Evaluation of Mi Amore: A Food Rescue, Recovery, and Redirection Organization in Winthrop, MA

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Bharathi Gandi
Abstract

Background Mi Amore is a nonprofit, food rescue, recovery, and redirection program in Winthrop, MA with no prior evaluation or assessment. Feedback and perspectives from the recipients may be favorable in learning if Mi Amore is effective in alleviating food insecurity in recipient households.

Objective To evaluate the perceptions, attitudes, opinions, and general concerns of the recipients of Mi Amore in order to determine if the services are satisfactory or acceptable.

Design Data was collected through in-person interviews for a qualitative study. Interviews were conducted using a 15-question interview guide with open-ended and sub-questions. Responses were coded according to four categories of perceived satisfaction: 1) satisfaction with type of food, 2) satisfaction with delivery and communication, 3) satisfaction with Mi Amore as supplemental financial relief, and 4) areas for improvement to increase satisfaction.

Participants Household members in charge of finances and/or groceries and over the age of 18 were recruited through phone calls. Out of 16 recipients, four were recruited.

Analysis Responses to interview questions were analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

Results All four recipients indicated that they are satisfied with the type of food donated by Mi Amore. All four recipients are satisfied with the delivery process and communication methods. Two out of four recipients are satisfied with Mi Amore as a supplemental food assistance program. The other two recipients do not find Mi Amore’s to be instrumental in alleviating their food insecurity. Two out of four recipients have made suggestions for improvement to increase satisfaction. The other two recipients find Mi Amore to be satisfactory overall and have made no suggestions for improvement.

Conclusion The findings suggest that Mi Amore’s services are perceived as satisfactory and acceptable by the recipients. The services are particularly beneficial to those who use other food assistance and financial relief programs, using Mi Amore as a supplemental resource.
INTRODUCTION

Food Insecurity, a Public Health Nutrition Concern

Food insecurity, formally defined by US Department of Agriculture (USDA) as a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food, is a pressing public health nutrition issue in America (1). It is predominantly associated with low-income and low socioeconomic status and disproportionately affects marginalized communities (2). In 2016, approximately 12.3% of American households experienced food insecurity, affecting especially vulnerable populations such as children, elderly, and people with disabilities (3). Food insecurity can be experienced over a range of intensity and is generally described in terms of food security. High food security is defined as no reported indications of food-access problems or limitations. Low food security is defined as reduced quality, variety, and desirability of diet and very low food security is defined as disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake (4). Food insecurity is recognized by USDA as a “nutrition quality gap” that leads to malnutrition, undernutrition, and the consequent chronic disease (1). Those who experience food insecurity tend to consume high-calorie, low-nutrient dense foods, which may contribute to diet-related chronic disease such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, hyperlipidemia, and diabetes (5).

To address this problem, there exist food policies and assistance programs that aim to reduce the incidence and risk of food insecurity, while attempting to mitigate its negative health outcomes. For example, USDA offers the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to those who meet a certain eligibility criteria (6). SNAP, previously known as Food Stamps, provides funding to low-income families to purchase food. The recipients of SNAP are given an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card to use as a debit card at participating grocery stores. In addition to SNAP, USDA provides other food and nutrition assistance programs including National School Lunch program (NSLP), Women, Infant, Children (WIC) program, and the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) (7).

However, disadvantaged populations, such as those with disabilities and undocumented persons cannot rely on government programs as a primary source of food due to physical and legal barriers (8). Moreover, there are additional barriers such as lack of awareness, perception of
stigma, benefit inadequacy, and unnecessary administrative burdens that further limit participation of low-income families from using government programs (9). In these cases, nonprofit or private food assistance programs aim to fill in the gaps and increase accessibility to all types of households. Food assistance programs such as food pantries, food banks, and food recovery programs all aim to reduce the stress of food insecurity among American households (10).

**Food Waste and Benefits of Recovery and Redistribution**

Food waste is another important public health issue in America that is often overlooked. Approximately one third of the food produced is wasted annually (11). For instance, food is grown in surplus and is disposed of for futile reasons such as lack of storage, access, and communication within the food system (12). Restaurants, grocery stores, and school food programs also contribute to food waste due to lack of profit or means of distribution. In theory, food insecurity should not exist within the same realm as food waste. Rescuing and redirecting food products that may be destined to a landfill can help address both food insecurity and food waste (13). Mi Amore, a food assistance program in Winthrop, Massachusetts, is focused on addressing this particular problem. Their mission aligns with the goal of rescuing food from restaurants, grocery stores, and schools and redirecting it towards families that are experiencing food insecurity.

**Mi Amore, Winthrop, Massachusetts**

Winthrop is a small city located to the east of Boston with a population of approximately 18,000 (14). The rate of food insecurity is consistent with that of America, with approximately 12% households experiencing food insecurity (15). Food waste in Winthrop, as observed by the director of Mi Amore, is substantial and mostly generated from grocery stores and restaurants. Mi Amore’s mission is to rescue and recover viable food from grocery stores and restaurants and redirect it to families with food insecurity in Winthrop, MA.

Jeff and Suzanne Carson, the founders and directors of Mi Amore, started Mi Amore to address the problem of food insecurity and food waste in Winthrop. Mi Amore is run by
directors, volunteers, and donors who are all Winthrop residents and engage with their community. The food donated by local grocery stores, restaurants, schools, and other aforementioned donors includes fresh produce, baked goods, leftover event/function meals, pre-made meals, milk, and bread (16). The recipients are recruited through community leaders such as church pastors, school nurses, and police officers who interact with community members regularly. The prospective recipients are then contacted by the directors to determine if Mi Amore is suitable for their household. After signing contracts regarding food safety, participants begin receiving at least one donation per week. There are currently eight volunteers working three shifts per week picking up and dropping off deliveries from donors to recipients (17). The volunteers use their personal vehicles to pick up and drop off food from donors to recipients. The recipients usually receive a phone call or a text message prior to a drop-off to confirm if they will need the food for that week. Once confirmed, the food is dropped off at the recipients’ house at a time convenient for both parties. Mi Amore is considered to be a point-to-point service, meaning the donated food is picked up and dropped off immediately.

As of 2017, Jeff Carson, who is in charge of the finances, estimates Mi Amore to be rescuing $15,000 of food at fair market value and is projected to rescue $25,000 of food in 2018. Mi Amore established agreements with key community stakeholders such as churches, schools, restaurants, and grocery stores to recover and allocate food. Donors of food and money include Winthrop Public School, The Arbors Assisted Living at Winthrop, La Siesta Restaurante, and Hurley Construction and Roofing. The volunteers who actively provide Mi Amore’s services are residents of Winthrop who are interested in the well-being of their community members (18).

As reported by Jeff Carson, Mi Amore rescues approximately $500 worth of food each working week and deliveries with fruits, vegetables, milk, sandwiches, and salads are made to the recipients. The program currently serves 16 families including 4 elderly individuals, 6 people recovering from substance abuse, 12 children, and 4 single parents. Mi Amore’s current goal is to expand its services to neighboring towns, Revere and East Boston. The directors of Mi Amore are in the process of applying for a Healthy Communities grant through the United States Environmental Protection Agency to ensure that there is sufficient funding for expansion to other towns and to initiate new projects within Winthrop.
Study Objective

The objective of this study was to evaluate the perceptions, attitudes, opinions, and general concerns of the recipients of Mi Amore to determine if the services are effective in relieving food insecurity in their households. If the type of food, delivery and communication process, Mi Amore’s role as supplemental financial relief, and the overall experience was found to be satisfactory by the recipients, the satisfaction and acceptability of Mi Amore was confirmed. The main goals of this study were to 1) study the perceptions of recipients in terms of satisfaction to determine Mi Amore’s role in alleviating their food insecurity and 2) note areas of improvement in Mi Amore’s services that would increase satisfaction.

METHODS

Institutional Review Board Approval

Study protocols and interview guides were reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at the Boston University Medical Center. The study was deemed exempt and did not require signed informed consent from participants because the study was considered low risk.

Study Design

The study was a qualitative study. The primary sources of data were in-person interviews. The recorded interviews were carefully transcribed for analysis by the PI. The transcriptions were then coded into four categories of perceived satisfaction, that were chosen a priori including satisfaction with type of food, satisfaction with delivery and communication process, extent of financial relief, and suggestions for improvement. The themes for organization were chosen a posteriori for organizational purposes. The interview was crafted using methods of qualitative interviewing, analysis, and interpretation (19). The interviews were analyzed qualitatively using the principles of content analysis, which is an approach to quantify qualitative information to sort, compare, and summarize data (20).

All 16 food insecure families who currently use Mi Amore’s services were contacted to participate in the study. Phone numbers and email addresses of the recipients were provided by
the director of Mi Amore. The member of each household who is in charge of family finances and grocery shopping was contacted to be interviewed. Each family was initially contacted by the principal investigator, Ms. Gandi, over the phone and the purpose of the study was briefly described using the recruitment script (See Appendix A). The principal investigator reached out to the recipients through email/phone call no more than 4 times. Interviews with those who expressed interest in participating were scheduled at a place and time of convenience to the interviewees.

**Interviews**

The perceptions, attitudes, opinions, and general feedback were collected through 30-minute, in-person interviews using a 15-question interview guide (See Appendix B). Six questions on the interview guide included sub-questions following the main questions designed to follow up if the recipients’ answers did not provide much detail in their initial response. The principal investigator met with each of the interviewees at a time and location of convenience to the interviewee; most of them in their respective homes. Each interviewee received an IRB-approved information sheet explaining the details of the study and terms of confidentiality and anonymity (See Appendix C). Anonymity of the interviews was assured, emphasizing the fact that no identifying characteristics of the households would be reported or revealed. The interviews were audio-recorded and handwritten notes were kept to be transcribed for analysis. Recording the interviews also allowed the PI to be as attentive as possible to create a comfortable atmosphere for the interviews. The 15-question interview guide aimed to address the following: participants’ relationship with Mi Amore, circumstances that lead to food insecurity, feelings around using food assistance programs, nature of received food, experience with delivery process, comfort and convenience of the services, recommendations for improvement, and lastly, general feedback to cover any gaps. Questions about circumstances that lead to food insecurity were included in this interview to note the determinants of food insecurity among Winthrop households. Recipients were given the option of not responding to any questions that may have felt too sensitive or uncomfortable to answer.
RESULTS

Participants and Interviews

Out of the 16 recipients, four dropped out of the program and hence were ineligible to participate, three had scheduling conflicts beyond the timeline of this project, three were unresponsive, two declined to participate, and four agreed to be interviewed. The interviews ranged from 25 to 30 minutes, depending on the pace and flow of conversation. Three of the four interviews took place in the recipients’ home and one took place at a coffee shop close to the recipient’s workplace.

Of the four interviewees, one was an elderly individual and three were parents in single-parent households. Three recipients had medical needs that require regular medical attention. One recipient was retired, two were currently unemployed, and one had a steady job with employment benefits. Three out of the four recipients were female and one was male.

Categories of Perceived Satisfaction

Responses to the interview questions were coded into the four categories of perceived satisfaction (Table 1). Attitudes, feelings, and concerns towards Mi Amore’s services noted in the interview answers were arranged in the categories of perceived satisfaction. Recipients’ satisfaction was determined based on if they seemed to appreciate, like, or express positive feelings towards any of the categories of perceived satisfaction.

Table 1. Participant Responses Organized into Categories of Perceived Satisfaction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfaction with Type of Food</th>
<th>Satisfaction with Current Method of Delivery and Communication: phone call and door delivery</th>
<th>Supplemental Food and Financial Assistance Used by Recipients</th>
<th>Suggestions for Improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recipient A</strong></td>
<td>(+): bread, milk, premade meals (-): none</td>
<td>Meals on Wheels, Public Housing (WHA)</td>
<td>No Suggestions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recipient B</strong></td>
<td>(+): fruits, vegetables, premade meals, baked goods (-): none</td>
<td>SNAP</td>
<td>Chicken, Steak, and overall consistency in delivered food.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Recipient C

| (+): fruits, vegetables, bread, (-): high quantity of baked goods, especially sugary foods, food that has been heated under artificial lighting lamps | Yes. | Public Housing (WHA), Fuel Assistance, Local Food Pantry | Similar service for non-food items such as toiletries, pet food, food gift cards, and collaboration with Community Supported Agriculture program for donations. |

### Recipient D

| (+): fruits and vegetables (-): none | Yes. | SNAP, Public Housing (WHA) | No Suggestions |

***(+)* refers to likes and positive response towards category, *(−)* refers to dislikes or negative response towards category.

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**-Satisfaction with type of food.** Recipients were asked if the food they received weekly was satisfactory in terms of personalized dietary requirements, choice, and ethnic/cultural inclusivity.

The type of food was perceived to be satisfactory by all recipients. The recipients appreciated the variety of food, fruits and vegetables, staples (bread and milk), and baked goods. All of the recipients we interviewed believed that the food they receive from Mi Amore is inclusive of their diets as well as their culture. For instance, one recipient who is vegan appreciated receiving fruits and vegetables. One recipient had concerns about the food in the deliveries. They appreciated that there is no processed or canned food, which they believe to be unhealthy due to unnatural preservatives.

“It’s always different—we don’t usually get processed or canned food. It’s typically stuff from the bakery at the end of the day. Then there’s produce.”

One recipient is reluctant to accept large quantities of baked goods and high-sugar products such as cakes and cookies as they believe these products are unhealthy for their children. Although there was reportedly minimal food waste among the households in this study,
one recipient mentioned that they throw away what they might perceive as unhealthy. For instance, one recipient mentioned how their major food waste is food that has been reheated under heat lamps because they believe such food is cancerous due to radiation.

“We don’t eat anything that is heated by food lamps. Anything that’s been under a heat lamp like chicken wings or something, I throw it out.”

The recipients prefer using Mi Amore due to the convenience but are reluctant to use them as their sole source of food assistance due to the inconsistency in the type of food they receive weekly. One mentioned that having the ability to customize the donations would be beneficial for their family.

“It's kind of hit or miss it would be nice to have some sort of consistency.”

“If they could just sit down with us and have an index card about what type of donations we'd like, that would be great.”

-Satisfaction with delivery and communication process. Recipients were asked if they found the current door-to-door delivery service and communication by phone (text message or phone call) to be satisfactory. The means of delivery and communication is perceived to be convenient, and satisfactory by the recipients. They believe that the delivery service is discrete and comfortable.

“I don’t think there is anything more convenient than them coming to your door.”

All four recipients stated that they would continue using Mi Amore as long as they are food insecure. They would also recommend this service to other similar households. Mi Amore also offers an additional service where the recipient can call to make special requests in case of emergency. Although three of the four recipients we interviewed were aware of this service, none had used this service.

-Satisfaction with Mi Amore as supplemental financial relief Recipients were asked if Mi Amore’s services relieves them of having to buy weekly groceries and hence, providing financial
relief. They were also asked if they use additional financial relief programs such as Public Housing, Fuel Assistance, and SNAP to gauge how Mi Amore is helping. All of the Mi Amore recipients interviewed also rely on other food assistance programs. Two recipients use USDA’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), one uses Meals on Wheels, and one uses the local food pantry. The type of program they use is dependent on the eligibility criteria of their respective households.

The recipients also use other financial assistance programs such as: Winthrop Housing Authority (WHA), US Welfare Program, Department of Transitional Assistance, Action for Boston Community Development Fuel Assistance, and MassHealth. Three recipients live in public housing through WHA and one pays rent through welfare. The food from Mi Amore relieves two recipients from having to buy some of their weekly groceries. One recipient stated how the timing of Mi Amore’s deliveries are crucial in helping alleviate food insecurity in their household.

“See I get food stamps but they don’t last so like I don’t need Mi Amore in the beginning of the month, I don’t really need any help. It’s more towards the end of the month when I run out of everything and I don’t have the money to get anything.”

One recipient mentioned that sometimes the local food pantry is not reliable due to holidays and sporadic donations and that is when Mi Amore is most helpful.

“I use the local food pantry once a month, first and second Wednesdays but if you miss one month, you have to wait a whole month until the next donation.”

In one case, one of the recipients who relies on Mi Amore for groceries saved money from not having to buy food due to receiving food from Mi Amore and uses that money for rent.

“The money [from welfare] doesn’t even pay my bills, it’s gone as quick as it comes. I use it to pay my rent.”

-Suggestions for improvement. Recipients were asked if they had any recommendations for improvements that would help Mi Amore be more effective in alleviating food insecurity in their household. Two of the four recipients have suggestions for improvement for Mi Amore’s services. The four main ideas for improvement were having more consistency in the type of deliveries, preferably tailored to the preferences of the household, more meat and protein such as
chicken and steak, toiletries such as paper products and laundry detergent, and having the option of customized deliveries. One of the recipients contacted the PI through email to address additional ideas for improvement. The additional ideas are using Community Supported Agriculture program for donations, pet food, and food gift cards.

“Chicken, steak, fish maybe fruits--they give us fruits and vegetable, just like that kind of food, chicken and steak. I mean you can’t expect them to give you that but if they want to know what else we want, that would be something, if they can get it.”

“I know it’s hard but maybe sit down and go a little deeper with me and discuss the donations with me like maybe put a limit on the junk. Maybe at the moment of the delivery, they took the adults aside and said ‘Hey, what do you think of this box? and I can decide instead of feeling obligated to accept it all.”

“People who are food insecure and do qualify for SNAP or food stamps, there are things that they can’t buy like laundry detergent or paper products like toilet paper. Often times, grocery store throw away dented and damaged stuff. Maybe [Mi Amore] can take a look into something like that and see if it’s something they could do. Those are most expensive things that families could use--toilet paper or toothpaste.”

Two recipients had no suggestions for improvement and are completely satisfied with the current services.

Other Observations
Responses from the open-ended interview questions were organized to encompass the overall recipient experience.

-Positive Relationship with Mi Amore Three recipients were recruited into the program directly through the directors and have maintained a positive relationship with Mi Amore since the beginning in 2016. One recipient was recruited through a case manager and has been working closely with the same volunteer. All four of the recipients have been using the services consistently since the start of the program in 2016. Feelings towards Mi Amore among all four have been positive and appreciative.
“I think those people have huge hearts—they’re just wonderful and they include their family members. Children often come to the door with bags—they’re teaching their children to be empathetic and to be giving and non-judgmental.”

“I keep it almost business like because I’m sort of a guarded person and I don’t get involved in their personal lives and I don’t really let them in mine very much.”

-Stigma Around Using Food Assistance Two recipients were reportedly able to overcome the stigma, while one expressed having feelings of shame regarding using an assistance program. One of the recipients mentioned that the need of their family was greater than feelings of pride, which allowed them to overcome the stigma. One of the recipients stated that the discrete nature of the deliveries has helped them overcome feelings of stigma. One of the recipients was worried that people would think they were taking advantage of the government programs and also appreciates the discrete nature of Mi Amore’s services.

“I don’t know what that is—like shame or pride, but I had to push that aside and look at the kids and say this is what we need right now. I had to balance those sorts of feelings with the needs of the family and when you have children, it’s a no brainer. I just need them to be as secure as possible.”

-Sustained Participation and Enthusiasm to Give Back The recipients anticipate using Mi Amore as long as the services are needed.

“I think if I reach the point when I don’t feel too food insecure, that would be the moment when I would stop using the services.”

One recipient mentioned that Mi Amore’s services are inspiring for them and their children and is helping teach them about empathy and importance of giving back to the community. The recipient, when no longer is food insecure, would like to contribute back to their community, in terms of volunteering and donating.

“They’re teaching their children to be empathetic and to be giving and non-judgmental—I wish I could give back.”
“If I don’t feel FI anymore that would be great. When I don’t need it anymore and the food would go to someone who would need it more-- it would be good to give back.”

**DISCUSSION**

**Satisfaction with Mi Amore**

Based on the results from the interviews (Table 1), all four recipients independently expressed the following attitudes. They have been using the services consistently since the start of the program in 2016 and stated that they would continue using Mi Amore as long as they are food insecure. Feelings towards Mi Amore are positive and appreciative. They appreciate the fresh produce and staples (bread, milk, etc.). They also rely on other food assistance and financial relief programs. They believed that the food they receive from Mi Amore is inclusive of their diets as well as their culture. They believed that the delivery services were comfortable and convenient. They would recommend using Mi Amore to households similar to theirs. These findings suggest that the recipients perceive Mi Amore’s services to be acceptable and satisfactory in the four categories discussed above.

The type of food in the deliveries are dependent on donations made by the donors, which predominantly contributes to the inconsistency. One of the factors of dissatisfaction mentioned by the recipients was the inconsistency. One way to address this issue would be to customize the donations to the recipients, as one recipient stated. Although the option to make special requests is a feature of Mi Amore, none of the recipients have practiced it. Using this option and allowing Mi Amore to provide to its best ability would help lessen the inconsistency in deliveries and would increase satisfaction. Moreover, sporadic donations, meaning gaps in timing or inconsistency of donations is not a characteristic unique to Mi Amore’s services. Food banks and pantries that are reliant on donations have this issue that is inherent to the nature of food assistance programs (21).

The door-to-door delivery and the phone call or text message prior to delivery is a convenient method of receiving donations for the recipients. It not only removes the physical distance but having the volunteers work around the recipient’s schedule removes time constraints, especially for busy parents. Furthermore, as one recipient reported, the discreteness
of the deliveries removes any residual feelings of stigma that comes with having to use food assistance programs (22).

Mi Amore is particularly beneficial to those using SNAP and the local food pantry as this program provides much needed food when food from the conventional options are unavailable. Moreover, all four recipients are using one or more financial relief programs and use Mi Amore as a supplemental food assistance program. They are also interested in continuing to use it as long as they are food insecure, which may indicate that they find Mi Amore to be of value in alleviating their food insecurity.

**Health Consciousness of Recipients**

The recipients appreciate the high quantity of fruits and vegetables received by Mi Amore, which they consider to be a part of a well-balanced diet. According to USDA’s Dietary Guidelines, five servings of fruits and vegetables daily are recommended for a healthy lifestyle (23). They also appreciate having no processed and canned foods in the deliveries. However, the baked goods with high sugar content such as cakes and cookies are not favored by one of the recipients. They also do not prefer to receive food that has been heated under heat lamps. Having customized deliveries can help mitigate this issue. The more health conscious recipients would be able to receive the food they prefer to include in their dietary lifestyles and increase satisfaction.

**Mi Amore SWOT Analysis**

Discussing the strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats of Mi Amore, based on the observations and learning the day-to-day functions of the program, can help note areas of improvement within the internal and external aspects of the organization.

Table 2. Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis of Mi Amore

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<tr>
<th>STRENGTHS</th>
<th>WEAKNESSES</th>
<th>OPPORTUNITIES</th>
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Mi Amore’s major strengths include convenience, comfort, and positive relationships. The comfort and convenience of the delivery service increases access to the program, however, the friendliness and positivity of the volunteers and directors make it a pleasant service to use. One of the prominent weaknesses of program that may be considered threatening to the sustenance of the services is the fact that it is entirely dependent on donations. Most of the food donations are rescued food and that may limit choices and options in choosing the quality of food. Although fruits and vegetables are considered a critical part of well-balanced meal, the following three food groups are equally important: protein, grains, and dairy, yet are not commonly donated items that recipients receive from Mi Amore.

The interviewed recipients seem to be enthusiastic about giving back to Mi Amore--whether in services or ideas. The program inspires the recipients to give back to their community when they no longer feel food insecure. One of the recipients had multiple ideas for improvement and implementing any of those could be beneficial for current and future recipients. Listening to concerns and ideas of the recipients could be a great resource in the

| Positive relationship between volunteers and recipients | Dependent on donations which are sometimes variable and inconsistent | In the process of applying to an EPA Healthy Communities Grant to expand into Revere and East Boston | Volunteer based and has potential for high labor turnover |
| Directors, volunteers, and donors are community stakeholders | Limited options in terms of type of food in deliveries | Recruit more donors | Limited funding |
| High quantity of produce (fruits and vegetables) donated | Inconsistency in type of food donated | Donations could include toiletries and non-food products | Feelings of stigma keeping new recipients from using the services |
| Convenience and comfort of delivery services | | Past recipients recruited as volunteers and/or donors | |
| Recipients’ enthusiasm in participating in Mi Amore to give back | | Potential to improve diet adequacy and quality and overall nutritional status of the recipients | |
sustainability of Mi Amore. The voices of the recipients can directly help those in similar situations.

Mi Amore’s Role in Reducing Barriers

There are several barriers that decrease access to food assistance programs including lack of awareness that the programs exist or who is eligible, administrative burdens that make it difficult for people to participate, perception of stigma, and benefit inadequacy that lessens the appeal of the programs (9). The internal structure and setup of Mi Amore surpasses these barriers to increase access to its recipients.

**Lack of awareness**: Recipients are recruited through community leaders such as church pastors, school nurses, and police officers. These members communicate with the residents regularly and are engaged in community activities. They are also trusted and approachable members of society. Appointing them to recruit participants may ensure that the majority of residents are aware of Mi Amore’s services--either through direct or indirect word of mouth. The barrier, lack of awareness, is addressed through the recruitment process and increases access to Mi Amore’s services.

**Few administrative burdens**: The recruitment process to be a recipient is fairly simple. The directors explain how Mi Amore works as well as provides food safety information to the recipients and have them sign a document of agreement. This removes the administrative burden barrier.

**Perception of stigma**: The discrete nature of Mi Amore’s delivery services helps to mitigate the feelings of stigma in recipients, as mentioned by one recipient. The food is delivered in boxes and directly to recipients’ houses. The boxes are never left outside, unattended.

**Benefit inadequacy**: Mi Amore provides fruits, vegetables, baked goods, bread, milk, and very few to no processed foods. Moreover, the door-to-door delivery service removes barriers of physical distance. Since the volunteers work around the recipients’ schedules, they are also addressing the barrier of time constraints. The benefits of good food and delivery service can be considered adequate. The services, additionally, provide financial relief so that the money saved can be used for other necessities.
Implications

**Mi Amore and Chronic Disease**

Given the relatively high degree of satisfaction among clients interviewed, Mi Amore has the potential to address food insecurity among Winthrop households and subsequently, may influence the long term consequences of food insecurity. Food insecurity can lead to long term chronic health issues caused by prolonged undernutrition and malnutrition (24). Budget constraints can urge families to practice reduced food intake and replacing well-balanced meals with inexpensive, high-caloric foods with high sugar, saturated/trans fat content (25). Moreover, population-based studies show that families with food insecurity consume fewer servings of fruits, vegetables, grains, protein, and dairy—the components of a well-balanced diet, and those dietary practices can be deficient in essential vitamins and minerals (26). The combination of consuming energy dense (high fat, high sugar) foods and inadequate amounts of nutrient-dense foods over an extended period of time can lead to chronic diseases such as hypertension, hyperlipidemia, diabetes, arthritis, and anemia (27). The health effects of poor nutrition are amplified in children who are food insecure since consuming a well-balanced diet is crucial during the stages of child/adolescent growth and development (28). By providing fruits, vegetables, bread, and milk, Mi Amore has the potential to contribute to reducing the risk of chronic disease in its recipients. The impact of Mi Amore on the dietary adequacy, nutritional status, and health status of its recipients deserves further study.

**Mi Amore and Mental Health**

Another adverse effect of food insecurity is the increased risk of poor mental health. The prolonged stress caused by food insecurity can contribute to depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and overall decreased quality of life (29). Although addressing the underlying causes of food insecurity would be most appropriate, short term stress relief through food assistance programs can be beneficial for mental health (30). Two recipients mentioned that Mi Amore has been instrumental in providing food when their primary source is unavailable or inaccessible. For instance, one recipient stated “It’s more towards the end of the month when I run out of
“everything and I don’t have the money to get anything.” This suggests that Mi Amore services may contribute to lower risk of stress by providing short term relief to food insecurity as well as financial relief. This would be a good objective for future studies.

**Strategic Recommendations**

**Expansion**

Based on the positive responses to Mi Amore’s current services, its expansion into neighboring towns, Revere and East Boston, is plausible. The immediate steps to be taken in expanding services include an evaluation of the systemic, nutritional, and economical aspects of Mi Amore. Expansion of the services requires more funding, volunteers, donations, stakeholders, and effective recruitment strategy. Mi Amore is a small organization run by volunteers and works on a point-to-point structure, meaning the volunteers pick up the donations and immediately make the deliveries. Observing the food supply chain, its day-to-day operations, recruitment and marketing operations, and stakeholder perceptions will provide insight to how Mi Amore functions both internally and externally. Comparing Mi Amore to other food assistance programs, such as Fresh Truck and Lovin’ Spoonfuls, can help gauge the success of the program in terms of alleviating food insecurity. The IRS consistently approved Mi Amore as a 510c3 non-profit organization since its inception in 2015. Evaluating the funding and policies involved in Mi Amore can help review the foundation of the program and estimate the sustainability of future endeavors. Part of Mi Amore’s mission is to reduce the risk of malnutrition and negative health outcomes among community members who experience food insecurity. With external funding, the dietary intake of the recipients can be evaluated to examine the extent to which Mi Amore is helping to address the risk of malnutrition among recipients. A thorough program evaluation of Mi Amore may draw more resources to sustain it and can inform a growth model that may better serve communities throughout the Greater Boston area.

**Collaboration**

Mi Amore is one of many food recovery programs in New England that aims to reduce food waste while contributing to reducing food insecurity. The Reduce and Recover Save Food for People Conference hosted by the EPA showcased similar projects to Mi Amore funded by the
Healthy Communities Grant Program. Some of these programs include the Center for Ecotechnology’s *Providence County Food Recovery Initiative*, Sustainable America’s *Implementing the Food Too Good to Waste Toolkit*, and Northeast Recycling’s *Council Healthy Communities through Food and Recovery & Composting in Vermont* (31). These programs especially focus on food recovery and redistribution to better manage practices that lead to wastefulness. For instance, *Implementing the Food Too Good to Waste Toolkit (FTGTW)* has resources such as the Implementation Guide designed to replicate the initial FTGTW model, which can be used as a template for new ventures or existing improvements (32). Following this toolkit, Mi Amore can encourage to reduce wasteful practices in Winthrop households, recipient and others. Instead of reinventing the wheel for new projects, Mi Amore could potentially collaborate with existing initiatives to optimize the available resources for expansion.

**Limitations**

One of the limitations of this study is the small sample size. The low response rate introduces the possibility of bias into this study. However, the nature of the in-person interviews with open-ended questions provided valuable information and perspectives of the recipients. Additionally, all of the interviewees are current recipients and reflect those who find the program acceptable and would prefer to continue using it. Interviewing past recipients have presented different results. Another limitation is the short timeline of the project. A more thorough investigation studying the personal barriers within recipient households would be beneficial to understanding Mi Amore’s role in alleviating food insecurity.

**CONCLUSION**

Based on the findings, Mi Amore’s recipients perceive the services to be satisfactory and acceptable. The services are perceived as particularly beneficial to those who use other food assistance and financial relief program and use Mi Amore as a supplemental resource.

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15. Food Insecurity and Food Pantry Access in Boston and Cambridge, MA: Assessing Areas
APPENDIX

A. Recruitment Letter

Dear Mr./Ms. ***,

I am Bharathi Gandi and I am volunteering with Dr. Carson from Mi-Amore, the food service program you use in Winthrop. I am calling/writing to see if you would be interested in participating in an evaluation of the program Mi-Amore. If so, you will be interviewed by me for 30 min about your experience with Mi-Amore as well as other food programs. Your feedback will help improve Mi-Amore’s services for your household and other similar households. I could come meet with you in person at a location you choose. I am a graduate student studying Public Health Nutrition at Boston University School of Public Health and am interested in learning about food assistance programs such as Mi-Amore. Please let me know if you are interested and we can move forward. Your participation would be greatly appreciated! Looking forward to hearing from you and have a lovely day!

Thank you,

Bharathi Gandi

B. Interview Guide

Interview Guide: Identify Perceptions of Mi-Amore Recipients: 15 questions; 30 minutes

Food insecurity is described as unreliable or lack of access to nutritious food. As you know from the informed consent, approximately 12.3% of Americans experience food insecurity. Food assistance programs help reduce hunger in households. My questions are about your experience with Mi-Amore and food insecurity.

1) Describe your relationship with Mi-Amore.
a) How did you find out about Mi-Amore?
b) How were you recruited to use the services?
c) What are your general feelings about the program?
d) What is your relationship with the director of the program or any of the volunteers?
2) When did you start using Mi-Amore’s service?
a) Have you used them consistently since? Please describe how often you’ve used it since you started.
b) Have your feelings and attitudes towards Mi-Amore changed since the beginning? How?
3) Are you currently using any other food assistance resources in addition to Mi-Amore? If yes, what other resources have you been using? If no, is this your first time using a food assistance program?
   a) What was the situation that led you to seek assistance?
4) A lot of people experience complex emotions about food insecurity and seeking food assistance. How did you feel about seeking help for your food insecurity?
   a) Did you feel any stigma about using them? If yes, how were you able to overcome the stigma?
5) Do you currently use any financial relief programs, either non-profit or governmental?
   a) If so, which ones do you use?
b) Do the financial resources help you buy food?
c) What percent of your weekly groceries would you say come from Mi-Amore? What do you typically buy at the grocery store on a weekly basis?
6) Would you please describe in detail what type of food you receive from Mi-Amore?
   a) Are you satisfied with the food you receive?
b) Ideally, what type of food would you like to receive from Mi-Amore?
c) Do you use all of the food you receive? If not, does any go to waste? What happens with the food you don’t consume?
7) Do you believe that the food you receive from Mi-Amore is ethnically inclusive? If not, do you wish it was?
8) Do you consider the food from Mi-Amore to be healthy? What do you consider to be a generally healthy diet?
9) Do you feel comfortable using Mi-Amore’s services? What would make it more comfortable?
10) Do you feel that using Mi-Amore’s services is convenient? What would make it more convenient?
11) Would you recommend Mi-Amore to other food insecure households? Why or why not?
12) Do you think you would prefer using Mi-Amore’s services compared to other food assistance programs? Why?
13) How much longer do you anticipate using Mi-Amore’s services? What would prompt you to stop using the services?
14) How do you think Mi-Amore services can improve in terms of type of food and the means of delivery?
15) Are there any other details or general feedback about your experience with Mi-Amore or food insecurity you would like to share today?

C. Exempt Information Sheet

You are being asked to voluntarily participate in a research study. We are doing this study to learn about your experience with Mi-Amore in order to provide improved services. If you agree, we will ask you to participate in an in-person, 30-minute interview where we will be asking questions about your experiences, attitudes, and opinions regarding Mi-Amore and food insecurity (unreliable access to nutritious food).

We will make an audio recording of your answers to the interview questions. The recording will be destroyed after the interview and your responses will remain anonymous to everyone but the interviewer.

You do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or upset. We will not record your name or any information that shows your identity. You will not be signing this form.

If you have any questions, please contact Bharathi Gandi, bgandi@bu.edu, 510-574-6260.
interviewer. You do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or upset. We will not record your name or any information that shows your identity. You will not be signing this form.

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