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Blessing Box Plant

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Final Honors Project: Blessing Box Plant

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Abstract

This project set out to build and plant blessing boxes in Bowling Green, Ohio to directly address the problem of food insecurity in the community. A blessing box is a free-standing food pantry that can be stocked through donations from the community, and utilized by whoever may be in need. The motto of these boxes is “Leave what you can, take what you need.” According to Feeding America (2022), Food insecurity is “A lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy life,” (Feeding America, 2022, para. 1). In 2021, 33.8 million people lived in food-insecure households (USDA, 2022) and 14.8 percent of people are food insecure in Wood County (Brown Bag Food Pantry, 2022). These statistics lead to a prominent issue as there is not great enough access to food for those in need. In this project, I set out to find a location to plant one to two blessing boxes. I also set out to find funding and construction of the box. While I received a donation of the materials needed for the box, and someone willing to build the box, I was unable to secure a location in the allotted time. Despite this, I plan to continue my work until this project is complete.

Final Honors Project: Blessing Box Plant

Introduction

A blessing box is a free-standing food pantry that can be stocked by community members who are able to give, and utilized by community members in need. These boxes hold items such as non-perishable food items (i.e., canned vegetables, soups, and peanut butter), hygiene essentials (i.e. toothpaste and deodorant), and other helpful items such as hats or gloves. These boxes aim to be discrete, and beneficial to all participating parties. Those giving have a useful place to make donations or make use of pantry items that might otherwise go to waste. Those in need have a private way of receiving help without having to directly ask for it. These boxes are open to anyone 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (Mercy Health, 2022). In a country with so many who are food insecure, blessing boxes are a way to help combat this problem. According to the USDA, in 2021 33.8 million people lived in food-insecure households (USDA, 2022). Food pantries, like blessing boxes, provide an additional resource to those who are food insecure. This project aimed to create one to two blessing boxes that would be planted in Bowling Green, Ohio. In this paper, we will discuss the actual results of the project.

Literature Review

The literature available supported the need for a blessing box both in general and in Wood County specifically. It showed that food insecurity is a very prevalent problem in America. According to Feeding America 2022, Food insecurity is “A lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy life,” (Feeding America,

2022, para 1). According to the USDA, in 2021 33.8 million people lived in food-insecure households (USDA, 2022). Food insecurity can have a variety of detrimental effects including poor physical health, poor mental health, obesity, developmental and learning problems in children, and so many more (Hartline-Grafton, 2018). According to the Brown Bag Food Project in Bowling Green, 14.8 percent of people are food insecure in Wood County. Among these people are often college students and seniors, who comprise a large portion of the Bowling Green community. College students are above the national average for food insecurity (Anthrosource, 2017). A study conducted among college students in California showed that this can lead to decreased grade point average, poor mental health, and social struggles among college students (Martinez, Frongillo, & Ritchie, 2018).

The USDA reports that the use of food pantries increased from 2019 to 2020. In 2019, 4.4 percent of households reported using food pantries. This percentage increased to 6.7 in 2020. Among households reporting food insecurity, 36.5 percent use food pantries. Despite the increase in food pantry use, this did not decrease the prevalence of food insecurity. This data shows that a blessing box is unlikely to reduce food insecurity in America. However, it is a tool that can and will be used by those who need it. A blessing box is simply a mobile food pantry. Building these boxes will help food-insecure people, support the growing use of food pantries, and take some demand off of the existing pantries. (USDA, 2022)

Based on these findings, we can determine there is a need for greater access to food resources. This project aims to address this need by planting blessing boxes. One example of a group that successfully created blessing boxes is the Columbus Blessing Box Project. They state, “We started Columbus Blessing Boxes Project in January of 2018 by purchasing some used cabinets on Craigslist, and with some willing friends and family, we turned them into the first

Blessing Boxes. To this day, we continue our project of helping to fight food insecurity by serving those in need in more than 100 areas of the Columbus community!” (Columbus Blessing Boxes).

Methods

The goal was to plant one box at H2O church and one box on campus at BGSU. This would have allowed both students and community members to utilize the boxes. Before the spring semester began, I began communications with a representative from H2O church. The idea was introduced at a staff meeting, and while they hoped they could be a plant location, they were unable to do so. H2O leases their building, and therefore they have rules against placing permanent objects on the property. I then contacted multiple other churches in the Bowling Green community and got the same response from each of them. Everyone was willing to support and donate to the box, but none were able to host the box. I rerouted my focus to the on-campus location. I reached out to multiple people on campus that all directed me to Campus Operations. I sent an email but never heard back.

In the midst of working to secure a location, I was also working on funding. Based on current prices of materials, each box is estimated to cost \$120-\$150. The goal was to raise \$400 for this project. The main allocation would be for materials, and any money left would go towards buying supplies to go into the boxes. The first method for raising this money was donations. A family member of mine had built many blessing boxes in the past for various parks and churches. He offered to provide all materials needed for the boxes and volunteered to build them. With this development, the location was the only missing piece.

After numerous failed attempts at finding a location in Bowling Green, I decided to shift my focus to a location in Butler County, Ohio. Because I live in Butler County, I felt I could be

more successful in finding a location willing to hold a box. However, at this point in the project, time was very limited. I immediately got in contact with Paul Hoover, who is the president of Kettering Hamilton Hospital. He helped get me in contact with Sonja Kranbuhl, who is the director of the Kettering Hamilton Foundation. Her job is to go out and get donations to support hospital projects. Paul felt Sonja was the perfect person to assist me with this project, and he was right. Sonja and I met to discuss the project, and she recommended a church in Hamilton, Ohio. This church has a group of women who work on projects similar to mine. Sonja felt they would be willing to manage and upkeep the boxes after the plant.

Limitations

As hinted at, this project had limitations that ultimately proved to be more detrimental than expected. As a student taking BGSU classes online from 2 hours away, finding a location in Bowling Green was very difficult. All communication with locations had to take place via email or phone. This limited my ability to sit down with the right people to find a solution. Time was another big limitation. Finding a location proved to be very difficult to do in just over three months. I feel that had I started working to find a location in the fall, I may have had a better end result. Another limitation was resources and references. There was an abundance of resources to prove the benefit of a blessing box and the prevalence of food insecurity. There were not, however, many resources on the logistics behind a blessing box plant. While I was able to find successful projects, blueprints for the boxes, and many examples of blessing boxes; none of those sources provided insight on how this project would unfold. I have found that often times, churches, community parks, schools, etc. request a box for their property. My need for a location proved to be a limitation in itself.

Results

While things began to move in the right direction towards the end, there was simply not enough time left. While I was unable to secure the Hamilton church location in time to complete this project, I plan to plant a blessing box at this location with Sonja's support and guidance. I did secure funding and construction of the Box, but the box serves no purpose without a location in which it can be planted. While this project did not end the way I had hoped, I would not consider it a fail. My hope is to still plant a blessing box at the location in Hamilton with Sonja's help. I believe that had the box been planted, we would see that the Hamilton community benefited from it. A lot was learned from this project as well. My expectations did not meet the reality of planting a blessing box, which forced me to evaluate what could have been done differently.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

In this project, I found that the issue of food insecurity is very real and very prevalent. As a country, we need to find ways to fight this issue and provide greater resources for our communities. Many groups are suffering, and among those are college students, the elderly, and those with lower incomes. There is more work to be done, and many more improvements to be made. I believe that blessing boxes are one small but practical way to do this. I believe that if blessing boxes were found at more schools, campuses, churches, parks, shelters, etc., we would see an improvement in food insecurities in our communities and in this country.

Conclusion

In the course of this project, a problem was identified, and a solution was found to combat the problem. My goal was to make a change in my community. I hoped to provide aid to the people of Bowling Green. I hoped to give the community a vessel to help others and those in need of a resource. The project did not reach the end I had hoped, but there is more work to be done. This project has proved the need for more food resources in Bowling Green, and in similar communities. I plan to continue to work against food insecurity by finishing the blessing box plant and finding other strategies in the future.

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