



## FAQ's –Hospitality Collaborative 2016

### BSM's Guests: People Experiencing Poverty

#### **1. Why don't we refer to our guests as "the homeless" or "homeless people"?**

There are several reasons for this. The first one is that, even though more than 99% of our guests experience deep poverty, in fact only about 23 to 30% (depending on the time of year) of our guests are experiencing homelessness – that is living outdoors in the city. Most of the other 70% of our guests are experiencing chronic housing (and food) insecurity. This means that, although they may have a place to stay tonight, and some food to eat, they have no clear expectation that such will be the case tomorrow or in the immediate future.

The other reason is that we believe that words matter. When we label someone as "homeless", we are reducing them to *one* factor in their lives amid a wide array of other factors. Describing their housing situation as a particular experience that they are having in their lives is one way that we can continually remind ourselves that our guests are fragile human beings living complicated lives, just like our staff, our volunteers and our stakeholders.

#### **2. Why do guests need of our help and how and why has the demand changed over the years?**

The short answer is because of issues related to deep poverty. The longer answer involves the fact that Philadelphia – once one of the more prosperous cities in the world with a thriving manufacturing base - is now the poorest of the top 10 largest cities in the country. BSM is also situated in the congressional district with the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest food insecurity rate in the country. And because General Assistance (a small monthly cash payment the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services distributed to extremely low-income adults with no dependents) was eliminated in 2012 this situation has become even more dire.

Also while virtually all of our guests are eligible for benefits like Medicaid, and SNAP (food stamps), a significant number do not have access to these important services. This is especially true for guests new to BSM. One of our goals is to increase the number of guests receiving these benefits as part of our overarching strategy to help them develop more stable lives.

On a macro-level we see that real wages have been flat and in some cases falling for decades. This situation has impacted the "working poor" probably more than anyone else. We have seen the number of guests who come through our doors increase every year since we began offering meals and services. And perhaps more revealingly, we consistently see greater numbers of guests coming to BSM in the last week of each month. Many of them have to make incredibly difficult choices between having enough food to stay healthy, and having enough money to pay rent or utilities.

Another factor that had contributed to this increase in demand for our services involves the Community Mental Health Act of 1963, which shifted the responsibility of caring for individuals to

states and local communities. This resulted in the systematic reduction in the number of mental health facilities that were providing essential support for many individuals with significant mental and emotional illness, and facilities that were geared toward assisting people with behavioral health issues, like drug and alcohol dependency. At the same time that this was occurring there was a corresponding increase in the number of people being incarcerated. Furthermore, the lack of affordable housing continued to worsen and became much more severe in the 1970s and 1980s. These two factors, along with other changes in our society have increased the number of vulnerable adults on our streets and the severity of those vulnerabilities.

### **Practices Regarding Guests**

#### **3. Why don't you encourage or require that guests volunteer in exchange for services/meal?**

This has been a question that our staff has grappled with since Breaking Bread, our meal program began in 2007. And we certainly see the potential value of empowering guests to become engaged with the work of BSM. However our experiences over the years experimenting with various ways we might have guests assume the role of volunteer have informed us that this is more challenging than we initially thought.

What we have found is that there are a number of barriers in place that make it very difficult for guests to take on the responsibilities of a volunteer – barriers as varied and complicated as the issues facing our guests on a day to day basis. Many guests are in the throes of addiction, and experience significant mental health issues. Others have cognitive and social skill challenges that also would be barriers to volunteering.

In addition, many of our guests interact with each other in outside environments. These interactions are complex. If some guests were to take on roles as volunteers, it could cause confusing, anxious, and at times unsafe feelings among the other guests. And this dual role could become problematic for staff and other volunteers as well. Since many (if not all) of our guests experience the trauma of chronic scarcity, taking on the role of volunteer could be confusing to them as well. They might feel that because they volunteered they should have special access to services that they might not have as a guests. This is certainly understandable, and our trauma-informed model seeks to maintain this clarity of roles to reduce this potential stress point.

We believe that ultimately this role confusion can, and in many cases would, negatively impact our goal of building trusting relationships with our guests, rather than transactional ones that in our experience does little to foster that trust.

#### **4. Why don't you let guests be a volunteer and a guest at the same time?**

We don't encourage this for many of the same reasons discussed above. Primarily, though, it is because when we have experimented with this approach it led to expectations from the guests that they could barter their volunteer work for extra meals or other services.

#### **5. Why don't you make guests who can, pay for the meal?**

Our approach to hospitality is to minimize (and hopefully eradicate) any barriers to entry into our dining room – be they actual or perceived. Everyone is welcomed to join us for a meal. If guests offer to donate money to BSM we accept that with gratitude, but we do not want there to be an expectation that a donation is either required or expected.

**6. Why don't you make sure someone is experiencing scarcity before they have a meal/get services?**

This question also speaks to our approach to hospitality. We do not believe hospitality can be means tested. Hospitality is welcoming and inclusive. On a practical level, however, we know that such means testing is unnecessary. We conduct an annual survey with our guests, using scientific methods and a large sample size. Results from this survey indicate that 99.9% of our guests are living in poverty.

Also such an approach would violate our values that speak to treating each individual who comes through our doors with dignity and respect. To have vulnerable adults enter BSM and have to demonstrate significant need would be counter to those values.

**7. Why isn't there a maximum amount of time guests can access meals and services?**

One of the many things we have learned from our guests over the years is that positive change happens, but it happens in its own time. Each of our guests is a unique individual with his or her own story and life history. Some who are in recovery learn that it is not always a road of continual progress. It has its stops and starts. Also we know that many of our guests who live on the margins of society experience episodes of extreme vulnerability interspersed with times when they are less so. We believe it is invaluable for them to stay connected to this community, and to continue to feel a sense of belonging.

**8. How many guests (or percentage) stay for a meal?**

When we look at the difference between our door count and our plate count (yes we pretty much count everything) we see that between 80 and 90% of our guests stay for a meal with the other 10 to 20% coming for services only.

**9. What are our goals for guests that participate in the HC?**

Contrary to what some might think, our ultimate goal is not to feed as many vulnerable individuals as we can – although that is certainly a worthy goal. Rather we strive to help our guests who live in deep poverty (many with chronic medical and behavioral health challenges, and who are experiencing homelessness and food insecurities) access and successfully navigate the complex social service systems they encounter. When this occurs they increase their resources, and so decrease their levels of vulnerability. In time this leads to a more stable life, and for many this allows them to lift themselves out of that deep poverty that they experienced for so long.

Our trauma-informed, harm reduction model focuses on several specific outcomes. We work with many of our guests to improve their behavioral health by gaining access to substance abuse and mental health services. We also assist guests in their efforts to obtain (and maintain) public benefits like food stamps, supplemental security income, and health insurance, which then improve their material stability. And finally the intangibles are important as well. We believe (and our data informs us) that our relational approach increases meaningful relationships with others, and also improves our guests' sense of hope, connections and empowerment.

**BSM The Organization**

**10. Where does BSM get its funding from?**

Our funding comes from a variety of sources. We are supported by generous individuals, corporations, and local businesses (especially those in the hospitality industry) as well as churches and synagogues and other faith-based organizations. We also have a number of foundations that have invested in our work and have faith in our approach. Government funding supports our Winter Café Initiative, and we do receive revenue from our Youth Initiative.

#### **11. Where do we get our food for the meals?**

We purchase the raw ingredients for our meals from two large local suppliers. In some cases we do accept donated food. Usually this is from known providers from neighborhood restaurants with whom we have relationships. Our winter overnight café (typically January through March) does accept donations of some prepared meals. All year round, we accept the following items:

- Next Day Bread
- Desserts (Unopened/Uneaten)
- #10 Cans (Diced, Crushed, Whole Tomatoes/Beans-Legumes/Fruit in Water) \*\*Please No Small Cans\*\*
- Raw/Fresh or Frozen Chicken/Beef/Lamb over 10 lbs
- Fresh Vegetables over 20lbs (Carrots/Onions/Celery/Peppers)
- Dry Spices

#### **12. How much does the food cost? How much does the HC cost? For example, per guest.**

There are several ways we calculate costs for the Hospitality Collaborative – per plate, per guest, and overall costs. This year the food alone costs \$2.10 per person per meal. But this only represents the cost of the food. When we add in the costs for staff, supplies and equipment to provide meals and social services, the cost per guest visit is \$11.89. Our budget for the HC this year is \$1.189 million, and the entire organization's budget is \$2.7 million. About 85% of our guests come for meals and services (the remaining for some services alone). With this in mind, in 2016 we anticipate that BSM will have 100,000 visits by 7,333 unduplicated guests, and that we will serve about 80,000 meals – one plate at a time with dignity and respect.

#### **13. What do we do about leftover food?**

This has not been a significant challenge for us. Since we carefully track the number of guests who come to each meal, over time we have been able to anticipate with a fair degree of accuracy the number of guests who will be served at each meal. For instance we know that there is a 20% uptick in the number of guests we serve during the last week of the month compared with the first week. So we plan our meals accordingly. Also our staff is quite knowledgeable about portion control.

In the rare event that we have significant amount of food left over, our chef is very creative in incorporating those leftovers in other meals, and in some cases we serve additional meals to our volunteers.

### **BSM's Services**

#### **14. Why did we start the mail service?**

Sometime during the first year of BSM's existence a guest decided to have his mail forwarded to our address. The sole employee at the time then delivered it to him. Then several other guests asked if they could have their mail sent here. Soon it became evident that there was a need for this service.

We initially envisioned a small mail service of no more than 300 participants. We vastly underestimated the need for this service in the community. The mail service has experienced constant growth since that humble beginning. In 2015 we were able to provide a safe place for 3,850 guests to receive their mail.

**15. Why did we choose to offer meals on each of the days they are offered and lunch vs. breakfast vs dinner?**

We base our meal schedule on several factors. We know the days and times that other organizations serve meals in Center City, and we try to fill in the gaps. We also take into consideration when volunteers are most likely to be available, and when our partner organizations are available to offer social services on-site. Finally we continually ask guests for their input when we do our annual survey.

**16. What is our volume (meals and people served)? For example: average people per meal, average plate per meal, average visits per week, average plates per week, number of guests and number of meals per year?**

Based on the trend lines we have seen from previous years we anticipate that during meal times in 2016 we expect to average about 285 guest visits per mealtime, and serve on average 240 meals. Each week we expect to serve more than 1,600 meals, and have 1,900 guests visit. Annually we expect to have more than 100,000 visits by over 7,300 unduplicated guests who will be served more than 80,000 meals.

**17. What do we do about conservation?**

In the same way that we do not believe that our vulnerable guests are disposable, we don't believe our dishes and utensils should be either. We strive whenever and wherever possible to reduce our contribution to the waste stream that plagues our environment. We are also working toward a more sustainable environment by replacing old light bulbs with newer more efficient LED ones. We have also installed a new heating and air conditioning system that will use less energy, while at the same time creating a more welcoming atmosphere for our guests, volunteers and staff.

**18. Do we have regular guests? What do we think of that?**

Many of our guests would consider themselves regular guests. And we think that is a good thing. Our research shows that guests who attend the HC more often have higher feelings of membership, emotional connection, sense of community, self-efficacy, and hope than guests who attend the HC less often. In fact guests who attend the HC for at least one year are more likely to be housed for the past two weeks than those who have been attending the HC for less than one year.

Building trust takes time and effort. That investment pays off whenever we see guests access services that were available to them but for a variety of reasons they had not used them. And there is research that validates our experience that, when guests come regularly, they are more likely to believe that positive change is possible. This has its limits, however. Our research also shows that for guests that stay longer than a year or year and a half, some of their positive feelings, like hope, can decline.

**19. What role does the worshipping community at BSM and faith have in the HC?**

The worshipping community is a vital part of BSM. In fact all of the social services that are provided by the Hospitality Collaborative – the Breaking Bread meals, our Clothing Closet, Mail Service, and Personal Care – all were initiated by the worshipping community not long after BSM was founded.

And their influence is felt in the present as well. The faith staff and the social service team are in continual dialogue to ensure that the way we interact with guests is in alignment with our core values and beliefs. And while the Hospitality Collaborative is secular and welcoming to all in its approach with no preaching, praying, or proselytizing it continues to adhere to those founding principles.

## **20. What are some examples of partners BSM has on site providing services?**

From the very beginning of the Hospitality Collaborative we have resisted the urge to try to be all things to all people. Instead we have looked to partner with some of the best in class organizations that are already providing needed services effectively in the community. Nurses from the **Public Health Management Corporation** are on-site two days per week. They not only do basic screening for medical and behavioral health issues, but they also serve as vital conduits to other medical facilities. In addition they have been invaluable during those times that guests experience medical emergencies.

We also have two organizations that come regularly to support guests who are eligible for various benefits. They are the **Utility Emergency Support Fund (UESF)** who work with a number of guests needing assistance with benefits, especially veterans experiencing homelessness, and **Health Federation of Philadelphia** provides “Health Navigators” who guide our guests through the challenging processes involved in gaining access to health insurance.

For the last five years we have been blessed to have our **Menders** at the Thursday Breaking Bread meals. These are some sixteen to eighteen women who come faithfully in groups of three each week (except on Holy Thursday and the Thursday between Christmas and Easter). Their spiritual practice involves mending the world by mending garments for our guests. These amazing women also provide a healing presence for our guests as they work to mend their favorite garments.

In addition lawyers from the prestigious Philadelphia law firm of **Drinker Biddle Reath, LLC**, come quarterly to BSM as part of the **Homeless Advocacy Project (HAP)**, an organization funded by the Philadelphia Bar Association. These attorneys provide vital *pro bono* legal assistance that include getting birth certificates (especially from other states), and gaining access to Social Security benefits, and many other civil matters. This work has been life changing for many of our guests who have been mired in bureaucracy and red tape sometimes for years. By helping remove these barriers many of our guests have been able to then get housing and other stabilizing services that serve to reconnect them to mainstream society.

## **21. Why are there no prayers, like grace, before each meal?**

This is a question we hear often, especially from volunteers from various faith communities, as well as young people who come to BSM with the Youth Initiative. And given the fact that BSM’s Faith Community, the Youth Initiative, and the Hospitality Collaborative are three facets of the same organization (rather than three organizations under the same roof), it is an understandable question to ask. At the same time it is not a simple one to answer.

At the heart of our decision not to include prayers at Breaking Bread meals is our desire to offer hospitality to everyone who comes through our doors, regardless (in this case) of faith or religious affiliation, or no affiliation at all. If we were to pray before each meal, we might give the erroneous impression that our guests would have to also pray in order to be served. In fact that is the

unfortunate case with some other organizations in the city that serve individuals experiencing homelessness.

We do realize, however, that some of our guests may come to a meal and might be in need of spiritual guidance, or someone to pray with them. To address this need, a member of the pastoral staff is available at most meals to respond to any guest who makes that request. And this is a common occurrence.

Also this decision is in alignment with the trauma-informed model that we employ at BSM. The BSM faith staff has offered invaluable guidance to the rest of the staff in helping us understand that, for some guests, organized religion, rather than being the source of solace, has been a traumatizing experience in their lives. In fact the Christian worship services offered at BSM engage scripture, music, and the Eucharist in such a way as to be sensitive to issues related to past trauma.

So while it is not a simple answer, we believe that we are striking the delicate balance between being responsive to guests with spiritual needs, while at the same time remaining inclusive and hospitable to all.