

CENTERING LIVED EXPERTISE TO ADDRESS FOOD INSECURITY

Mobilizing Community Insights to Improve Policy and Implementation Processes

Barbie Izquierdo has been an anti-hunger advocate for the past 13 years. Her journey started through personal experience, sharing her story, and her battle with food insecurity, which was featured in the documentary, “[A Place at the Table](#).” Living through these circumstances has helped her find her calling and the focus of her life’s work.

“I have learned how to take the challenging circumstances that I lived through with my children and my family and translate those experiences into actively contributing to making society a better place,” says Barbie.

Barbie has worked at various anti-hunger organizations, including the [Coalition Against Hunger](#), [The Food Trust](#), [Hunger Free America](#), and now [Feeding America](#), where she is director of advocacy neighbors engagement. She recently won the [2022 Global Citizen Prize: Citizen Award USA](#) for her advocacy work.

Barbie serves as a community partner with lived expertise on [Exploring Cross-Agency Partnerships to Address Food Insecurity](#), a national initiative led by the Center for Health Care Strategies with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. In this profile, Barbie shares her perspectives on the importance of engaging communities in policymaking and implementation processes.



Who: Barbie Izquierdo

Role: Director, Advocacy Neighbors Engagement, Feeding America

“Individuals with lived expertise of experiencing hunger and navigating state government systems for help have the will and determination to succeed, persevere, and overcome — and deserve respect, empathy, and compassion.”

CENTERING LIVED EXPERTISE TO ADDRESS FOOD INSECURITY: PROFILE SERIES

No one understands public benefit programs as well as the community members served. This series shares the voices of people with direct experience using programs such as Medicaid, SNAP, and WIC on the value of cross-program coordination and incorporating lived expertise into policymaking and implementation processes. This series is a product of [Exploring Cross-Agency Partnerships to Address Food Insecurity](#), a national initiative led by the Center for Health Care Strategies with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

How can state agencies better coordinate across programs to improve access for individuals?

States can create direct linkages across programs' eligibility and enrollment. For example, if an individual qualifies for SNAP, the system will automatically confirm whether they are eligible for Medicaid. Some states already do this. When applying for SNAP benefits in Pennsylvania, individuals can also apply for [other human service programs](#) that go hand-in-hand, like Social Security Income (SSI), Medicaid, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits, on a single application. Coordination across programs through a combined application process is one concrete way to improve access to individuals and families.

Opportunities also exist to coordinate across programs for a more seamless recertification process when renewing benefits. This would not only help individuals and families but would also ease the burden on case managers who have to process substantial paperwork for clients frequently (e.g., every six months in many cases). Support to align and streamline recertification processes nationwide could help individual states make strides toward improved access as well as efficiency.

I worked in the mental health field for about four years in a customer service role for individuals seeking mental health support. In listening to people's stories, I found that food insecurity was often something that individuals and their families were facing. In response to this need, I created a database of community resources that not only listed health care providers, but also nearby food pantries or other community resources. Access to this information can be impactful!

What recommendations do you have for state agencies to better incorporate lived expertise in policies and programs?

Valuing insights from individuals with lived experiences — and recognizing those experiences as not only enriching, but as *expertise* — is so important, particularly from a policy standpoint. I think that every government agency should create a community advisory board to offer feedback and recommendations on service delivery, policy design, and implementation on a consistent basis. Community participants should also be compensated for their involvement on these boards or committees — and even hired as consultants or staff over time given their expertise as well as their commitment and dedication to the community. I found my calling and my love for this work in part through my participation in a community advisory committee through a public health organization focused on addressing social drivers of health. In that space, I was able to share learnings within my own community. I met people who look like me, dress like me, talk like me, have shared experiences — and we were able to get our points across in a solutions-oriented and actionable manner.

How can states better engage directly with individuals with lived expertise?

Analysis paralysis can happen when there's an acknowledgement of the issue and the need, but not a lot of experience or comfort with action. People often wonder, "How can we get insights and perspective from individuals with lived experience and use that feedback in the most equitable, appropriate, and impactful way?" Find the people in the community who are being affected by the decisions being made, give them the

opportunity to offer input, and genuinely take those suggestions to heart. Start in the communities that need it most and have them involved in the decision-making process, including what issue or policy to prioritize.

Community members often think if we speak up, we may not actually be listened to or taken seriously. If government officials can demonstrate to community members that they can speak their mind and will be heard — and that there's going to be tangible action to make changes — more people will want to participate. More community members will want to be a part of something that ensures that future generations won't continue in the struggle.

It's also important to consider how organizations are potentially excluding people in job qualifications or job descriptions for open positions. Reframing these postings to center the focus on desired skills versus academic or other qualifications is powerful in opening the door to talented individuals who can add tremendous value because of their lived expertise.



ABOUT THE CENTER FOR HEALTH CARE STRATEGIES

The Center for Health Care Strategies (CHCS) is a policy design and implementation partner devoted to improving outcomes for people enrolled in Medicaid. We support partners across sectors and disciplines to make more effective, efficient, and equitable care possible for millions of people across the nation. For more information, visit www.chcs.org.