



**NEIGHBOR
ENGAGEMENT
TOOLKIT**

**The mission of the Vermont Foodbank
is to gather and share quality food
and nurture partnerships so that no
one in Vermont will go hungry.**



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Introduction

This work begins with a shared belief: that supporting your community means not only providing food, but ensuring every neighbor feels respected, heard, and valued. At Vermont Foodbank, we are committed to centering neighbor's needs, in fact, it is one of our Network Relations Team's guiding principles. This toolkit is designed to support that effort of centering neighbor's needs. It offers you practical, achievable ways to gather feedback and partner with your community, strengthen your programs, and build trust.

What is Engagement?

At its heart, engagement is a practice built on three core actions:

1. Listening deeply to understand the real experiences of your neighbors.
2. Learning from what is shared to refine and improve your services.
3. Partnering with your community to create meaningful solutions together.

How to Use This Toolkit

This resource is designed to be flexible and meet you where you are on your engagement journey.

- **Start where it makes sense.** The tools here range from simple to in-depth. The best approach is to choose one idea that feels manageable and begin there.
- **This is a menu of options, not a strict curriculum.** Select the methods that align with your organization's current capacity and goals.
- **Remember to close the loop.** The single most important step in this process is reporting back to those you serve. Sharing what was heard and what actions you are taking transforms a one-time request for feedback into an ongoing cycle of trust.

A Foundation of Care: The Trauma-Informed Lens

Asking for and offering feedback requires vulnerability. For neighbors who have experienced hardship, sharing their perspective can feel risky. A trauma-informed approach ensures that every interaction you have is conducted with emotional and physical safety as the highest priority.

This means consistently asking yourself:

- How can you create an environment where people feel safe enough to be honest?
- Are you fully transparent about how feedback will be used?
- Are you engaging people as respected partners with valuable expertise?

When these principles guide your efforts, you do more than collect data; you honor the dignity and agency of every individual.

Some great resources to learn more about trauma-informed and de-escalation practices:

- [SAMHSA on Trauma-Informed Care](#)
- [Article: “What is a Trauma Informed Food Pantry?”](#)
- [Dartmouth Trauma Interventions Research Center video: Calming & De-escalation Strategies](#)

Spectrum of Engagement

Lowest ← Engagement Level → **Highest**

INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Broadcast Information	Seek Input or Feedback	Invite Two-Way Communication	Partner Meaningfully	Share Leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> outreach newsletter fact sheet annual report 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> survey public meeting invite questions focus group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> workshop volunteer role data collection program design input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> planning team co-hosted event advisory council staff + board reflect community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> participatory evaluation delegated decision community-based governance

Adapted from the International Association for Public Participation’s Spectrum of Participation

Pause Here and Read This

We will continue to reference the Spectrum of Engagement throughout this toolkit. It is great to familiarize yourself with this tool. Vermont Foodbank references the Spectrum of Engagement often in its own engagement work.

Best Practices for Accessible & Equitable Engagement

In this chapter you will find details on: Examples of Different Engagement Platforms, Creating Safe Spaces, and Closing the Loop



Meeting People Where They Are

True accessibility means meeting neighbors in places and ways that are most convenient and comfortable for them.

- **Literally:** Bring feedback opportunities to the spaces where neighbors already are. This could mean having short conversations in the food shelf line, setting up a table at a meal site, or bringing surveys to a local community event.
- **Figuratively:** Use plain, clear language free of jargon. Approach conversations with genuine curiosity about their priorities and experiences, not just a predetermined set of questions. Stay engaged with what people share. When we have a lot of work, being present with someone who is sharing their story might feel challenging. Just remember that it is a huge gift to offer someone your attention and time. Think of this time as part of your work, not a distraction from your work. Giving people time and space to share meets people in their own frame of reference and shows that their perspective is what matters most.

Offer Multiple Formats

People access information and communicate in different ways. Relying on a single method can unintentionally exclude valuable voices. A diverse approach offers choices.

- **Verbal:** Train staff and volunteers to respectfully ask for feedback during conversations. Simply, “We’re always looking to improve, do you have any suggestions?” can open the door to thoughtful exchanges.
- **Paper:** Have printed surveys and forms readily available with pens. This is a critical option for those who are not comfortable with technology.
- **Digital:** Digital tools in common use:
 - QR Codes: A quick and easy tool to link from a poster or flyer directly to an online survey. You can easily upload QR Codes online.
 - Text Message (SMS): Use platforms like Vivory to send survey links directly to phones. Keep in mind best practices when sending texts:
 - ◇ Be sure to get written permission from recipients that they want to receive texts. This can be in the form of a signed consent or opt-in link.
 - ◇ Inform recipients how often to expect texts and what type of information they will receive.
 - ◇ Limit frequency of texts and respect “quiet hours” by limiting texts to business hours.
 - ◇ Send SMS texts only, as opposed to MMS (photos, videos, GIFs) that can incur additional charges.
 - ◇ Offer an opt-out option.
 - Email & social media: Share digital forms through your existing online channels to reach a different segment of your community.

Creating Spaces to Support Safety

Creating safety is the foundation of a trauma-informed approach and is essential for receiving honest feedback. Safety related to both physical and conversational spaces:

- **Physical Spaces:** Ensure areas for giving feedback are clean, welcoming, and offer a degree of privacy. Consider the location too – is it ADA accessible, is it in a neutral setting, etc. One effective way to host conversations that are accessible and offer more privacy is to host conversations at your location either before or after normal distribution hours.
- **Conversational Spaces:** In meetings or group settings, co-create simple group agreements with participants, such as “one person speaks at a time,” “we listen to understand,” and “we respect different viewpoints.” You can propose your own group agreements to save time but go over them with the group and ask for edits or additions. Sharing group agreements at the start of your time together builds a container of mutual respect and creates space for emotional safety. [Vermont Foodbank uses this Memorandum of Understanding when facilitating conversations.](#)

Closing the Loop: The Cycle of Trust

Closing the loop is the practice of reporting back to the community about what you heard and what you are doing as a result. **This is the most critical step in the entire engagement process. Without it, asking for feedback can feel like an empty exercise and may erode trust.**

- **Why it's critical:** It demonstrates respect, proves that you were truly listening, and builds credibility for all future engagement efforts. It shows that community voices lead to tangible action.
- **How to do it simply and effectively:**
 - Use a whiteboard or poster in a high-traffic area: “You Spoke, We Listened! Last month, many of you asked for more cooking oil. We’re happy to say it’s now regularly on our shelves!”
 - Dedicate a section in your newsletter: “Your Feedback in Action.”
 - Share quick updates on social media or during community announcements.

The scope of “closing the loop” should match the depth of the engagement. For a simple survey, a posted summary of findings is perfect. For a more involved process, like a community conversation that influences program design, closing the loop might look like a formal report-back meeting or a co-created plan of action. The key is to ensure your response is proportionate and meaningful to the investment the community made in sharing their voice.

The goal is to complete the cycle: you ask, they share, you act, and you report back. This transforms a one-way extraction of information into a genuine, ongoing partnership.

Light-Touch Engagement: Simple Ways to Start Listening

In this chapter you will find details on: Newsletters, Suggestion Boxes, Digital Connections, and Surveys



If engagement feels a little daunting, this is a great place to start. The methods in this chapter are designed to be low-barrier but hopefully, high-impact. They will allow you to gather quick, actionable feedback while showing your community that their perspective matters. Starting here builds momentum and makes the process of listening an integral part of your practices. In fact, you might find that your organization is already doing some of this work:

Newsletters & Brochures (The “Inform” Step)

Newsletters and brochures are a great way to inform your community, both donors and those accessing your services, about the work you do and why. It can also be a low-pressure place to begin inviting feedback, especially if these methods of communication are something that you already do as an organization. This approach meets people in a place where they are already interacting with your work.

- **A Simple Call to Action:** Add a brief, welcoming line to your newsletter or brochure, such as “We value your experience and want you to help us improve.” This plants the

seed that their opinion is important.

- **Leverage a QR Code:** For printed newsletters, include a QR code that links directly to a short, online feedback form. This turns a static piece of paper into an interactive tool for suggestions. It's a discreet option for those who prefer not to speak up in person.
- **Remind and Reinforce:** Use a small corner of your publication to consistently list the various ways someone can share feedback with you (e.g., "Talk with staff," "Use our suggestion box," "Scan the QR code"). Repetition makes these opportunities familiar and more effective.

The Suggestion Box (Physical & Digital)

A suggestion box is a go-to tool for good reasons. It is a private, always available channel for feedback, honoring those who wish to share anonymously.

- **Setting It Up for Anonymity & Trust:**
 - **Physical Suggestion Box:** Place a suggestion box in a semi-private yet visible spot. A small sign that says "Suggestion Box: We Want to Hear from You" clarifies its purpose. You can state that people can leave their name and contact information if they are interested in a follow-up from staff, but make sure people know they are also welcome to leave feedback anonymously.
 - **Digital Suggestion Box:** Create a simple online form (using free tools like Google Forms) that doesn't require a name or email to submit. State clearly that submissions are anonymous. You can share this as a link or a QR code.
- **Promoting It Effectively:** Integrate the suggestion box into your organization's culture. Mention it during intake and upon return visits. Train staff and volunteers to casually remind visitors, "Feel free to leave us a note in the suggestion box on your way out."
- **Reporting Back:** The Visible Loop: This is where trust is actively built. Place a small whiteboard or chalkboard right next to the suggestion box. Use it to share periodic updates, for example: "You Spoke: Requests for low-sodium options heard. We Listened: More options are arriving next week!". This simple act proves the box is not just decorative but a conduit for real change. You can have this in response to what you hear digitally, too.

Digital Connections

Digital tools provide essential pathways to meet community members in the online spaces they are engaging with, creating multiple points of contact for different people.

- **Social media for Invitations & Updates:** While social media is not ideal for deep or private conversations, it is excellent for broadcasting opportunities and closing the loop publicly. Use your platforms to:
 - Share links to your latest survey.
 - Announce upcoming community events or coffee hours.
 - Post “You Spoke, We Listened!” updates to show how feedback is leading to action.
- **Direct Outreach via Text Message:** For more personal and direct communication, platforms like **Vivory** enable you to send text messages. Vermont Foodbank staff are trained to support you with this resource. Vivory can be a highly effective way to:
 - Send a survey link directly to people’s phones.
 - Share a timely update about new hours or services.
 - Personally invite community members to a feedback opportunity.

** Remember best practices when using any digital platform to connect with your community. Please refer to chapter one of this toolkit for more information.*

Surveys: Your Go-To Tool for Structured Feedback (The “Consult” Step)

Surveys are one of the most versatile tools for gathering consistent data that can directly inform decisions about services, hours, and programs.

Note for online surveys: Some of the platforms that Vermont Foodbank uses in our work to conduct surveys online are Survey Monkey, Google Forms, and Alchemer. Vermont Foodbank does not recommend a certain platform, as there are many options available, and it is important to find one that meets the needs of your organization. Some require subscriptions or have a cost associated with using them, so do your research to find the best fit.

Best Practices for Conducting Surveys:

- **Keep Them Short:** Respect people's time. Aim for 5-10 minutes to complete. For longer surveys, consider an appreciation of some kind, like a gift card.
- **Use Simple, Clear Language:** Ask one direct question at a time. Avoid insider jargon, and not too many questions that require written answers.
- **Consider Different Needs:** You may need to translate surveys or help fill them out. Make sure they are accessible.
- **Design for Anonymity & Option:** Structure surveys to be anonymous to encourage candor. Always include an optional final section where people can share their name and contact information if they wish to learn about volunteer roles, advocacy efforts, or other ways to get more involved.
- **Offering Different Choices for Participation:**
 - QR Codes: Generate a free QR code that links to your online survey. Place codes on posters or provide a tablet on-site for immediate access. Make sure to test the code with your phone's camera before sharing.
 - Printed Copies: Always have paper surveys with pens available in a visible spot with a clear return box. Use a font of at least twelve points or larger and leave plenty of space for written answers.
 - Tablets on site: Set the tablet to open directly to the survey. A simple "kiosk mode" browser app can help keep it on the correct page.
 - Social media & Email: Share the survey link through your digital newsletters and posts.
 - Direct Outreach: Gently offer a survey during intake or at community events

Survey Templates

To make starting as easy as possible, this toolkit includes [downloadable, customizable templates for common feedback needs](#), including:

- First-Time Visit Check-In
- Food Preferences & Cultural Needs
- Hours, Food Availability, & Layout of Space
- Dignity & Choice

- Strengths and Challenges for Regional Food Access
- Current Program Feedback

[Download the Survey Templates](#)

In Review

The methods in this chapter provide the essential first steps in opening a meaningful dialogue with your community that falls under the inform and consult steps of engagement. By starting with these light-touch tools: using newsletters, suggestion boxes, digital resources, and surveys, you demonstrate a clear commitment to listening and building the trust necessary for deeper collaboration. Each small effort to ask, “What do you think?” moves you closer to a true partnership and strengthens the relationships that make up your work.

Building Community & Fostering Collaboration

In this chapter you will find details on: Welcoming Spaces, Community Meetings, Community Conversations, and How to Use Feedback



This chapter is about creating intentional spaces for dialogue where richer stories and insights can be shared. Here, you shift from simply gathering feedback to building relationships and thinking with the community about solutions. If you refer to the Spectrum of Engagement tool, these options fall under, “Involve & Collaborate.”

While surveys and suggestion boxes provide crucial information, conversations build the trust and shared understanding that turn feedback into lasting partnership. The methods in this chapter, from casual coffee hours to structured dialogues, are designed to foster this deeper connection. They allow you to explore the “why” behind the feedback, uncover shared priorities, and begin the collaborative work of creating solutions together.

Coffee Hours & Open Houses: Welcoming Informal Conversation

Think of these as low-pressure, social opportunities to connect. The primary goal is not to tackle a specific agenda, but to build rapport, show the human side of your organization, and listen to understand, not to defend.

Planning a Welcoming Event:

- **Hospitality Matters:** Simple snacks and drinks go a long way to create a warm, welcoming atmosphere.
- **People-Centered Scheduling:** Choose days and times that work for your community, not just your staff schedule. Consider hosting events at times that may be more accessible to those you serve, such as in the evenings or at weekends.
- **Set the Tone with Presence:** Ensure friendly, familiar staff and volunteers are there to greet people, mingle, and listen. Their role is to be approachable hosts, not to run a formal meeting.

Facilitating with an Open Mind:

- Let conversation flow naturally. You might have a few broad, open-ended questions in your back pocket (e.g., “What’s one thing you appreciate about our service, and one thing you wish could change?”), but be prepared to follow the community’s lead.
- Practice listening without the need to immediately problem-solve or defend. It’s okay to say, “Thank you for sharing that perspective—it’s really helpful for us to hear,” and note it for future discussion. Do not make any promises on the spot. If you do not follow through, this can erode trust. Listen, take note of what you hear, and show gratitude to the person sharing.

Community Meetings: Structured Space for Shared Purpose

When you have a specific topic or issue to discuss, such as changes to distribution hours or ideas for a new program, a community meeting provides a more structured format to gather focused input.

A Step-by-Step Guide to a Community Meeting

1. **Define a Clear Purpose:** Name the topic and the goal of the meeting (e.g., “To gather your ideas for our holiday food distributions.”).
2. **Create a Safe Container:** Start by sharing simple group agreements with attendees. You can propose some agreements (e.g., “One speaker at a time,” “Listen to understand,” “Share from your own experience”) and ask for additions. This builds mutual expectations and helps to create a safe container for those participating. We also have people sign a disclosure agreement, that we discuss with the participants,

letting people decide on what from the conversations they feel comfortable sharing. You can find out more about this in the Community Conversations Guidebook, which is linked below.

3. **Craft an Accessible Agenda:** Share a simple timeline at the start. Include time for introductions, the main discussion, and a clear wrap-up and next steps.
4. **Facilitate Effectively:** Use a co-facilitator to help manage the flow, and a notetaker to capture key points. Please note: your cofacilitator and notetaker could be the same person. At Vermont Foodbank, we record meeting audio on our phones. That way we can listen back to key points or capture quotes directly. We do not share the recording with anyone, but we do disclose that we are recording and get permission from everyone participating.
5. **Honor Participation:** Provide appreciation for what people have offered. Vermont Foodbank uses gift cards to do this.
6. **Do Not Forget About the Feedback Step:** Consult the first chapter that outlines closing-the loop. You do not have to share any definitive steps at the end of the meeting but let participants know what you plan to do with learnings.

Managing Difficult Moments with Care

Sometimes, a challenging moment might arise. Think of it as a moment to create trust. Acknowledge the emotion: “I hear this is really important to you, thank you for sharing.” A trauma-informed approach means not shutting down difficult feedback but holding it respectfully and seeking to understand the need behind it.

Community Conversations: Collaborating on Solutions

Do Not Skip This Resource: Everything you need to facilitate community conversations can be found in Vermont Foodbank’s step-by-step guidebook:

[Download the Community Conversation Guidebook](#)

The main difference between a community meeting and what Vermont Foodbank calls community conversations is that the community conversations are a series, not just a single meeting. This is a deeper form of partnership, moving into the “Collaborate” zone of the Spectrum. Here, the participants, or “community consultants” as we like to call them, are active partners in designing a solution, not just commentators on an

idea. These conversations are focused on challenges and opportunities. Readiness of your organization is critical if you are going to host community conversations, because you are accountable to community members who show up to work alongside you.

Using the Support that Exists:

Vermont Foodbank staff are here to help make community conversations a success for you and your organization. You don't have to figure it out on your own. In fact, Vermont Foodbank has a "Community Conversation Guidebook" that explains everything from recruitment to using gift cards as appreciation. The Guidebook is full of additional resources and information.

From Dialogue to Action:

The output of these conversations should be a clear set of community-informed ideas or recommendations. Summarize these back to the group in the moment to ensure you've captured their intent. This sets the stage for the next, crucial phase of moving into action based on what you have heard.

From Feedback to Action: Using Your Data Strategically

The insights from these conversations are powerful tools for change, both inside and outside of your organization. Closing the loop here is key.

Internally – Inform Decisions:

Synthesize what you heard into clear themes. Present these findings to your board and staff not just as "data," but as the voices and stories of your community, making a compelling case for program adjustments or strategic shifts. This is where to use direct quotes to emphasize themes you heard. For example, if we want to talk about transportation as a barrier, you might highlight a quote like, "Even though we only live three blocks from the grocery store, it is hard in the winter because the sidewalks are often not plowed and icy. I can't carry much back with me, and I'm worried about falling."

Externally – Strengthen Your Voice:

This authentic community input is invaluable for grant applications and fundraising

appeals. It moves your narrative from “we think there’s a need” to “our community has told us directly what they need.” It demonstrates credibility and deep community connection.

In Advocacy – Amplify Community Voice:

Qualitative stories and quantitative data from your engagement work are powerful tools in advocacy for systemic change. You can share personal stories and themes with local representatives to show the real human impact of policies related to food access, transportation, or benefits. A benefit of being in a small state, like Vermont, is that our representatives are not only willing to listen, but eager to connect.

In Review

The methods in this chapter represent a significant shift—from listening to your community to creating solutions alongside your community. By creating space for conversation and collaboration, you build the shared understanding and trust necessary to co-create solutions. This transforms feedback from a one-way report into a dynamic, ongoing partnership, ensuring your work remains deeply rooted in and responsive to the community you serve.

Empowerment: **Sharing Power** and Leadership

In this chapter you will find details on: Starting a Neighbor Advisory Council and Expanding Your Board with Lived Experience



This last step on the Spectrum of Engagement is about partnership at its deepest level. The options in this chapter fall under “Empower.” The methods discussed here: establishing formal advisory roles and integrating lived experience into governance move beyond collaborating on solutions to genuinely sharing decision-making. This work ensures your organization’s direction is guided by the community’s wisdom.

Empowerment is the act of not just inviting input, but of sharing the power to decide. It means creating intentional pathways for community members, especially those with lived experience, to help steer your organization’s course. This commitment leads to more resilient, relevant, and accountable work, and it builds a profound, structural form of trust. It is the ultimate expression of the belief that those most impacted by a problem hold the key to its most meaningful solutions. This is not a place to start, but rather a place to build toward.

Starting a Neighbor Advisory Council

A Neighbor Advisory Council (NAC) is a dedicated group of community members who provide ongoing, formal guidance to your organization’s leadership and staff. It creates

a structural bridge for community voices to directly influence decisions. You know you are ready for this step if you:

1. Have organizational support from your board and leadership.
2. Have relationships based on trust with the neighbors who access your services.
3. Have staff who are committed and have the capacity to do this work.

Things to Keep in Mind:

- **Recruitment with Intention:** Seek members who reflect the diversity of your community. Reach out through personal invitations, trusted partners, and clear announcements. Look for individuals who are thoughtful, dependable, willing to share their perspectives, and represent a range of experiences. Lean on the relationships that you have built through your other forms of engagement.
- **Appreciation as Respect:** Offering a gift card for meeting attendance can be a critical practice of equity. It formally recognizes the expertise and value community members bring to the table.
- **Clear Expectations from the Start:** A good NAC has a timeline and a clear scope. They are a big ask and a big commitment, so you want to be clear and organized about your expectations from the start.
- **Structuring Effective Meetings:** Co-create meeting norms and agendas with the NAC members. Ensure meetings are accessible, well-facilitated, and focused on substantive topics like program feedback, strategic planning, and community concerns. You might need to spend time in the beginning doing a deeper dive into your organization's programs and operations, so members feel they have a good grasp on the topics.
- **Integrating Feedback into Leadership:** Establish a clear, documented process for how the NAC's insights are shared with your board and staff. This could be a standing report at board meetings or a designated staff liaison. Crucially, you must close the loop with the NAC, showing them how their input impacted decisions.

For Guidance: Many food banks have successfully created Neighbor Advisory Councils. Below is an example of one that we hope will support your organization. You do not have to start from zero. A great place to start is with this toolkit:

[Advisory Council Toolkit – Social Impact Commons](#)

Expanding Your Board with Lived Experience

Inviting individuals with lived experience onto your governing board embeds community perspective at the highest level of decision-making. It ensures the voices of those you serve to help shape the budget, strategy, and policies of your organization.

- **Why it Matters:** This practice moves lived experience from an anecdote shared in a meeting to a voting voice at the table where fundamental decision-making happens. It leads to more innovative and grounded strategies, builds greater community trust, ensures authentic oversight, and creates valuable opportunities for community members with lived experience.
- **Your Board Must Be Ready for This Step:** Often, existing boards need support and time to be ready for a step like this. The readiness of your existing board is critical. Vermont Foodbank and Vermont Foodbank partners have gone through or are going through this process and are great resources to learn from. Please contact Vermont Foodbank staff if this is a step you want to take.
- **How to Recruit, Onboard, and Support Authentically:**
 - **Recruitment:** Look within your network: your NAC, dedicated volunteers, or program participants. Extend a personal invitation. Be transparent about the role, time commitment, and the support you will provide.
 - **Onboarding:** Create a welcoming and thorough onboarding process. Use plain language, pair new members with a seasoned board mentor, and patiently explain organizational acronyms, financial documents, and procedures.
 - **Board Education:** While it is critical to onboard members, so all have the tools they need to do the important work of the board, it is also important to support current board members in making space for new board members. Think about offering board education about diversity, equity, and inclusion.
 - **Ongoing Support:** Foster a board culture where all contributions are genuinely valued. Actively solicit perspectives and ensure meeting materials are accessible. There are also a lot of great resources available from organizations who have done this work. You don't have to create the wheel on expanding your board.

- **Addressing Common Barriers:** To make this work equitable, proactively address obstacles:
 - **Transportation & Childcare:** Consider whether you can offer reimbursements for travel or provide a stipend for transportation. Provide or subsidize childcare during board meetings.
 - **Board Appreciation:** By offering gift cards, or actual payments by adding them to your payroll, you honor the expertise of those with lived experience ensuring equitable participation in decision-making. This practice values their contributions as essential to meaningful governance.
 - **Jargon & Culture:** Commit to using clear, accessible language in all board materials. Encourage questions and create a culture where questions are encouraged so that everyone can learn together.

In Review

The practices in this chapter, establishing a Neighbor Advisory Council and integrating lived experience onto your board, represent the full embodiment of partnership. They ensure that volunteers and staff do not only reflect the community's voice, but it is present and influential in the boardroom. This is the work of building structural trust and creating organizations that share power with the community they serve.

From Feedback to Action: How to Use Your Data

In this chapter you will find details on: Effectively communicating, internally and externally, what you have learned from your engagement work.



This last chapter is about ensuring that all the listening and partnership leads to tangible results. Collecting feedback is only the beginning; neighbor engagement directly impacts how you design your programs, communicate your work, and structure decision-making.

The feedback loop is not truly closed when the last survey is collected, or the meeting adjourns. It closes when the community sees how their input created outcomes. This chapter provides a practical guide for the essential next steps: analyzing, presenting, and activating the insights you have gathered to strengthen your work from the inside out.

Internally: Informing Your Organization's Decisions

The feedback you gather should be the fuel for your planning and continuous improvement.

How to Interpret and Present Findings

- Look for key themes, patterns, and compelling stories. Communicate data points

clearly. For example: “Three main themes emerged from our conversations: a strong need for more fresh produce, challenges with our current Thursday evening hours, and deep appreciation for the respectful tone set by our volunteers.”

- Present these findings to your board and staff in an engaging way. Use direct, anonymized quotes to bring the data to life. Focus on the discussion on what feedback means for your strategic priorities and what program changes it suggests. What format to share your learnings might be the most engaging for your intended audience? A booklet, a presentation, a one-pager? Creating these might take some time, but they prove worthwhile as a go-to resource.
- Think about how you can share your work with the broader community. Who could benefit from your learnings? Local representatives, other social services organizations, town councils, etc.?

Integrate into Routines

- Build it into regular staff meeting agendas. Dedicate time to discuss recent feedback and decide on responsive actions. This makes listening and adapting a core operational habit, not an occasional project.

Externally: Strengthening Your Communication and Funding

Authentic community voice is your most powerful asset for telling your story and demonstrating need to supporters and funders.

For Grant Applications and Fundraising

- Use feedback to demonstrate specific needs. Incorporate specific data and quotes: “In a recent survey, 72% of households reported that the rising cost of utilities forces them to cut their food budget. As one neighbor shared, ‘I’m making a lot more soup from scratch to stretch what I have.’”
- This evidence makes your case compelling, credible, and deeply human to funders.

For Annual Appeals and Community Reports

- Let your community speak on behalf of your organization. Feature their stories and feedback to illustrate your impact. This builds a powerful emotional connection with donors and shows them exactly how their support makes a difference through the voices of those served. There are great resources to learn more about ethical

storytelling in the nonprofit world. Make sure you are using a trauma-informed approach when sharing someone's story.

Remember Your Channels

- Share these “Feedback in Action” stories everywhere: on the chalkboard by the suggestion box, in newsletters, on social media, and in brochures. This visible loop-closing shows your entire community that you are listening and responding.

In Advocacy: Amplifying Voice for Systemic Change

The collective voice of your community can influence the policies that shape everyone's lives.

Using Qualitative and Quantitative Data

- Quantitative Data (The Numbers): Aggregate survey data to show clear trends. Example: “Over the last year, visits from seniors increased by 30%, with many citing fixed incomes and medical costs as primary drivers.”
- Qualitative Data (The Stories): With explicit permission, share personal stories that put a human face on the statistics. A single, powerful story can create lasting empathy and is often what policymakers remember most.

How to Advocate Effectively

- Schedule meetings with local representatives. Use the combined power of data and story to paint a clear picture of community needs.
- Prepare a simple, one-page fact sheet that includes key data points and a resonant, anonymized quote. This provides a professional and impactful takeaway that clearly communicates the issue.

In Review

This chapter is about honoring the promise of engagement. By strategically using the feedback you gather internally to guide your work, externally to tell your story, and in advocacy to fight for broader change, you ensure that every voice shared with you becomes a catalyst for meaningful action. This is how the cycle of listening, learning, and partnering builds not just better programs, but a stronger, more responsive, and more just community for everyone.

In Conclusion

Engagement is not a project with an end date, but an ongoing practice of partnership. By starting where you are, choosing methods that fit your capacity, and always remembering to close the loop, you embed dignity and responsiveness into the heart of your service. Every time your organization asks the people you serve, “What do you think?”, it strengthens relationships and builds trust that makes true collaboration possible.

Vermont Foodbank is honored to be on this journey with you. The work of improving the neighbor experience is a shared endeavor, and we are committed to learning, growing, and supporting your organization as much as we can. Thank you for your dedication to listening deeply and partnering meaningfully with your community.