

Kent County Essential Needs Task Force

Food & Nutrition

Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Background and Purpose

We recognize that a community and/or organization often uses words and phrases that have multiple meanings or varied impacts. These meanings are based on a variety of factors, including context (organizational, population-based, geographical, etc.), intended audience, desired response or outcome, among others. What may seem like shared vocabulary within a system may actually cause significant confusion and counterproductive results.

The Shared Vocabulary activity is intended to bring a group of ENTF partners together around the words and phrases commonly used within a particular system. The activity provides opportunity for in-depth dialogue, sharing of perspectives, and partnership. The activity may reveal vulnerabilities and may lead to uncomfortable conversations. The desired result is to better shape the community-wide narrative around the issue system and guide organizations to consider the intended and unintended consequences of system language.

Working in broad systems, we recognize the inequitable opportunities and disparate outcomes that exist across Kent County. These disparities are rooted in systemic racism and other forms of oppression that hold back certain community members, neighborhoods, and population groups. In ENTF, we hold equity as the foundational value of our efforts. We acknowledge that many of us benefit from white privilege and other advantages of class, ability and opportunity. We acknowledge that we, in our own way, have been complicit in racism and oppression of black and indigenous people of color, and others who have experiences other than our own. It is with this understanding that we approach our shared vocabulary project in the local food system. We enter this work holding the assumptions that power in our local food system historically has been held by dominant culture, and that the county's emergency food system has perpetuated disparities (while intending to improve situations for people living in low income and other challenges). It is our hope that a counternarrative is established that shifts the tone of awareness and conversation and leads to increased activism.

Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Process

1. Identify a set of words and phrases that are used frequently in designated system
 - This can be done by initially asking: “What are you tired of hearing when it comes to the community narrative around this issue area?”
 - Review mission statements, marketing materials, media articles and other documents to help expand list
2. Explore definitions based on dictionary, common uses, geographic variances, etc.
 - This should take place over the course of two or more discussions, allowing activity members time to process
 - Once the group agrees upon a shared definition, this definition should be documented in a manner that recognizes that the definition is a system-derived definition (as opposed to a community-derived definition)
3. Discuss use cases for each word
 - Even with an agreed-upon definition, the identified words can still be utilized in ways that bring about either positive or negative impacts.
4. Create word-cloud related to each identified word (taking into account the examples of positive and negative use cases)
 - The word-cloud will give the group a visual depiction of the impact of each system word
 - Be specific in instructing the group creating the word-cloud to focus on only the positive or negative use case, not general associations to the word
5. Develop a list of considerations for use, based on the agreed-upon definition and use cases
 - ENTF is not in the position of telling partner organizations what they should or should not say. Considerations for use are appropriate to guide partner organizations in their internal thinking and decision-making as they prepare both internal and external messaging
 - Is the context national, state, regional or local? What are the perspectives that you want uplifted? What are the assumptions you want to challenge?
 - Who is using the word and in what contexts? Who is telling the story?



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6. Establish a counternarrative

- Is the word or phrase primarily negative, what is the alternative framework that you would like to normalize?
- There are likely multiple counternarratives to shift the way the community uses and thinks about the word/phrase either from a high-level or detail-level perspective

7. Create headlines/talking points and accompanying hashtags

- How are short phrases catching the attention of the general public and helping to build awareness and reinforce the new narrative?

8. Distribute and Educate

- All partners should have final documents and description of the process and purpose of the shared vocabulary guide(s)
- Provide partners time and space to learn, discuss and respond

9. Develop narrative shift campaigns

- Prioritize the words/phrases that the group hopes to uplift
- Identify the key audiences and points of leverage
- Establish timelines and partners for participation in campaign implementation



Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Scarcity

Definition

- Lack of access, limiting reach and opportunity
- Inequitable distribution (of food)
- Intentional focus to produce some things over others for profit (capitalism)

This word can have the following impact:

- Positive: Can be helpful when used to define need (e.g. “in this neighborhood, there is a scarcity of fresh produce available at stores” or “in this community, there is a scarcity of green space available for growing food)
- Negative: Dismisses the abundant talent, skills, and resources already present in communities and neighborhoods; devalues collaboration; may promote rivalries among groups that actually have the capacity to work collectively

If you are going to use this term, please consider:

- Place it in a local context, be specific about what is scarce and where
- Understand that scarcity is an economic concept (supply and demand myth) rather than a reflection of human/community capacity; poverty creates scarcity
- Challenge the assumption that scarcity of food is an issue in Michigan; Michigan has an abundance of fresh produce and food

Here is the story we want to tell (counternarrative):

- Michigan is the 2nd most agriculturally diverse state in the US
- In Kent County, there is a robust resource-sharing network of community organizations and neighbors
- Our local food system is much broader than commercial agriculture
- We can grow enough food for everyone through collective and shared efforts
- Fresh water from the Great Lakes supports a healthy ecosystem

Headlines/Talking Points

- Scarcity is a Myth
- Share not Waste
- We Grow Enough for Everyone
- Buy just what you need
- Ugly Fruit is Delicious
- Food Recovery Works
- Don't waste our Resources
- Fresh Water Fresh Food
- Great Lakes Food
- Brimming with bounty

Hashtags

- #scarcityisamyth
- #sharenotwaste
- #wegrowenoughforeveryone
- #buyjustwhatyouneed
- #uglyfruitisdelicious
- #foodrecoveryworks
- #dontwasteourresources
- #freshwaterfreshfood
- #greatlakesfood
- #brimmingwithbounty



Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Hunger

Definition

- A **feeling** of discomfort (mental/emotional component) or weakness (physical component) caused by lack of healthy food, coupled with a **desire** to eat (noun)
- A strong desire or craving for (verb)

This word can have the following impact:

- Positive: (verb) A hunger for something can drive action.
- Negative: (noun) An insufficient or misleading term in the food access conversation, identifying a symptom of food insecurity instead of the root cause. Often used to mean nutrient deficient or even malnutrition; these issues are not always connected to hunger or inability to access nutrient-rich foods, particularly for older adults; when these issues are connected it's from a persistent state of hunger, not the daily bodily function of feeling hungry before eating.

If you are going to use this term, please consider:

- Challenge the assumption that capitalism works for everyone. We need reform to return on investment and other market-based approaches (e.g. variable cost)
- Challenge the assumption that the role of the emergency feeding system is to feed people now and other sectors should deal with the reasons people are poor
- Place it in a local context, be specific. Using "hunger" does not encompass the whole problem. Ask people (in conversation) to describe their experience with hunger; draw out specifics from their situation(s) to help lead the conversation to addressing the specific issue

Here is the story we want to tell (counternarrative):

- We (those receiving services) are not hungry as a people; we are in a situation of poverty or low income and we can overcome these situations
- People may be eating calories yet unable to fulfill their nutritional needs; symptoms of nutrient deficiency include lack of energy, greater susceptibility to illness, etc. We need to ensure access to nutrient-rich foods
- Food and nutrition should be culturally relevant; healthy food varies by culture and diet is only one part of whole person health

Headlines/Talking Points

- Good Food for All
- Nutritional Needs, not Hunger
- Undernourished, not Hungry
- Strength through nutrition
- Fresh food, fresh outlook

Hashtags

- #goodfoodforall
- #nutritionalneedsnothunger
- #undernourishednohungry
- #strengththroughnutrition
- #freshfoodfreshoutlook



Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Food Insecurity

Definition

- Food is unaffordable in consideration of income
- Seasonal and culturally appropriate foods are not available
- Food is not accessible (location of residence and groceries)

This word can have the following impact:

- Positive: Reframes the problem from the symptom (“hunger”) to a systemic issue and is less emotionally-charged; encompasses a broader approach.
- Negative: Can be used as an academic buzzword and can be confusing for framing the dynamic challenges people are facing. It depersonalizes and can feel empty. The word “insecurity” itself can also foster trauma and/or insecurities about self and situation. Is not asset-based, focuses on negative impact/lack.

If you are going to use this term, please consider:

- Challenge the assumption that poverty and hunger are inevitable and there is no alternative.
- Challenge the assumption that hunger is separate from other issues such as housing, health, education, unfair wages, mass incarceration, racism, etc. There is likely a compromise between someone’s next meal vs paying a bill
- It disproportionately impacts different communities (more obvious in times of local system disruption, such as COVID-19 pandemic)
- Consider asset framing and using “food security” instead

Here is the story we want to tell (counternarrative):

- There is a connection between food insecurity and root causes of injustice
- Access should be driven by neighborhood priorities and planning, not commercial corridors formed by county/city-level planning and zoning
- No one should be food insecure, food security is a human right

Headlines/Talking Points

- It’s more than what’s on the table
- Broader than food

Hashtags

- #itsmorethanwhatsonthetable
- #broaderthanfood



Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Food Desert

Definition

- Geographic area perceived to be barren and lacking access to fresh, local foods that comprise a balanced diet

This word can have the following impact:

- Positive: Common terminology, so people know what you mean; Kent County uses the term officially; reflects opportunity for something good to be in place (room for an oasis)
- Negative: Linked to politics and systemic issues; may restrict conversation; implies a naturally occurring situation that we cannot control or fix

If you are going to use this term, please consider:

- Challenge the assumption they are by chance or just unfortunate occurrences
- Challenge the assumption nothing can grow in a desert
- People living in food deserts may feel shamed for seeking assistance; build awareness of how systems have contributed to their situation
- Food deserts may be in places that look well-resourced (i.e. urban areas) but there are barriers to accessing those resources for certain people (cost, transportation, seasonal and culturally appropriate, etc.)

Here is the story we want to tell (counternarrative):

- Food deserts were intentionally created through systemic racism (i.e. redlining practices); maintained both intentionally and through ignorance of those in power. This requires us to educate people who are unaware of their existence
- Equitable distribution of food would reduce the impact of food deserts, eliminating some entirely (a large amount of edible food is wasted)
- We can grow food anywhere and everywhere
- It's a myth that people only want to eat highly-processed foods. In reality, these foods are available, cheap, quick to make, filling, and last a long time

Headlines/Talking Points

- Good Food Grows Here
- Good Food Grows Everywhere
- Grown in the Desert
- Redline District Food
- Systemic Food Inequity

Hashtags

- #goodfoodgrowshere
- #goodfoodgrowseverywhere
- #growninthedesert
- #redlinedistrictfood
- #systemicfoodinequity



Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Food Apartheid

Definition

- Intentional separation of people from food access and choice by way of infrastructure (highways, industrial buildings, etc.), systems policies & processes (low wages, benefits cliff, etc.), and inequitable investments of resources and capital.

This word can have the following impact:

- Positive: Reflects that the withholding of resources by outside decision makers is intentional (there was purpose in the design); explains the divide that exists
- Negative: Directs people's thinking to something distant (i.e. racial segregation in South Africa), not something local.

If you are going to use this term, please consider:

- This is not a common term and requires historical context and explanation
- Challenge the assumption people must rely on the industrial food system (e.g. "people can't grow food or produce their own")
- Challenge the idea our food system has to be set up this way; equity is possible and apartheid can end
- Challenge the assumption people are lazy or "need education" to eat better and acknowledge that bias has led to disproportionate availability of food choice

Here is the story we want to tell (counternarrative):

- Creating and promoting local food systems has a direct and positive impact on the health of the community
- Local food organizations have the capacity to create and own sustainable food production and distribution when resources are allocated equitably
- People know what's best for themselves if given the opportunity and resources
- Communities within apartheid have assets beyond how they are labeled
- The outcomes we see are by design, we have to intentionally create change

Headlines/Talking Points

- History of Food Apartheid
- Know Your History
- Vote with Your Dollars
- Invest in Local Food
- End Food Apartheid

Hashtags

- #historyoffoodapartheid
- #knowyourhistory
- #votewithyourdollars
- #investinlocalfood
- #EndFoodApartheid



Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Food Justice

Definition

- Righting wrongs of the local food system
- “The benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown, produced, transported, distributed, accessed, and eaten are shared fairly.”
- Our Kitchen Table

This word can have the following impact:

- Positive: Common, well-known; related to access to food and healthy life
- Negative: Is fleeting; when we see single achievements, we feel we have fixed the problem, but it is not a single act of fixing; not clean-cut; in seeking justice, those who are fighting sometimes do not take time to build relationships and unity; for some, not all (“just us”)

If you are going to use this term, please consider:

- Personal experience may impact the way “justice” is understood; it has been used as a buzzword to make empty promises; justice for who?
- Justice is active and ongoing; if we say we are working on food justice, we must be working to address systemic oppression
- We must confront the fact that wrongs have been done; we cannot talk about justice without reorganizing power

Here is the story we want to tell (counternarrative):

- Legitimize and amplify frontline communities’ existing and ongoing work
- The food system should be accountable to our communities. Everyone can advocate for what is right: reorganizing power, sustainable compensation, ongoing checks and balances, equitable access, inclusivity
- Justice is not only doing things differently but also correcting past wrongs (e.g. reparations, reclaiming foodways and land, taking back what rightfully belongs)

Headlines/Talking Points

- Justice for all, not “just us”
- Whole food is soul food
- Food justice is racial justice
- Food is a human right

Hashtags

- #justiceforallnotjustus
- #wholefoodissoulfood
- #foodjusticeisracialjustice
- #foodisahumanright



Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Food Access / Food Security

Definition

- Convenient proximity between residence and grocery locations
- Reasonable cost of food in consideration of income
- Access to seasonal and culturally appropriate foods
- Unaffected in times of local food system disruption (such as a pandemic)

This word can have the following impact:

- Positive: An asset-focused term; understanding these terms can be eye opening
- Negative: These are buzzwords (people may not know what they mean); They are also sterile terms, which may cause barriers due to misunderstanding the terms

If you are going to use this term, please consider:

- These terms may not be uniformly understood and may require education
- Challenge the assumption food access in general equals food security; what kinds of food (is it nutritious and culturally relevant, is it “good food,” etc.?); is the food aligned with health and dietary needs and preferences?
- Challenge the assumption resources are limited and hunger is normal and expected. Food services are pressured and even incentivized to take food that may be unhealthy/overproduced.

Here is the story we want to tell (counternarrative):

- Local good food equals food security
- An intentional food system can provide enough good food for everyone.
- Everyone deserves to be food secure; good food access is a human right
- Supporting and strengthening community food assets is a long-term solution for ending food insecurity

Headlines/Talking Points

- Food choice is essential
- Gardens are for Everyone

Hashtags

- #Foodchoiceisessential
- #Gardensareforeveryone



Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Charity

Definition

- The system or perception of one person or group benefiting from another person or group's donation or contribution
- The act of voluntarily giving help or money, often influenced by faith/religion

This word can have the following impact:

- Positive: In an emergency or crisis, there is support. Generally, people feel good about being involved in charitable work; there is an emotional connection
- Negative: promotes white savior mentality; can be degrading or dehumanizing; separates "haves" and "have nots," givers and receivers; diverts attention away from the real issues; temporary fix, hierarchical, transactional not relational; reinforces and perpetuates classism/racism/power dynamics

If you are going to use this term, please consider:

- Challenge the assumption people in poverty are not capable of changing their own reality (e.g. "If you are poor or hungry that is your own fault")
- Challenge the assumption community is "taking advantage of" services
- Challenge the assumption people "should be grateful for this help" and should "take whatever you are given"
- This is a systemic challenge; the charity food system has become normalized as a food system in and of itself

Here is the story we want to tell (counternarrative):

- People working in charity initiatives are generally good people **AND** we need to redirect energy and resources to address root causes
- There are better ways of doing things (e.g. mutual aid networks)
- Redistribution of power is more effective in the long run than distribution of food today; dismantling/reorganizing systems is hard but worthwhile work - "we can do hard things!"

Headlines/Talking Points

- Food Today, Gone Tomorrow
- Worth the Effort
- Health from the Shelf
- From Charity to Solidarity (from Closing the Hunger Gap)

Hashtags

- #foodtodaygonetomorrow
- #worththeeffort
- #healthfromtheshelf
- #fromcharitytosolidarity



Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Food Sovereignty

Definition

“Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. **It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems** and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.” – Declaration of Nyéléni, the first global forum on food sovereignty, Mali, 2007

This word can have the following impact:

- Positive: Prompts a shift in understanding of where ownership and power should exist in food production and distribution; asserts that power and ownership should be turned over to local producers while reconciling a history of exploitation of workers within the food system
- Negative: Not a common term, often creating a disconnect. The end result is harder to understand or visualize (whereas, “end hunger” can be easier for the public to support)

If you are going to use this term, please consider:

- May be explained as a component in establishing food security in a community (e.g. food sovereignty and food choice lead to a community being food secure)
- The aspiration should come from community members identifying their interests and desires and they should be provided the resources and support to bring about their goals. Neighborhood and community solutions may differ
- May be used as part of a broader awareness-building campaign to bring people along in their thinking about local food systems
- Invite people with a marginalized experience to speak to those who have not had that lived experience. Listen to learn how to be invited into a community

Here is the story we want to tell (counternarrative):

- We can play a positive role in the global food system by reinstating local oversight and involvement
- Food can be acquired through bartering; everyone has something of value they can share/contribute to the local economy

Headlines/Talking Points

- We Grow Our Own Food
- Freedom to grow
- Farmers Markets, Local Options
- Fair Wages, Fair Food
- Local Food First

Hashtags

- #wegrowourownfood
- #freedomtogrow
- #farmersmarketslocaloptions
- #fairwagesfairfood
- #localfoodfirst



Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Resident Driven

Definition

- People living in the local community are an equitable partner in food efforts and fairly compensated for their contributions
- People living in the local community have shared power, own the means of production and distribution, and influence policy
- People living in the local community identify and implements idea and solutions that suit their neighborhood/region

This word can have the following impact:

- Positive: Empowering of individuals in the community- brings people together. Provides opportunities to embrace diversity of backgrounds and perspectives.
- Negative: Can come off as a buzzword - is difficult to do and may leave the community disappointed/distrustful if this word is used but the idea is not actually achieved. "Resident" can imply citizenship and be exclusive of people who are un/under-documented or experiencing homelessness (no permanent address), maybe "local community driven." The process of coming together toward agreement can be very difficult when diverse groups come together on a single issue.

If you are going to use this term, please consider:

- Be honest about whether an initiative is really resident driven; avoid making this a buzzword without substance behind it.
- Establish parameters to benchmark and goals to work toward (show data regarding how the initiative is resident-driven)
- Challenge the assumption that community members are not informed enough or do not have enough experience to know what is best for themselves
- Challenge the assumption that people cannot be trusted to make the "right" decisions

Here is the story we want to tell (counternarrative):

- Community organizing builds power
- True community engagement means supporting residents in implementing ideas and sharing power in decision-making

Headlines/Talking Points

- Neighbors have the power
- Our neighborhood, our decisions

Hashtags

- #neighborshavethepower
- #ourneighborhoodourdecisions

