No Kid Hungry City Innovation Fellowship
WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES TO ADDRESS FOOD INSECURITY

Boston

Memphis

Seattle
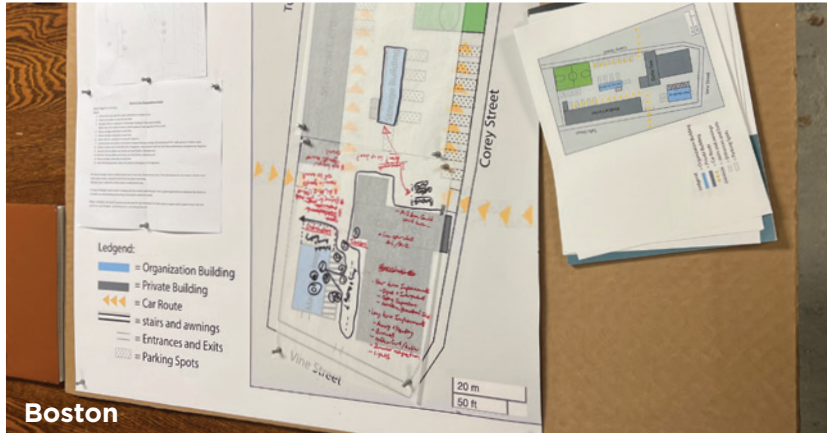
Background

In 2022, we launched the "No Kid Hungry City Innovation Fellowship." This 18-month program brings leaders from diverse backgrounds into city innovation teams and community-focused organizations. Their mission? To creatively address food insecurity. The fellows use a human-centered-design process to bring new voices to the table, develop bottom-up solutions, and pilot new approaches to addressing food insecurity.

Thanks to No Kid Hungry's grant support, they have experimented with various ideas that emerged from communities in Memphis, Boston, and Seattle. We spoke to them about what they learned and how others can implement a human-centered design approach.

Fellows

Mark Araujo

Mark's work straddled the City of Boston **Office of Food Justice** and one of the nation's pioneering city innovation offices, the Mayor's Office of **New Urban Mechanics**. Mark is a design engineer, artist, educator and systems thinker with a joint Master of Arts in Design Engineering from Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design.

Angelica Carey

Angelica's fellowship was with **Innovate Memphis**, a nonprofit focused on delivering creative civic solutions. She previously worked in community engagement and project management for the City of Memphis Division of Planning and Development and has a dual graduate degree in Regional Planning and Sustainability Sciences from the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Gurdeep Gill

Gurdeep led the evaluation and improvement of the City of Seattle Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program as part of her fellowship with the city's **Office of Sustainability and the Environment** and worked closely with **Seattle Public Schools Culinary Services**. She also supported the School Food Work Group, a public and private coalition in Seattle, as part of her fellowship. Gurdeep has a long history of working with community-led government programs and food justice in Seattle.

What brought each of you to this work?

Mark: During the pandemic, we saw so many different populations being affected by food insecurity, that I had to rethink where my career was going and how I could use design to help.

Angelica: For me, it was a little different. I have a background in city planning and during the pandemic I began volunteering on a food insecurity project. When this fellowship came up, I knew it was the perfect match.

Gurdeep: Prior to the pandemic, I had a background in food justice and organizing and had experienced food insecurity myself. Just like Mark, I felt the greater urgency during the pandemic, so when I saw the position focused on school food, it just felt right.

What is human-centered design?

Angelica: It's really engaging the community and having them be the driving force of the work you are doing.

Gurdeep: I'd add that it's also about centering those who are most impacted and working with them to co-create the solutions.

Mark: Yes, a big thing too is that it's a very bottom up, not top-down approach. I think people in the community often have things figured out and we just need to listen to them.
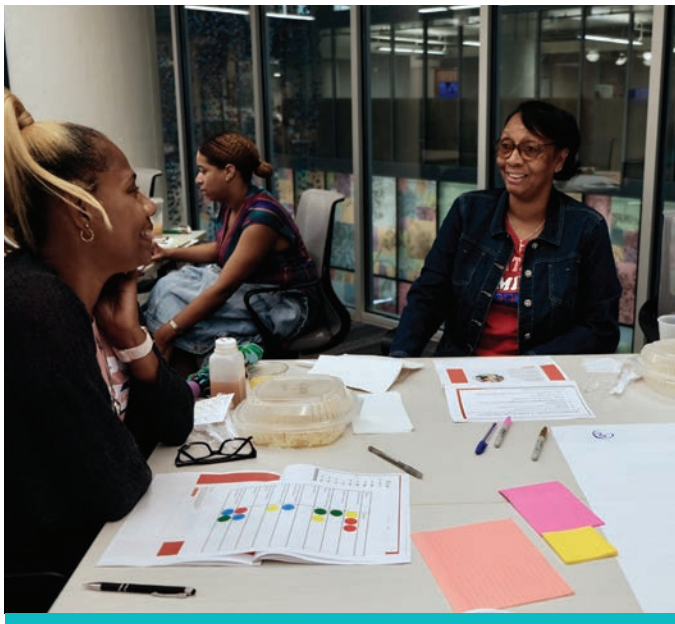
Images from co-design workshops with community members in Memphis

What did the discovery process look like for each of you?

Mark: I started by researching all that had been done to address food insecurity in Boston, exploring every Boston neighborhood, and volunteering at food pantries. And then for my work at the Harvest on Vine pantry, I was just **a fly on the wall** for a bit. Eventually that led to co-design sessions with the pantry coordinator, volunteers, and community members to decide what changes they wanted to try.

Gurdeep: For me, it was learning from conversations with kitchen staff and students about what's already been done, what's working, what's not working, and what do they like. The **big lightbulb moment was talking to the kitchen staff.** Some of them would look up fun facts around the produce items in the cafeteria on their own time just because they want students to be more excited about the food. They were really invested in it.

Angelica: I was helping with another research project with Clean Memphis doing a food waste landscape analysis and that really gave me **direct intel from key food providers** on what their communities needed. I realized they would benefit from knowing who is doing what, so when one organization runs out of food, they can recommend another place that's open. Or maybe **one organization has a kitchen, but not enough storage** and another organization has the opposite problem.

Volunteers at the Harvest on Vine food pantry plot out different line management strategies

How did you begin to build relationships and trust to get to the key insights you needed for a pilot project or prototype?

Angelica: For me, it was a lot of just cold calls and emails at first to say hey, this is my role, I'm really invested, I live here in Memphis. Then we would meet and just get people to dream and think about how solutions could come about in a way that made sense for them. Eventually it was **leading a lot of focus groups and individual interviews** which led to greater stakeholder convenings among providers.

Gurdeep: Building relationships with students was important and challenging. There is limited time in the school day. A lot of schools let us come in to talk to them during lunchtime, but we only had 20 or 30 minutes and they needed to eat during that time! So we did a lot of thumbs up, thumbs down surveys to start the conversations. And in these interactions I would **emphasize the importance of their voice and experience,** that they are the experts and I'm here to learn from them. We also got to work with a student leadership team of fourth and fifth graders to go more in-depth and **they took the lead on a survey.**

Mark: At Harvest on Vine, we really wanted to have an **interdisciplinary group of folks, including the pantry coordinator, volunteers, community members, community advocates, neighborhood association folks, and healthcare workers.** After the initial co-design sessions, we broke it up into three sections: service design and how the pantry user experience could be more joyful, culturally-appropriate foods, and more holistic approaches like how we utilize community spaces or think about coming together with food as a catalyst.

And then you got to the exciting stage of piloting or prototyping the ideas that came from your discovery process. What did you each choose to focus on?

Angelica: A lot of my focus groups and interviews were really imaginative. Is there a way people could be more informed about local or federal food assistance programs in Memphis? What would that look like? How would you interact with it?

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Once we got to the heart of those information-seeking pathways, it was clear that a website would be the primary tool we would use to aggregate resources available online – but one that really caters each page by user type. Now there are pages developed for community members, providers, retailers, and farmers.

A lot of times in focus groups, you can fall into being too prescriptive in how you ask questions. But I was **working with adults who have never been asked how to develop or design something.** By leaving the table open to all sorts of ideas, really interesting pieces came through. For example, they wanted to see pictures of children and families. Or you can't have too many links to follow because you could get scammed. And then **bringing the initial design back to them and hearing "this part is good, but this could be better."** It was interesting to see it play out with adults—and fun.

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>
> ANGELICA CAREY

What about your project Gurdeep? What did you decide to do with your findings?

Gurdeep: After talking to students, the kitchen staff, and administrators, we learned that schools and students like the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, they love having the diversity of fruit and vegetable snacks like beet smoothies and dragon fruit, but communication was the biggest challenge. Kitchen staff had the most knowledge, but teachers and administrators just lacked awareness, and **students weren't aware that if they brought lunch, they could still grab a mango slice.** They thought they had to buy it.

We began hosting **joint trainings with kitchen staff and school administrators** so that everyone had the same knowledge. That was big because they can see students in the hallway and say "hey, don't forget there is a bok choy today." We also developed some promotional materials and flyers for the cafeteria since that's something we heard from a lot of folks. And we geared them toward students because we wanted to show them that we respect that they are individuals who can make a choice. "Hey, there are snacks here Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Feel free to grab it." We also **expanded to more days, added more variety of produce items, and put more fruits on the menu– all things we heard from students.** They especially wanted more strawberries, watermelon, and mangoes. Having them appear more frequently throughout the year honors their likes while still balancing the goals of the program, which is to introduce them to a variety of produce items.

Students vote for their favorite fruits and vegetables by moving throughout a gym in Seattle

Mark, some of the biggest changes at Harvest on Vine came directly from the co-design participants themselves.

Mark: Yes, I mean really all of them. Initially, we focused on service design and how we make people feel welcome and seen. At a lot of food pantries, **the wait time is two to three hours, and it causes all sorts of problems on the line.** One participant suggested splitting the line in two alphabetically and just switching the order for every distribution, so that everyone waits less time and there's no favoritism about who goes first. And it worked. We also did things like **having coffee and tea to greet people and an accessibility line for wheelchair users and older adults.** It's not perfect, but it's so much less stigmatizing now.

We also asked people what foods bring them joy or feel like home, and we were able to **acquire a lot more culturally-appropriate foods** like garlic, spices, and ginger. These are things that seem small, but I think are extremely important once you go back home and can make a meal that is full of joy and love.

And then finally, we had discussed how do we become a **community food center** or a community center that's focused around food. Food distribution is part of that, but can we also have a public kitchen? And cooking classes? Can we link developing recipes to the food that is available? And our next step is to make that happen.

Gurdeep Gill educates Seattle students on produce offered through the fresh fruit and vegetable program

> **"When it comes to working with youth and doing co-creation, I think a big part of it is letting them take the lead, letting them dream big, but also being transparent about what you can and can't do. It's about finding a balance of letting them know they are heard, but also focusing on what is possible."**
>
> GURDEEP GILL

Community advertisement for Seattle's free fruit and vegetable program

You learned so many lessons from this process. What would you tell others who are considering a human-centered-design approach?

Gurdeep: For me, a big one is that innovation doesn't always mean something new. The programs funded by the Sweetened Beverage Tax in Seattle were already in place for five years and came about through a lot of community-led advocacy. We don't need to overhaul the whole program, but how can we use this approach to make it work better? **How can we build on what has already been done by the community?**

Also, when it comes to working with youth and doing co-creation, I think a big part of it is letting them take the lead, letting them dream big, but also being transparent about what you can and can't do. It's about finding a balance of letting them know they are heard, but also focusing on what is possible.

Angelica: Yes, I agree. You have to be **transparent about your process and be realistic about what you have the capability to do.** I remember working in the city government and people thought, "Well, you work for the city, can't you just make this happen?" But that's not how it is. Level-setting is really important.

And I'd also say be more willing to take chances. Make the phone call. Put yourself out there. Try things. I finally said, "Okay, I'm just going to talk to every single person and see who bites, who is passionate about this, and if we can work together."

Mark: Yes, I think we have to remind ourselves that we're living in other people's imaginations. **So often the voices of Black, Indigenous, and communities of color are not part of the conversation.** We're in a food system where decisions are made from the top down. "Here's what's good for you, here's what you can get." And then the root cause of food insecurity is poverty, so in these sessions we start to talk about root causes and systems change. But we also have to do this with some guardrails because it's going to require incremental changes to get to a more just food system. There is no magic wand.

Seattle school nutrition employee prepares some locally sourced salmon from the Muckleshoot tribe, as part of a district-wide effort to include culturally relevant dishes

Was there a moment over the last year where you stepped back and said "This is it! This is human-centered-design in action."?

Mark: I love that moment when I'm not speaking or facilitating, and things are just happening. You're surrounded by 10 or 12 people that are part of the session and people are brainstorming and building off of each other's ideas and I'm just kind of there. I could step away. That's when you know the work is not done, but it's started.

Gurdeep: For me, it was seeing the recommendations being implemented. The signage in the cafeteria, the flyers, expanding the program. **All of these enhancements came from our conversations with staff and students.** Being able to provide tangible changes to the program that they brought up was wonderful. Definitely an example of human centered design in action!

Angelica: Yes, you see that energy just kind of happening when you provide the space and the parameters. And people just kind of take it, run with it, and the ideas are flowing. That's what human-centered-design is all about!

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Learn more about the work of **The Center of Best Practices and Program Innovation**

Community members in Boston dicsuss and trade ideas on how to manage food pantry waiting lines