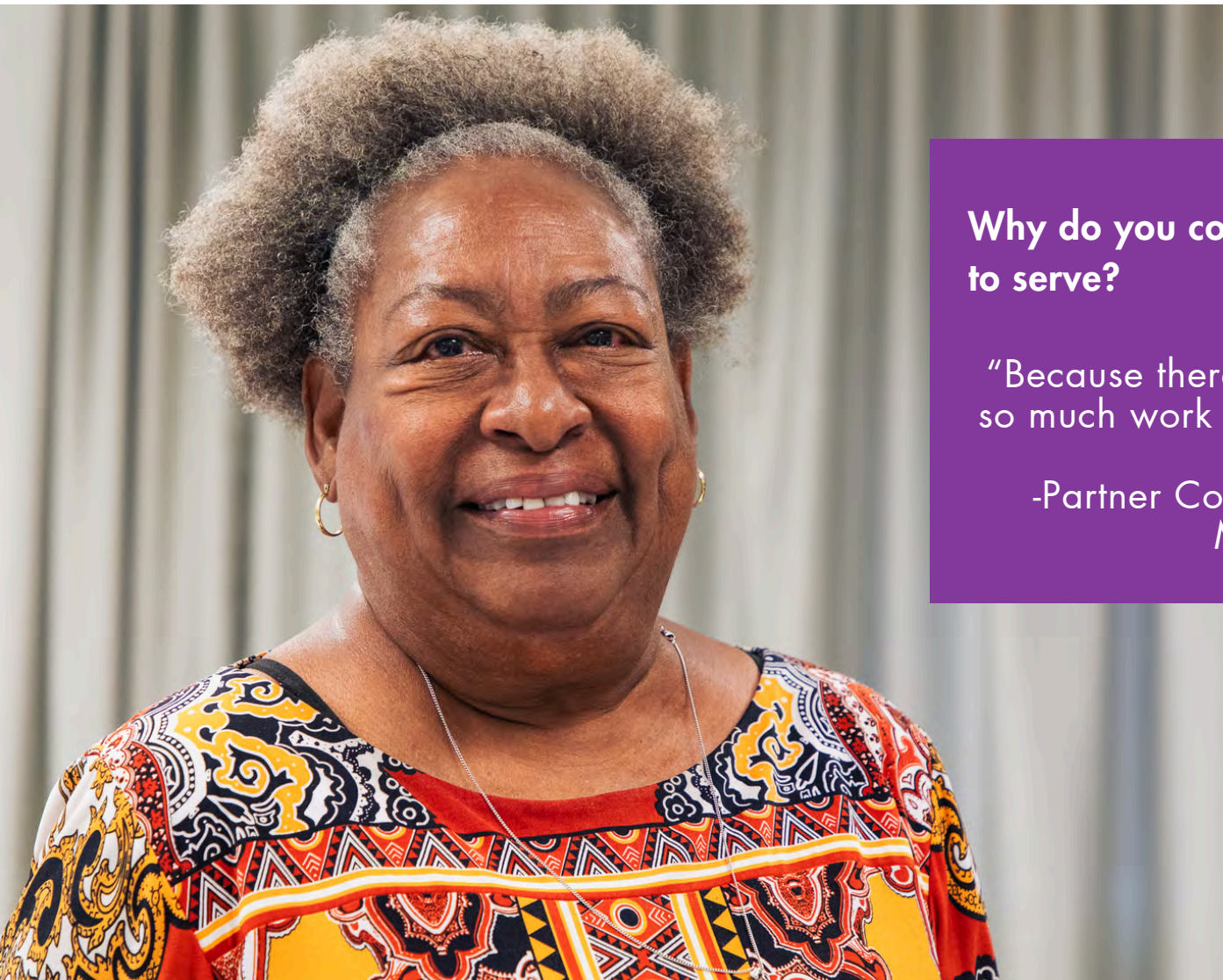




FROM VOICES TO ACTION:

Achieving Integration through Collaboration

Community Engagement
Joint Committee Impact Report
October 2024



Why do you continue to serve?

“Because there’s still so much work to do.”

-Partner Committee Member

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From the President & CEO

There is far more wasted food in the United States than there is hunger. Food banking first started with vision that if we set up a strong enough logistics infrastructure to capture that surplus food and distribute it through a network of charities, at least on a day-to-day basis, we could end hunger. Over time, we came to realize that this theory of change had a huge flaw: we were mistaken in thinking of hunger (or food insecurity) as an isolated problem.

The households we serve at Houston Food Bank rarely only struggle with just food. They are also struggling to pay rent and utilities, medical costs, transportation and other incidentals. Food just tends to be the most flexible expense and the most available form of aid. To help “fill the food bucket” won’t work.

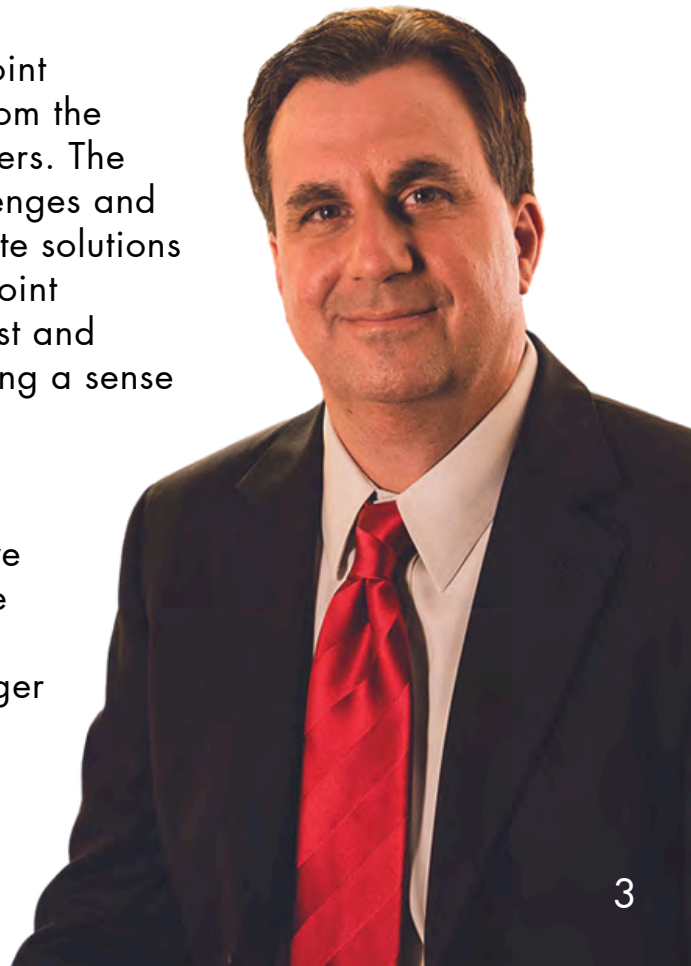
As a result, Houston Food Bank has been on a journey to find real solutions. We currently distribute food valued at \$250 million dollars and believe we can grow that to half a billion dollars per year. But how do we create the most sustainable impact? How do we use our resources to truly shorten the line? How do we end the line?

These questions led us to challenge not only what we should be doing, but how we should decide what we should be doing. And who should decide. In 2021, Houston Bank created the Community Engagement department to ensure community voices are central to the food bank’s strategies and operations.

One of the key initiatives of this department is the Joint Committee, which is composed of representatives from the food bank, partner agencies, and community members. The Joint Committee meets regularly to discuss the challenges and opportunities facing the food system, and to co-create solutions that are relevant, well-informed, and effective. The Joint Committee also serves as a platform for building trust and relationships among the participants, and for fostering a sense of ownership and accountability for the outcomes.

Houston Food Bank believes authentic community representation fosters confidence in creating effective solutions. With support from the board and staff, we remain committed to shared decision-making and advancing our mission to lead the fight against hunger with the power of community.

Brian Greene



Our Journey

Committees made up of neighbors and community organizations help Houston Food Bank to understand local needs and concerns better. Those committees provide valuable insights that make programs and services more effective and relevant. By extending committee members useful information about the food bank, sharing power in decisions, and encouraging open conversations, we have built a strong sense of unity and shared ownership among members. Engaging the community builds trust and shows a commitment to transparency.

It also fosters stronger relationships and creates opportunities for collaboration. By including key voices, committees ensure all perspectives are heard. This leads to more informed decisions, and greater community support and involvement. Overall these committees act as a bridge, making sure the organization's actions reflect the community's true needs.



Key Milestones

2021

Department & Committee Formation:

The Community Engagement department was established in November. Partners and neighbors were selected through an application process.

2022

Utilizing Insights: Members identified the Top 10 goals through sessions focused on sharing industry and program knowledge, reviewing data, and discussing real-time impacts on neighborhoods, as well as beginning to implement high-impact, low-risk projects.

2023

Joint Committee Formation:

Staff, partners, and community members united to refine goals and unify agendas through structured work group approach. Four work groups were established: Capacity and Infrastructure, Resources and Tools, Advocacy, and Program Enhancements.

2024

The Work Continues: Members reengaged to deep dive, develop scopes, and discuss project impacts, simultaneous to addressing organizational staffing constraints. Joint Committee members remain active and expanded the Advocacy Workgroup.



In 2023, committee members and Houston Food Bank staff identified shared objectives that could have a wider impact on the organization, its network, and the community at large. To accomplish these objectives, most members believed a structured workgroup approach would be the most effective. Consequently, four work groups were established:

Capacity and Infrastructure

By revising Houston Food Bank’s infrastructure-granting policies and practices, members are laying the groundwork for an organization-wide embrace of fairness and a robust accountability framework.

Program Enhancements

Members are creating a more dignified, fresh-produce forward enhancement to the Backpack Buddy program, which currently provides school-age children with pre-packaged, shelf-stable food for the weekend. The new, choice-centered model will be adaptable for both rural and urban schools.

Resources & Tools

Members are aiming to empower communities by ensuring information about local food pantries and services are easily accessible. Their work is addressing systemic barriers such as language, technical skills, and the functionality and accuracy of the Houston Food Bank’s website – challenges that have previously obstructed progress.

Advocacy

Members focus on the broader systemic and policy-facing opportunities within the housing, transportation, healthcare, and employment sectors. They attended advocacy trainings, gathered perspectives, and will develop a legislative guide that can be shared across networks.



“Honest conversations empower neighbors and partner organizations to understand how resources flow through the ... communities we serve. This knowledge helps build collaborative relationships to meet community-specific needs.”

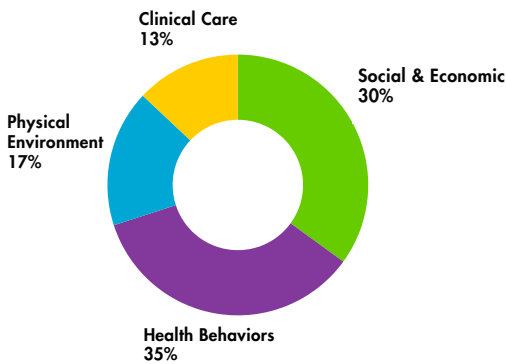
Our Committee Family

“The Houston Food Bank Community Engagement team acknowledges the commitment and participation shown by our neighbors, partner organizations, and staff for their time, insights and commitment to supporting our communities. Thank you for your dedication, grace with missteps, sharing your truth, and holding everyone accountable. **You are appreciated... thank you.**”

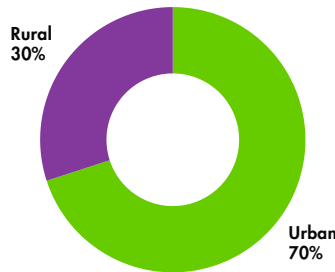


Joint Committee Makeup (Partners & Neighbors)

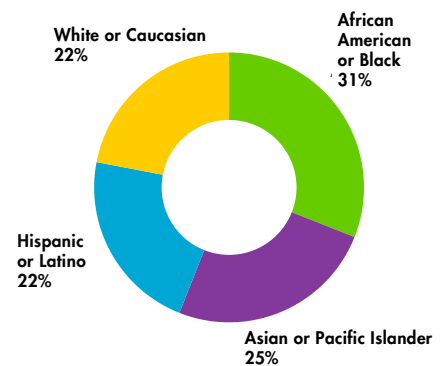
Areas of Passion



Geographic Area

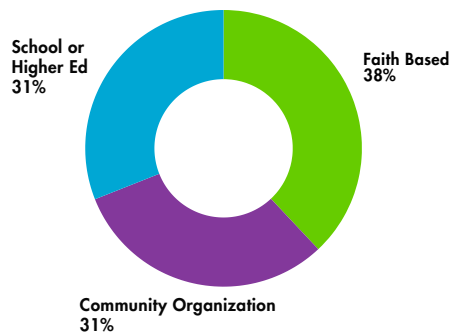


Ethnicity

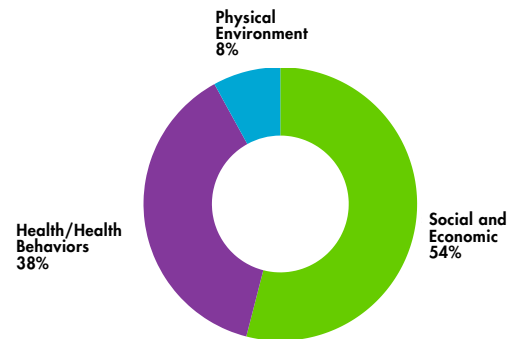


Partners represent varied organizations and industries, including from sectors defined by the County Health Rankings model.

Composition



Industry Represented

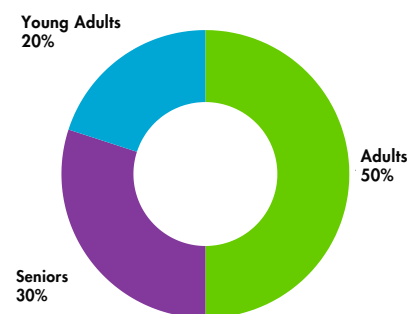


100% of **Neighbors** live or have lived experience with food insecurity

30% are primary caregivers

20% are higher education students

Age Range



Member Reflections: Power Sharing & Co-Creation

Following an intensive two-and-a-half-year journey, Committee Members reflected on the impact of their individual contributions, shared roles, commitment, group dynamics, and expertise as a pathway to build a future for the work.

What worked well:

- Intentional onboarding and information-sharing for a year solidified the foundation for informed and community-led systemic work.
- Listening and being among partners, neighbors, and food bank staff leadership produces understanding that cost-efficiency increases agency effectiveness.
- Within a cultivated safe structure, trust is formed, allowing varying perspectives to emerge, break barriers, and overcome perceptions and biases to inform best practices.
- Community involved collaboration delivers meaningful, on-mission action.



- Both Houston Food Bank and our partners benefited from a 360-degree view of each other's knowledge of programs and perspectives.
- Communities and their needs are constantly changing. This requires an ongoing commitment to receive and act upon real-time inputs from those actively engaged in our shared mission.
- Houston Food Bank investment in organization and resident participation in the mission to provide food for better lives creates a burgeoning ambassador force that multiplies impact to influence policy, funding and needed resources.

Most enjoyable for me during this process has been Houston Food Bank's deliberate intent and focus on respect, values, and principles of democracy [...]

-Neighbor Committee Member

Member Reflections: Power Sharing & Co-Creation

The trust built within the committee allowed members to openly share feedback and insights, leading to a collective realization of future opportunities for effective strategies, collaboration and decision-making.

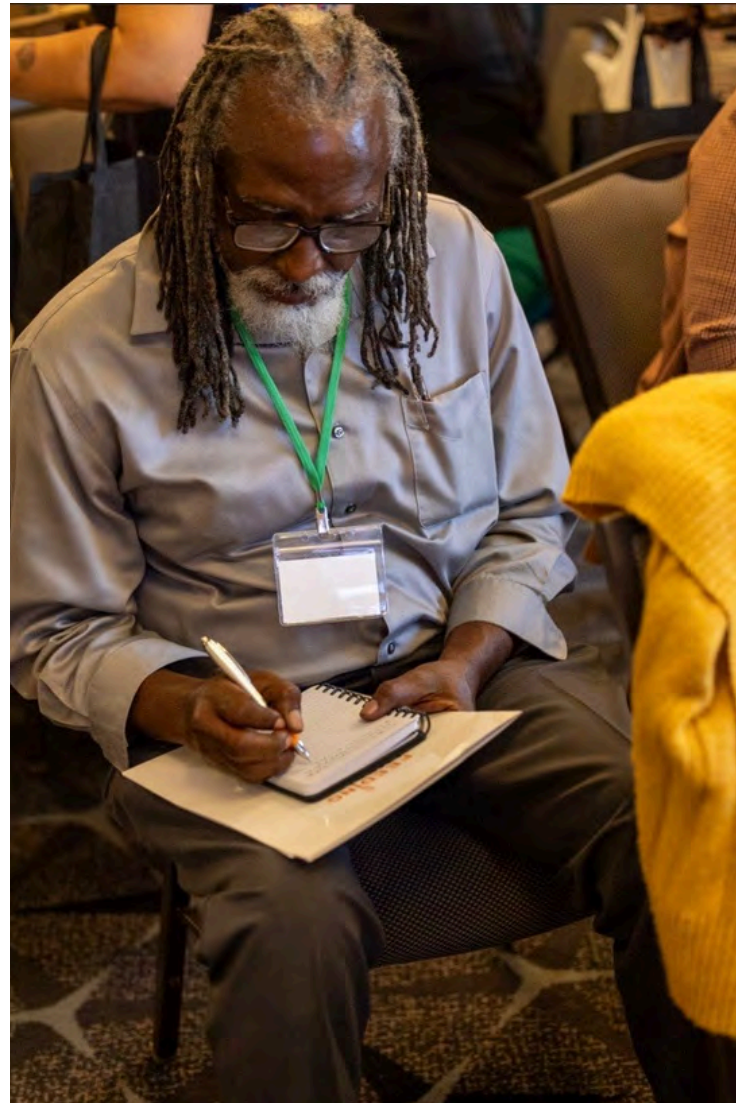
What can be done differently:

Group Dynamics: Integrate a practice that encourages broader participation in workgroup settings, enabling members not in decision-making roles to offer feedback at different project stages and discussions.

Differing perspectives: Continue to acknowledge groups for sharing their perspectives, ensuring all voices are heard, and collectively navigating concerns to reach solutions.

Address process barriers: Advance notice of organizational staff changes would support preparation and development of contingency plans. Transparent funding declarations for committee efforts would streamline operations, facilitate cross-workgroup budget optimization conversations, and expedite implementation lead times.

Engage experts: Members strongly desire ongoing exposure, face time, and insights from Houston Food Bank's executive leadership and board to stay informed about local, state, national and international trends in food insecurity.



The collaborative nature of the model promotes transparency and accountability in decision-making processes. By involving stakeholders in co-creation, there is greater visibility into how decisions are made and how resources are allocated, fostering trust and accountability.

-Partner Committee Member

Member Voices

Through survey results, we determined Joint Committee members stayed committed to the cause because of the opportunity to help shape the direction and priorities of the Houston Food Bank. Joint Committee members also enjoyed learning that people from different backgrounds can share similar goals. Members also noted Houston Food Bank's deliberate focus on respect and democracy, which has created a welcoming space for sharing and growth. They also appreciated the collaborative nature of the Joint Committee model, which promotes transparency and accountability in decision-making processes.

I stayed involved to help shape the direction and priorities of the organization.

-Partner Committee Member

Partners and neighbors reflect on what drew them to apply to be a committee member in 2022:

- Make a meaningful difference
- Be a change agent
- Be a community voice to help others
- Share my experience with food insecurity
- Advocate for policy
- Gain knowledge, insights to help me help others
- Improve operations, processes
- Drive sustainability
- Ensure no one goes hungry
- Collaborate to find realistic, creative solutions
- Provide a better experience for our food-insecure community



Member Voices

Survey results also showed Joint Committee members felt heard, valued, and that their perspectives were actively considered in key decisions. Members also noted a strong sense of shared ownership, recognizing that they each held a valuable seat at the decision-making table, contributing to meaningful outcomes.



An Effective Workgroup Structure

93%

of members reported the workgroup structure is extremely or very effective. One person reported the structure was moderately effective.

Members Feel Heard

50%

of neighborhood advisors report they felt heard "Almost always" while half said "to a considerable degree." A majority of Partners said they felt heard "Almost always." Two felt they were heard "to a considerable degree."



Participation Has Made A Difference

66%

of Neighbors and Partners aligned, with two-thirds reporting they "somewhat" feel they made a difference, while a third believed they'd made a difference "to a great extent."



Member Voices

Partner members shared valuable insights on the innovative adaptations they implemented as a direct result of the information provided during the meetings. These contributions underscored the dynamic and responsive nature of our collaborative efforts highlighting how our collective knowledge is actively shaping and improving our strategies. The changes made below by partners are long-term and systemic.

What Partner Organizations Have Done Differently Due to Joint Committee Participation:

- Attract and engage more volunteers
- Expand local community representative voices
- Become more culturally responsive to our neighbors
- Add resources to address food insecurity
- Take a more community-centered approach
- Think differently about offerings
- Think about how we educate to help reduce waste



- Improve food distribution process
- Understand value of neighbor's voice
- Share best practices
- Work collaboratively with other organizations

78%

of organizations engaged with similar partners because of their learnings from the Joint Committee.

I have had the chance to provide input into decision making processes such as identifying priorities, developing strategies, and allocating resources. This input is based on my lived experiences and expertise in relevant areas... I also have opportunities to share my personal stories and experiences related to food insecurity as a form of advocacy. These narratives can help raise awareness build empathy and inform decision makers what the lived realities of those affected by food insecurity.

-Partner Committee Member

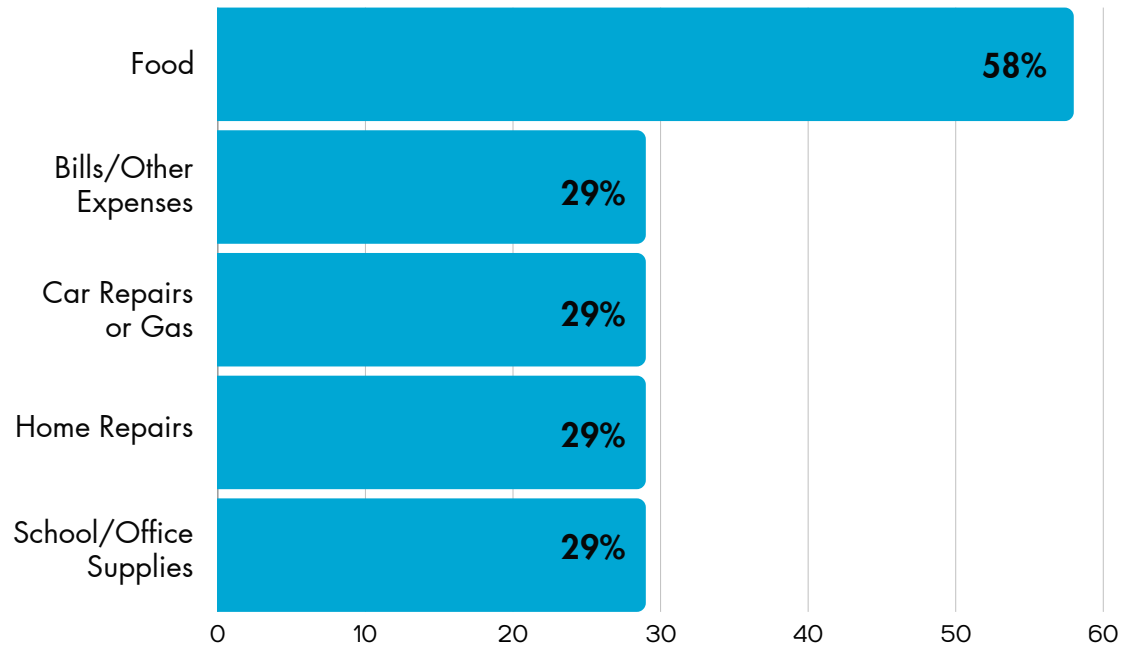
Member Voices

The Houston Food Bank investment in an annual stipend for the Joint Committee is a unique model implemented in an effective way to support participation by stakeholders. Neighbors and Partners believe the **stipend value was very fair** and they also agree the **payment format was very effective**.

Neighbors' Use of Stipend:



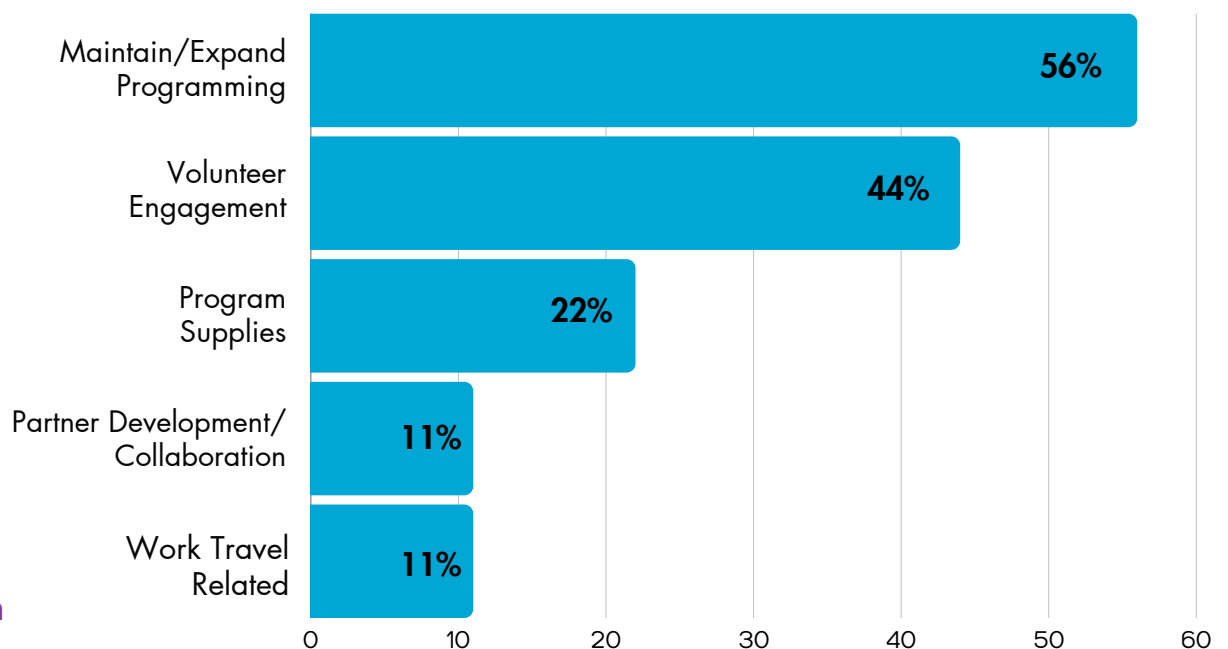
Those who received the stipend report positive impact on family



Partners' Use of Stipend:



Those who received the stipend report positive impact on mission



Member Empowerment

By participating in an Advisory Committee, neighbors and partners gained new skills through various activities. They attended trainings, shared strategies, and engaged in both national and local opportunities. They also practiced community outreach, reviewed data, and explored programs, policies, and practices in depth, which enhanced their overall understanding and capabilities. The collective efforts and actions supported members' desire to be more creatively confident in finding agile and relevant solutions for larger-scale projects.

What skills have you been able to build as a result of being part of the Committee(s)?

100%

- Better understand the needs of my community
- Feel better prepared to share my story and experiences

86%

- Engaged with elected officials
- Incorporate feedback into community solutions
- Understand what it take for organizations to implement a project or service

71%

- Incorporated culture and language into programs and services
- Improved public speaking

57%

- Collected information from the community
- Evaluated effective programs
- Formed a network of people with shared and similar interests
- Learned to work with organizations, residents, and funders at the same time

43%

- Helped to design projects and pilots
- Read and understand policy for gaps and advocacy purposes

How have you engaged with your neighbors and community as a result of your learnings from the Joint Committee?

71%

- Engaged with elected officials
- Incorporated community feedback into solutions
- Incorporated culture and language into programs and services

43%

- Formed a neighborhood-level network with shared interests

14%

- Able to guide others to the food bank or nearby pantries when needed

Early Impact

In an ever-evolving landscape, seizing opportunities at the right moment is crucial to maintaining a competitive edge and driving impactful change. Our committee members have made the strategic decision to act on current opportunities rather than waiting, guided by a comprehensive analysis of industry trends, emerging technologies, and the pressing needs of our community.

Through rigorous evaluation, it became evident that the potential benefits of immediate action far outweigh the risk associated with delay. Acting now allowed the organization to leverage favorable conditions, capitalize on momentum, and address urgent challenges. By choosing to move forward without hesitation, the committee is positioned to achieve greater outcomes and set a precedent for future initiatives.



Highlights of the early impact between 2022 to 2023 include:

Advocacy

- Committee framework replicated by partners in neighborhood-level coalitions to drive neighborhood-level change
- Early engagement with local Elected Officials about community needs and experiences
- National advocacy by neighbors related to Farm Bill

Capacity and Infrastructure

- Elevated need for organization-wide fair granting practices and policies

Program Enhancements

- Integration of culturally responsive foods on partner ordering platform
- Movement toward multi-language support

Resources and Tools

- Revised neighbor intake form to be more dignified and streamlined
- Development of Food and Culture Guide and Culture Map
- Initial improvements to Partner Locator Map for enhanced end-user experience

Looking to the Future

Integrating community voice into systems change initiatives is not just a complementary process but a foundational alignment. This alignment ensures that transformative efforts are grounded in the lived experiences, needs, and aspirations of those most affected by systemic issues.

What Houston Food Bank has learned from this experience in the last two-and-a-half years is that change initiatives that include community voices are more likely to address real, on-the-ground challenges and authentically represent the community. This authentic representation builds a sense of comfort when we sit side-by-side and co-create solutions that are just.

Fueled by our early successes and insights, the Joint Committee is determined to carry forward our vision and projects. With a unified spirit, we are considering the exciting possibility of continuing to address other opportunities or integrating a second cohort in the future. **Our commitment to progress is guided by the desire to see:**

- **A shift to shared decision-making and thought leadership:** Adjustments were required as we adopted this new approach.
- **Evolving trust and relationships:** We have invested time in this slow but essential process for sustained change.
- **Continued Houston Food Bank Leadership support:** We need direct Board and Executive Leadership involvement to facilitate knowledge sharing, educate on market trends, and allocate resources for human-centered and place-based strategies through the Community Engagement Department.

Co-creation provides —

opportunity to build resilient strategies that can adapt to future challenges,

space and intention to discover novel approaches,

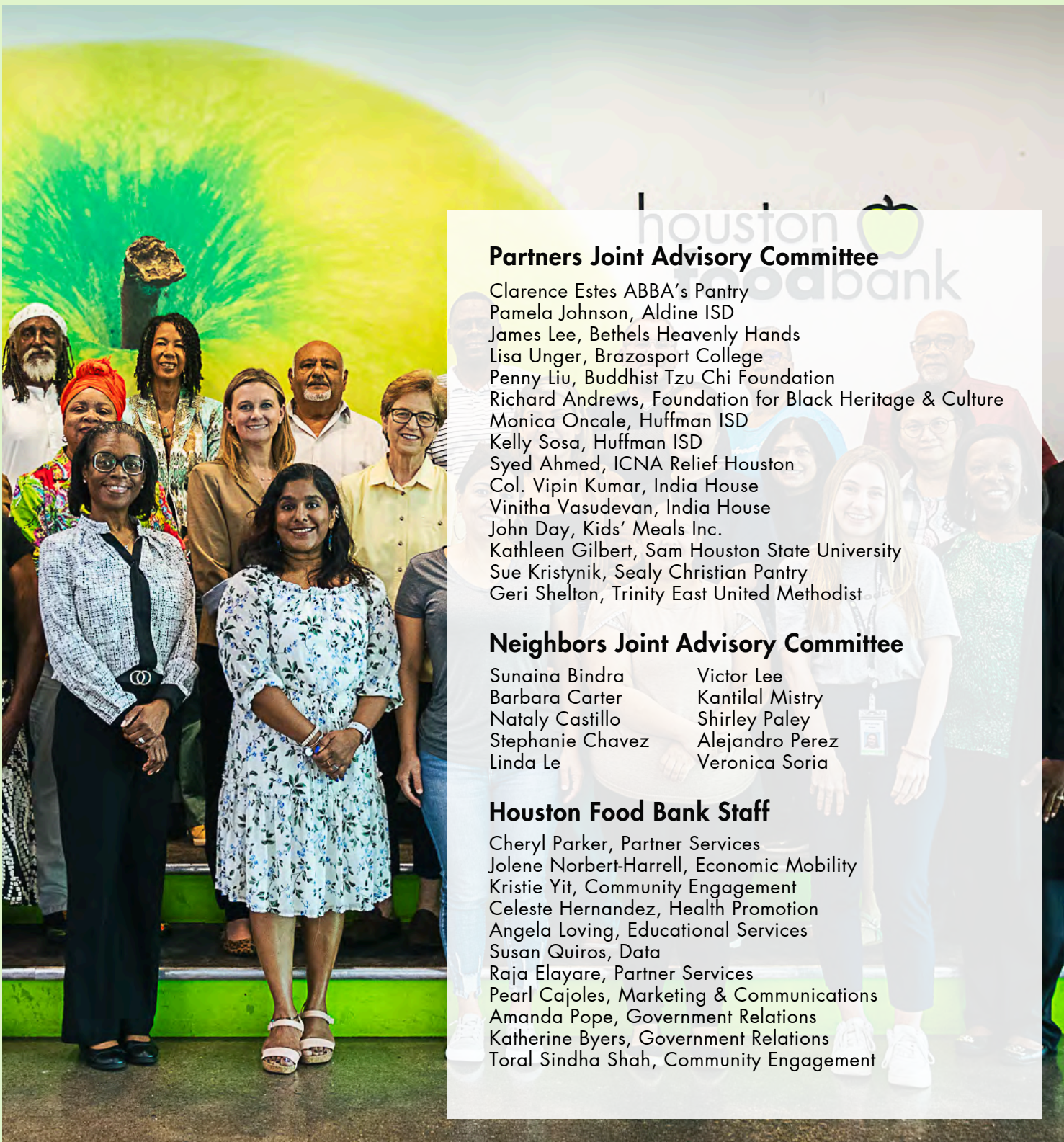
a chance to look at the role external and rooted factors truly play in a person's home,

the validation of experiences and knowledge,

and connections.



**With sincere gratitude to the
Houston Food Bank Board and
Executive Leadership Team for their
ongoing support and partnership.**



Partners Joint Advisory Committee

Clarence Estes ABBA's Pantry
Pamela Johnson, Aldine ISD
James Lee, Bethels Heavenly Hands
Lisa Unger, Brazosport College
Penny Liu, Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation
Richard Andrews, Foundation for Black Heritage & Culture
Monica Oncale, Huffman ISD
Kelly Sosa, Huffman ISD
Syed Ahmed, ICNA Relief Houston
Col. Vipin Kumar, India House
Vinitha Vasudevan, India House
John Day, Kids' Meals Inc.
Kathleen Gilbert, Sam Houston State University
Sue Kristynik, Sealy Christian Pantry
Geri Shelton, Trinity East United Methodist

Neighbors Joint Advisory Committee

Sunaina Bindra	Victor Lee
Barbara Carter	Kantilal Mistry
Nataly Castillo	Shirley Paley
Stephanie Chavez	Alejandro Perez
Linda Le	Veronica Soria

Houston Food Bank Staff

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