

Connecticut Foodshare Neighbor Council: Elevating Voices, Empowering Change

Connecticut Foodshare's mission is to deliver an informed and equitable response to hunger. We cannot fulfill our mission without centering the expertise of the neighbors we serve across the state. The Connecticut Foodshare Neighbor Council is an innovative five-month advocacy and leadership training program that meaningfully engages a cohort of neighbors who have experience with food insecurity to improve food bank operations and government policies that address its root causes.

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 neighbors' voices to build public awareness of food insecurity and ways to end food insecurity in our state.

Program Structure

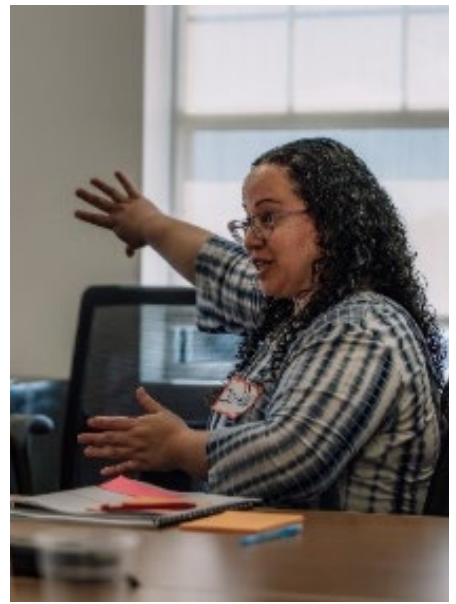
Launched in 2024, Connecticut Foodshare convened three cohorts of the Neighbor Council to date, one per year. A diverse group of 31 Connecticut residents with firsthand experience of food insecurity, collectively these cohorts represent 24 cities and towns across the five Connecticut Congressional districts.

The Neighbor Council curriculum is grounded in Marshall Ganz's "Public Narrative" model, which calls on us to use self-narrative to practice leadership and advance systemic change. This model has three dimensions – use of the heart to communicate values through emotion; the head to strategize; and the hands to act. Each session of the Neighbor Council explores topics that align with the food bank's current and future work, while supporting members in strengthening their skills to use their voices, perspectives, and experiences to advocate for change. The curriculum includes:

- **Story of Self and the Food Assistance Network:** With the first session of the Neighbor Council program, time is spent intentionally creating our brave space together. Facilitators guide the cohort to learn about storytelling, and Neighbor Council members reflect on and develop a story of self. They practice sharing their stories with others. Facilitators guide the cohort to learn more about food insecurity in Connecticut and the food assistance network, including the role of Connecticut Foodshare.



- **Public Policy and Advocacy:** Facilitators guide the cohort to learn about the policymaking process. In an interactive panel, community advocates discuss their work on various policy issues that address the root causes of food insecurity affecting Connecticut residents and provide advice to Neighbor Council members as they engage in advocacy.
- **Program Initiatives and Community Awareness:** Facilitators guide the cohort to learn about Connecticut Foodshare's strategic plan. In an interactive panel, agency partners discuss their innovative strategies for addressing food insecurity in their communities.
- **Connecticut Foodshare Feedback:** Neighbor Council members provide feedback on specific areas of focus to help strengthen the work of the food bank. Facilitators guide the cohort in creating an action plan for policy change.
- **Taking Action for Change:** Session five is the culminating experience of the Neighbor Council program, taking place at the State Capitol in Hartford. Legislators join the Neighbor Council for a discussion on food insecurity and legislative action, followed by Neighbor Council members drafting messages to their legislators about an issue important to them. Facilitators also guide the cohort on a tour of the State Capitol. In a graduation celebration, Neighbor Council members are recognized for completing the program and becoming Neighbor Council Ambassadors.



Incorporating member feedback is an important part of the program's success. Neighbor Council members provide feedback to our team during each session. Through this direct feedback, we continue to improve the Neighbor Council program. We provide live interpretation and translate materials for Neighbor Council members whose preferred language is Spanish to create a more inclusive community and accessible experience.

"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."
 – Neighbor Council Ambassador, Cohort 1

Program Impact

Across all cohorts, Connecticut Foodshare's Neighbor Council proves to be a transformative experience for members, fostering civic engagement and advocacy skills. We conduct pre- and post- surveys with each cohort to better understand what neighbors learn and experience through the program.

Overall, evaluation results from the 2024-2026 cohorts showed:

- 92% stated the program met their expectations.
- 72% were more familiar with the functions of government at the local, state, and federal levels.
- 88% indicated they were very confident in sharing their story to advocate for change.
- 96% reported being likely or very likely to contact their elected officials, reflecting civic confidence and engagement.

“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

Once participants graduate from the Neighbor Council program, they become “Neighbor Council Ambassadors” and are provided many ways to stay engaged to use their voice for change. Neighbor Council Ambassadors participate in important advocacy activities such as events with elected officials, testimony on proposed legislation, speaking at press conferences and with the media. Neighbor Council Ambassadors review and provide feedback on neighbor-facing materials for the organization (i.e., flyers and survey tools). They also were included in a stakeholder convening hosted to inform the organization’s strategic plan and will be a part of a planning committee for an upcoming regional Elevating Voices Neighbor Summit.



The Connecticut Foodshare Neighbor Council exemplifies a powerful shift in addressing food insecurity by centering lived expertise and elevating neighbor voices. The program stands as a model of transformative, community-driven solutions as graduates step forward to lead change across Connecticut.

“The thing I liked most about the Neighbor Council was how intentionally it centers the lived experiences of neighbors...Being part of a cohort where every voice carries weight, not because of titles, but because of truth, made the work feel authentic, grounded, and deeply human...It reminded me that systems change is strongest when it starts with the people most impacted.”
– Neighbor Council Ambassador, Cohort 3