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A Process Evaluation of Utah's Food Security Council

Palak Gupta, Heidi LeBlanc

Abstract

Utah's Food Security Council (FSC) brings together diverse stakeholders to address food security across the state. As FSC concluded its inaugural year of work, a process evaluation assessed its progress. Findings will inform FSC's future strategic improvements, partnerships, and community outreach activities.

Introduction

Food security is critical to public health and welfare, ensuring all individuals have access to nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and preferences [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 1996]. Food security encompasses four important pillars, including food availability, access, utilization, and stability, all essential for individuals and communities to lead healthy and productive lives (FAO, 2008).

In Utah, 12.3% of families face food insecurity, with 1 in 6 children suffering from hunger (Feeding America, 2022). Recognizing the importance of addressing food insecurity and promoting access to healthy food options, the Utah Food Security Council (FSC) was established under Senate Bill 133 in 2022 (Utah State Legislature, 2022). This council serves as a collaborative platform, bringing together stakeholders from government agencies, non-profit organizations, community groups, and other relevant entities to address issues related to food security within the state.

Response and Participants

The FSC is housed under the Hunger Solutions Institute at Utah State University (USU), and it started its operation in January 2023. It operates with the mission of developing comprehensive strategies, policies, and initiatives to enhance food security, reduce food insecurity rates, and promote equitable access to nutritious food for all Utah residents. Through research, advocacy, education, and community engagement, the council endeavors to identify barriers to food access, implement effective solutions, and foster partnerships to address food insecurity at both the local and statewide levels.

As the FSC completed its inaugural year, conducting a process evaluation became crucial. This evaluation served as a key mechanism to assess the council's operational effectiveness, identify community reach, identify best practices of the council, and identify opportunities for strategic improvement in the future. As the council progresses into subsequent years, the insights gathered from this evaluation will serve as a foundational pillar for informed decision-making, and efficacy in advancing food security for all Utah residents.

Data for this evaluation were collected through two methods: (a) Primary data via a Qualtrics survey sent to FSC listserv members ($N = 85$), assessing partnership development, council

impact on organizational food security efforts, and future priorities; and (b) Secondary data from the council's website, social media, press releases, and news articles provided insights into community reach.

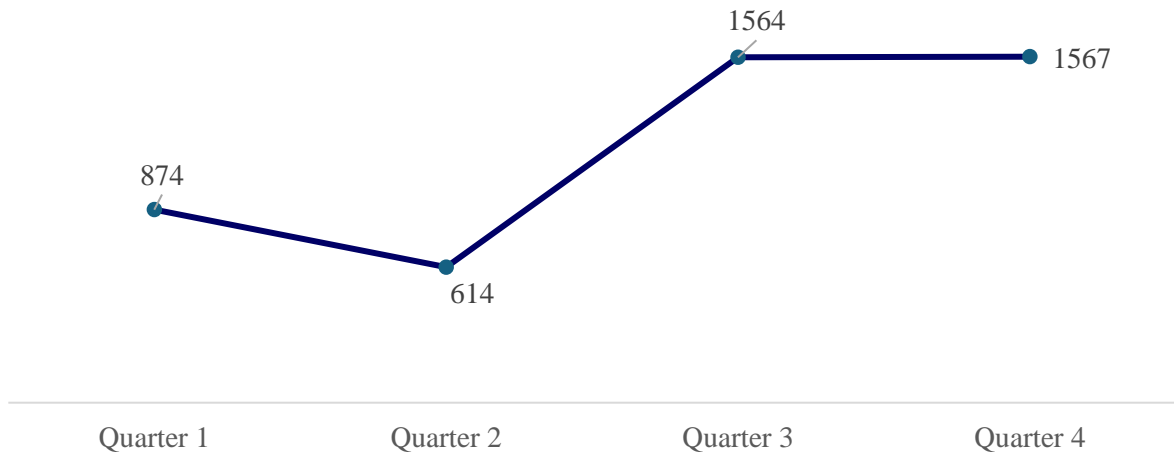
Outcomes and Impact

In the first year of the FSC, 85 members participated at least once in the council meeting. Nine council meetings were held in 2023, and nine organizations shared their work related to hunger. This allowed other participating members to learn about each other and connect with their programs.

Development of sub-committees: Five sub-committees were developed based on the goals of the FSC. These included mapping, communications, policy, homelessness, and food recovery sub-committees. Detailed information on sub-committees can be found on the FSC website (www.utahfoodsecuritycouncil.org).

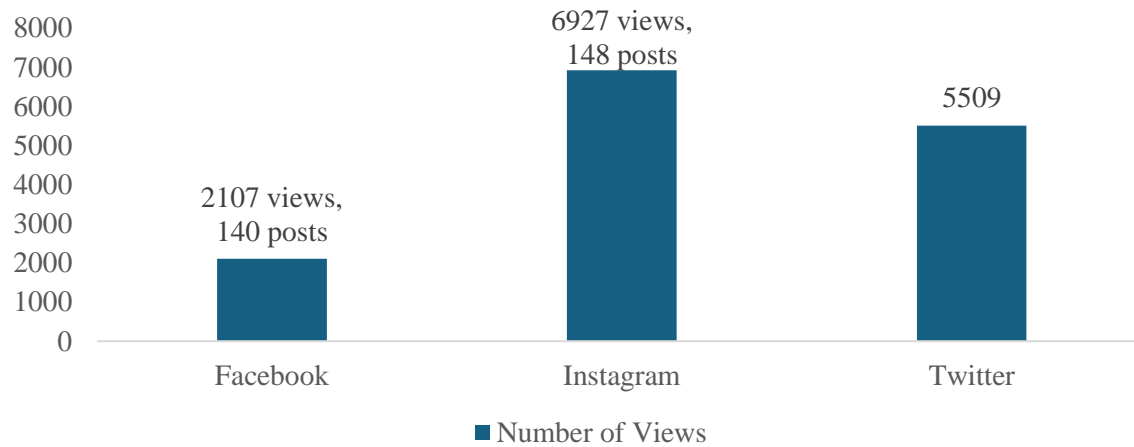
Community outreach: In its inaugural year, the FSC launched a website to provide community access to its work and hunger-related resources in Utah, with audience reach detailed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: FSC Website Audience Reach



Additionally, the FSC shared posts on social media platforms to raise awareness of food and nutrition insecurity. Figure 2 depicts social media views and the number of posts shared on each platform.

Figure 2: Audience Reach via Social Media Platforms

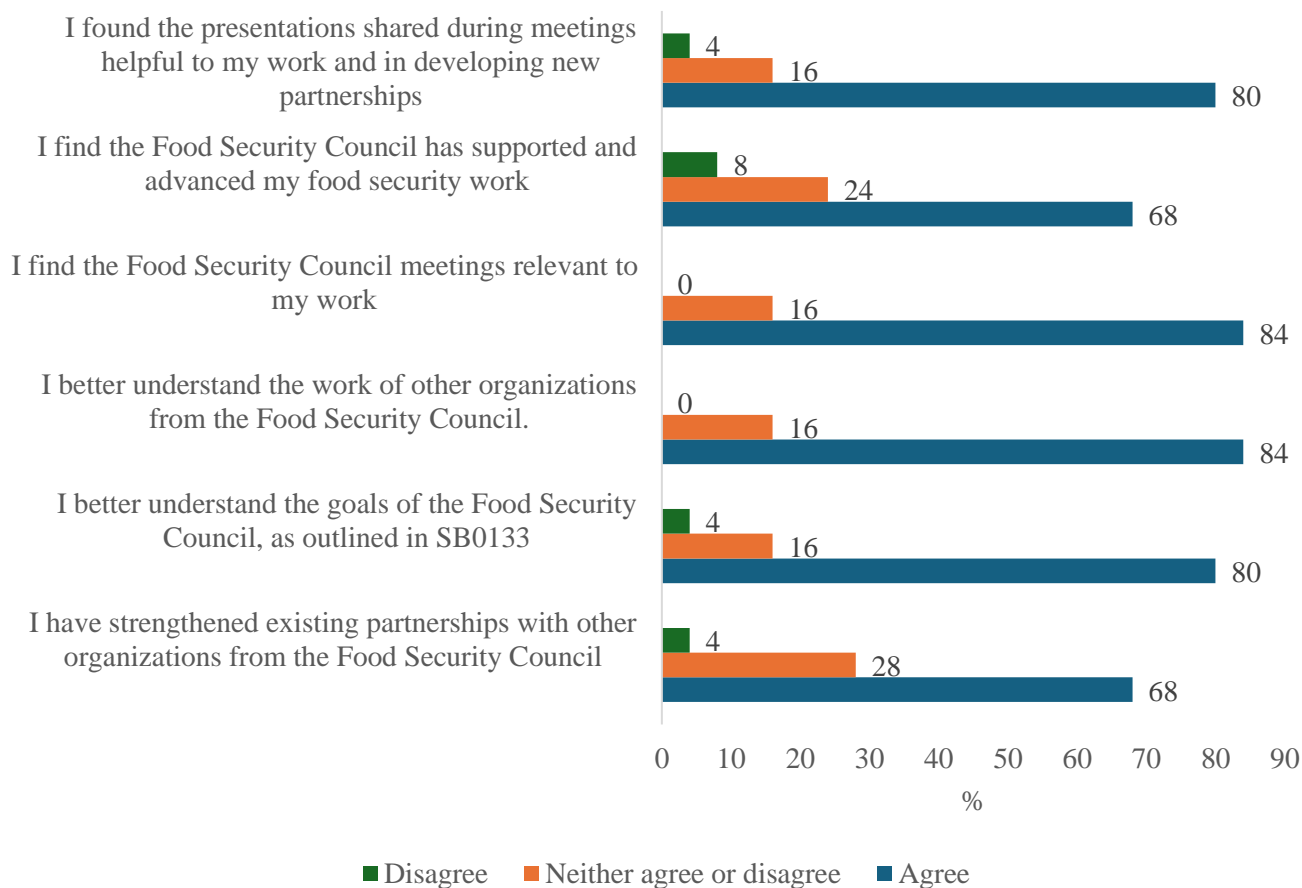


Furthermore, in 2023, the FSC disseminated information to address food insecurity concerns through two press releases, four interviews, and two expert articles.

New partnerships developed: Participants that attend FSC meetings developed an average of 3.24 (± 1.85) partnerships.

Identify best practices for council: Participants rated their involvement with the FSC, including strengthening partnerships, understanding council goals, and meeting relevance. The majority reported the council's effectiveness in providing new information and enhancing partnerships (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Participants response to their involvement with Food Security Council



Future directions for strategic improvements: Participants voiced their priorities for future council activities, highlighting a commitment to collaborative efforts addressing food insecurity. Firstly, there was a strong emphasis on population-focused efforts, with participants advocating for specialized workgroups targeting specific demographics, such as higher education and homelessness. Secondly, there was unanimous support for building community capacity through training initiatives, empowering individuals to address food security challenges effectively. Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of practical initiatives and policies to improve food access, suggesting strategies such as lobbying for funding for food pantries.

Collaboration between different agencies emerged as a priority, with participants stressing the need for enhanced coordination to maximize the impact of food security initiatives while avoiding duplication of efforts. Clear evaluation metrics were deemed essential, with participants emphasizing the importance of aligning goals with measurable outcomes and implementing concrete actions to achieve them. Lastly, there was excitement about developing subcommittees and anticipating their future interventions, reflecting a collective enthusiasm for collaborative problem-solving in the fight against food insecurity.

Public Value and Next Steps

Overall, the first-year results of the FSC demonstrate a concerted effort to address hunger in Utah through collective action, community engagement, and strategic partnerships. With a solid foundation laid and actionable insights from the participant feedback, FSC is well-positioned to continue making meaningful strides toward a more food-secure future for all Utah residents.

Participants made many recommendations, which will form the basis of the work FSC will do in the next years. One of the recommendations that the council plans to focus on is the development of an evaluation matrix. As the council continues to evolve and grow, it will be important to remain committed to its goals and conduct regular evaluations to ensure that it is moving in the right direction.

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