

Michigan Local Food Council Network
ORGANIZING FOR MICHIGAN GOOD FOOD

Ottawa Food:

COMMUNITY ADVOCATES



MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

Center for
Regional Food Systems

Introduction

The [Michigan Local Food Council Network](#) (MLFCN) is coordinated by Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems and brings together food councils to build their individual and collective capacities to work on food and food policy issues, operate effectively, and engage their communities through peer-to-peer learning.

The main roles of the MLFCN are to:

- foster a space for local councils to network with one another;
- connect local councils to statewide and national policy information, issues, and actions;
- assist local food councils with capacity building, including hands-on training; and
- connect local policy information, issues, and actions to other parts of the state.

In 2022, the MLFCN launched the Advocacy Campaigning series of workshops as a lead-in to a more intensive learning experience, the Policy Advocacy Learning Cohort (PALC). The PALC was designed for local food councils (LFCs) who had identified an organizing issue to advocate for in their communities, were in the beginning stages of building a base to support an issue to be further refined by community participation, and/or were ready for advocacy campaign planning and implementation.

The PALC centered grassroots organizing as a strategy for LFCs to advance equitable food policy. Based on the [Life Cycle of an Organizing Campaign](#), participating councils focused on base building and issue selection phases of campaign development. The *Lifecycle of an Organizing Campaign*, published by the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota, is a tool for organizers and leaders to see the steps in pulling together a successful campaign. The PALC also provided an opportunity for the participating councils to apply for funding for their community engagement.

About Ottawa Food



[Ottawa Food](#) is a collaboration of many local agencies and individuals that exists to ensure all Ottawa County residents have access to healthy, local, and affordable food choices, and was one of the participating PALC councils. Their membership includes a variety of working backgrounds and organizations, such as farmers, local public health workers, food pantries, human service organizations, food security advocates, MSU Extension, Feeding America West Michigan, United Way, and many others. The Ottawa Food [strategic plan for 2022-2024](#) consists of three priority areas: eliminate hunger in Ottawa county, healthy eating by all, and increase sourcing of local food.

Getting Started

Sierra Schuetz, coordinator of Ottawa Food, shared, “The advisory board and Ottawa Food members have discussed for years that we haven’t meaningfully enough addressed two of Ottawa Food’s standing goals: To support the development of policies that eliminate hunger... and encourage healthy eating in Ottawa County.”

Participants in the PALC were introduced to grassroots organizing as a strategy to uncover and collaborate on community food systems issues. Originally, the participating Ottawa Food members considered projects to improve the quality of food in The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) boxes and to create policies with food pantries that encouraged more culturally inclusive and affirming experiences. Through the PALC and assessment of their internal capacity and structure, members of Ottawa Food concluded that more extensive community engagement was needed to build capacity and facilitate grassroots collaboration on issue selection. “The desired outcome was that Ottawa Food, through the grant, could pay people for their time to advance policies in Ottawa County that worked to eliminate hunger and encourage healthy eating,” Schuetz said.

Building the Base

In exploring solutions to these challenges, Ottawa Food created a community advocate program. This program offered stipends to four community members with lived experience of food insecurity and a passion for amplifying the needs of their community to act as community advocates. Community advocates, such as Renee Jennings, were motivated to participate to bridge the gap between organizations providing resources and the communities that need them. Jennings shared, “[Ottawa Food] realized they didn’t have too many [grassroots] sources that they can reach out to. And I thought that I could help them out with that.”

The community advocates met regularly to craft goals, practice community conversations, and engage in training with the PALC facilitator. To gather feedback about the challenges community members experience with food access, they facilitated 35 listening sessions. Advocates shared their findings at Ottawa Food meetings. Themes from community listening sessions include: concerns about the high cost of food, limited access to transportation to grocery stores, and low quality of food at food pantries. These findings are congruent with other community surveys regarding food access as well as feedback local pantries receive. Ottawa Food is considering this feedback to guide their work in the years ahead.

ACTION ORGANIZING

To gather feedback about the challenges community members experience with food access, they facilitated 35 listening sessions.

Originally, Ottawa Food members designing this program envisioned that each community advocate would focus on a segment of the council's work. However, community advocates expressed a desire to work collaboratively. Through ongoing coaching with the PALC facilitator, the structure of the work transformed to support the advocates collaborating on shared goals. The PALC facilitator and coach helped onboard the advocates with an introduction to community organizing training. This training included activities like uncovering advocates' motivation for organizing, introduction to the *Life Cycle of an Organizing Campaign* and roles of an organizer, brainstorming discussion questions and talking points for organizing conversations, and practicing organizing conversations. They also facilitated a virtual weekend session that accommodated community advocates' availability, supported them to see intersections of their individual goals, and started to clarify shared goals for the advocates as a team.

Successes

The community advocate program was successful in connecting community members to Ottawa County resources, MLFCN resources that support skill building in community organizing, and each other to build collaboration on food systems issues.

"As an Ottawa Food board member and agency member representative on Ottawa Food, I think this project was extremely successful," Chara Bouma-Prediger, Assistant Director of Food Access with Community Action House, shared. "All four advocates maintained engagement throughout the project and are still engaged and excited to continue the work. Their time and energy investment in a project like this is an incredible success, and I am so encouraged by their commitment."

The advocates also reported that facilitating the community listening sessions was a great experience for them and supplied them a reason to have these intentional conversations with community members.



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**CHARA BOUMA-PREDIGER, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF
FOOD ACCESS WITH COMMUNITY ACTION HOUSE**

Challenges

One of the biggest challenges faced by the council in supporting this kind of community engagement was a lack of time and people supporting the project. "The big learning from the admin side of this: each person needs a buddy from Ottawa Food that is well established to guide or support them... Someone who can take phone calls and texts and sit down with people, and make sure their access needs are met (like writing, etc.). There is a serious time commitment to this, it can't just be added as 'extra,'" shared Schuetz.

Community Organizing Insights

Many valuable lessons were learned in piloting the community advocates program with Ottawa Food:

Cultivating Capacity takes Capacity and Time

Building capacity with limited time, energy, and resources was a theme throughout this program pilot. Staff and board members' limited capacity was a major motivating factor for the creation of this program, and continued to impact the way the program was able to unfold. This is a common tension in community organizing, and especially prominent for organizations who historically have not been set up to support this type of in-depth community collaboration.

Systemic issues are rooted in longstanding power dynamics that disadvantage community members who are directly impacted. However, grassroots organizing can shift those power dynamics in favor of the community. This requires building trusting relationships, which takes time and capacity. If this is something that your council thinks would benefit its work, center and prioritize this as a council-wide strategy for success rather than an “extra” project that one or two people are supporting. You may have to change the way your council is structured and how it functions, but if you are working for justice, you need to have collaborative relationships with those most impacted by the work your organization does. It is also important to consistently assess and adjust so that collaboration with community members is mutually beneficial. Relationships of a more transactional nature are less likely to build the trust necessary for transformative change to occur. Open discussions with community partners regarding values, interests, motivations, goals and desires can help ensure that everyone is benefitting from the collaboration.

Celebrate the Small Wins

It can be easy to move towards the “big goal” at the finish line, but forget to recognize the small wins and progress made along the way. Take time to consider how your council measures success throughout the process as opposed to just at the end. This will help your organization sustain your efforts and stay motivated, even in the slow work of base building.

Emergent Strategy

In community organizing, councils cannot always “stick to the plan” as they must learn what works in context through experimentation and adaptation. To best support community advocates, try formats of engagement that “meet people where they are,” such as intentionally matching the engagement level they need through supportive strategies like coaching. [Coaching](#) empowers people by uncovering their own answers, helps them identify areas for skill development, and connects them with resources to consistently act on the issues that are important to them. There are many ways to meet community members where they are, including making meetings at more accessible times of the day, or providing food, stipends, child care and transportation support. A great practice is to ask people directly what would make it easy and enjoyable to participate and incorporate that feedback into your planning.

Foundational to community organizing is understanding the level of intentionality and capacity needed for meaningful community engagement in policy campaign development. Ultimately, there is no food justice without the voices and collaboration of those most impacted by food insecurity, so we must be creative in our efforts to collaborate with impacted community members.

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