

VASHON MAURY COMMUNITY FOOD BANK

# KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS from an Organizational Assessment

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## THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS:

The Board of Directors of the Vashon-Maury Community Food Bank Board hired organizational and leadership development consultant Jim Reid of The Falconer Group to conduct an assessment of the leadership, management, and operations of the Food Bank following the expression of concerns by a group of volunteers.

Jim conducted interviews of eighteen people. He interviewed five Board members in one meeting on 4 April 2011. He also met with staff, volunteers, and donors between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> of April in one-on-one confidential interviews. Most interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes, although a few lasted between an hour and 75 minutes.

## KEY INTERESTS:

Everyone interviewed shares this interest: With compassion and respect, serve the people on Vashon-Maury Island who are in need of the services the Food Bank offers. And the great majority of the people who were interviewed—Board members, staff, volunteers—are interested in building a stronger partnership between them so that together they can serve the Food Bank's clients.

All the volunteers are also interested in: 1) understanding the “big picture” in terms of the Food Bank's long-term strategic direction; 2) understanding how the Board of Directors' short-term decisions are helping to advance or achieve the long-term direction; and 3) being recognized and appreciated for their contributions.

## THE FINDINGS:

Approximately half the volunteers who were interviewed expressed concerns about leadership, management, policies, operations, and communications. The remaining volunteers do not share these concerns. But they agree that the Board's leadership needs to be more transparent.

Most volunteers who voiced criticisms of management acknowledged recent improvements in the relationship between management and volunteers, and offered specific and constructive

suggestions for building on those improvements. The volunteers who voiced support for management acknowledged that some criticisms voiced by their colleagues have merit and should be addressed. The great majority of volunteers who were interviewed, in other words, were fair and constructive, and want to see the relationship between the Board, staff, and volunteers improve.

Here are the major themes from the interviews:

1. Board members are respected, but their work on behalf of the Food Bank is not recognized or understood.

Most volunteers believe the Board is not guided by a long-term vision or goals and priorities. If the Board is guided by a vision and goals, volunteers are not aware of it. Because of this perception, Board policy decisions are not understood or supported. For example, many volunteers question why the Board appears to be accumulating a larger “rainy day fund” than they believe would be needed in an emergency, such as an earthquake cutting off Vashon’s access to food and supplies from the mainland.

The information “gap” between the Board and volunteers has produced three outcomes: a) Volunteers, many of whom are deeply committed to and passionate about the mission of the Food Bank, and who have been volunteering for years, do not have a “big picture” view of the organization or its long-term future direction; b) The organization’s decision-making processes do not appear to be open, transparent, or accessible to volunteers and others; and c) trust and teamwork between the Board and volunteers are not as strong as they could be.

2. Board members, staff, and volunteers stated that the Executive Director, Yvonne Pitrof, is an effective ambassador of the Food Bank to the community and an excellent fund-raiser. She also knows the organization “inside and out” because she has “worn many hats” during the years she has been employed by the Food Bank. Yvonne is also credited with strengthening the culture of the organization by raising the standards of professionalism. The volunteers who accompanied Yvonne on a recent tour of food banks in Des Moines, White Center, Renton, and Maple Valley said that the tour helped them realize that the Vashon-Maury Community Food Bank is among the most professional, effective, and sophisticated food banks in the region. Many people who were interviewed credited Yvonne for this cultural shift and believe it demonstrates that she is an effective, skillful leader.
3. Some people find that Yvonne’s style can occasionally be “off-putting.” To some volunteers she seems distant and removed, and appears to neither listen to them nor seriously consider their ideas. Other volunteers have positive communications with her and enjoy working with her. They believe that if she seems remote or hard to “pin down,” it is because she has so many responsibilities and priorities but very limited resources.
4. Most volunteers said the situation with management is improving for two reasons: a) In the past six months Yvonne has been more visible on Wednesdays when food is distributed to clients. Thus, volunteers have seen her more often and feel they are getting to know and understand her better. They also stated that their informal conversations with Yvonne have helped her better understand their interests, needs, and concerns; and b) Greg Reed, who recently took the job of Volunteer Coordinator, is universally applauded by volunteers for his

management and communications styles. Volunteers feel he genuinely cares about them and is interested in ensuring that they are heard and appreciated.

5. Many people commented that the staff team is the strongest that the Food Bank has had. In addition to positive comments about Yvonne and Greg, Jenn Coe, a consultant who manages the farm, was praised for her dedication to the Food Bank's mission and for her skills as a manager of the volunteers who help grow food. (Note: At the time of these interviews, the new warehouse manager had just begun working at the Food Bank so he was not well known.)

But they also expressed concerns that because the staff members (with the exception of Yvonne) are part-time, they may not choose to remain employed by the Food Bank for very long. It is assumed that at some point in the future they will want full-time jobs with higher salaries. The possibility of losing this team concerns many people. Some of them stated that this is an example of a long-term strategic issue that the Board should be addressing.

6. Many volunteers feel that they are neither adequately appreciated nor recognized by the organization for their contributions. Some feel this way because not enough Board members have attended "Volunteer Appreciation" celebrations in the past. Others feel this way because Board members and staff may not thank people often enough.
7. Some people also believe that volunteers are not given an adequate voice in the organization. This perception exists because they feel there are not enough "formal" channels by which volunteers can offer observations, ideas, or suggestions. To them this means that the Food Bank's leadership and management are not taking advantage of volunteers' experience and perspectives.
8. The Food Bank's website is under-utilized as a communications tool. Everyone recognized that it takes resources to maintain a website. But many people noted that it is seldom updated and doesn't contain information that would enhance learning, understanding, and support for the Food Bank among volunteers, donors, and the community-at-large.

### **THE RECOMMENDATIONS:**

These recommendations are mostly suggestions from the volunteers but also include ideas and options from Jim Reid based on his experience and expertise. Recognizing that the Food Bank is largely a volunteer organization, it's not feasible to undertake all these ideas simultaneously. The Board and staff will need to consider and prioritize them. It may help to rank them according to which would be easiest or least costly to implement, or which would provide the greatest benefit for the smallest investment, or which would resolve the most important and urgent concerns.

**1. *Finalize the strategic plan and communicate it to key audiences throughout the community.***

This recommendation is intended to achieve four interests: a) enable the Board and management to anticipate and address emerging issues; b) employ the finite resources of the Food Bank in the most effective and efficient manner; c) strengthen the effectiveness and raise the visibility of the Board's leadership; and d) increase understanding of and support for the Food Bank among volunteers, donors, and the community-at-large.

The Board has been working on a strategic plan for approximately a year. Once finished, the Board should market it to key audiences, including volunteers, donors, funding agencies, other social and health services agencies, elected officials, and the community-at-large. The Board may also want to consider seeking the reactions and suggestions of representatives of these groups before finalizing it.

With a strategic plan the Board and staff will be able to more easily and clearly recognize and understand their priorities. In addition, the Board could structure and organize its committees according to the plan and its priorities.

One example of a "high level" issue that could be anticipated and addressed by the Board's long-range plan is the staffing plan and structure, including whether or not full-time staff will be needed in the future or how to ensure the Food Bank is or becomes a competitive employer through salaries and compensation.

**NOTE:** This is Jim Reid's recommendation regarding what to include in the strategic plan, if not already included. The plan should: a) define the Board's values; b) articulate a long-term vision or strategic direction; c) define the Food Bank's mission; d) identify longer-term goals and shorter-term priorities; e) identify the actions needed to begin to achieve the vision and implement the goals; f) identify performance measures by which the organization will be held accountable for implementing the plan; and g) clarify roles and responsibilities of the Board, Executive Director, staff, volunteers, donors, and clients.

**2. *Ensure that volunteers understand the long-term direction of the Food Bank.***

This recommendation is intended to achieve the following interests: a) increase the satisfaction of volunteers; b) build greater trust, respect, and cooperation between the volunteers, Board, and staff; and c) strengthen service to the Food Bank's clients.

A strategic plan will be an important step in helping volunteers see and understand "the big picture." In addition, the Board should consider the following suggestions:

- Continue the orientation sessions for volunteers. The one held recently received rave reviews. In the future, ensure that a representative of the Board is present to provide the Board's perspective and to educate the group about the Board's activities.
- Post the strategic plan on the Food Bank's website.
- Post Board meeting agendas and summaries on the website or send them electronically to volunteers, staff, and donors, highlighting discussions or decisions that advance the strategic plan.

- Publish a Food Bank newsletter for volunteers. (NOTE: Yvonne and Greg are initiating a newsletter in June 2011.)
- Host quarterly or semi-annual meetings at which the Board reports to volunteers on the progress in implementing the strategic plan and discusses with volunteers important issues of mutual interest or concern.

**3. *Provide opportunities to obtain the perspectives, ideas, and suggestions of volunteers.***

This recommendation is intended to achieve the following interests: a) capitalize on the expertise of volunteers, particularly those who have been with the Food Bank for a very long time; b) strengthen the volunteers' sense of "ownership;" c) attract additional volunteers; and d) build stronger teamwork and collegiality between volunteers, Board members, management, and staff.

In addition to the suggestions under recommendation #2, the Board may want to pursue one of these three options for more formally involving volunteers in decision-making:

- Designate a "volunteer seat" on the Board of Directors. Although past and present Board members are volunteers and have volunteered at the Food Bank in ways other than serving on the Board, the member occupying this "seat" would be an official representative of the volunteers, and would be expected to not represent just her or his interests, needs, and concerns, but those of a broad range of volunteers;  
OR
- Establish an Advisory Committee to the Board comprised of volunteers and donors;  
OR
- Invite volunteers to serve on Board committees, which would make committees a "training ground" for Board service.

Additional options for obtaining the perspectives of volunteers could be:

- Encourage greater attendance at Board meetings by publishing meeting dates, times, and agendas.
- Create a suggestion box or use the website to solicit volunteers' opinions and suggestions. This has been tried in the past; one difference if tried again could be that the Board and management find ways to communicate to volunteers how their suggestions were used, and if the ideas could not be used, why they were not.
- Provide a more formal means by which to solicit the perspectives, ideas, and recommendations of volunteers in developing a strategic plan. Perhaps as the Board finishes drafting the plan, it could host an "open house" to explain the draft plan to the community and solicit reactions and suggestions.
- Conduct an annual survey of volunteers (and Board members and staff) to assess the organization and solicit ideas for how to improve.

**4. *Do even more to acknowledge and thank the volunteers for their contributions.***

Under the assumption that you can never do enough to thank or celebrate volunteers, this recommendation is intended to achieve the following interests: a) make volunteers feel more

appreciated and celebrated; b) motivate and inspire them; c) attract new volunteers over time; and d) help the Board and staff recognize and understand more easily and accurately the contributions of individuals.

Soliciting volunteers' suggestions for how to improve the Food Bank's operations and giving them a role to play in developing the strategic plan are also important strategies for acknowledging the expertise, skills, and contributions of volunteers.

While the Food Bank already has one or two volunteer celebration events per year, they would be even more effective if more Board members, staff and volunteers attended them.

Other ways to thank and celebrate volunteers are:

- In the newsletter, feature "Our Latest Greatest," a volunteer whose contributions merit special or additional attention and commendation.
- Name the "Volunteer of the Month" and at year's end select the "Volunteer of the Year" from the twelve candidates.
- Publicize the "Volunteer of the Month" and "Volunteer of the Year" in the newsletter and Vashon Beachcomber.
- Develop a brief statement or set of principles about what volunteers mean to the Food Bank—and their central role in helping the organization fulfill its mission—and print the statement on the website and in the newsletter, and include it among the key values of the organization's strategic plan.

##### **5. *Raise the visibility of the Board's leadership.***

Many of the ideas listed in recommendations 1-4 can strengthen the Board's leadership and make its decisions more transparent and accessible to volunteers, donors, staff, and the Vashon-Maury Island community.

Board members could also take turns representing the Food Bank at community forums and events. This strategy could increase the visibility of the Food Bank and build even stronger support for it across the island. This idea may mean the Board becomes more aggressive in seeking invitations to be featured as speakers at these events.

The Board may also need to expand in size to get closer to the number of members that the by-laws allow. Board members may want to reexamine the structure and processes to ensure that they are as efficient as possible to enable them to assume a more visible role in the community and with volunteers without overextending themselves. After all, Board members are volunteers, too. One way to streamline operations could be to have fewer committees, and to ensure those committees reflect the Board's strategic priorities.

##### **6. *Improve the website to strengthen communications and a culture of openness and transparency.***

This recommendation is intended to achieve the interest of helping volunteers, donors, clients, and the community-at-large understand what is happening at the Food Bank and why.

The website should be used more strategically to: a) introduce the Board and staff to volunteers, donors, and the community; b) communicate and build support for the Board's strategic vision, goals, and priorities; c) advertise Board meetings and their results; d) recognize the contributions of volunteers and donors; e) publicize recent developments at the Food Bank; f) generate support for Food Bank events.

Because the website is a reflection of the organization, there is a need to maintain controls that ensure the site is properly updated. Given that it is a time-consuming endeavor to maintain a website, the Board and Yvonne may want to strategize how to use a small contingent of volunteers to help with the effort.