

Service Learning at Ballard Food Bank Reflection

I first want to give a major shout out to Maggie who coordinated this opportunity at the Ballard Food Bank. She went out of her way to schedule a medium sized group to work directly with people, meeting a basic human need. I went into this service with a positive attitude, excited to work with my classmates.

When we got there, we got a rundown of how Ballard Food Bank works. Their model is different from any food bank I have work at. They have a warehouse where they sort and store food, but the majority of their facility was set up as a grocery store. They have relationships with major grocery store chains (Trader Joes, Safeway, Whole Foods, etc.) and stock high quality food for their clients. They also have many carts that have been donated. Clients come in and get the full shopping experience: a shopping cart, a store to pick which foods they want, and a place to checkout and bag their groceries. I was blown away at their set up and how the work they did de-stigmatized the food bank. I personally know how hard it is to ask for help and I constantly had to remind myself I did not know any of the client's stories and why they are at the food bank. I took this opportunity to connect to individuals I was serving and to treat them with dignity and respect.

Our first task was to sort the vast amount of donations that came in in the morning. There was an assortment of bread, vegetables, fruits, pre-made meals, and an assortment of miscellaneous food. We sorted and stocked the store with all of the food before clients started to arrive. As a team, we worked very efficiently, each stepping into a role that was needed. Sometimes, I had to sort moldy fruit from the fresh fruit. Other times, I was bringing different types of bread to the storefront. And other times, I was breaking down boxes. No one complained at the jobs they were asked to do.

The second task was helping out at the bagging and check out station. I helped unload groceries from the cart, place the food in bags, and helped folks out to their car or the bus stop. I absolutely valued talking to each individual, hearing their stories, and simply hearing about their day/weekend. Each person brings a rich story and experience, I was inspired by listening and asking deeper questions. One thing I try to do on a regular basis is acknowledge people as people. An example of this is beggars on the street asking for money. Whether I choose to give money to these individuals or not, I acknowledge them and talk to them as people. So much of the time, folks choose to completely ignore them, see them as less than human and lazy, and perpetuate to stereotypes of the homeless.

My last task was with Al and Eric. We had been hosted well by the folks at the food bank and we wanted to leave their space clean. We divvied up the work and washed all the dishes, swept the floor, and cleaned all the counters/tables. Working together and deciding that these tasks were important to us was a great process. We wanted to make a positive impact not only on the clients, but also the non-profit.

One observation I had about the food bank that has stuck with me is how systems still exist in small capacities that marginalize certain folks. For example, the Ballard Food Bank asks for proof of residence in order to access the grocery store. For those who are homeless this provides a hard challenge. If a homeless person does come into the food bank, they will give them a few non-perishables but asks for references from other non-profits for proof that they hang around the Ballard area. I understand the reasons why they need to have these constraints. The food bank is set up to serve clients in the Ballard community and there are other food banks that serve other districts in Seattle. However, I think it would be advantageous to not turn anyone away the first time they come to the food bank.