

A Collection of

Community Reflections

**from the Albion Library
Community Food Space**

Project funded and supported by 8 80 Cities / 2022-23 Ontario Community
Changemakers program

Karenveer Pannu, August 2023



INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had incredibly wide-reaching impacts within communities all across the GTA. In particular, the pandemic resulted in an increased number of individuals experiencing food-insecurity. In response to the incredibly challenging days early in the pandemic, the City of Toronto, the Toronto Public Library and the team at the Albion branch provided critical support to North York Harvest (NYH) and the Albion community, by establishing and operating a 'pop-up' food bank out of the library space when surrounding programs were forced to close.

The unique and special partnership between North York Harvest, Toronto Public Libraries (TPL) and the Albion Library has continued to grow and develop over the last three years. This pop-up location has now become a permanent location within the North York Harvest food space network. When the Albion Library branch reopened its space to the public, they passed the day to day operations of the food space over to the NYH team, but their ongoing support has been critical to the success of the program. Since its first days in April 2020, the Albion Library Food Space has seen more than 70,000 food bank visits and supported thousands of community members across the community.



INTRODUCTION



A Little Bit About Me

My name is Karenveer Pannu and with support from the North York Harvest team I worked on this project, conducted the community engagement activities and reflected on the responses we received from the community to put together this zine. The purpose of this project was to engage community members in a meaningful way, foster a strong relationship grounded in trust and understand the emerging needs and interests of the community.

This project is important to me because of my connection to the Albion Library Community Food Space. My family and I grew up in the Rexdale neighborhood and frequented the Albion Library. The Albion Library was a space where my family and I received support, services and a comforting sense of community.

The time I've spent working at the Albion Library Community Food Space has been incredibly rewarding. I've learned so much and have been able to connect to the community in a different way. I'm so grateful for the community I've found at this space.

A big thank you to the North York Harvest staff, in particular Sarah Watson and Nisha Joshi, for their ongoing support and care. I also have so much gratitude to the community that surrounds, supports and engages the Albion Library Community Food Space.

This report and zine (and the activities which yielded this knowledge) were the product of a project funded and supported by the 2022-23 Ontario Community Changemakers micro-grant program.

OUTREACH DESCRIPTION

The purpose of this engagement effort was to engage community members, understand their unique needs and interests, and better understand the local landscape. This activity gave North York Harvest (NYH) staff an opportunity to connect with community members and get their input on programming. Specifically, the activity asked community members to reflect on the service standards that shape and influence the food space's current model of programming.

The service standards are as follows:

- **ACCESSIBILITY:** signage is clear; accommodations are made for clients with unique needs, where possible
- **DIGNITY AND CHOICE:** clients have choice in the food they receive; food is distributed equitably; volunteers and staff demonstrate customer focused values
- **EMPOWERMENT:** clients are encouraged to provide feedback to improve services; there are opportunities for clients to inform decision-making
- **CONNECTIONS:** clients are connected to a range of services and opportunities that is tailored to their needs

OUTREACH DESCRIPTION

Participants were engaged in 3 different ways:

1 Rating and Reviewing

Participants were asked to comment on how well the food space embodied service standards

2 Defining

Participants were asked to provide insight on what each of the service standards should mean and represent

3 Feedback and Recommendations

Participants were asked to share ideas on things the food space should consider starting, stopping and continuing.

This engagement effort also served as an engaging on-site activation which animated the food space. Community members were given a space to pause, reflect and share ideas. Participants who offered feedback and insight were given a gift card as an honorarium.

OBJECTIVES: PURPOSE OF EACH ACTIVITY

Activity #1: Rating and Reviewing

This activity allowed us to gauge how well we embodied our service standards.

This was the first activity participants moved through, and it asked them to read our existing definitions for each service standard and accordingly rate our performance

Activity #2: Defining

This activity asked participants to consider our definitions and offer ideas, reflections and perspectives to animate and expand our existing understanding.

Participants used their own words and perspective to offer definitions. Using these responses we can work towards developing a shared understanding of the service standards, and ensure they are relevant to the community.

Activity #3: Feedback and Recommendations

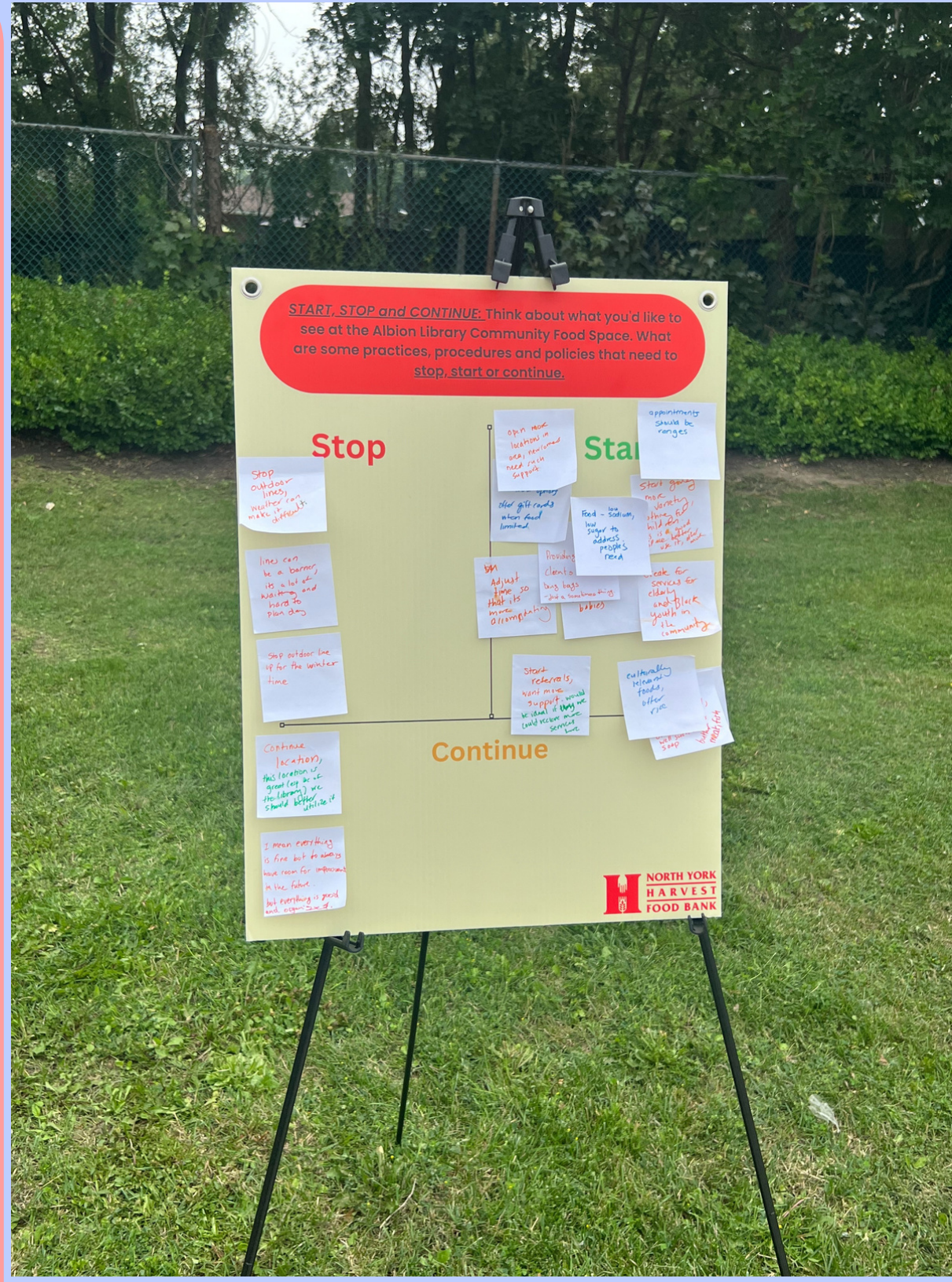
This activity encouraged participants to offer ideas around practices, programs or policies they believed the food space should consider implementing.



Activity #1: Rating and Reviewing



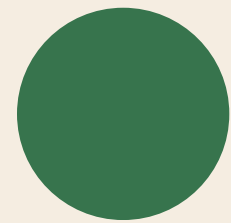
Activity #2: Defining



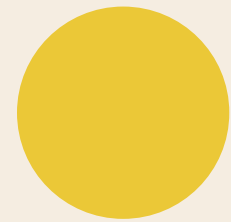
Activity #3: Feedback and Recommendations

ACTIVITY #1

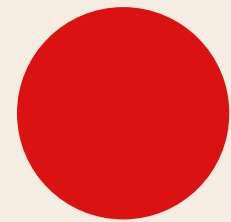
First thing participants were asked to do was think about how well the service standards were reflected in the current model of programming at the food space. Participants were asked to rate the food space's performance using stickers:



Green stickers = food space is doing a good job embodying and enacting this standard



Yellow stickers = food space is doing a fair job embodying and enacting this standard



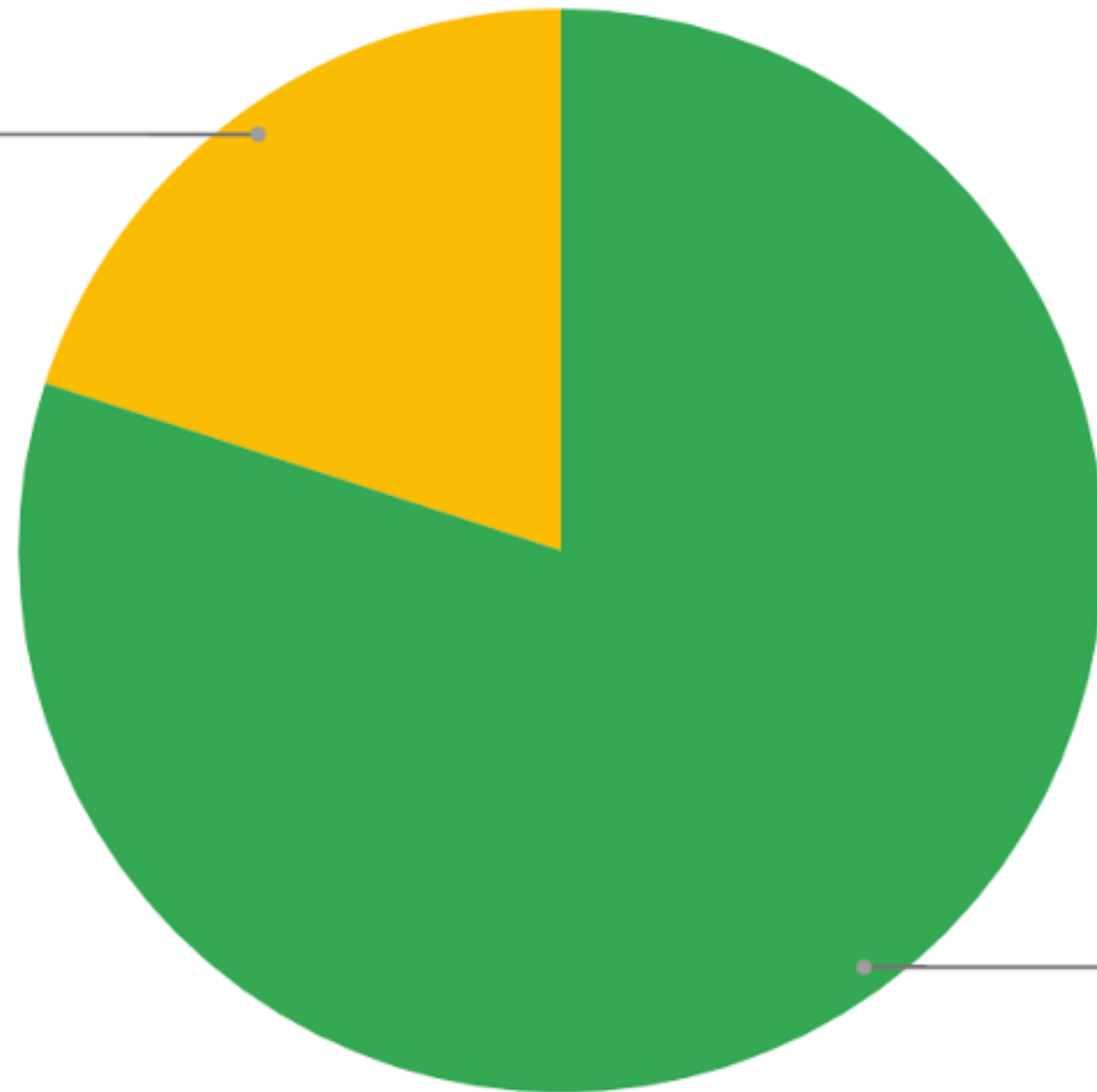
Red stickers = food space needs significant improvement

Participants placed stickers next to each service standard. The following charts represent how participants ranked the food space's performance around the four service standards.



ACCESSIBILITY

YELLOW
20.0%

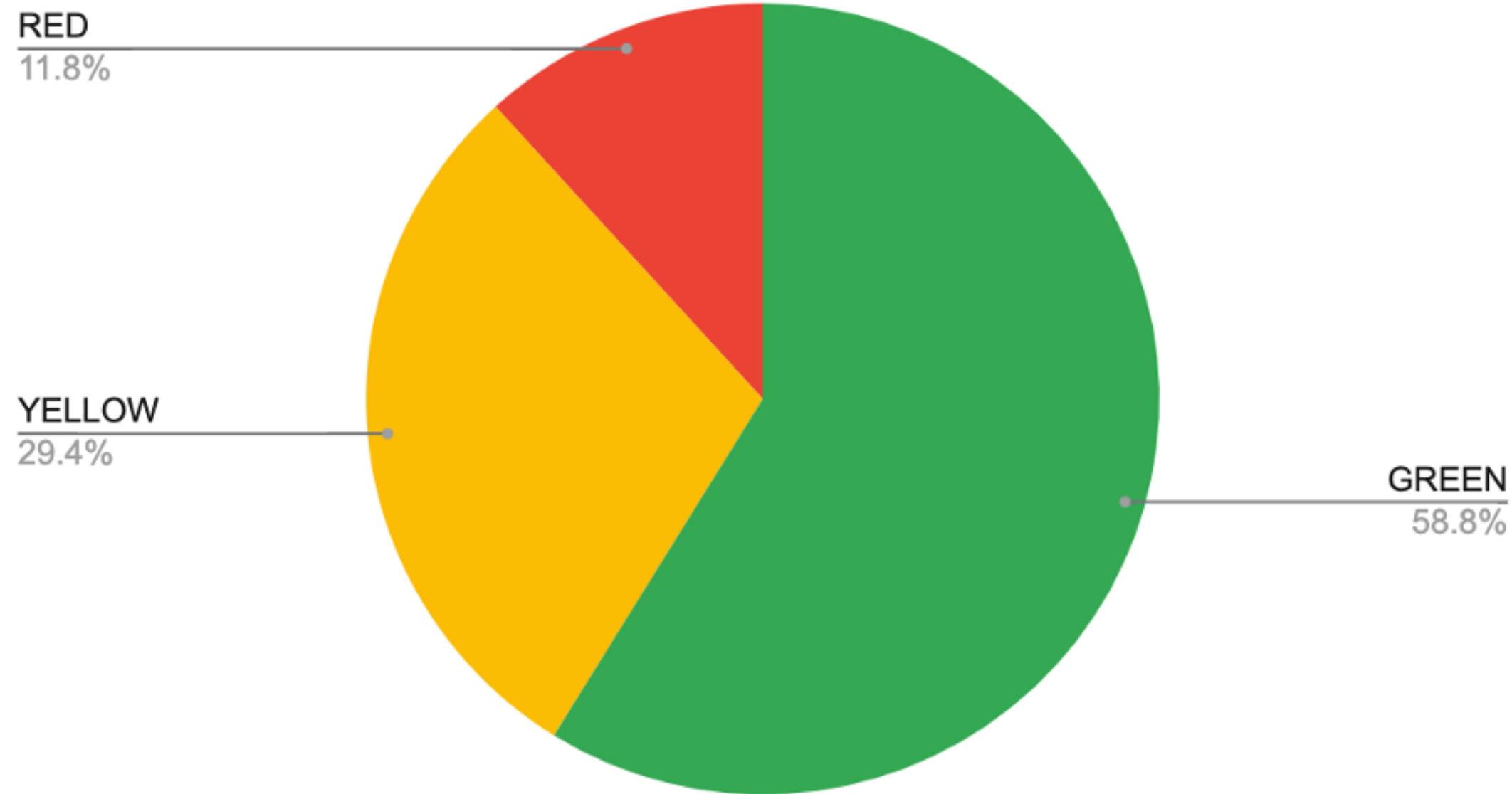


GREEN
80.0%

Some Observations:

- A lot of people spoke about how much they love the space - in particular, the location.
- The location seems to be very central and accessible

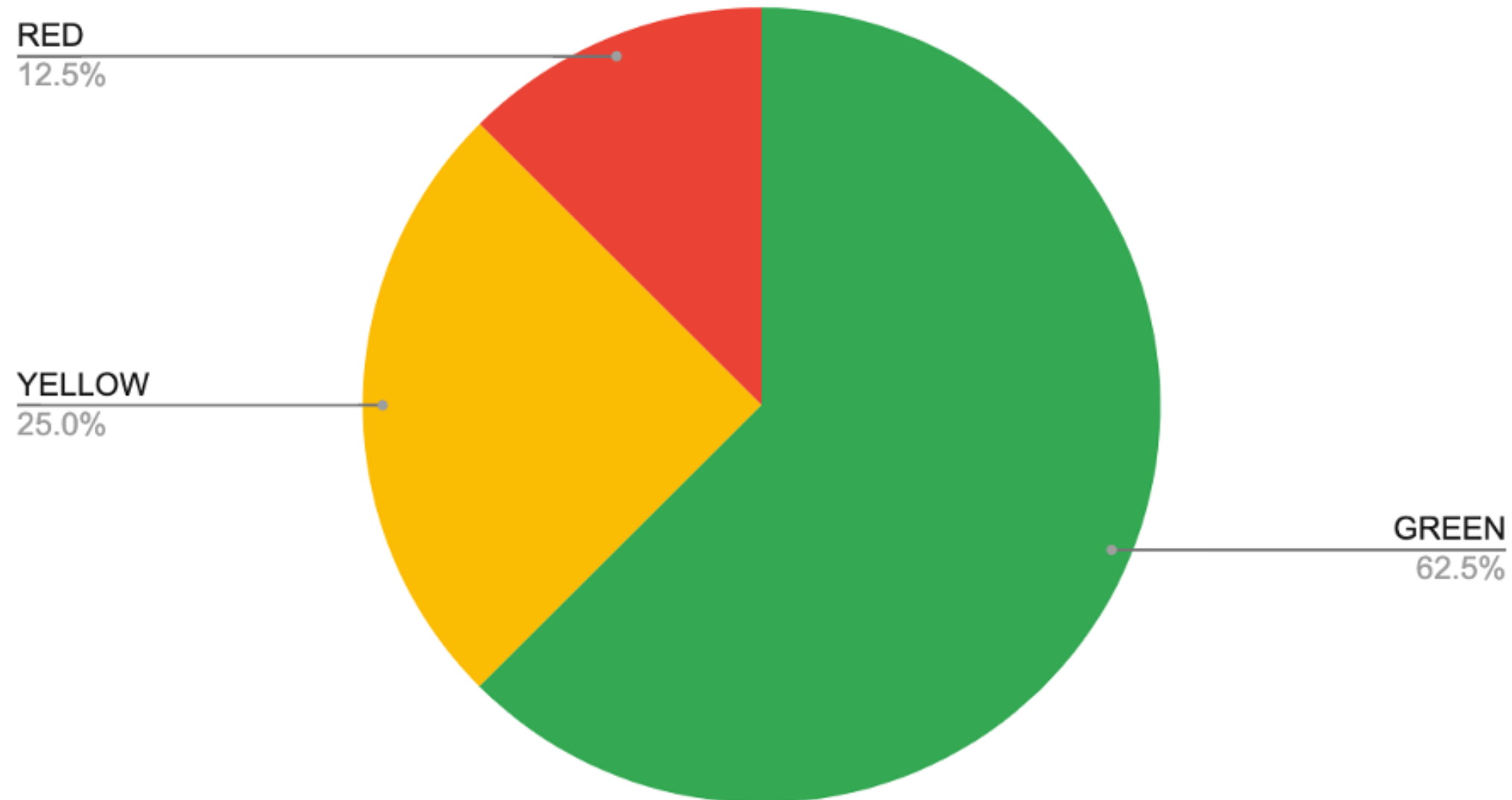
DIGNITY AND CHOICE



Some Observations:

- People were happy with the choice model; many mentioned not liking the pre-made hamper model
- People spoke extensively about wanting more variety in the food they received - in particular, healthier foods

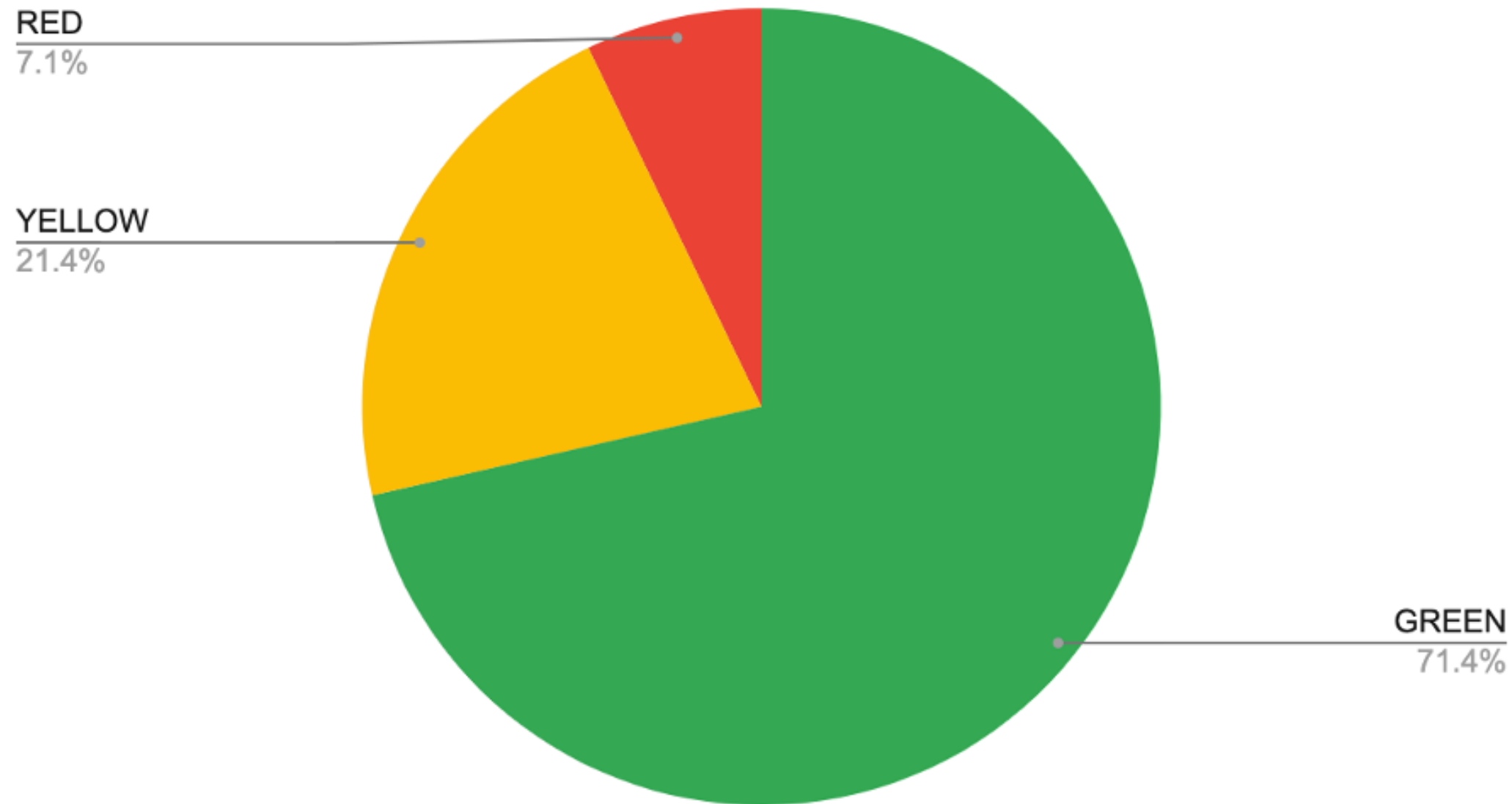
CONNECTIONS



Some Observations:

- Many people were unclear about this; they weren't sure if this was something the food space offered
- Many mentioned that staff have been helpful in the past (have shared helpful information/referrals when they asked)
- Many people showed interest in the food space focusing more on providing connections

EMPOWERMENT



Some Observations:

- People discussed feeling comfortable at the food space; feeling as though they could speak to volunteers/staff and offer feedback
- Some people mentioned wanting more opportunity to connect and talk; not to be rushed through service
- Some people mentioned the importance of training - training staff and volunteers to engage community members in an empowering way (and to make sure they don't police others)

ACTIVITY #2

Using their own words, participants also shared insight on what each service standard meant to them. The following section uses input shared by participants to define and describe each service standard.



Accessibility

- Recognizing the importance of a space and the importance of location
- The Albion Library Community Food Space is in a very central location and easily accessible to most people in the community
- Accessibility also requires recognizing the different types of barriers that limits access to the food space. This can include the following:
 - Long lines can be a barrier
 - A lack of crowd-control can be a barrier as large lines/a large crowd can be overwhelming to navigate
 - Large lines creates a sense of uncertainty around how long it will take to get served, which can make planning around a food space visit very difficult
 - Transit costs can also be a significant barrier, as this means every food space visit comes at a cost
- Certain elements of the food space location can make it difficult for individuals with mobility issues to navigate and access (for example: getting on and off the curb can be an issue)

Dignity and Choice

- Choice model is the best; the pre-made boxes (which many received during COVID) were helpful at the time, but they did not meet the needs of individuals
- Dignity and choice is about giving participants the ability to have choice in the services and programs they receive
- Dignity and choice is about understanding the unique needs of food space users
 - This includes being more understanding of people's dietary needs
 - Offering a variety of food is critical, people want healthy and culturally appropriate food
- Dignity and choice also means having a team of staff and volunteers who are friendly and respectful
- Dignity and choice can be fostered by having staff/volunteers who speak multiple languages - so that they can meaningfully connect to the diverse local population who use the food space.

Connections

- Connecting with the local landscape and understanding the area - understanding the needs and interests of the local community
- It would be helpful for the food space to operate as a type of 'hub' and provide referrals and connections
- Connections can also mean providing responsive programming that responds to the local context
 - For example: within the neighbourhood, there is a large population of seniors. It would be helpful to have programming that serves their unique needs.
 - For example: the neighbourhood is home to a lot of newcomers, providing support and key referrals would be very helpful to them as they settle.
- Offering connections could mean offering one-on-one support and having a dedicated staff member working to make key partnerships to support people on-site
- Having an email list and providing information and updates on upcoming events, opportunities and resources available in the community
 - OR creating a community board (located at the food space) where community residents can share and receive information, this could be a valuable way to animate the food space
 - OR having a number people can call to inquire about local resources and opportunities.

Empowerment

- An empowering food space is one where everyone feels comfortable; it is an inviting space
- Empowering food spaces prioritize connection; there is always space and time to chat
 - Food space staff and volunteers make an ongoing effort to connect with the community
 - Mutual respect is important
- Providing positive interactions with others in the community
- Empowering food spaces have staff who are trained and know how to engage clients in an empowering way
 - Staff are trained not to police community members who use the food space
 - Staff are trained to foster a safe space
- Community members should be able to offer advice and input without being patronized
 - Relationship between food space and community is one grounded in respect

ACTIVITY #3

Finally, participants were asked to move through a **STOP, CONTINUE and START** activity. We asked participants to consider practices, procedures and policies they'd like to see the food space stop doing, start doing and continue doing. The hope with this activity was to give participants the space to contribute to the future visioning of the food space.

The following section captures the participants' responses.

Something to Note: The purpose of this activity is to understand the community's perspective. Some responses might feel critical but they shed an important light on how people move through and experience support at this food space. This responses from this activity offer valuable insight and perspective that can help shape our approach.



STOP

- Stop the outdoor lines, as weather can make it difficult to stand in lines for too long
 - Sometimes lines can be a barrier and prevent individuals from accessing support
- Stop overbooking, as it creates a very rushed and chaotic environment
 - This type of environment is not conducive for relationship building

CONTINUE

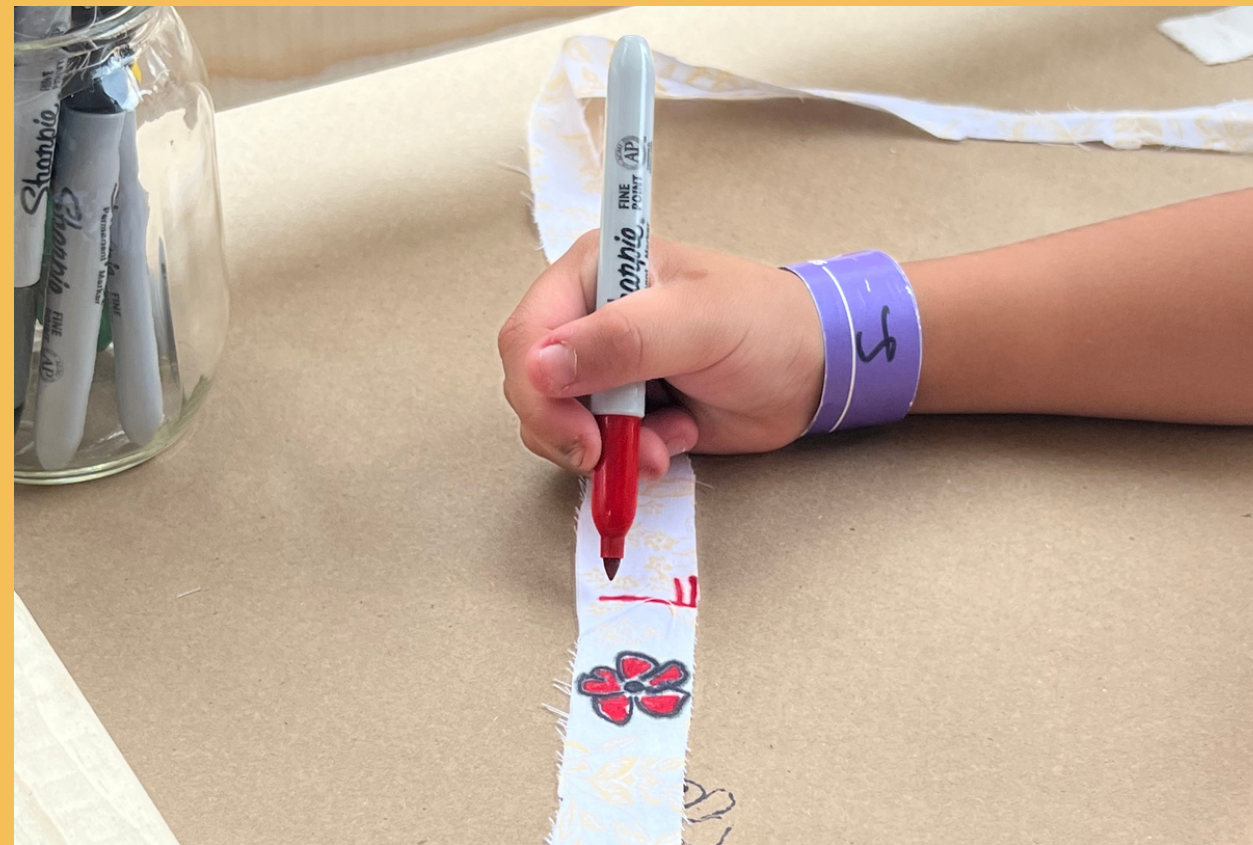
- Location! Location is great and accessible, the food space should continue operating at the library
 - And the food space should consider thinking about how they can better utilize the space (by animating the space further and offering more programming)
- Continue the choice model
- Continue supporting community
- Continue accommodating to people's needs

START

- Start offering a variety of items
 - More snacks and food that doesn't require a can opener
 - Clothing, household items
 - Start making and offering pre-made hampers for people without housing
- Since the location is near the library, it would be very helpful for the food space to introduce food space users to library services and staff
- Start connecting food space users to other support
 - Support with employment and housing would be helpful
- Start specific programming for elderly in the community
 - It could be helpful for the food space staff to identify seniors who need support and make deliveries
- Start educating community members on helpful/important tax credit and benefits
 - The grocery rebate was very helpful, providing additional information around this would be very helpful
- Start community dinners - the food space could do a lot more to foster a strong and connected community
 - Community dinners could be a great way to celebrate community
 - community dinners can help build meaningful relationships amongst community members
- Food space should start advocating for more programming in the community
 - Food space staff are connected to community members, they should leverage their understanding of the community to advocate
 - Food space staff should work with the library to create more programming
- Host different programming at the food space to animate the food space

August 25th - Foodie Fest

On August 25th, NYH participated in the Foodie Fest (which was taking place in the Albion Library parking lot). This event was open to all community residents. Many local businesses and organizations were present, there were prizes and free food being served. At this event, we presented community members with our zine. We also facilitated a community weaving project. We asked participants to write some reflections on food and community onto pieces of pre-cut fabric, and then we wove them together. The product was a beautiful woven piece that symbolizes our ongoing commitment to honour and integrate community voice into our programming/visioning.



August 25th - Foodie Fest



REFLECTIONS

This engagement effort was important as it allowed us to pause and reflect intentionally. The Albion Library Food Space is still rather new to the community and this effort allows us to connect meaningfully with community members. Fostering a sense of community is critical to an empowering food space, and engagement efforts like this play an important part in creating a safe and inviting environment. From this process, we gained many learnings. *Some of them include...*



REFLECTIONS

UNDERSTANDING THE LOCAL CONTEXT:

This engagement effort gave us the opportunity to better understand the local community context. Participants offered key insight on what is happening at the community level, and this was incredibly informative. We recognize that the landscape of a community is always changing, and needs are always in flux. As such, it is important to engage the community in an ongoing manner so that programming remains responsive and relevant to the local needs.



REFLECTIONS

RECOGNIZING THE POTENTIAL OF THIS SPACE:

The food space is an important space within the community. It is a space where people gather to connect and receive support. Many participants highlighted how valuable the food space is, and how helpful it would be if the food space offered additional support (beyond just food). It is important to make an effort to animate the space and offer varied programming. It is important to leverage this space and effectively use it towards fostering a strong sense of community. Beyond just food, participants were interested in seeing the food space being utilized more like a social space. Participants are interested in having a space where they can celebrate and be in community with one another.



REFLECTIONS

A SHARED FUTURE VISION:

At core, this engagement gave participants the space to co-create a vision for the future of the Albion Library Community Food Space. Participants were encouraged to reflect and offer suggestions that could shape the future of the food space. This practice is empowering and important because it encourages community residents to participate meaningfully within their local context. It also fosters a participatory environment within the food space, where community members feel empowered and invited to offer ongoing feedback and insight.



REFLECTIONS

COMMUNICATING PROGRESS:

Many suggestions we received during this process are things we are currently working towards or things we have already implemented to some extent. However, this effort and ongoing progress is not entirely clear to community members. Overall, this engagement effort has emphasized the need to more effectively share information about the work NYH does and the supports we offer. Furthermore, this disconnect also signals the need to reevaluate our programming and consider how to foster more clarity and transparency. Making an effort to communicate our progress and the changes we are implementing also serves as a valuable opportunity to communicate our role within the community, and the types of impact and support we are working towards providing.



SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE IMPLEMENTATION

- It could be beneficial to move through the activities incrementally; presenting all 3 activities at once can be overwhelming and discourage participation
- Some participants found the service standards too abstract to understand - it is important to spend time developing a clear and accessible description (of the service standards and their purpose) to share with participants
- Gift cards were important - it is important to offer honorarium for participation
 - this activity + the gift cards is a great way to show our appreciation for the community; participants felt very appreciated after receiving the gift cards
- Some participants have a lot to share - participants who have the time and are interested can be interviewed more thoroughly
 - This could be a great way to capture stories
 - These types of interviews can also be scheduled so that participants have time to prepare
- It would be helpful to host this activity (or similar activities) a couple time a year as it gives community residents the space to connect with each other and the food space staff/volunteers
 - People are interested in the food space creating more space for connection and community - this is one way to do that
 - This is also a great and easy way to develop a deeper relationship with the surrounding community; which is important for newer food spaces
- This activity can also be used to 'map' the community context (it's similar to asset mapping processes). It can be used to learn about key locations/services/organizations within the community and understand emerging needs and interests of the residents
 - This process would especially impactful for staff who are new to the community

NEXT STEPS (and a THANK-YOU)

We received a lot of great feedback and insight from this engagement effort. Community members were eager to share and provide a vision of what the future of this food space could look like. We recognize that change can not happen immediately, and that many of these suggestions are goals to be worked towards. We will reflect on this body of knowledge that we have collected as we look towards the future of the Albion Library Community Food Space. The community voice, captured through this effort and future engagements, will continue to inform our programming.

We are so grateful to the community members who took the time to pause and reflect with us. We appreciate the sense of community they embodied and the optimism they demonstrated. We are grateful to have received so many kind words and thoughtful reflections on how to evolve our programming. We also appreciate the feedback we received that pushes us to reconsider our existing practices and work towards being better. Above all, we are so grateful for the community that surrounds and supports the Albion Library Community Food Space! Thank you for your ongoing care and consideration!

