

Process Evaluation of Culturally Preferred Food Pilot for Arkansas Food Pantries and Farms

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Abstract

Background: Limited research documents how organizations implement programs to increase culturally preferred foods. This project explores organizational factors in implementing a cultural food preference pilot across food pantries and farms with specific attention to Hispanic and Marshallese culturally preferred foods.

Methods: Food pantry and farm partners were engaged through a low food security community of practice (i.e., a partnership with community-based organizations). Six partners were funded for seven months to grow and distribute culturally preferred foods. An evaluator conducted semi-structured interviews with partners which were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed using rapid thematic analysis.

Results: Rapid thematic analysis revealed six themes: 1) frequent discussion about culturally preferred foods within organizations; 2) received positive feedback from clients; 3) incorporation of culturally preferred knowledge into other programming; 4) formed new partnerships with procurement and distribution sites; 5) identified sustainability concerns related to continuing to offer culturally preferred foods; 6) committed to continuing to grow culturally preferred foods.

Discussion: Findings can inform practitioners in food pantries and farms implementing interventions with culturally preferred foods and highlight the need to address sustainability concerns related to food access and cost to ensure long-term impact of such interventions.

Keywords: community of practice, culturally preferred foods, farmers, food insecurity

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The United States is expanding in its racial and ethnic diversity, a trend mirrored in Arkansas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The Northwest Arkansas region, in particular, has a 29% racially and ethnically diverse population, with expectations that it will reach 32% by 2026 (Northwest Arkansas Council, 2022). A large number of Marshallese Pacific Islander and Hispanic immigrants and migrants fuels this racial and ethnic diversity. The region has the highest number of Marshallese in the continental U.S. (~16,000), and 17% of the population identifies as Hispanic (McElfish et al., 2021; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Increasing access to Marshallese culturally preferred foods is particularly important as U.S. military nuclear testing in the Republic of the Marshall Islands between 1946 and 1958 destroyed traditional food production and led to the proliferation of imported and processed foods in the Marshallese diet (Ahlgren et al., 2014). Limited employment opportunities, poor infrastructure, and increasing climate change have contributed to Marshallese persons moving to Arkansas in search of a more favorable cost of living (McElfish et al., 2015).

A shift in the food system is necessary to accommodate the region's increase in diversity. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, culturally preferred foods are safe and nutritious foods that align with the diverse tastes and needs of individuals arising from their cultural identity (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). However, research has documented the lack of culturally preferred foods in retail and corner stores (Hearst et al., 2021). This lack of access may contribute to poor dietary intake and chronic diseases for minority populations, which are already at high risk for food insecurity (Cooksey-Stowers et al., 2018a; Levi et al., 2022).

Arkansas has the highest levels of food insecurity in the U.S., reaching 18.9% in 2023, compared to the national average of 13.5% (Rabbitt et al., 2024). The impact of low food security intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, disproportionately affecting Hispanic and Marshallese residents in Arkansas, with food insecurity rates for Marshallese residents reaching as high as 80% (Anderson et al., 2022; Willis et al., 2022). In addition to federal food assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the charitable food system of regional food banks and local food pantries helps procure and distribute free food to people experiencing low food security. Even when food-insecure individuals have access to food through the charitable food system, clients often report a lack of familiar foods that align with their cultural and medical preferences (Carle & Rosenberg, 2018; Long et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2019). Multiple food pantries and food banks nationwide have implemented programs to increase culturally preferred foods with varying degrees of success (Food Bank of the Rockies, n.d.; Leah's Pantry, n.d.-a).

While research has focused on staff perspectives on nutrition interventions and perceived preferences of clients, there is limited literature documenting how organizations implement programs to increase culturally preferred foods (Cahill et al., 2017; Cooksey-Stowers et al., 2018b). The current article aims to document the implementation and evaluation of a pilot project to increase equitable and inclusive access to culturally preferred foods in Arkansas. Due to the disproportionately high rates of food insecurity among Hispanic and Marshallese residents, this pilot focused on growing Hispanic and Marshallese culturally preferred foods on farms and distributing those foods at food pantries. This article is one of few that integrates the perspective

of farmers growing culturally preferred foods for distribution in food pantries (Bacon et al., 2024).

Methods

Food Insecurity Community of Practice

The University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences Institute for Community Health Innovation (hereafter the university team) was funded to implement the Food Insecurity Community of Practice (FI CofP). The FI CofP was comprised of 23 community-based organizations guided by a stakeholder advisory board of seven residents with knowledge of food insecurity and a national advisory board of five experts on food insecurity. The FI CofP had four goals: 1) increasing SNAP and WIC access; 2) evolving food recovery and distribution models; 3) increasing equitable and inclusive access to healthy foods; and 4) increasing the ability of organizations to operate as a coordinated body.

The FI CofP implemented three pilot projects across these four goals. This article focuses on the implementation and evaluation of the pilot project, which sought to increase equitable and inclusive access to healthy foods. The university team implementing and evaluating these projects has experience with community-based approaches to increasing healthy food access in a variety of settings, including faith-based organizations, farmers' markets, and food pantries (Long et al., 2021; Long et al., 2022; McElfish et al., 2020; Rowland et al., 2018; Silva et al., 2023). The university team uses a community-based participatory approach to guide their work with Hispanic and Marshallese communities (McElfish et al., 2021).

Participant Recruitment

Six partners were selected based on organizational capacity, previous experience growing or distributing food, staff and/or volunteer time, experience with culturally responsive practices,

and prioritization of healthy foods. The six partners were two farms, three food pantries, and a combined farm and pantry. Each partner received \$10,000 to grow and/or distribute culturally preferred foods over seven months. Growing culturally preferred foods on farms and distributing them in food pantries targeted system and environmental changes.

To determine which foods to grow and distribute, the university team provided partners with the Northwest Arkansas Cultural Food Preference toolkit built through community feedback with specific attention to Hispanic and Marshallese communities. Partners participated in monthly meetings with the university team to provide updates, discuss best practices, and receive technical assistance. The university team invited partners to participate in a culturally responsive best practices training led by Food Bank of the Rockies and a trauma-informed nutrition security training hosted by Leah's Pantry. Table 1 provides a profile of partners. The University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences Institutional Review Board (#262625) approved this project.

Table 1

Partner Profiles

Partner	Type of Partner	Number of Full-Time Equivalent Staff & Volunteers Per Week	Farm Size (acres)	Average Number of People Served Monthly by Pantry/Educational Programs	Food from Farm Distributed Per Month (average pounds)
Farm 1	Teaching farm	1.4 full-time equivalent staff; 3.4 volunteers	1.5	3,638	350
Farm 2	Farm	4.5 full-time equivalent staff; 5 volunteers	2	N/A	3,240
Pantry 1	University-based food pantry	2 full-time equivalent staff; 4.9 volunteers	N/A	910	N/A

Partner	Type of Partner	Number of Full-Time Equivalent Staff & Volunteers Per Week	Farm Size (acres)	Average Number of People Served Monthly by Pantry/Educational Programs	Food from Farm Distributed Per Month (average pounds)
Pantry 2	Rural food pantry	1 full-time equivalent staff; 65 volunteers	N/A	1,800	N/A
Pantry 3	Food pantry	1 full-time staff equivalent; 15 volunteers	N/A	150	N/A
Pantry/Farm 1	Food pantry and farm	Pantry – 3 full-time equivalent staff; 75 volunteers Farm – 3 full-time equivalent staff; 8 volunteers	2	4,725	1,400

Data Collection

A process evaluation was conducted to evaluate implementation effectiveness. Implementation effectiveness was determined by an increase in the number of culturally preferred items distributed by a pantry or an expansion of yield of culturally preferred foods produced by a farm. The senior evaluator conducted semi-structured interviews—chosen because of their flexible, iterative nature—with partners after seven months. Developed internally by the senior evaluator, the semi-structured interview guide was based on key components of the implementation, including facilitators and challenges to implementation, organizational changes resulting from implementation, unintended consequences of implementation, and recommendations for other organizations looking to replicate this work. A representative question was, “What challenges, if any, did you encounter during the cultural food distribution project?” Following the trauma-informed principles of trustworthiness and transparency, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was outlined, including how data from

interviews would be stored and used. Partners were also given the opportunity to review findings prior to manuscript finalization, which aligns with the principles of empowerment, voice, and choice (Karmakar & Duggal, 2024). Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer and interviewee to remain open to additional lines of inquiry relevant to project aims as they arise, which aligns with the principle of collaboration and mutuality. The interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams video; the interviews were approximately 35 minutes in length; they were recorded and transcribed.

Qualitative Data Analysis

A rapid thematic analysis of interview transcripts was conducted (St. George et al., 2023). The primary analysis team was comprised of two evaluators. After reading and re-reading the transcripts, the senior evaluator developed a rapid coding template using *a priori* codes from implementation goals with space for emergent secondary codes. The secondary evaluator read all transcripts, looking for patterns, identifying codes, and building a codebook of initial emergent themes and subthemes. The two evaluators then met to review the codebook and resolve discrepancies between coders through discussion and consensus. The two evaluators revised the codebook twice, changing themes and definitions as needed. The university team reviewed the codebook, which was refined based on their experience supporting implementation, and discrepancies were resolved through consensus. Partners reviewed the finalized themes and resolved discrepancies through discussion and consensus.

Results

The six partners included two farms, three food pantries, and a combined farm and pantry. All partners successfully increased the number of culturally preferred items distributed (pantries) or expanded the yield of culturally preferred foods produced (farms) through the use of

the cultural food preference toolkit and collaboration with the university team. Table 2 includes each partner's approach to implementation, specific culturally preferred foods grown and/or distributed, the number of new culturally preferred foods distributed, and pounds of culturally preferred foods grown or distributed.

Table 2

Approach to Implementation & Distribution

Partner	Approach to Implementation	Distribution	Culturally Preferred Foods Grown/Distributed ^a	Number of New Culturally Preferred Items Distributed	Pounds of Culturally Preferred Foods Grown and/or Distributed
Farm 1	Expanded yield of culturally preferred foods	Aligned distribution to educational programming sites at community centers, schools, and school-based food pantries	Apples, bell peppers, carrots, cilantro, garlic, lettuce, onions, radishes, potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, winter squash	0	975.44
Farm 2	Expand yield of culturally preferred foods	Distributed items at regional food banks and food pantries	Bell peppers, cabbage, carrots, cilantro, cuts of pork, chicken, and lamb, garlic, lettuce, onions, potatoes, radishes, tomatoes, watermelon	0	8,436.30
Pantry 1	Added new culturally preferred foods to include in choice-based list	Distributed onsite at pantry location	Apples ^b , bananas ^b , bouillon cubes (chicken & beef); canned fish; cilantro; cooking oil ^b ; corn ^b ; cuts of pork, chicken, and lamb; garlic ^b ; jalapenos; limes ^b ; milk ^b ; onions ^b ; potatoes ^b ; tomatoes ^b	10	1,690.95
Pantry 2	Partnered with Hispanic faith-based organizations to distribute	Distributed onsite at pantry location and through Hispanic faith-based organizations	Apples, avocados, black beans ^b , grapes, Masa flour ^b , onions ^b , sweet potatoes	3	2,174.00
Pantry 3	Added cultural section to new client choice model pantry	Distributed onsite at pantry location	Apples, bouillon cubes ^b , canned fish, cinnamon ^b , cooking oil ^b , eggs, garlic ^b , Masa flour, milk ^b , onions ^b , potatoes ^b , sweet potatoes	7	Data (in pounds) unavailable due to staff turnover at the pantry

Partner	Approach to Implementation	Distribution	Culturally Preferred Foods Grown/Distributed ^a	Number of New Culturally Preferred Items Distributed	Pounds of Culturally Preferred Foods Grown and/or Distributed
Pantry/Farm 1	Expanded yield of culturally preferred foods & added new culturally preferred foods	Distributed items at two onsite food pantry locations	Apples ^b , black beans, cabbage, canned tuna ^b , corn ^b , onions ^b , potatoes ^b , radishes, sweet potatoes ^b , watermelon, white rice ^b	7	2,813.90

^aHispanic/Marshallese culturally preferred foods from the regional toolkit.

^bNewly grown or distributed by the organization.

Evaluators identified six major organizational themes as a result of the implementation of the pilot project: 1) frequent discussion about culturally preferred foods within organizations; 2) received positive feedback from clients; 3) incorporation of culturally preferred knowledge into other programming; 4) formed new partnerships with procurement and distribution sites; 5) identified sustainability concerns related to continuing to offer culturally preferred foods; 6) committed to continuing to grow culturally preferred foods. All were themes that partners noticed as a result of the pilot implementation. Table 3 presents the themes and exemplary quotes.

Table 3*Themes and Exemplary Quotes*

Themes	Exemplary Quotes
<i>Frequent discussion about culturally preferred foods within organizations</i>	“We’re continuing to have more conversations and more emphasis on thinking about the cultural aspects of foods and how we’re making sure we’re inclusive with what we do.” (Farm 1)
<i>Received positive feedback from clients</i>	“I think generally it’s kind of made clients a little bit happier, especially a lot of our international clients, that’s who we’re targeting of course. I think it made them feel a little more comfortable having those items around.” (Pantry 1)
<i>Incorporation of culturally preferred knowledge into other programming</i>	“I would love to focus, spend more time on the community meal piece of it. I know we’re really great about the fresh produce. They incorporate that into their meals, including the ones that are culturally appropriate. But I would just love to be able to spend more time with that piece of it . . . serving a meal that the Marshallese population would really enjoy.” (Pantry/Farm 1)
<i>Formed new partnerships with procurement and distribution sites</i>	“We talked to one of the managers of [the culturally appropriate grocery stores. . . and [had] conversations with them about what should we get? Like you see people buying stuff here, like what would be helpful to get?” (Pantry 3)
<i>Identified sustainability concerns related to continuing to offer culturally preferred foods</i>	“I think [this project] helped [the pantry leadership team] recognize that any ways we can look for additional funding in the future to provide this sort of produce would be super beneficial for the clients. I think it, having the ability to do that, see how happy the clients are, has planted that seed in their head for the future. And so, I think any chance we get to find additional funding, I think one of the main considerations would whether we can provide more fresh produce.” (Pantry 1)

Themes	Exemplary Quotes
<i>Committed to continuing to grow culturally preferred foods</i>	“... We were really excited to see that a lot of what we were growing is in the [regional cultural food preference toolkit]. That was a really reassuring thing ... we’re definitely going to use that to inform future crop plans. I think that was like the biggest takeaway, being excited that we’re already on the right track and knowing how to refine that to be even more culturally appropriate to our neighbors.” (Farm 2)

Frequent Discussion About Culturally Preferred Foods Within Organizations

Partners highlighted frequent organizational conversations about culturally preferred foods following the implementation of the pilot project. These conversations included awareness and consideration around purchasing culturally preferred foods. In addition, they spoke about a shared objective to enhance their understanding of their client population and ensure that the food resonates with the cultural diversity within their communities. Specifically, three partners initiated conversations with clients to gain insight into preferred foods. One partner at a food pantry shared, “As [clients] are doing the rounds and picking the foods, I’m in the room, and it naturally starts discussions and conversations about ‘What kind of food do you like?’ ‘What do you not see here that you wish you could have?’” Two partners had internal conversations to enhance the amount of culturally preferred food they provided. Implementation resulted in a new intentionality among partners to have conversations that address cultural considerations around food within these organizations.

Received Positive Feedback From Clients

Partners discussed the widespread appreciation from their clients after distributing culturally preferred foods. They relayed that their clients frequently expressed gratitude for fresh produce and felt more comfortable with culturally preferred foods. One farm shared feedback from a client who stated, “I’m always trying to be healthy for my family and this produce has

helped me succeed with this goal.” One partner noted increased comfort among their international clients with the culturally preferred foods they received at the pantry. Another partner received specific praise for their pantry’s expansion of client choice as a result of offering culturally preferred foods.

Incorporation of Culturally Preferred Knowledge Into Other Programming

Several partners applied culturally preferred knowledge gained from training and the regional cultural food preference toolkit to other aspects of their programming. For example, when asked how, if at all, the partner organization changed as a result of the pilot, one partner named how they started to incorporate Hispanic culturally preferred foods into their community meals program with an intent to expand this to the cultural preferences of Marshallese community members. Another partner shared how they integrated culturally preferred foods into their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) bags, which could be purchased with SNAP benefits. One partner’s implementation of culturally preferred foods coincided with the start of a client-choice pantry model. The transition to a client-choice model, along with the increase in culturally preferred foods, allowed clients to pick and choose food pantry items that best fit their needs, with specific access to fresh produce and scratch-cooking ingredients. One of the pantry partners stated that they planned to share new cultural knowledge as part of an upcoming hunger conference: “We’ll have lots of pantry representatives from [organizations] across the U.S. so being able to have a resource [toolkit] to share with them is super helpful . . . and just makes all of our missions better.” Integrating culturally preferred knowledge into other areas of programming highlighted partners’ commitment to extending their impact beyond the immediate scope of this pilot project.

Formed New Partnerships with Procurement and Distribution Sites

When asked about success stories as a result of the pilot, four of the partners discussed establishing new partnerships with procurement and distribution sites as part of their focus on culturally preferred foods. The nature of these partnerships varied. Two partners (one farm and one food pantry) formed a relationship; the farm piloted the distribution of different cuts of pork, chicken, and lamb to the food pantry, where clients had requested different cuts of meat. Another partner added two new distribution sites and was more strategic about aligning the foods it distributed based on the food preferences of the specific communities in those geographic areas. Still, another partner formed new relationships with two local culturally appropriate grocery stores, which allowed them to source items from familiar locations for their clients and contributed to the support of local businesses. Three partners highlighted their strengthened relationships with other partners in the cohort, which allowed them to provide mutual support, share insights, ask questions, and strategize collaboratively. During interviews, one partner elaborated: “I think we could call [the partners] up and be able to have conversation[s] because we’re going through similar things; we’re part of this larger effort together. We’ve worked with [partners] before in other capacities, but this is just another touchpoint; it’s great to further strengthen [those] relationship[s].” These partnerships expanded their networks and allowed them to serve their communities better.

Identified Sustainability Concerns Related to Continuing to Offer Culturally Preferred Foods

Partners identified concerns about the sustainability of continuing to offer culturally preferred foods to clients when asked about challenges encountered during the pilot. While commitment to providing culturally preferred foods was strong, challenges related to accessibility, cost, and availability were discussed as significant considerations. One partner

stated, “[The funding] could not have come at a more perfect time. . . because we were transitioning to a bigger farm, and a lot of the extra funding for COVID-19 [which allowed for the purchase of food] had tapered off, yet our numbers were still so high. . . this [funding] really made it possible for me to continue to offer a good amount of food and variety to clients.” Two partners acknowledged the need to actively seek additional funding to ensure the continuation of providing culturally preferred foods. Another highlighted that irregular stock and limitations from smaller distributors were barriers to consistently providing culturally preferred foods at their pantry, especially in large quantities. Partners reported financial and logistical challenges in their efforts to provide culturally preferred foods and said that continued financial support and strategic planning are needed to address these challenges in the long term.

Committed to Continuing to Grow Culturally Preferred Foods

When asked about pilot challenges, farming partners reported issues with particularly intense insect activity and plant and soil diseases (what partners referred to as pest pressure) during the growing season for this pilot project. However, interviewees indicated that this activity was due to Arkansas’s humid climate and was unrelated to growing specific culturally preferred foods. All three farms expanded their current yield of culturally preferred foods, with one adding new culturally preferred foods. One farming partner stated: “[We grew] more of the types of things we were already growing but chose to do more sweet potatoes or peppers because of the connection with the [pilot], and knowing there’s a great preference for that, rather than something like okra.” Farming partners stated that the intense insect activity and plant and soil diseases did not discourage partners from continuing to grow culturally preferred foods in the future.

Discussion

This project identified six themes from staff and volunteers as a result of implementing a cultural food preference pilot in farms and food pantries. These findings build on the limited body of research emphasizing the importance of culturally preferred foods to clients within the charitable food system (Carle & Rosenberg, 2018; Long et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2019). This project is one of few to include farmers' perspectives in evaluating the growth of culturally preferred foods for distribution in food pantries (Bacon et al., 2024).

The first theme demonstrates that growing and distributing culturally preferred foods led to frequent discussion within organizations about those foods, shaping organizational outlook and interactions with clients. These findings build on previous research, which shows that client-volunteer and client-staff conversations contribute to improved client experience (Cooksey-Stowers et al., 2018b; Jones et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2022)—discussion of culturally preferred foods extended into direct conversations with clients.

As noted in the second theme, clients expressed positive feedback about the distribution of Hispanic and Marshallese culturally preferred foods. In particular, clients highlighted the availability of fresh produce, the expansion of choice, and the familiarity of seeing culturally preferred foods. This positive response affirms previous findings from food pantry clients nationwide who express a desire for foods relevant to their households (Carle & Rosenberg, 2018; Long et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2019). This finding highlights positive client responses to Marshallese culturally preferred foods, adding to the limited literature on studies of food preferences that focus on Pacific Islander populations (Long et al., 2022; Rowland et al., 2018).

The third theme focused on incorporating culturally preferred knowledge into other aspects of programming as a result of the pilot, which demonstrated partner commitment to extending their impact beyond the scope of the pilot. Partners cited examples of incorporating

culturally preferred foods into CSA boxes and community meal programs. While the literature has documented the implementation of nutrition education interventions in community meals programs, there is little documentation of cultural interventions in these programs (Rowland et al., 2018). Evaluating partners' incorporation of Hispanic cultural foods into their community meal programs was outside this project's scope; however, further research should investigate the effectiveness of these interventions from both the client and partner levels. Similarly, while research has demonstrated the effectiveness and client satisfaction with CSA programs and farm-to-clinic programs, this project makes an important contribution because it fills a void in the literature documenting facilitators and barriers to implementation of such programs from the perspective of farmers (Cotter et al., 2017; Tripp et al., 2020). Further research on facilitators and barriers to implementing cultural interventions in community meals and CSA programs is needed to fully understand the potential efficacy and implementation barriers and facilitators of such programs.

The formation of new partnerships with procurement and distribution sites was the fourth theme outlined by partners as a result of the pilot. New and strengthened relationships between partners, specifically connecting farmers and food pantries, were integral facilitators to increasing this work's success and long-term sustainability. Building on established community networks within the cohort of partners helped expand the network of sites where food pantries could procure food items (Tripp et al., 2020). Before pilot initiation, the FI CofP laid the groundwork to cultivate these relationships, which were leveraged throughout the implementation process and proved to be a strength of the pilot implementation. With supply chain challenges and inflation, protein items remained high-cost items for food pantries to purchase; as a result, partnering with a farming partner willing to supply cuts of meat was a

strategic fit for the food pantry (Adjemian et al., 2024; Federal Trade Commission, 2024). Our findings highlight that partnering with local farms and culturally appropriate grocery stores is a viable approach to sourcing and providing culturally preferred foods. As indicated in Table 2, the majority of culturally preferred foods distributed by farms were fresh produce. Research demonstrates the importance of safety net food programs leveraging local food sources to increase community access to healthier and fresh foods (Arkansas Department of Agriculture, 2022; Harris et al., 2012). Our findings provide preliminary evidence that partnering with local farms to distribute culturally preferred produce may correlate with this increased access.

Sustainability was the fifth theme outlined by the partners. When asked about pilot barriers, partners emphasized that the success of continuing to offer culturally preferred foods relied on overcoming challenges related to access and cost. Previous research has shown that lack of resources is a significant barrier to food pantries providing culturally preferred foods (Cooksey-Stowers et al., 2018a). This project affirms that rising costs and inflation continue to impact food pantries, and supply chain deficiencies across the food system exacerbate the situation (Adjemian et al., 2024; Gizem Templeton et al., 2022). Funding sources may have to consider the continued need to support the cost of food when outlining grant opportunities for food pantries.

The sixth and final theme is a commitment to continuing to grow culturally preferred foods. Notably, the current project is one of few that prioritize the perspective of farmers growing culturally preferred foods (Bacon et al., 2024). Adding more culturally preferred foods to their harvest did not significantly change the way these farmers grew food. Many of the recommended foods were foods they already grew; they just needed to increase production and address preventive measures around insect activity, as well as plant and soil diseases. Farmers

new to growing culturally preferred foods could start by expanding the yield of culturally preferred foods they already grow before attempting to grow completely new crops. Expanded production was made possible by the grant funding for this project; however, in the absence of targeted funding, increasing production may be challenging for many local farmers. An exception to this is the discovery in this project of preliminary evidence that growing Marshallese-preferred foods is relatively easy for farmers in a rural Southern state.

Conclusion

This project documented the organizational factors associated with implementing a cultural food preference pilot in food pantries and farms with specific attention to Hispanic and Marshallese culturally preferred foods. This project is one of few that incorporate the perspectives of farmers growing culturally preferred foods. Partners demonstrated a commitment to extending impact beyond the scope of the pilot by incorporating culturally preferred knowledge into other programming, developing partnerships with procurement and distribution sites, and an intent to continue to grow culturally preferred foods. This project emphasizes the need to address sustainability concerns related to implementing such programs. Project findings provide important information and guidance for researchers, staff, and volunteers implementing culturally preferred foods in food pantries and farms across the U.S.

Reflection

This project's small sample of six organizational partners in a rural southern state limits the generalizability of its findings to a larger population. The focus of this project was on the Hispanic and Marshallese cultural preferred foods because of the disproportionately high rates of food insecurity among these communities in Arkansas. This project fills a gap in the literature on integrating farmers' perspectives in growing culturally preferred foods for distribution in food

pantries (Bacon et al., 2024). The project is also among a limited number of studies that focus on addressing the cultural food preferences of immigrant and migrant communities, specifically Marshallese Pacific Islanders (Long et al., 2022; Rowland et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2019). Focus on the cultural food preferences of Marshallese Pacific Islanders is particularly important from a trauma-informed perspective in light of the nuclear testing carried out in the Republic of the Marshall Islands by the U.S. military from 1946 to 1958, which destroyed traditional food production and introduced imported processed foods to the Marshallese diet (Ahlgren et al., 2014).

Client surveys were conducted as part of this project to receive feedback on the culturally preferred foods grown and distributed; however, the results were not included in this article due to insufficient sample sizes from the target populations. Future projects should solicit client feedback (in surveys or interviews) to better understand how partners can respond to client preferences. Future farmers should focus on expanding their yield of culturally preferred foods they are already growing before attempting to grow new types of culturally preferred foods. In addition, pantry partners emphasized the importance of strategic planning in deciding whether pantries want to distribute a large quantity of a few culturally preferred items or small quantities of a wide variety of culturally preferred items.

This project involved a trauma-informed approach, as the university team relied on a community-based participatory approach to guide this pilot with specific attention to Hispanic and Marshallese communities. In alignment with the community-based participatory approach, the FI CoFP and a stakeholder advisory board of members with low food security experience guided the pilot project implementation. The university team applied trauma-informed principles during semi-structured interviews with partners and invited them to participate in a training

focused on trauma-informed nutrition security hosted by Leah's Pantry during the pilot project. The training described the trauma-informed approach and how partners could apply it to policy, system, and environmental changes (Leah's Pantry, n.d.-b). Partners demonstrated a commitment to extending the impact of implementing culturally preferred foods; however, in the future, sustainability concerns related to funding, supply chain, and rising costs of food must be addressed to ensure this implementation has a long-term impact. Specifically, farmers were able to increase the production of existing culturally preferred foods; however, dedicated funding is critical to support this increase.

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