



# Relieving Food Insecurity for Seniors in America

From current experiences of accessing food to future design opportunities for better serving seniors, and increase food security across America.

May 10, 2017

A partnership between



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## About the research

The primary goal for this study was to gather learnings about challenges of daily lives, and better understand the issue of food insecurity among seniors. By applying design methods, the team conducted qualitative research with seniors struggling with food insecurity to learn about their experiences and the operational, social and nutritional contexts through which senior citizens source their food. Understanding the context of seniors' experiences served as the reference point to envision demand-centered models of sourcing food, consequently re-envisioning current models of delivering food that ensure the accessibility of food security for all seniors.

## A partnership between



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## Design approach

### Interviews

#### 25 Seniors

##### Senior building

Good Shepherd Tower, Hegewisch, and Peace Memorial Manor

##### Food Programs

Marie Wilkinson Food Pantry, and La Salle Neighborhood Senior Grocery Market

##### Public space

Thurgood Marshall Public Library

#### 12 Expert

Nutritionists, food bank experts, food pantry coordinators. Feeding America employees. program capacity experts. fundraising experts. Americorps Vista. community building organizers. food service volunteers, among others.

### Immersion

#### Site observation

##### Northern Illinois Food Bank & Greater Chicago Food Depository

By visiting the sites and observing the dynamics in the environments, the research team built an understanding of the logistics taking place, including those related to the distribution of food and the services seniors experience within food pantries and mobile markets.

##### Food pantries, senior building, & public libraries

The research team was able to learn about the infrastructures in the touch points where seniors can access resources and food.

#### Cultural experience

##### Greater Chicago Food Depository, Aurora Marine Food Pantry, La Salle Neighborhood Senior Grocery Market, & Peace Memorial Manor

The researcher team took part in volunteer activities at food banks and pantries to develop an understanding of the food journey by engaging in the process.

### Collaboration

#### Sense making Workshop

13 key stakeholders participated in co-creation activities, developing insights and design principles based on primary research done during the first six weeks.

#### Prototyping & Testing

Multiple iterations of prototyping activities to test hypothesis, and co-develop design concepts with seniors and experts at Good Shepherd Tower & Marie Wilkinson Food Pantry.

#### Expert forum discussion

Experts from the healthcare industry, NGOs and food service companies, environmental performance, food policy, and design joined in a discussion centered around alternative futures to increase food access for seniors.

#### Ideation Workshop

12 community organizers joined a co-creation workshop to embed new capabilities into future-scenarios, considering challenges around the implementation of the proposed concepts.

## Executive summary

This contextual report is the result of a 14 week collaboration between Feeding America and IIT-Institute of Design. The collaboration was structured under a graduate-level design course at IIT-Institute of Design. It provides information about the current state of how the senior population (60+ years) accesses food in the greater Chicago area. It also reveals design opportunities for alternative futures, in which seniors could have access to nutritious food, and live a healthy, active life.



## Setting the stage

### Why seniors?

Each year, more than 5.7 million seniors (60+ years old) experience food insecurity and 13 million older adults aged 50+ receive assistance from the Feeding America food bank network each year<sup>1</sup>. According to the Feeding America study *Baby Boomers and Beyond*<sup>2</sup>: *Facing Hunger After Fifty*, Seniors experiencing food insecurity report regularly making tough tradeoffs, including facing the decision between paying for food or paying for utilities, transportation, medical care, and/or housing. Seniors are not always able to obtain the nutrient-rich food they need to enable medications to work effectively and maintain their health. As a result, seniors often face significant health barriers (40% of households with a senior have a member with diabetes, and 70% have a member with high blood pressure).

Over the past five years, Feeding America has intensified its research on domestic senior hunger. Today, they have a better understanding than ever about senior's vulnerabilities to the negative health implications of food insecurity. Research includes Feeding America's *Spotlight on Senior Hunger*<sup>3</sup>, *Spotlight on Senior Health: Adverse Health Outcomes of Food Insecure Older Americans*<sup>4</sup>, *Hunger in America*<sup>1</sup>, and *Baby Boomers and Beyond*<sup>2</sup>. However, while this research provides valuable insight into the issue of senior hunger, there is a significant lack of understanding about the experiences and preferences of seniors who experience food insecurity.

The younger cohort of seniors are found to suffer from the highest degree of food insecurity. They deal with barriers such as decreased income, ineligibility to certain welfare benefits, and low awareness of the available programs. As food insecurity among older adults is on the rise, it becomes a critical social issue that require immediate attention from multiple stakeholders involved in food systems.

### About Feeding America

Feeding America is the largest domestic hunger-relief organization in America. It provides food to people through its network of 200 food banks supplying food and programming to 60,000 agencies around the United States for the last 35 years. Feeding America aims to re-imagine the future of food services that will meet their vision of a hunger-free America by first understanding the needs of their clients and beneficiaries. With this human-centered approach, services can be developed to better serve their audience while understanding the complex system and the need for sustainability and adaptability.

#### What is food insecurity

It refers to "the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food."<sup>1</sup>

#### How is food insecurity different from hunger

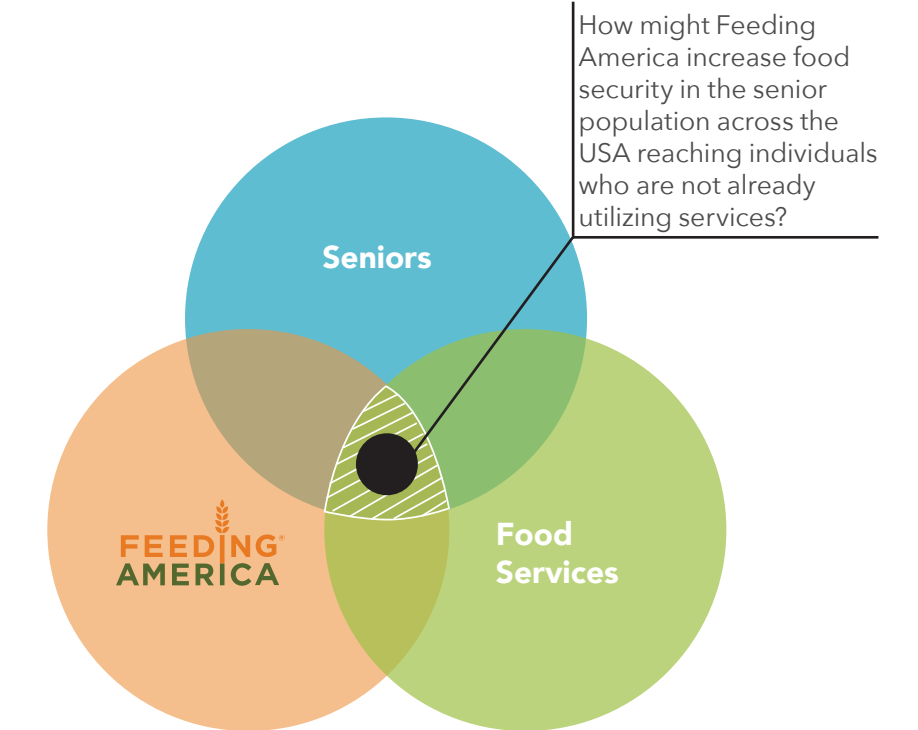
Hunger is "a physiological state that describes the physical pain and discomfort an individual experiences", while food insecurity is a holistic overview of the "social, cultural or economic state of the individual"<sup>1</sup>.

Unlike hunger, it is not a temporary state or sensation of an individual, but covers a much wider and often more systemic problems.

Additionally, food insecurity has been an easier concept for policy makers to accept.<sup>1</sup>



## Guiding questions



**1** Why do seniors experience food insecurity?

**2** What does it take for seniors to access food and eat meals?

**3** How do seniors understand their eating options and make decisions?

Why do seniors experience food insecurity?

# Seniors enter a major shift in lifestyle juggling new needs that lead to unexpected limitations.



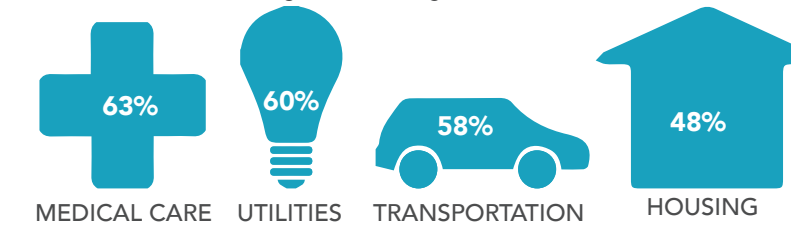
*"They put the fruits and vegetables right before the desserts so that people have to pass the healthy stuff before they can get to the sugars that aren't good for anyone's diet. We let them have one sweet, but they can have as many fruits and veggies as they'd like. A lot of people will just skip this section all together."*

**Volunteer, Marie Wilkinson Food Pantry**

## 1a Seniors lack sustainable infrastructures to support their changing lifestyles.

Fixed income because of retirement or decreased work load due to physical or cognitive capabilities increase challenges in managing household budgets. Under financial limitations, seniors juggle complicated choices between paying for healthy choices, transportation, utilities, medical care, housing, and entertainment.

**Senior's household spending trade offs**  
*Feeding America Hunger in America 2014*



*"My food allowance is small. If the pantry does not have the greenery this means I have to go out and spend my few little dollars and unfortunately I am in debt."*

**Female senior, Urban Public Library**

With age, seniors develop chronic conditions that require regular medical supervision to monitor their changing health. The healthcare sector is a primary stakeholder in a senior's life as medical personal develop a recommended nutrition plan appropriate for the senior's specific health needs. When seniors stray from their recommended diets they can develop additional diseases, which impact their mobility and independence. This can later lead to isolation from the community causing depression and loneliness.

Along with mobility issues, many seniors have different experience levels in the capability to transform ingredients into a meal. There are services like *Meals on Wheels* and congregate meal events where seniors receive a precooked meal. Although these prepared meal services are available there are many programs that only focus on providing the raw ingredients without the assistance which bridges the gap from food to meal.



*"We do everything on the bus. We have a little wagon that we take. It is actually like a luggage cart. We put stuff in there. We go for two or three things, but when we head back home it is four or five. You can't even pull it back on the bus. If we do that then we will have to have someone bring us back home."*

**Female senior, Senior Building Resident**

## DESIGN PRINCIPLE

Support seniors with a holistic service that addresses needs beyond accessing healthy food, connecting them with aid in other areas of their lives.

## 1b Seniors have varying capabilities to recognize dependency and the need for outside support.

Seniors are not equally skilled in self assessing their own lives to identify the need for extra support in managing their health and wellbeing. Many seniors believe that there are others who are in more need of the services and resist in participating in programs in order it provide more access to others in need. What they do not realize is there are plenty of resources and they are not taking opportunities away from others in need.

*"We have plenty of food. That is not the issue. We are able to provide the resources to more people, but we have to find those people. That is my number one goal is to find those who are in need of support because we can provide it."*

**Employee, Food Bank**

With the change in medical conditions, some seniors do not understand the role that food plays in maintaining a healthy lifestyle. New eating habits must be adapted to support their changing health journey. Many seniors still identify as caretaker to those in their lives and continue to take on the responsibility while neglecting themselves.

*"I tend to pass it on (unwanted food). I am a caretaker, so my male client, I give him a lot of stuff... He has a lot of bad habits. His money is usually not enough to last him the whole month. I do take him shopping. I make sure he has a well rounded ability to eat properly. I help him."*

**Female senior, Urban Public Library**



*"We presume there is a huge stigma that is keeping seniors from accessing food or feeling like they are included in the processes of food distribution... Stigma is huge is the older population. We are talking about the greatest generation. We are talking about folks who don't feel like they should ask for help and on some level they shouldn't. We should be making it so that they are not having to ask for it..."*

**Employee, Feeding America**

### DESIGN PRINCIPLE

Provide assistance for seniors to self assess themselves using a "whole" person lens by addressing their financial, health, and mobility capabilities.

## 1c Behavior change is difficult to adopt; seniors need encouragement to take knowledge into actionable practice.

Although there are seniors who do not understand their developing dietary restrictions to prevent chronic disease, there are many seniors who have developed the knowledge from the close interaction they have their healthcare providers. They are able to communicate the importance of specific foods and what to eliminate, but when it comes to putting the knowledge into practice, there is a disconnect in adapting the suggested eating lifestyle.

*"I'm supposed to eat low sodium food because of my high blood pressure. I try to cut back, but my husband cooks for me. He tries to cut back, but since he doesn't have to watch his sodium he forgets and he will doctor it up with salt and butter."*

**Female senior, Senior Building Resident**

Through the research it was evident that many seniors struggle with change in behavior to meet health restrictions. When told what is appropriate to eat without support on implementing these practices, they have difficulty breaking habits that have been established for decades.

*"It comes down to will power. For anything. There is an old saying, 'You cant teach old dogs new tricks.' That applies very much to seniors. You need to talk to yourself, no! You need to say very strongly and say no to yourself!"*

**Female senior, Senior Building Resident**



*"I worked in the hospital for 20 years, I know what to eat, what I am not to eat, and sometimes I do it, sometimes... I don't."*

**Female senior, Senior Building Resident**

### DESIGN PRINCIPLE

Make sure groceries can be used easily by offering pre-prepared meal components, recipe cards, and appropriate portions.

What does it take for seniors to access food and eat meals?

## Despite many limitations, seniors must navigate a complex system where they face challenges in accessing food and eating a meal.



### 2a With instability, seniors diversify their food channels to ensure there is a safety net in place to access food in any situation.

Seniors cannot rely on one resource to access the food they need to support a healthy lifestyle. Many seniors who understand their needs will use multiple methods to ensure there is some food available at all times. This will involve accessing multiple food pantries in the community, using the SNAP program at the local grocery store, or getting support from local organizations like the libraries and faith based facilities. Seniors who are food secure understand how to navigate the system within their area to find ways to provide for themselves.

*"I am really thankful for these pantries because they have really increased my ability to eat properly and efficiently... My insurance lady's church has a pantry and I went to check it out. I've been going there ever since October. It is great because if you don't have any money, you can go once a week and get food... I went last week to the one on 74th. I go probably twice a month."*

**Female senior, Public Library**

Through primary research at a mobile food pantry seniors explained how they cannot rely on only this service to provide them the food they need on a daily basis because the pantry is available only once a month. The seniors who are not able to navigate the logistics in diversifying the methods of collecting food will turn towards other strategies to manage their hunger.

Seniors and veterans form a line outside as they wait 30' before the scheduled time in which they are allowed to enter the food pantry to stock up on weekly groceries.



Other strategies in managing food insecurity:



**79%**  
Purchase  
inexpensive  
food



**53%**  
Receive help  
from friends  
and family



**40%**  
Water down  
food or drinks



**35%**  
Sell or pawn  
personal  
properties



**23%**  
Grow food  
in a garden

### DESIGN PRINCIPLE

Create stability while tending towards emergency situations, but also provide sustainable support during seniors daily routines.

## 2b Seniors interact with subjective gatekeepers who evaluate senior needs and permit access to food services.

Seniors who are or wish to use the food programs available to them are not all receiving equal treatment. In a senior building setting, the building coordinator has the power to enroll seniors in need into the Food Box and Mobile Pantry programs. There is no standard protocol to help building coordinators determine eligibility for the benefits. This results in subjective determination of need by this single individual, simultaneously putting strain and responsibility on their job.

*“But the produce in there is horrible. I don’t have a lot of money, but I think anybody deserves better than that. If you look at Fairplay in other areas - I used to live near west end - that Fairplay never had anything like that, because that’s a mixed area. It’s not right.”*

**Female senior, Senior Building Resident**

Gaining trust from a vulnerable group can be a challenge. Apart from gaining their trust on the quality and safety of the food provided, which might be easier to achieve, it is important for seniors to establish healthy relationships with field staff and volunteers that they interact with during their food collection experience. One bad interaction with a volunteer who might subjectively “police” the quantity of food a senior can take, will alter their perception of the pantry. Thus a stable and reliable involvement of the food assistance service should be ensured to help build a stable physical and mental state of food security for seniors.

Food pantries are not consistent in training volunteers to have empathy for patrons of the programs. Along with the personal interaction factor, many pantries line seniors up standing outside in harsh weather conditions. These unwelcoming factors impact the decision to continue using the services or recommending them to others. Seniors embrace situations where they feel a developed relationship and consistency, where there is mutual respect.



Though volunteers are one of the key assets to a successful food pantry or food program, they can also cause seniors to feel uncomfortable and disrespected if the volunteer does not have empathy for the clients. When seniors feel they are being disrespected, judged or policed by volunteers they become wary of the benefits in participating in the food pantry.

### DESIGN PRINCIPLE

Associate joy with the experience at food assistance locations to reduce stigma for individuals.

## 2c Social and cultural influencers feed into how seniors perceive food and experience a meal.

Humans are inherently tribal and develop their identities based off of the people surrounding them. This affects how people understand themselves in all aspects of their lives, including their relationship with food. Cultural and social traditions can determine what foods are familiar and enjoyable to an individual. Seniors depend largely on their community as a resource in where they can access their daily food.

*“I meet with my girlfriends, just like four of us get together, have a girl’s day, we will go to the movies, we eat, then go shopping... We eat what we not supposed to eat but it is good. We won’t do it everyday, once month something like that. I don’t think that’s bad.”*

**Female senior, Senior Mobile Pantry**

Seniors prefer a life of familiarity when they choose the food they eat. With current Food Box recipients, many seniors mentioned that they would not eat food that they have not tried before, as they don’t know how to cook it. It is not only about the type of food that is offered in these programs, but also being culturally sensitive to the demographic being served. At Peace Memorial Manor in the Chicoland area the population is heavily of Chinese decent. However, the volunteer staffed at their mobile food pantry did not reflect the population and in some cases could not communicate with the native Chinese speaking patrons.



*“Each ethnic community, we eat different things. Programs don’t seem to cater to our community as well. I am for experimenting with things. Each month they send us just about the same thing. When I first moved in here I had so much peanut butter and jelly.”*

**Male senior, Senior Building Resident**

### DESIGN PRINCIPLE

Build a community around food by providing avenues and opportunities for communication and engagement.

How do seniors understand their eating options and make decisions?

## Seniors make decisions based off developed relationships and built trust, upholding dignity as they choose between eating options.



*"Never assume anything when you are talking with seniors. They are proud people and you can never assume they need help. They may turn your services away and you have to respect them. We instead empower seniors by bringing them to the table so that their voice is part of the conversation."*

**Expert, Food Bank Employee**

### 3a There are varying channels in which seniors access information on services, limiting the number of touch points that reach seniors in need.

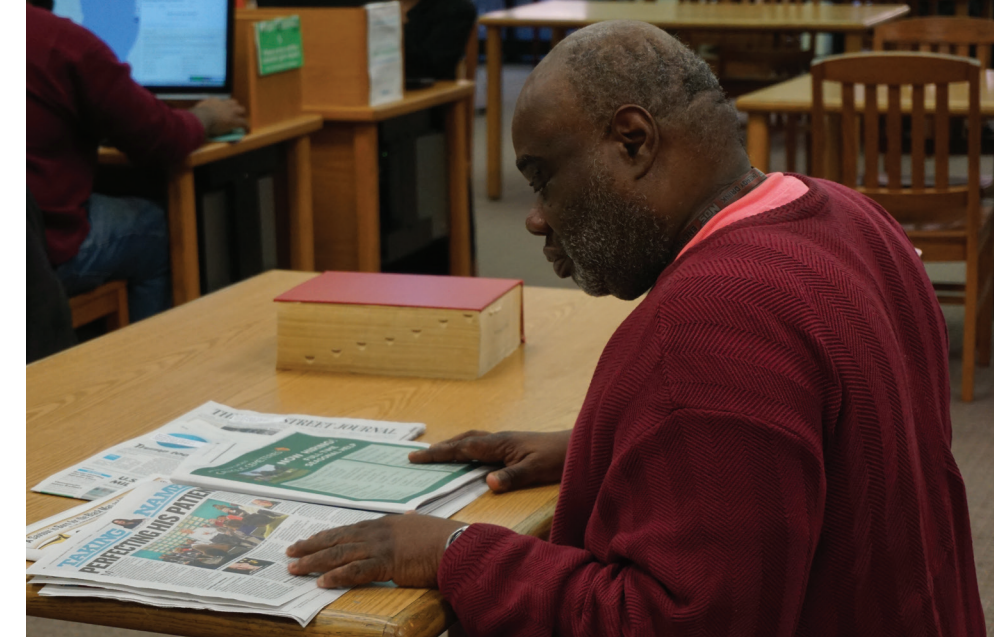
Many seniors prefer word of mouth over other sources because of the relationship built on trust and respect of the other persons opinion. Through the in person connection, seniors have a better sense of their options and understand first hand from someone who has experience a food pantry or other services and how it could work for them as well. Along with communication between other seniors, there are trusted stakeholders within the community who has a strong influence on how seniors might make decisions, such as faith based or medical personnel.

*"If a senior citizen is going to go anywhere, he or she is going to go to the doctor or to the clinic. Their health and following their diet recommended by their doctor is a huge factor. Most people of that age are facing a health issue because naturally as you age, you are more susceptible to chronic disease."*

**Expert, Food Bank**

Though traditional methods are the most cited among seniors, there is a growing interest to engage with technology. It seems seniors will not actively try the latest technology, but when they are given a new gadget, they will not refuse to learn.

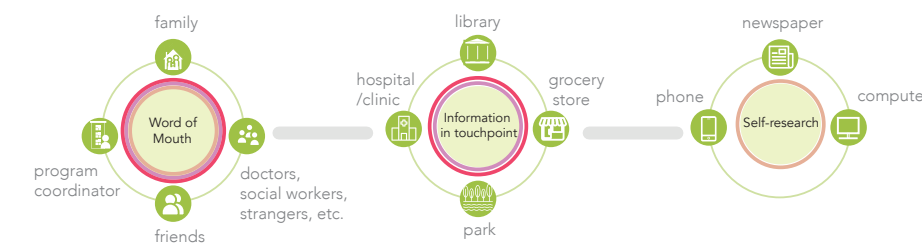
The percent of seniors engaging with the Internet varies. With wide adoption of smart phone and computer among the general public, seniors are starting to join by accessing information and entertainment Online. They are use personal devices or utilize resources at the local library, community center, and senior recreation center. Although, some have adapted the tools, there are those who do not trust technology and the risk fraudulent scammers who target vulnerable older adults.



*"Oh, I get to know about the other pantries when we are standing in the line (at her local pantry). We ask around."*

**Female senior, Public Library**

Senior's source of information:



### DESIGN PRINCIPLE

Empower seniors to support one another by providing seniors advocates with information about resources and education around healthy eating.



### 3b Seniors worry that soliciting negative feedback portrays ungrateful attitudes toward the services provided.

Though seniors have strong opinions and like to share stories about their experiences in life, they also resist giving honest feedback about the food service programs provided to them. The hesitation to share issues with providers stems from the worry that they are casting an unappreciative tone towards the organizations that are supporting their needs. Without honest feedback the programs are unable to adapt, which in some cases leads to seniors leaving the programs when they no longer see value in participating.

*"I don't even take the box now. It turned out to be a waste because I either had to give it away or throw it away... I am grateful, but disappointed with the box. I hope you don't think that I am ungrateful."*

**Male senior, Senior Building Resident**

During the prototype testing phase of the primary research the team tested a concept initiating a feedback loop between patrons and the service providers. The seniors were asked to take a voice recorder after shopping at a food pantry and anonymously give feedback about that days experience. The result were greatly positive thanking the organization for their support.

For honest feedback there must be a formal platform that seniors can consistently engage where they can start to trust the surroundings and have an open dialog. Once seniors have built a relationship, they feel more comfortable sharing their opinions knowing their voices are valued and improving the services for their community.



*(Have you ever talked to anyone about something you don't like in the food box that you received?)*

*"We live in a senior building and we have a service coordinator here. I think she can determine the things that have to be disposed of. She can pretty much tell what is liked and what is not liked."*

**Female senior, Urban Public Library**

### DESIGN PRINCIPLE

Show seniors they can make a positive difference by incorporating consistent feedback that will create a dialog between the system and the beneficiaries.

### 3c Society has an unfortunate framing of "seniors", creating barriers when they wish to contribute to the community.

There are stigmas associated with seniors depicting them as vulnerable people who are in great need of help. When many seniors feel they have so much more to give to their communities. They are capable independent people who desire interaction with others and supporting their peers when times get tough. Seniors are the greatest assets of a community because of the knowledge they bring, the free time they have to share, and their compassion for others.

*"I'm 75 years old and I have been volunteering at this food pantry two times a week for the past five years. I come on the veterans days because I too am a veteran. I do a lot of other volunteering in my community because I understand the people I'm helping. I know when someone has diabetes and he shouldn't grab a sweet on his way out."*

**Volunteer, Food Pantry**

During the research interviews with seniors around the greater Chicago area many of them mentioned how they are still very active in the community. Some were activist fighting for equal rights for minorities and the elderly population while others contributed to relieving stress for family members and friends.

To support a life of purpose after retirement, food service programs and other NGOs can offer a channel for these seniors to participate in with the drive to bring joy and wellbeing to those in need. These seniors are more capable to reach their peers and suggest taking part in food services because of like-minded understanding and developed trust.



*"There is one lady who works here, but she needs to take Monday and Tuesday off. When she's not here, that just leaves two people here. That is why I offer my help... I just say okay I'll help."*

**Female senior, Mobile pantry**

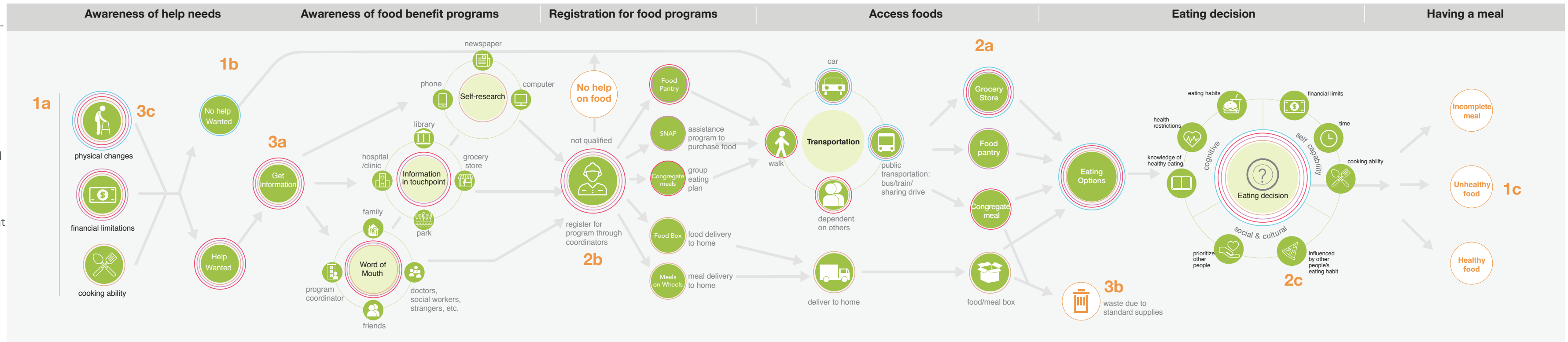
### DESIGN PRINCIPLE

Treat the people served as assets to their community by understanding what they have to offer (everyone does) and provide opportunities to tap into the knowledge.

# Senior Food Journey

We designed a senior food journey that summarizes decision-making processes that multiple seniors go through. We created personas based on the patterns of challenges we uncovered throughout the research. While not extensive, this journey represents the complex system in which seniors are involved, and several of the challenges they encounter in their daily lives. We distributed the points presented on the previous pages throughout the journey. On the next page, you can find a summary of these same points.

## Personas



- Pamerla, City Lonely Knight**
- Alice, Village Grandma**
- Lily & David, Suburban Duo**
- John, Home-bound City Dweller**

<p>Pamerla thinks she should not take advantage of food programs since she always has food to eat.</p>	<p>She get to know healthy eating practices from her doctor and learns about programs like SNAP from her local library where she found a Feeding America brochure.</p>	<p>The volunteer at the Library helps her to apply for SNAP and gives her more information about the closest food pantry in the neighborhood.</p>	<p>She drives herself to the discount grocery store twice a week. Occasionally, taking the bus if she has time.</p>	<p>She loves homemade pancakes, but seldom make them since it is a lot of work. It is much easier for her to make microwavable foods.</p>	<p>She mainly eats microwavable meals, which are usually high in sodium.</p>
<p>Alice is retired and does not has as much energy as she used to. Living with her family she helps as much as she can as they manage their tight budget.</p>	<p>Their daughter tells them they are qualified for the SNAP program to help pay for a percentage of their groceries.</p>	<p>The SNAP sign up process was not worth the hassle with the small benefit they would receive and they decided it wasn't for them.</p>	<p>She drives to the food pantry once a week which can satisfy 60% of the families food needs. Scheduling her pantry trips is bothersome to the entire family since she shares the car.</p>	<p>Her eating decision is primarily decided by her financial limitations and the grand children's needs. She makes sure her grandchildren have the proper food they need before she takes care of herself.</p>	<p>She eats homemade foods catering to her grand-children's needs.</p>
<p>Lily and David cannot live the lifestyle they desire because they are both retired and no longer have a steady income.</p>	<p>He enjoys the convenience that technology brings to him and always does the research on his computer or smart phone.</p>	<p>He wanted to participate in the food box program, but the building coordinator refused his application saying he did not qualify.</p>	<p>Their retirement savings with their daughter's help allows them a monthly tradition of a nice seafood meal. Other days they will walk to the community center to enjoy a congregated meal.</p>	<p>They enjoy making foods from scratch. It takes a lot of energy, but they look forward to a homemade meal. Though they prefer fresh meals they will sometimes eat a pizza or hot dogs because they are out with friends or family.</p>	<p>They usually eat Asian foods made from scratch. Sometimes they eat free congregated meal.</p>
<p>John suffers from severe chronic disease which are linked to an unbalanced diet. He is always concerned about his diabetes disease, but is unable to cook food.</p>			<p>After months of going without the food box his building coordinator submitted his application. He receives the box, but only eats a small portion throwing away what he does not like.</p>	<p>Because of his physical restraints every week his caregiver prepares meals for him to get the much needed nutrition that his doctor recommends</p>	<p>Most of time he eats pre-made meal or fast food.</p>

## Principles for alternative futures

Design principles to create sustainable systems that empower seniors to take action, as well as to utilize their knowledge and capabilities as assets within their own community.

### 1 SUPPORTING CAPABILITIES

**a** Support seniors with a holistic service that addresses needs beyond accessing healthy food, connecting them with aid in other areas of their lives.

**b** Provide assistance for seniors to self assess themselves using a “whole” person lens by addressing their financial, health, and mobility capabilities.

**c** Make sure groceries can be used easily by offering pre-prepared meal components, recipe cards, and appropriate portions.

### 2 ACCESSING MEALS

**a** Create stability while tending towards emergency situations, but also provide sustainable support during seniors daily routines.

**b** Associate joy with the experience at food assistance locations to reduce stigma for individuals.

**c** Build a community around food by providing avenues and opportunities for communication and engagement.

### 3 MAKING DECISIONS

**a** Empower seniors to support one another by providing seniors advocates with information about resources and education around healthy eating.

**b** Show seniors they can make a positive difference by incorporating consistent feedback that will create a dialog between the system and the beneficiaries.

**c** Treat the people served as assets to their community by understanding what they have to offer (everyone does) and provide opportunities to tap into the knowledge.



# Relieving Food Insecurity for Seniors in America

From current experiences of accessing food to future design opportunities for better serving seniors, and increase food security across America.

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