

Final Report: Albert Schweitzer Fellowship – Detroit Chapter

Fellow: Adediwura Adegbite

Project Title: Addressing Food Insecurity in Immigrant and Refugee Communities of Southeast Michigan

Mentor: Dr. Carolina Restini

Host Site: Freedom House Detroit

Background Summary

This project was developed in response to the overwhelming rates of food insecurity among immigrant and refugee populations in Southeast Michigan - communities that often fall through the cracks of government food assistance programs due to their immigration status. Detroit, in particular, faces a stark disparity, with an estimated 33% of households experiencing food insecurity, nearly three times the national average.

Many immigrant and asylum-seeking families arrive in Detroit with limited access to affordable, nutritious food, frequently residing in food deserts and facing housing instability. Freedom House Detroit is a well-established sanctuary that offers temporary shelter, food, and legal aid to newly arrived families in the Detroit area. Once families have been housed and helped to settle in, they would be on their own to fend for themselves with far fewer resources than the average US citizen. At the time of beginning my project, the Freedom House was experiencing record numbers of asylum seekers and refugee families, and they were unable to meet the full demand. My project was designed to support the overflow, families and individuals who have, for lack of better terms, graduated from the Freedom House but are still in need of some support. In this case, the

support I provided was consistent access to nutritious food and connecting them to additional community resources.

Project Goals and Approach

Original Goals:

1. Provide healthy food and produce to immigrant and refugee families ineligible for government aid.
2. Distribute culturally tailored, easy-to-prepare meal recipes in participants' preferred languages.
3. Address and provide support to families that may experience housing insecurity during this time.

Implementation Strategy:

The project began by identifying families with semi-stable housing situations, addressed as food insecure, who had been referred by Freedom House. Food items were sourced biweekly from Grassroots Grocery, and deliveries were made Friday evenings. Initially, the plan included distributing translated recipes to help participants create healthy meals using the food provided.

A few months into the project, participants expressed that they did not need or want recipe guides. Within the first few weeks, it became clear that this approach did not meet the community's actual needs. Many families already had a strong understanding of how to cook healthy meals with the whole food ingredients provided, and consistent

access to whole foods was the biggest issue they were facing. They preferred to rely on their own culinary traditions rather than recipes designed by someone outside their culture. In response, I adjusted the scope of the project by shifting focus away from recipe development and doubling down on reliable access to high-quality food and support for housing needs.

This shift taught me a vital lesson in community-responsive care - true service means listening, adjusting, and centering the community's lived experiences over assumptions about their needs. As someone deeply committed to community engagement, I realized that good intentions can still lead to misguided solutions if they're not grounded in community input. Listening to participants, especially when their feedback challenges your assumptions, is essential to building trust and delivering meaningful support.

As the project progressed, I encountered several challenges that demonstrated the complexity of working with vulnerable and highly mobile populations. One family dropped out of the program temporarily after losing their housing. For weeks, I was unable to reach them, and it took time and some coordination with Freedom House staff to reconnect. Eventually, they were able to secure new housing and continued as a part of the service project. Their journey emphasized how tenuous stability is for many immigrant families and how quickly someone can disappear from even the most well-intentioned support system.

Another participant family experienced a crisis when one of their members was detained due to immigration status issues. The remaining family members, in emotional

distress and unsure of how to seek help, opened up to me during one of my drop-offs. I became their bridge to Freedom House, helping them get in touch with legal support and community resources. That experience reminded me that advocacy often extends beyond the original scope of a project - it requires being a consistent presence and an anchor during periods of instability.

Finally, as a part of my project, I conducted informal home health and housing assessments during drop-offs every other visit to assess whether families needed more support, either via more food deliveries or needed support due to new developments in housing insecurity. These informal surveys, which were mostly via open-ended questions, helped identify households facing unsafe or unstable housing conditions. Based on assessment findings, I was able to serve as a bridge for families to reconnect with the Freedom House if they now needed additional support.

Outcomes and Accomplishments

Quantitative Results:

- Four different households with 30+ members consistently received produce and pantry staples.
- 100% of participating families conveyed satisfaction with the project.
- Midway through deliveries, 100% of families expressed that they would like to continue with the project.

- One family was referred to Freedom House and community shelters for emergency housing support.
- One family was referred back to the Freedom House for legal assistance for an immigration related arrest.

Qualitative Outcomes:

- Families reported increased feelings of stability from consistent food access.
- Some parents shared that their children were excited to cook meals together.
- Parents described a sense of dignity and cultural affirmation from receiving whole foods they could prepare in familiar ways.
- Trust was built between myself and the families, who came to see the program not only as a source of food but also as a source of support during times of crisis.
- Feedback emphasized gratitude for being trusted with autonomy over their meals.

Evaluation of Impact

Though the project did not proceed exactly as envisioned, its impact was shaped and strengthened by its responsiveness to community feedback. By eliminating the recipe component and focusing on consistent food access, the project more effectively met the needs of the families it aimed to serve. Rather than prescribing how participants should cook or eat, the project empowered them to use their knowledge and cultural practices.

The challenges I encountered - especially losing contact with one family due to unstable housing, and navigating an immigration-related crisis with another - highlighted

the need for persistent, flexible, and human-centered service models. These moments were difficult, but they were also deeply instructive. They reminded me that food insecurity rarely exists in isolation; it intersects with housing, legal status, and systemic exclusion.

While I was not able to complete a formal housing assessment survey as originally planned, I still engaged in consistent dialogue with families about their housing conditions and made referrals as needed. The evolving nature of the project made clear that responsiveness and trust matter more than rigid structure.

Sustainability Plan

As the project progressed, I began shifting the model from weekly deliveries to empowering families to access food directly through local pantries, particularly Gleaners Grocery, which is open every weekday. By introducing families to this resource, they will be able to obtain produce and pantry staples at times most convenient for them, rather than waiting for weekly deliveries. This shift promotes independence and allows families to better meet their needs on their own terms.

However, a growing concern has emerged over the course of this transition. The quantity and quality of food available at the pantry have declined significantly in recent weeks. Conversations with pantry staff and other volunteers suggest that this may be linked to funding cuts, potentially influenced by recent shifts in government support for community aid programs. This instability is worrisome, as it jeopardizes one of the few consistent resources available to the food-insecure families I've worked with.

Given these developments, part of the sustainability plan now includes helping families build relationships with multiple food distribution centers across Detroit, so they are not solely dependent on a single site. Additionally, I am thinking of exploring potential partnerships between MSUCOM and local nonprofits to host periodic food drives or donation campaigns to help bridge the gap created by shrinking pantry resources. Another potential sustainability method is connecting families with MSUCOM's street medicine, which provides free medical services as well as food and clothing that families might need. While the student service organization model is still under development, it is clear that sustainability in this context must also involve system-level advocacy, raising awareness about the fragility of food systems that many vulnerable families rely on, and working to ensure that access to nutritious food remains a priority despite changing political landscapes.

Although my official term as an Albert Schweitzer Fellow is coming to an end, my commitment to supporting these families is far from over. I plan to continue working alongside them and potentially expand my reach to serve even more. As an immigrant myself, I carry a deep sense of empathy and personal connection to their experiences, and I am dedicated to continuing this work with compassion, purpose, and sustained advocacy.

Recommendations for Serving This Population

1. Center the Voices of the Community: Don't assume what people need—ask them.

2. Support Cultural Autonomy: Providing ingredients allows families to maintain food traditions; avoid "fixing" what's not broken.
3. Be Flexible in Operations: Expect housing changes, communication barriers, and scheduling surprises—and be ready to pivot.
4. Leverage Trusted Partners: Freedom House was crucial in building early trust with participants and ensuring outreach to the most vulnerable.
5. Language Accessibility is Non-Negotiable: Even when participants have basic English skills, translating key materials builds dignity and inclusiveness.

Reflection on My Fellowship Experience

This project was both professionally and personally transformative. As a Nigerian immigrant, I have experienced many of the barriers these families face, from being ineligible for assistance despite paying taxes to navigating a system not built to support people like me. I've felt invisible, unsupported, and excluded. That history drove me to want to be the kind of person who shows up for others in similar positions.

This fellowship gave me the opportunity to not only give back but to grow. I learned how to design and adapt a community-based project, how to earn trust, and how to serve as both a provider and a listener. More importantly, I learned that service is not just about filling gaps - it's about building relationships, showing up consistently, and holding space for people during their hardest moments.

This experience has deepened my desire to serve marginalized communities as a physician and advocate. It has also solidified my dream of one day creating a sustainable

program, maybe even a nonprofit, that connects immigrants and refugees to healthcare and basic necessities.

Conclusion: A Legacy of Reverence

Dr. Albert Schweitzer believed in “reverence for life”—in the dignity of all people, regardless of race, citizenship, or circumstance. I believe he would have embraced this project. It reflects his belief in compassionate service and the idea that no life is more deserving than another.

I leave this fellowship more rooted in my values and more inspired than ever to build a life of service. This project was a beginning, not an end—and I look forward to expanding its legacy in the years to come.