

Making Tough Choices

Facilitator Instructions:

This exercise is to help participants understand the choices faced by the individuals served by food banks and food pantries. The activity should take about 10 minutes, followed by 30-40 minutes of discussion.

1. Provide each participant the “*Making Choices Handout*”
2. Review and read the activity instructions to participants. Facilitate activity.
4. Discuss using the discussion guide. You may also provide a printout of the guided reflection section to be reviewed later by participants.

Activity Instructions:

Read the following to participants:

- This exercise is to help you better understand the choices individuals are forced to make in our community every day. There are consequences. What would you do?
- Forget everything that you may know about services available to families, or the opportunities that might be afforded to you and really take on the role of this individual
- The categories on the left side of the page are necessities for individuals and families.
- You will see various choices for each category in columns A, B and C.
- As you go from left to right through each column, each choice is associated with a “monetary” requirement.
- Your currency for this exercise is smarties candy (*don't eat them until the end of the game*). The 15-piece candy budget represents \$45,991 of annual income. This is the TEFAP guideline maximum income for a family of 3, which is 185% of the poverty threshold (*\$25,820 per year*). That equates to roughly \$3,833 a month or about \$885 a week.
- You will assume the role of a parent in a household of 3. You are employed. You have two children: a 3-yr-old daughter and a 9-yr-old son. • You must determine how to allocate your candy budget across all categories. Do not skip categories or rows.
- You have 10 minutes to make choices. Begin now.
- After time is up, facilitate a discussion on participants' choices.

Facilitated Discussion (30-40 minutes):

Activity Wrap-up: The goal of this activity is to give you a glimpse of what tough decisions hardworking people right here in East Texas are making every day. The median income in East Texas is \$56,981.38 for one earner. The top of TEFAP income guidelines level for a family of three is \$45,991. Can a family get by on that? Housing is expensive and food and gas prices have been going up. Median rent for a 2-bedroom apartment in Tyler, TX as of March 2024 is \$1,450 per month (*28% lower than the national average*).

- a. How did you feel about making these choices? Did you run out of money?
- b. How did your priorities change based on the limited resources?

Decision Discussion Questions: start with these questions and see where the conversation goes organically!

<p style="text-align: center;">HOUSING:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How many were lucky enough to live in a three-bedroom house?• How many have their children sharing a room?	<p style="text-align: center;">HEALTHCARE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How many only have health care for themselves or none at all?• What happens when a child gets sick? Do you have extra spending money?
<p style="text-align: center;">FOOD:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How many chose three meals a day? One meal?• What types of meals do you think families can afford? Do they have healthy options?• What do you think about the ability of a 3-year-old who gets one meal a day to learn and focus in school?	<p style="text-align: center;">TRANSPORTATION:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• In this simulation, how many of you own a car? Take public transportation? Walk or bike?• Do you think the choice you made regarding transportation affects the ability to shop for food or go to work with kids in tow?

The facilitator may not have time to cover all the reflection points. Feel free to select which points you'd like to discuss or provide a handout to participants.

If you allocated your smarties so that you and your family were only eating one meal a day, what effects could that have on your family?

Example Responses:

- Family members could lose concentration at school/work because they are undernourished, thinking about food, or not sleeping.
- Poor nutrition could lead to health problems.
- Arguments over food and money could lead to mental strife or physical or emotional abuse.

Additional Commentary: Let's explore this topic a little more. If the children in your family are only eating one meal a day, it is most likely school lunch. These two children are probably showing up to school hungry and unable to concentrate in class. If we begin to think longer-term about repercussions, poor grades and behavioral health problems are issues that could arise. Ultimately, this could even lead to the children dropping out of school. If no help is given, these are just a few of the potential issues that could arise.

In this simulation, you represented a household of 3 earning \$45,991 per year. What kind of job do you think a single parent visiting a food pantry might have?

Here are a few examples of careers that can earn around this amount annually.

- Teachers – average first year teachers in TX make less than \$40K per year
- Certified Nurses Assistant – average salary for CNA in Texas is \$26K – 35K per year
- IT Tech – Average pay for an IT Technician in Texas is \$43K per year
- Dental Assistants – average pay for a dental assistant around \$45K



Are these the jobs you had in mind?

In our simulation, we assumed your income was steady. Many of our clients do not have the luxury of job security. What happens when you or your child being sick causes you to miss work, or a late bus or flat tire causes you to be late to work one too many times? It could cause tension between you and your supervisor, increasing your stress level. Worse, it could cause you to lose your employment altogether. How will your family survive with no income while you search for a new job?

This simple activity cannot simulate all the costs and decisions an individual might encounter. Here are more of the many possibilities to consider.

- What if you are paying student loans?
- What if your electricity bill is higher than you budgeted for this month because it was colder than normal?
- What if one of your children really wants to participate in extracurricular activities? Do you have the money, time, transportation, etc. to provide that opportunity for them, or will you have to say no?
- We haven't even discussed the impacts of the current pandemic. Many individuals lost wages, and the cost of groceries and gas continues to rise. What if you, the parent, got sick? How do you care for your kids during your illness, and what additional medical costs will you have to take on?
- What if you don't have internet access for kids to do homework?
- What happens if you can't pay your rent?

Additional Discussion:

Not all costs are monetary. Here are a few more challenges and sacrifices you might have to consider.

- You work a full-time job and have two children, which is challenging for any single parent. If you choose to take public transportation, how early will you have to wake up to get to work on time? How long are you waiting in food assistance lines?
- People say get a better job. You'd need more training to qualify for a better job, but you can't afford to stop working to go get trained for something new, and you likely don't have the extra time to do both.
- Constant worry and stress about being able to meet the needs of your family can keep you in low-functioning crisis mode and lead to mental and physical health challenges.

What thoughts and questions might be going through the minds of neighbors that might seek out help from food pantries?

Example Reflection Responses:

• Where can I find help? • What if they won't serve me? • What will it be like? Should I be embarrassed? • How much food will they give me? Will it be enough? How often can I come back to get more food? • I am embarrassed and I know several of the people or volunteers at the pantry closest to me. What will they think? • What if my family doesn't like the food they give us? What if it's not safe or is something I don't know how to cook? • What will my kids think about us going to a food pantry? Will they be embarrassed or think less of me as a parent since I cannot take care of us on my own? • I have no time! Where can I get to around my work schedule? What if it takes forever? I need somewhere I can get in and out of quickly. • I'm so glad we are able to get food, but what do I do about all the other costs and setbacks I've been facing lately? Do they offer any other services or help? Do they know where I can go to get more help?

Additional Discussion: What changes can your agency make to your space, organizational culture, operations, and service offerings to ensure each client feels welcomed and receives dignified assistance that addresses their unique needs?