

SECTION: SHELTER

TOPIC TITLE: Food Justice



Importance of Topic:

Everyone has an inherent right to access healthy, fresh food. Access is a mixture between location, affordability, and cultural appropriateness. Food justice is important for everyone because food is culture. Food is your family. Food is part of how we communicate with one another; it's a way we share our love. Being able to enjoy and prepare food that nourishes the body and keeps us healthy is connected to our ability to stay sane as human beings ([Source](#)). For some survivors, their abusers have used food as a way to assert power and control. There may be limitations on what kinds of foods they are allowed to eat, limiting access to the kitchen pantry, restrictions on household grocery budget, or verbally abusive tactics to shame survivors about weight gain. Domestic violence shelters must care about food justice in order to wholly meet the individualized needs of survivors, using food as another opportunity in supporting survivor agency, voice, and choice.

Statutes/Professional Standards:

- Code of Virginia Reference: [§ 63.2-801](#). Food Stamp Program. This article authorizes the implementation of a food stamp program across Virginia in accordance with the Federal Food Stamp Act.
 - [Professional Standards Reference](#): STANDARD #14: Sexual and Domestic Violence Agencies will address diverse needs of the community served, providing specialized advocacy programs and population-specific interventions. Demonstrate efforts to provide a range of specialized advocacy services to identified populations within the agency's service area that may include race, ethnicity, national origin, age, disability, religion, limited English proficiency, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, refugees, age and developmentally specific, and non-English speaking.
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Terms Used or Needed to Understand this Topic:

Food Justice: Food Justice is communities exercising their right to grow, sell, and eat healthy food. Healthy food is fresh, nutritious, affordable, culturally-appropriate, and grown locally with care for the well-being of the land, workers, and animals ([Food Justice Glossary](#)).

Food Security: Access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life: the availability of nutritional and safe foods and the ability to acquire the food in socially acceptable ways (without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies). Food Insecurity is any limitation on that access ([Food Justice Glossary](#)).

Food Sovereignty: The right of peoples – especially farmers – to define their own agricultural and food systems. Food sovereignty demands that the policies and mechanisms involved in production, distribution, and consumption of food focus on creating ecologically sustainable systems and healthy lives for people, rather than profits for corporations ([Food Justice Glossary](#)).

Did You Know?

Certain individuals may be eligible to receive SNAP benefits within 7 days. Applications can be submitted online here: <https://commonhelp.virginia.gov/access/>.

Find a local food bank here: [Find Your Local Food Bank](#).

Find a local food pantry here: [Food Pantries | Soup Kitchens | Food Banks](#).

Find a local farmer's market here: [Virginia Markets](#).

Food Desert Map: [Food Access Research Atlas](#).

Racial/Social Justice Focus:

Food insecurity disproportionately impacts people of color and people with limited financial resources. The food system itself is built on centuries of the [exploitation of people of color](#). Meeting the needs of survivors' diverse customs, traditions, cultures, economic disparities, and religions through food access honors these differences and promotes individual and family well-being.

Scenario 1: Zaira is a Muslim woman who has long suffered at the hands of her spouse. She recently contacted her local domestic violence program seeking support and talked with an advocate about her options. Zaira adheres to a Halal diet, which she considers incredibly important in relation to her religious beliefs. She expresses uncertainty about coming into shelter, as she wants to be able to wholly continue her religious practices outside of her home. Zaira asks the advocate about the availability of certain foods and the capacity for making individual meals as opposed to eating communally. While the advocate is unsure at first, she offers to work with Zaira to make a plan to meet her food needs and begins to research about Halal food in preparation for Zaira's arrival.

- How could limiting access to certain foods become a barrier to shelter for people with cultural or religious dietary needs?
- How could your shelter accommodate separate kitchen prep spaces in order to support survivors' dietary needs?
- When resources are limited, how could your agency ensure access to a variety of perishable and non-perishable groceries?

Scenario 2: Chloe is a single woman who has experienced extensive emotional and verbal abuse from her abuser, especially related to food. Her abuser often kept locks on the pantry door and only allowed Chloe to cook foods he specifically wanted to eat. Chloe was only allowed to eat the leftovers and some salad greens. When she arrived at the shelter, she nodded when the advocates gave her a tour of the communal pantry but was not observed preparing food for the first week she was in the shelter. Staff did not want to overstep boundaries, not knowing Chloe's schedule, so did not check in about this until Chloe later presented with a migraine and appeared as if she was about to faint in the hallway.

- What are Chloe's immediate health needs?
- How can staff support Chloe's healing and recovery process during her stay in shelter?
- What additional community resources could Chloe need long term?

Trauma-informed Focus:

Emphasizing survivor choice is a recurring theme in trauma-informed advocacy and ensuring access to an array of food options and space to store and prepare meals elevates survivor autonomy during a critical time. Trauma responses related to food justice may include a survivor hoarding food items, eating in a very particular way, or developing an eating disorder. Staff understanding these responses can create opportunities for survivors to talk about the trauma they've experienced and how it relates to food.

Promising Practices:

Overview of General Characteristics:

- Shelter residents have a right to on-the-spot access to healthy food.
- Although donated food may be received in waves, and staff may have reason to reserve some donations for a later date, families without food should have ready access to food.
- Shelters and non-shelter programs should consider the short term and intermediate term needs of families by developing a plan to purchase, or otherwise acquire, perishable items on a recurring basis, as not all families have resources to purchase these items.
- Shelters provide multiple spaces for food storage and preparation to accommodate the number of residents living in shelter and to foster a positive communal living environment.
- Shelters residents are accommodated for their dietary needs, with consideration on types of food products (ex. Halal meat), and kitchen supplies (specific pans, rice makers, etc.) needed to prepare their meals. It is ideal if shelters already have some of these items present within their food pantry.

Examples:

- **Southside Center for Violence Prevention** (SCVP) has worked to ensure 24/7 access to perishable foods, pantry items, and kitchen space for everyone at their shelter to support meal preparation at any time. They have created a space where

multiple people can utilize the kitchen at one time and there is ample storage for a variety of foods. This has led to group meals happening organically and some survivors sharing cooking skills and techniques with survivors with less cooking experience. While the agency relies primarily on food bank donations to keep the pantry stocked, they have been able to leverage local funding streams to fill the gaps and rely on VDSS OFV funding when necessary with a goal to have a diverse array of healthful food options available to survivors. During intake, staff inquires about food restrictions of any kind and will purchase items that are not readily available in the shelter. SCVP works with individuals to access SNAP benefits if they are not already receiving them and helps plan for what the agency can provide and what survivors will need to use their benefits to purchase. A staff nurse is available to provide nutrition planning support for survivors. One challenge faced by SCVP relates to infant formula - in order to make sure fresh formula is available in the preferred brand of the infant, SCVP must purchase formula for infants that come to shelter. This can be quite expensive, but they are committed to ensuring access to food for infants, children, and adults and will leverage all available resources to do so.

- At **Shelter House**, clients reside in apartment-style units, where they are able to maintain and cook their own food. Resources, such as food pantries and a local global market grocery store are in close proximity to the units. Shelter House has an open pantry available 24/7 on site, where people can take what they need to supplement what they aren't getting through their own funds and/or food stamps. To accommodate the diverse populations that they serve, Shelter House has in-house items such as halal meat and ingredients for Hispanic and Asian foods. They work with local churches to help with getting specific cooking items like rice makers and diverse types of pans/cooking utensils that weren't in shelter before. At intake entry, clients are asked about specific food needs, allergies, and dietary restrictions, which is discussed more specifically with their case manager. Shelter House purchases food in bulk, but when specific needs occur they quickly reach out to donors to accommodate clients in a timely manner. This was especially the case when a Vietnamese client shared she primarily ate Vietnamese food - Shelter House connected with a donor who was able to accommodate this need. A staff member has been teaching cooking classes to clients to support nutritional education. They

prioritize fresh and frozen foods, working with Whole Foods regularly for a weekly produce pick up. They have also had relationships with Panera, WaWa, Chick-Fil-A for frozen food products such as breakfast sandwiches. They are hoping to expand their partnerships with Wegmans for future partnership.

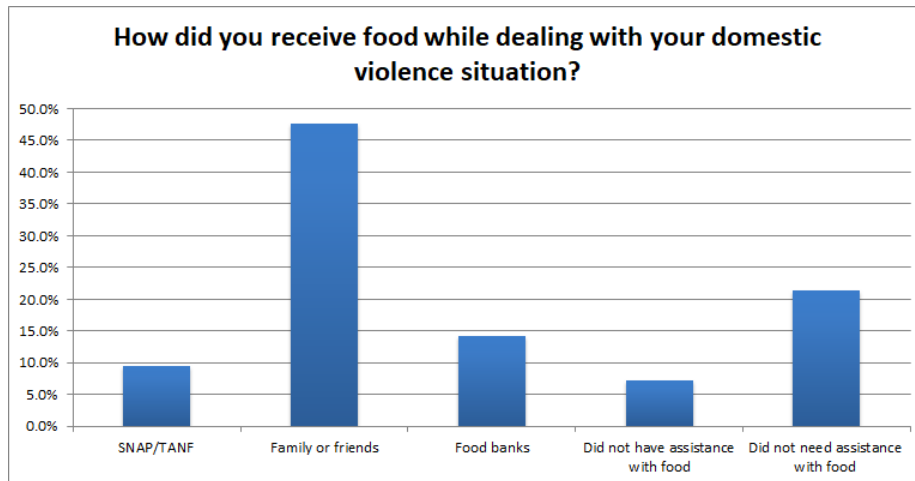
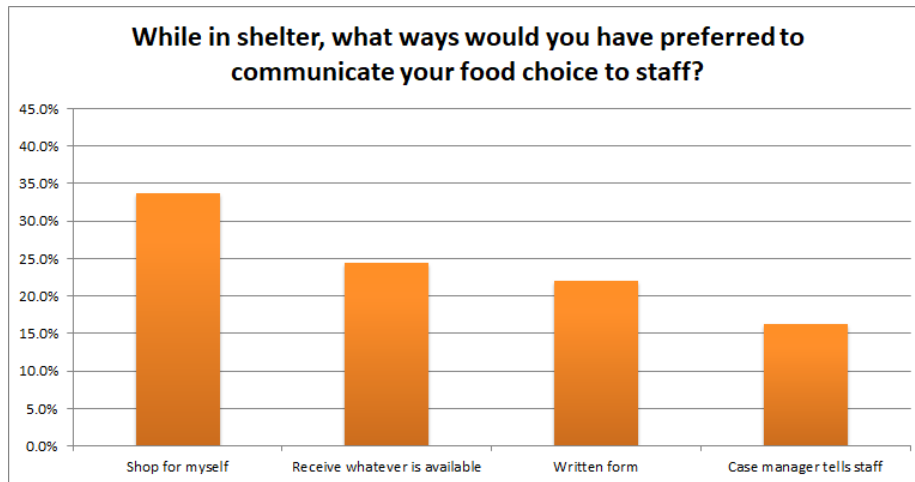
Program Focus:

- Does your practice of food access in shelter maximize client autonomy?
 - Do clients have a choice about when, how, and what to eat?
- Does available food take into account dietary requirements, preferences and cultural/religious practices?
 - Are families specifically asked about food needs?
 - What are the active steps taken by your program to procure these foods?
- Is food access and meal preparation controlled in shelter? Or do families have ready access to food and meal preparation?
- How does your program ensure daily access to fresh, non-perishable food items?

Survivor voice:

Documenting Our Work Evidence

- "There was food options (halal). It was nice to see good interactions and genuine concern shown for me by staff was great for me"
- "During the time I had no money they had food to help get through the time"
- "Someone was stealing food from myself and my son"
- "People would take the donations to their rooms leaving the rest with no food other than the stuff in the pantry"
- "I am Jewish my dietary needs are not always met I do not (cannot) receive food stamps so I'm dependent on shelter food"



Data from Survivor Voice Survey, 2021
(Second chart is related to individuals who did not stay in shelter)

COVID-19 Focus:

The provision of emergency shelter and other domestic violence services must be voluntary and without conditions or requirements. Pandemics mean that provision of shelter and services may be contingent on being negative for symptoms of COVID-19 or proving that you have a negative COVID-19 test which could be used to deny services, however this is against statutes relating to voluntary services. Services cannot be withheld from survivors based on COVID-19 test status. Steps can be taken, though, to promote the best safety practices.

Food shortages have the possibility of affecting all populations due to COVID-19. With shelter structures rapidly changing, the way that the nutritional needs of survivors are met will also need to change. Agencies will need to determine new plans for getting survivors any food supplies they need within alternate shelter locations. Agencies should also make

themselves aware of how schools are providing free meals and distribute this information to survivors with children to ensure that they are able to take advantage of these resources.

During COVID-19:

- How will your agency continue receiving food supplies and provide them to survivors at various shelter site locations?
- How will your agency allow clients to have choices in the foods they eat even if kitchen access needs to be restricted?

COVID-19 Examples:

- Due to COVID-19, staff at Shelter House made a choice to close the 24/7 access to the open pantry due to social distancing difficulties within the pantry. This was a challenging decision, as it impacts survivor agency. However, clients can call and request items needed to be dropped off at their units. Clients are able to call 24/7 to get any food items they need and are able to provide a weekly list of food needed to be added to Shelter House's online Peapod order, which is also delivered right to their apartment units. Despite some corporate partners decreasing or currently pausing food donations, Shelter House has worked with their community for food donations during COVID. A challenge during the program is accessing enough fresh foods like fruits and meats, which are typically more expensive. Without the support of Whole Foods during COVID-19, there has been a decline in accessing these items. The agency prefers frozen vegetables over canned vegetables, for health and nutritional reasons, however more donations arrive in canned form. Leadership has pushed the frozen and fresh food for nutritional value since increasing access for fresh and healthy foods leads to healthier home cooked meals.

Additional Resources + Links:

Videos:

- [Food Justice](#): PBS, 30 minute documentary about food access through a social justice perspective.

Publications:

- [Perspectives: Food Justice](#): Nourish Life, brief interview discussing the importance of Food Justice and Cultural Appropriateness in food access.
- [Food Justice Glossary](#): Repair the World, two-pager with language/terminology related to the food justice movement.
- [The Grocery Gap: Who Has Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters](#): The Food Trust and PolicyLink, research and policy document on food access and the impact on people with limited financial means and People of Color.