

2. Programs

ASC has three major program areas: lunch 4 days per week, food distribution, and clothing/housewares/furniture distribution. Beyond this, there are less tangible activities that are considered by many to be fundamental for ASC. These include providing a sense of community, counseling, and clinical services. This section will consider each of the three formal program areas separately, and then consider these less tangible activities as a fourth program area.

A. Lunch

ASC offers one of the best lunches in the area four weekdays per week (closed Wednesday), without charging a penny. With donations from the areas best organic and local food suppliers, under the direction of talented and resourceful cooks, and supported by a dedicated team of kitchen volunteers, meals are consistently diverse and superb.

According to the 2006 Annual Report (FY06: 7/1/05-6/30/06), average lunch attendance was 40 people, and 6,902 lunches were served. However, both numbers may be low. (6,902 lunches divided by average attendance of 40 people equals 173 days that lunch was served. ASC is open for lunch Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. Four days per week times 52 weeks equals 208 possible lunch days that lunch is served. As compared to the number of lunches served, that leaves a discrepancy of 35 lunch days. ASC was closed for a few of those days, but not all 35. The discrepancy must be attributable to a higher daily attendance and/or a higher number of total lunches served.) See “Administration” section below for more discussion of statistics.

A typical lunch offering, served buffet style, might include tempeh stroganoff, curry tofu, veal stew, tropical fruit salad, Caesar salad, humus, rice pilaf, roasted fingerling potatoes, steamed green beans, pasta with red sauce, fresh bread, and an array of fancy and basic condiments. Desserts and beverages are also varied and copious. Most tastes and dietary restrictions can be accommodated. “Soup kitchen” is the term of art for such programs, but the term does not do justice.

Lunch begins at noon, and typically begins on time. Consumers form a line that is generally orderly. Several staff point out what is what, serve food, and help keep things moving. The layout is an open kitchen setting. The buffet table divides the kitchen and the dining area. The open layout fosters a sense of camaraderie and teamwork. The space is cheery, and the mood is convivial. Staff, volunteers, consumers, and anyone who happens to be around (like consultants) eat together. Everyone is dressed casually which helps reduce perceived boundaries between “the needy” and others. Though a lack of boundaries and role definitions is a key problem at ASC in some settings (see “Administration” section below), it works in this situation.

The dining area is too small. The tight squeeze gives the feel of a crowded lunchroom or downtown café, but it is also impractical. People have a difficult time maneuvering around others to get to their seat. Consumers with disabilities can generally be accommodated, but with difficulty. The dining area is generally at capacity. According to the Interim Director, on very busy days consumers eat in shifts, use other rooms, or eat outside. The dining area floor is sometimes dirty. See “Administration” section below for more discussion of space.

Assessment: Excellent performance given physical constraints and difficult logistics.

Recommendation: Sweep and mop more consistently. Keep up the great work.

B. Food Distribution and Pickup

Food distribution

In addition to prepared meals (lunch), ASC also distributes perishable and non-perishable food. In FY06, 2,874 boxes of non-perishable food (weighing 125,365 pounds) were distributed to 681 households and 1,404 individuals. According to the report, 468 of those households were new to ASC, which corroborates research showing that the typical length of time that people need safety net services is very short. On the other hand, ASC is also serving an increasing number of families that are neither homeless nor totally unemployed, but who find they cannot make ends meet.

About 115,478 pounds of perishable food (bread and produce) were also distributed.

These are impressive numbers. Though there will always be times when there is more demand than supply in the case of certain specialty items that are donated rarely and in small quantities, generally the reverse is true. At the end of the day, after all consumers have had an opportunity to shop, perishable food is often picked up by small farmers for their sheep and ducks, and other animals. While this arrangement makes sense (especially in terms of reducing significant waste removal costs), it has also been a source of unfortunate theories about large quantities of food being stolen and animals being prioritized over consumers. Better communication might help prevent such theories.

Food distribution is based on a number system. Numbers are assigned to consumers. The numbers are called out on a PA system (when it is working, and without a PA system when it is not).

The biggest problem with food distribution seems to be space—both for storing food and for staff, volunteers, and consumers to move around. Bread, for example, is often stored in the hallway or dining area.

The quality of the food is generally good, but not always. The locally donated food tends to be high quality, but much of the boxed and canned food that is part of a USDA distribution system is of questionable nutritional value. One glaring example is trans-fat peanut butter. Peanut butter is known to be an inexpensive, high-protein food. It is used quite effectively as emergency relief in famine-stricken parts of the developing world. But while very young children benefit from high-fat foods, this is not the case otherwise. Childhood and adult obesity is quickly becoming an epidemic and a serious public health problem in the United States. Trans-fats (typical of inexpensive peanut butter) add to the deleterious effects of an already naturally high-fat food. The health risks associated with trans-fats are at this point well-documented (New York City recently banned the substance from all food service establishments). Finally, peanuts can be a severe allergen for children.

Some might think of the adage, “beggars can’t be choosers,” but that thinking is clearly antithetical to the uplifting philosophy of ASC. In such a health conscious and natural foods-oriented region, removing trans-fats would help show that people in need are not second class citizens. And banning trans-fats is probably an achievable goal.

There does not appear to be a problem with rotting, spoiled, or otherwise unsafe food.

Assessment: Generally well-run. Room for improvements.

Recommendation: Screen out unhealthy food. Obsessive neatness will minimize unpleasantness of tight quarters. Communicate policies and special arrangements better.

Food pickup

Surplus food is inevitable for large stores, and area stores are generally very pleased to be able to find alternatives to their dumpster for this food, provided there is no risk that donations will reduce the number of paying customers. ASC can fill this need without any concern that people will obtain for free what they would have otherwise paid for. And so while volunteers load up the ASC truck behind Whole Foods with over a thousand pounds (conservatively valued at \$1,000) of food every week, regular customers come in the front door and pay full price for virtually the same food.

ASC fills its full-sized pickup truck (and then some) four days per week with donated food from Whole Foods, Stop & Shop, Trader Joe’s, Panera, Henion Bakery, and several other local stores. ASC also picks up food from the Food Bank once per week.

While it is imperative that food pickups happen every day ASC is open, it may be the case that ASC collects too much food. Space is limited, and there is often excess at the end of the day. It is understandable to want to take advantage of all the willing food donors in the

area, but ASC's needs might be met by Whole Foods and one additional complementary store.

Assessment: ASC is over-performing here.

Recommendation: Be more selective with pickup locations to increase quality and reduce work.

C. Clothing/Housewares/Furniture Distribution

Clothing and housewares are distributed through The Free Store. The metaphor is purposeful. The Free Store is set up, as much as possible given physical constraints, to feel like a normal store. Consumers are encouraged to shop and browse, and to try on things. Staff and volunteers are eager to help find the correct sizes or even take special requests and try to locate those items. Parents with small children are given special care. Though the store is well-stocked and well-organized, it is often dirty. A newly redesigned toy section allows children to try them out first. Quantities are limited to ensure that everyone is served, and to help prevent redistribution for profit or otherwise.

The small sorting room, or back room, is a common source of controversy. The most common concern is similar to one theory about food distribution--that large and small quantities of clothing, housewares, and furniture are "going out the back door" before consumers even get a chance to see it. There are theories that "the good stuff" is screened out and taken by staff or volunteers immediately. There are other theories that furniture and huge garbage bags of clothing are being sold, and that one or more staff have organized this arrangement for their own personal financial gain.

These theories seem to be almost entirely unfounded. But there are some sloppy practices. And there are some sensible procedures that could be misconstrued and thus contribute to these theories of systematic misbehavior.

First, consumers do sometimes linger and "size up" incoming donations as they arrive. It is easily imaginable that, in spite of policy to the contrary, consumers or volunteers that are also consumers take things surreptitiously before they make it out to the free store shelves. To address this problem, the staff is trying to make the appropriate arrangements so that the back door of ASC can be used exclusively for receiving donations. This way, it is unlikely anyone will be watching what is coming in. Though the change may seem straightforward, there are issues related to signage, door bell, security, and parking that are unresolved. Better supervision of volunteers in the sorting room is probably also needed.

Second, while about 122,599 pounds of clothing were received in FY06, only about 75,737 pounds were deemed suitable for distribution and then taken away by consumers. Therefore, approximately 46,862 pounds of clothing was disposed of. Instead of paying for

their removal (dumpster), ASC arranges pick-ups from an international organization called Planet Aid with a US base in Holliston, MA. This organization's model is to collect clothing donations, resell them, and use the proceeds to sponsor development projects abroad. There has been a fair amount of controversy surrounding this organization over the last five years. The controversy, which has been covered by the Boston Globe and a few other papers in the US, the UK, and Denmark, seems to revolve around how much actually goes to charitable purposes. Some probably also think the donated clothes are going to poor countries, when in fact it seems that they are sold in the origin country and simply used as a revenue source.

Planet Aid is a registered nonprofit organization with tax-exempt status in Massachusetts, though the charitable status of their affiliates in other countries seems to have been revoked. A quick look at their IRS 990 filing from 2004 shows that they claim to have spent \$1.7 mil of an \$8 mil budget on development projects largely in Africa.

In any case, even if Planet Aid threw away the clothes after removing them from the Center, the arrangement still seems to be a good one for ASC. Again, better communication might help prevent specious theories.

The third source of controversy seems to be occasional preference given to volunteers who are also consumers. An ad hoc Policy Review Committee has created a collection and distribution policy to help clarify the rules (more detail in "Policies and procedures" section below.)

Assessment: Great model that sometimes works well.

Recommendation: Clean floor and all surfaces more often. Enforce rules more rigorously. Communicate policies and practices better. Make rear drop-off area functional.

D. Community, counseling, and clinical services

In addition to lunches, and the distribution of food, clothing, housewares, and furniture, ASC succeeds at providing a much-needed sense of community. But there are limits to what ASC does, and is capable doing, in this area.

Community

The sense of community and the importance of social space and cooperation are communicated effectively in the mission statement:

"The Amherst Survival Center's mission is to provide a welcoming community where families and individuals who are struggling to make ends meet can come for food and clothing, for companionship and relief from isolation, and to share their material resources,

information, concerns and frustrations. No one is turned away. An equally important function of the Center is to help people move beyond a condition of need, to help them to help themselves and each other. Volunteering is encouraged among all who want to play a bigger part in the cycle of giving and receiving that defines the Center.”

The more time one spends at ASC, the more these intangibles become apparent. There is wide agreement that, in addition to whatever shortcomings may exist, there is a special “homey-ness,” and a sense of belonging and ownership that is rare. That said, ASC might be a little too homey, in the sense that the space is often messy and has a cobbled together feel. ASC deserves credit for avoiding a corporate or antiseptic feel, but things have clearly moved too far in the opposite direction. Issues related to the ASC’s physical space are addressed in more depth in the “Administration” section below.

Some explain that the fact that ASC is a “drop-in” center makes it more of a destination that a quick pit-stop.

Counseling

Terms like “counseling” seem to originate from the “Purposes” section of the articles of organization from 1978:

“To operate exclusively for charitable and educational purposes in the town of Amherst, providing free clothing, food, and furniture, survival counseling, and free classes in survival techniques....”

This purpose statement is repeated in ASC’s bylaws and annual external audit.

Counseling is offered on a very informal basis. Many staff have experience with special needs populations, but none are credentialed. Counseling is most often provided in the sense of one-on-one conversations to help troubled consumers get organized or stabilize their immediate situation, and to refer them to the appropriate resources.

Classes and workshops have been offered over the years on a pro bono basis by local residents, but none have been offered recently. More could be done to recruit interesting people to provide useful workshops for consumers, but it is clear that ASC does not have the capacity to show any real results in this area. Improving referrals is a better use of resources.

Clinical Services

One of the biggest questions about ASC has been to what extent the organization should, or could, provide clinical services for its many consumers with special needs. There is clearly a need. Many Massachusetts residents with real mental health challenges have been de-institutionalized, and in the context of budget cuts, this population is dramatically

underserved. But, as in the case of counseling, ASC may already be doing too much, and trying to take up the slack in the mental health system is not realistic.

That said, many people with real mental health problems pass through the doors of the Survival Center on a regular basis. Many of these people are not receiving adequate care or medication, and as a result they create an unsafe or unwelcome environment.

Conflating matters, staff are not always equipped to respond to the variety of situations that may--and do--arise. The proven ability to work well with special needs populations should be a requirement for every position. Not all staff have this ability. Ongoing professional development should also be targeted to this need. There is almost no precedent for providing professional development opportunities (see “Administration” section below). ASC’s referral system, and its policies and procedures to deal with the kinds of disturbances that will arise with some regularity, could also be strengthened. If these elements are addressed, ASC can avoid the kind of major programmatic expansion that clinical services would require.

A Board assessment of ASC dated July, 2002, describes some specific types of supportive services that are provided. They extend beyond food and clothing provision, but stop short of clinical aid (See Appendix C), and seem like a good idea for now.

Clinical services could easily emerge from a systematic long-range planning process as a priority. The difference being that in this context, all of the serious ramifications of such a shift (mission, budget, human resources, space, etc.) could also be addressed. There has already been some interest among Board members in one suggestion for this long-range planning process: upgrade the existing Assistant Director/Volunteer Coordinator position to the level of a clinician (e.g., MSW).

Whatever ASC decides to do, the organization’s bylaws and audit should better reflect the programmatic reality.

Assessment: Beyond its formal program areas, ASC provides a valuable sense of community (though it has been constantly challenged since the Spring of 2006). ASC also provides a degree of informal counseling, but could do more. Clinical services are largely absent, and could not be added without a major program expansion.

Recommendation: ASC should: a) continue to foster a sense of community, b) immediately begin augmenting its counseling and referral capacities, and c) continue to explore true clinical services (and its implications) in the context of a long-range plan.

E. Volunteers

Volunteers would not normally be addressed in the programmatic section of an organizational assessment. But for some organizations, volunteers are so essential to the functioning of the organization, and so much of the organization's mission is achieved by providing meaningful work for its target population, that volunteering itself must be considered a critical program element. (Volunteering is also addressed in the "Administration" section below.)

Habitat for Humanity is a well-known and well-regarded example of volunteering as a central programmatic element. The model considers the process of volunteering to build one's own home, or someone else's home, to be as important as the construction of the home itself. If this were not the case, there would certainly be more efficient ways to build homes for people who need them, and Habitat for Humanity's "homes built annually" statistic would be a lot higher. As it is, Habitat for Humanity builds a limited number of home every year and the bulk of its mission is achieved in the process.

Likewise, ASC would be much more efficient if it did not incorporate volunteers into almost every aspect of the organization. While many volunteers are not consumers, most are. And it is consumer volunteers in particular which give ASC a special feel, and which amounts to a significant programmatic deliverable. Consumers have also become staff, Board members, and committee members over the years. (Some disadvantages of this approach are addressed in the "Administration" section below.)

One former board member explains the uniqueness by contrasting ASC with "paternalistic" models that she considers to be the norm among direct service organizations. What she means is that many organizations seem to have decided what poor people need and are intent on imposing that vision on them. At ASC, consumers are often volunteers as well, and as such, are essential to operations. As one staff member put it, "consumers participate in their own salvation." ASC is more effective—both in terms of getting things done, and delivering value to consumers--because it allows consumers to be more than passive recipients of charity. (Many consumers do not volunteer, and that is permitted as well.)

Assessment: ASC's effectiveness is in large part attributable to its participatory model (i.e., volunteers).

Recommendation: Keep consumers and community members involved as volunteers (critical administrative implications addressed in "Administration" section below).

F. Community Impact

In addition to narrowly defined program outcomes, most nonprofit organizations seek to favorably impact the larger community (e.g., Amherst or the Pioneer Valley) or a broad issue (e.g., poverty, hunger). While this kind of larger impact may be even more important, it is also harder to measure and causally link to any one intervention. Other variables, which could be much more influential than ASC's efforts, include state funding cuts (or restoration of funding) to the mental health system, and the direction of the overall economy. But it is important to at least make an effort to track those trends and consider ASC's possible role.

While there is no data that directly addresses hunger, a lack of clothing/housewares/furniture, or feelings of isolation and hopelessness, a 2002 assessment of ASC conducted by then Board members gives a good snapshot of local and regional hunger and poverty (see Appendix D). Repeated every year or two, this type of analysis would be a good barometer of larger community trends.

Assessment: ASC is likely making a difference regionally, and is likely contributing to the struggle against poverty, hunger, isolation, and hopelessness.

Recommendation: ASC should do more to track regional issues in order to help understand its impact, and to be able to inform services needs and program planning.

General Comment:

The brief assessment conducted by William Marcello and John Manning at the request of Amherst Town Manager Larry Schaffer (dated 9/7/06) concluded that:

“The overall mission of the organization should be re-examined. It is difficult for a small organization such as this one to offer a comprehensive approach to meet all of the needs of anyone needing help. This organization may have to prioritize its goals, in order to meet certain needs with its limited resources and staffing. In view of this, it is important that they develop a local resource network that will be able to provide services which the Center cannot meet.”

(See Appendix B for Marcello and Manning's summary statement.)

It should be noted that Marcello and Manning may not have been referring to the mission statement per se, but rather ASC's program portfolio. But in any case, their suggestion is to do less, but to do it more effectively. ASC Board members, staff, consumers, and others have also asked if ASC is trying to do too much. The reality is that given the current space and staff constraints, ASC may be better off trying to do less. However, removing these

constraints and becoming a higher performing organization is a better alternative to scaling back much-needed services. See “Space” section below for more detail.