Kent County
Essential Needs Task Force

Food & Nutrition

Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

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 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 often intending to improve situations for people living with 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 dictionaries, 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?

Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

6. Establish a counternarrative

- If the word or phrase is 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 or availability
- The sense of not having enough
- Intentional focus to produce and purchase 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")
- 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; implies a zero-sum food system that does not reflect reality

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 rather than a reflection of human/community capacity; poverty creates scarcity
- Challenge the assumption about why 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):

- Scarcity is a result of our systems; intentional inclusion of all communities in decision-making will reduce scarcity
- We can produce enough food for everyone through collective and shared efforts
- 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

Headlines/Talking Points

- Scarcity is a Myth
- We Grow Enough for Everyone
- Food Recovery Works
- Great Lakes Food
- Brimming with Bounty

Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Hunger

Definition

- A feeling of discomfort or weakness caused by lack of food. In the short-term, this can mean not having enough calories to eat for the day. In the long-term, hunger can lead to malnutrition.
- As opposed to food insecurity, hunger is a short-term, non-systemic description of the problem.

This word can have the following impact:

- Positive: Hunger is simpler to understand than food insecurity, and engenders financial support from donors who are moved by the image of hungry people.
- Negative: This is an insufficient or misleading term in the food access conversation, identifying a symptom of food insecurity instead of the root cause.

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

- The negative aspects of capitalism create hunger; hunger will not be ameliorated by one-time or short-term deliveries of food.
- 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 the term "hunger" does not encompass the whole problem. Ask people to describe their experience with hunger; draw out specifics from their situation(s) to help lead the conversation

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

- Systemic poverty creates hunger, and hunger is more than just a one-time occurrence necessitating a one-time response.
- Hunger will not be solved by giving away enough food; a holistic response is necessary.

Headlines/Talking Points

- Good Food for All
- Food Insecure and Hungry
- Capitalism Creates Hunger
- Hunger Shouldn't Last Forever

Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Food Insecurity

Definition

- Food is unaffordable considering level of income
- Seasonal and culturally appropriate foods are not available
- Food is not accessible (location of residence and groceries)
- Not necessarily constant; security can fluctuate

This word can have the following impact:

- Positive: Reframes the problem from the symptom ("hunger") to a systemic issue. This term is less emotionally-charged than hunger, and encompasses a broader approach.
- Negative: Can be used as an academic buzzword and can be confusing for framing the dynamic challenges people are facing. The term feels less personal. This term is not asset-based and 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 the COVID-19 pandemic)
- There are many causes of food insecurity: financial, physical access etc.
- Climate change will exacerbate insecurity and focus it on those with less resources.

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 need, not global, regional, and corporate factors
- No one should be food insecure; food security is a human right

Headlines/Talking Points

- It's more than what's on the table
- Good people are food insecure
- All people deserve food security
- Food Insecurity is not inevitable

Food Desert

Definition

- Geographic area lacking access to fresh, local foods.
- No grocery store within 1 mile (urban) or 10 miles (rural)
- Affects those with 80% area median income (AMI)

This word can have the following impact:

- Positive: This is common terminology, so people know what you mean; Kent County and the USDA use the term officially
- 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:

- This term implies a false assumption that food deserts happen by chance or are just unfortunate occurrences
- Implies that nothing can grow in a desert
- Living in a food desert is not someone's fault; 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, culturally appropriate, etc.)
- Food is often grown in rural areas, but residents cannot access it

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

- Food deserts were intentionally created through systemic racism (i.e. redlining practices), and maintained both intentionally by 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

Headlines/Talking Points

- Good Food Can Grow Everywhere
- Lacking Access to Fresh Food
- Food Deserts Are Intentional

Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Food Apartheid

Definition

- Intentional separation of people from food access and choice due to racism and classism. Infrastructure (highways, industrial buildings, etc.), systems policies & processes (low wages, benefits cliff, etc.), and inequitable investments of resources and capital all contribute to food apartheid.
- Alternative term to 'food desert' that emphasizes the intentionality of restrictive food access.

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 apartheid in South Africa, not something local. This term may alienate funders/politicians.

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

- This is not a common term and requires historical context and explanation
- Challenging the idea our food system has to be set up this way; equity is possible and apartheids can end
- This term acknowledges that bias has led to disproportionate availability of food choice; a longer discussion about the history of inequality may result.

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

- The outcomes we see are by design; we have to intentionally create change
- 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 opportunity and resources
- Communities subject to apartheid have assets beyond how they are labeled

Headlines/Talking Points

- Know Your History
- Racism Created Food Insecurity
- Invest in Local Food
- End Food Apartheid
- Food Apartheid, Not Food Desert

Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Food Justice

Definition

- Righting wrongs of the local food system including: land ownership, reparations, and food access.
- Food Justice is the actions and processes that lead to Food Sovereignty.

This word can have the following impact:

- Positive: Common, well-known; related to access to food and healthy life
- Negative: when we see single achievements, we feel we have fixed the problem, but it is not a single act of fixing; in seeking justice, those who are fighting sometimes do not take time to build unity, or do not work for justice for all

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

- Be clear on what justice means, and for whom.
- Food justice likely involves redistributing land, money, and power. What is your role?
- Justice is active and ongoing; if we say we are working on food justice, we must be working to address systemic oppression
- Justice requires accountability: admitting wrongdoing, listening to those harmed, and transforming systems
- For real justice, injustices from all systems (e.g. housing) must be reconciled, up to and including food.

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

Headlines/Talking Points

- Justice for all, not "just us"
- Food justice is racial justice
- Food is a human right

Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Food Access

Definition

- Convenient proximity between residence and grocery locations
- Reasonable cost of food in consideration of income
- Access to seasonal and culturally appropriate foods
- Physically accessible for all abilities
- Food access is a component of food security (consistent access to affordable, culturally relevant food; opposite of food insecurity listed above)

This word can have the following impact:

- Positive: An asset-focused term; understanding this term can be eye opening
- Negative: This term is jargon-people may not know what it means

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

- This term may not be uniformly understood and may require education
- Challenge the assumption food access in general equals food security; the quality, relevance, nutrition of the food and consistency of access also need to be considered
- Challenge the assumption resources are limited and hunger is normal
- Access to food is not the same as access to good food: Food pantries are pressured and even incentivized to take food that may be unhealthy

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

- An intentional food system that is accessible, affordable, and offering culturally relevant food can benefit everyone
- Good food access is a human right
- Good food being available is not the same as being accessible

Headlines/Talking Points

- Food choice is essential
- Food access is good; consistent food access to a variety of foods is necessary
- Not just food access, but good food access

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: diverts attention away from the real issues and often prevents lasting change from occurring; promotes white savior mentality; can be degrading or dehumanizing; temporary fix, hierarchical, transactional not relational; reinforces and perpetuates classism/racism/power dynamics; can have strings attached

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

- Charity can perpetuate food insecurity instead of addressing the root causes of it
- Corporations can benefit from charity: it can whitewash their image, increase their profits, and generally perpetuate inequality
- 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 help" and should "take what you are given"; charity can often mean lesser quality and worse treatment

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

- People deserve healthy food access; food is a human right
- Addressing root causes of insecurity, as opposed to charity, will make the biggest impact toward solving hunger
- Mutual aid (reciprocal giving) may be a better model than charity (top down)
- Redistribution of power is more effective long-term than food distribution today

Headlines/Talking Points

- From Charity to Solidarity (from Closing the Hunger Gap)
- Food Sovereignty, not Charity; People Deserve Dignity, not Charity
- Helping People is Community Care, not Pity

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
- When people who produce, distribute and consume food also control the mechanisms of the food system.

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: This is an uncommon term which can create misunderstanding. The end result of food sovereignty 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:

- Center the experience of marginalized people and adhere to their leadership and vision of an equitable food system
- Food sovereignty efforts should be led by community members identifying their interests and obtaining resources and support to achieve their goals
- Incremental change (e.g. backyard chickens) is possible
- Food sovereignty should be considered when discussing food security
- Educating people about food sovereignty can advance their thinking about local food systems

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

Shared Vocabulary and Narrative Change Guide

Food Sovereignty (continued)

Headlines/Talking Points

- We Grow Our Own Food
- The Freedom to Grow and Share
- Own your food
- From charity to sovereignty
- Local Food First

Resident Driven

Definition

- People living in the local community identify and implements idea and solutions that suit their neighborhood/region
- They drive decision-making and implementation of policy
- They own the means of production and distribution

This word can have the following impact:

- Positive: Amplifies the impact of individuals in the community-brings people together. Provides opportunity to embrace diverse backgrounds and perspectives
- Negative: Can be 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

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
- "Resident" can imply citizenship and be exclusive of people who are un/under-documented or experiencing homelessness; maybe "local community driven" instead
- Community is not a monolith: agreement can be very difficult when diverse groups come together on a single issue

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

- Community organizing builds power, community, and resilience
- Communities can drive their own change
- Communities know what they want and need
- 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