

Connecticut Foodshare Neighbor Council: Elevating Voices, Empowering Change

For over five decades, since the inception of the first food banks, the response to growing food insecurity was often met with increased food distribution. However, the root causes of food insecurity are much more complex. Addressing issues such as a lack of affordable housing, low wages, high living costs, and systemic inequities is necessary. Connecticut Foodshare cannot end food insecurity without addressing these root causes, and our solutions must center on those most affected by it. The Connecticut Foodshare Neighbor Council is an innovative program that meaningfully engages with neighbors who have experience with food insecurity to improve food bank and government policies related to food insecurity.

The goals of the Neighbor Council are to:

- Center neighbor expertise and feedback in food bank operations.
- Educate and train neighbors to engage in public policy and systems change.
- Elevate neighbor voices to build public awareness of food insecurity and ways to end food insecurity in our state.

Connecticut Foodshare convened two cohorts of the Neighbor Council to date – one in 2024 and one in 2025. Our two cohorts, a diverse group of 19 Connecticut residents with firsthand experience of food insecurity, represented 14 cities and towns across the five Connecticut Congressional districts. The Neighbor Council curriculum is grounded in Marshall Ganz’s “Public Narrative” model, which suggests that public narrative is assembled from three central parts: the story of self, the story of us, and the story of now. This focus on self-narrative is necessary to practice leadership to achieve purpose in the face of uncertainty and to advance systemic change. Each session, we addressed topics to align with the current and future work of the food bank including:

- **The Story of Self and the Charitable Food System:** Facilitators guided the Neighbor Council to establish community norms, develop a story of self, and learn about Connecticut Foodshare and the food assistance network.
- **Public Policy and Advocacy:** Community advocates discussed their work on various policy issues that address the root causes of food insecurity affecting Connecticut residents.



- **Program Initiatives and Community Awareness:** Partner pantries discussed their innovative strategies for addressing food insecurity in their communities.
- **Connecticut Foodshare Feedback:** Neighbor Council members provided feedback on specific food bank initiatives to improve our response to food insecurity and create long-term strategies to end hunger.
- **Reflection and Action Planning for Change:** Facilitators gained feedback from the Council on Connecticut Foodshare practices, helped members practice advocacy strategies, and offered space for reflection by the Neighbor Council on their journey.

“Each [session] has been filled with exactly what I have needed to hear. I've been challenged. I've opened what I thought was an open mind even more. I've sat in awe at the courage and strength of each of you because you all are incredible...and how you share it is just right.”

– Neighbor Council Ambassador,
Cohort 1

The 2025 program included a visit to the State Capitol where members met with legislators to share their expertise and ask questions about current policies.

Program Impact

Across both cohorts, the Neighbor Council proved to be a transformative experience, fostering civic engagement, advocacy skills, and a deeper understanding of food insecurity. Based on pre- and post- surveys and session by session feedback, the program was extended from four to five months in the second year, and all materials and sessions were translated into Spanish to improve accessibility and diversity amongst the cohort.



Overall, evaluation results from both cohorts showed:

- 71% of members were more familiar with the functions of government at the local, state, and federal levels.
- 50% of Neighbor Council members reported an increased likelihood of contacting local elected officials, reflecting a meaningful shift in civic confidence and engagement.
- 79% of members reported they were very confident in sharing their story to advocate for change.
- 93% stated the program met their expectations

“The Neighbor Council empowered me to speak about food insecurity with accurate knowledge. I know where to access statistics to back my points up. I feel more comfortable speaking to neighbors, clients, townspeople and hopefully soon my legislators.”

– Neighbor Council Ambassador,
Cohort 2

Graduates of the Neighbor Council continue to create meaningful changes beyond the program by participating in Connecticut Foodshare strategic planning, press opportunities, and advocacy activities.

Summary

The Connecticut Foodshare Neighbor Council exemplifies a powerful shift in how food insecurity is addressed by centering lived expertise and elevating neighbor voices. Through its innovative curriculum and responsive design, the program empowered participants to engage in advocacy, shape policy, and influence food bank operations. Feedback driven adaptations, such as language accessibility and expanded curriculum, deepened inclusivity and impact. As graduates continue to lead change across Connecticut, the Neighbor Council stands as a model of a transformative, community-based solution.



“Too many times, [seniors] are brushed off which is very frustrating because we prefer to believe we still matter. When we are included, we can feel misunderstood; however, within the Neighbor Council, our voices were encouraged.”

– Neighbor Council Ambassador, Cohort 2

“The confidence to reach out and know that I can be a voice in unity with others will be placed in practice by writing emails to our legislators and making phone calls to their offices, followed up by continuous communication until we see the change happen.”

– Neighbor Council Ambassador, Cohort 2