

Mission of Hope Action Research: Analyzing and Understanding Local Homeless

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Abstract

Mission of Hope is an organization in Cedar Rapids, Iowa that provides services to hungry and homeless clients. Recently, Mission of Hope has made substantial improvements in their new location and services and is looking to better serve their clients. Action research is an ideal tool to find these areas of improvement and to enable people to find solutions to problems in their everyday lives. This project looks deeper into the lives of the clients of Mission of Hope to best provide suggestions for the organization.

The organization

Mission of Hope is a local organization in Cedar Rapids, Iowa that aims to provide physical, emotional, and spiritual help to its clients by living out its motto, “Loving others unconditionally—one heart at a time.” Self-labeled as a Community Center of Mound View neighborhood, the organization primarily serves to alleviate hunger and homelessness. The vision of Mission of Hope is to provide a holistic service to give each client that walks in a fresh start. The organization is relatively successful in serving the community with services such as free meals, a 24/7 shelter, worship, clothing access, food pantry, and other supportive services. In the last seven months, Mission of Hope relocated and is currently improving its services to best meet the needs of its clients.

Defining the problem

The project began January 2015 in the Coe College Honors Action Research Course. The first step in the process was to visit Mission of Hope and meet with the directors. During this initial meeting,

I learned that Mission of Hope moved into its current location in November. With more square footage and an opportunity for expanding services, Mission of Hope desires to be a “one stop shop” to provide solutions for homelessness. In addition to the food pantry, emergency clothing, and free lunches, Mission of Hope provides a shelter for transitional housing that currently houses 27 men, mental health referrals to the Abbey Center, AA meetings, and services to those formerly incarcerated. This move to a new location was an opportunity to refocus their vision to not only feed people today, but to give each client a fresh start. A recurrent 24-hour cycle related to homelessness that leads to a constant worry for food and shelter leaves little time to advance in other aspects of life. Mission of Hope aims to provide these needs while enabling their clients to be introspective and help themselves, as well.

While Mission of Hope produces many success stories and knows that many clients are very fond of their services, not each story is readily successful. Some clients do not move into a home or gain employment. To interpret this gap in outcome, Mission of Hope would like to understand what motivates some clients to apply for a job more than others. The directors of Mission of Hope would also like to know what makes their services preferable to those of other organizations.

Little information is known about the current homeless population of Cedar Rapids. There is a lack of documentation found when doing a literature review. Most standard homelessness data in Cedar Rapids comes from the Point in Time collection. This count is Cedar Rapids’ main source to understand the number of homeless in Cedar Rapids, however it leaves much unknown about the demographics and plight of the homeless population. The last major survey done regarding Linn County’s Iowa’s homelessness was the 2005 Iowa Statewide Homeless Survey for all counties in Iowa. Linn County reported the third largest number of homeless, 1,875, or a 1.0% homeless (Iowa Council on Homeless 2005). The Cedar Rapids Community School District reported the most homeless students (Iowa Council on Homeless 2005). In Iowa, mental health and disabilities were found in 40% of respondents. While this information is extremely valuable, it is outdated and may not reflect the current state of the Cedar Rapids community that Mission of Hope serves. At the time of the last Snapshot of Service and

Shelter Use in 2012, 16,238 Iowans were homeless in 2012 and served by I-Count agencies (Statewide Homeless Management Information System) (Iowa Institute for Community Alliances 2012). The Linn County Hunger Free Network distributed a food survey to meal sites and food pantries. This survey found valuable information about access barriers and contributing factors to food needs, and it provided statistics about the local community (United Way 2010). An updated, comprehensive, Cedar Rapids-specific survey is necessary to truly understand the population Mission of Hope serves.

Action Plan

The mission of this action research project is to help the organization assess and achieve success. The first piece of this is to understand the mission of the organization. The main research question is why do services at Mission of Hope motivate some clients to move toward a job and home more than others? This prompts further questions such as who is Mission of Hope serving? What services are being utilized? What services should be added? Answering these questions would help fulfill Mission of Hope's desire to best serve every client. Additionally, quantifying this information could potentially lead to the receipt of more grants.

My action plan is to observe the services provided by Mission of Hope, specifically the daily free lunches, food pantry, and emergency clothing closet. I plan to talk to clients to gain a deeper understanding of the population served. This information gained from conversations will directly enlighten me about the clients and organization by identifying strengths and areas of improvement of Mission of Hope. These conversations will allow me to gain this knowledge about the organization and clients to create an effective survey for future use.

As a quantitative measure for Mission of Hope, I will draft and dispense a survey to understand the population Mission of Hope serves and the population's current needs. This survey will provide ongoing insight about the population Mission of Hope is continually serving and give clients the opportunity to identify areas of improvement. From both the conversations and the survey, I will

develop suggestions to invest more time and resources to better existing services as well as analyze the feasibility of expanding Mission of Hope's services.

Process

To conduct any research with human subjects, I had to complete an Institutional Review Board proposal. My Human Subjects Review Form required me to describe my project, the benefits, risks, protocol, and develop a consent form to receive information from any participants. Given the sensitive nature of the project, analyzing homelessness, it was vital to be aware of the trust and ethnics necessary to gain this information.

To best serve those invested and affected by Mission of Hope, I had to identify all groups impacted by Mission of Hope. The stakeholders of the organization are the directors, workers, volunteers, clients, the neighborhood surrounding Mission of Hope, and all citizens of the city of Cedar Rapids. The difference Mission of Hope can make in the lives of many has the potential to impact the surrounding community and economy. In fact, the level of crime in the Mound View neighborhood has dropped 85% since the community center moved in.

Once my research question and action plan were defined, I began to spend several hours a week at Mission of Hope. By visiting during lunch hours, I was able to see in action the free lunches over the noon hour, clothes closet, and food pantry, which both operate from 1:00 to 4:00 in the afternoon. I was able to engage in participatory action research, enabling me to build trust with clients and work alongside them in the clothes closet and food pantry. This also permitted me to visit with volunteers and clients receiving the services. A key characteristic of action research is to give voice to the clients, helping them to realize they have power and knowledge about their situation. I have met and heard about many life stories and how Mission of Hope plays some role in each visitor's life. A key goal of Mission of Hope is to provide those who are unemployed skills during volunteering that will help them in the workforce, such as stocking shelves or helping in the kitchen. The services of Mission of Hope cater to

those from all walks of life. They may provide resources to enroll at Kirkwood for someone looking to earn a degree, or provide emergency clothing to a woman leaving town to escape an abusive husband. For a client with a criminal background, Mission of Hope can provide necessary direction and encouragement to find a job. While at Mission of Hope, I have witnessed unemployed visitors emerge happily employed and others utilizing lists of businesses that are hiring. For a volunteer serving community service hours, Mission of Hope can provide a meaningful experience that will leave the visitor feeling empowered and successful.

The social atmosphere is a major determinate of why clients love Mission of Hope. Talking over the lunch hour in a safe, welcoming environment is appealing. Many commented that the new location provided more security, and that environment created by the current directors has improved substantially since several months ago. The overwhelming feeling from Mission of Hope clients was the sense of community. Some commented that Mission of Hope would do anything for any client, and that any client who did not want to gain every advantage they could from Mission of Hope just wanted to “stay on the street.” From one interview in particular, the feeling was expressed that “anyone who didn’t come into Mission of Hope happy would leave happy.” The client felt that Mission of Hope had helped him pick up jobs, worship, find shelter, enjoy recreational activities, form friendships, and generally “do it all.” According to the client, “any resource is always within your reach here. If you know why you’re here and know where you want to go, you’ll get there. If you don’t want to know, then you’ll hate it.” This gives insight as to why some clients take full advantage of the services Mission of Hope provides, as they have a sense of responsibility and a goal. On the other hand, if others do not desire to move onto the next step, they will not.

To develop a better understanding of the demographic of the clients Mission of Hope serve, I drafted a survey to fill the needs of Mission of Hope and began a literature review of current surveys studying homelessness. I combined questions from United Way’s Food Survey by Linn County Hunger Free Network, 2012 City of Pasadena Homeless Survey, and Homeless Persons Survey in San Mateo

County. These resources served as a foundation for the survey and educated me to the basic needs and problems of many homeless. To specifically give voice to the participants of the survey, I added several open-ended questions to allow for participants to share their story if they so desired. After an original draft, Mission of Hope suggested further exploring the areas of drugs, alcohol, and domestic abuse, as they are prevalent in the community. To provide opportunity for these questionnaires, supplementary questionnaires were created based on information from the Mayo Clinic about domestic violence, and the Nation Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependent self-tests on drug and alcohol dependence.

Surveys were completed during the month of April. The methods to dispense the survey were not standardized or randomized. This was done to produce a natural feel while completing the questionnaire, ideally to generate more genuine responses. While the method was not entirely consistent, the aim of action research is not to be generalizable, but to gain insight. The consent form did produce some discomfort for some participants, as they noted it had some large words and unfamiliar ideas. Further, many clients were hesitant to provide a signature to reveal their identity, so initials were allowed. Some avoided taking the survey, leading me to believe there was understandable hesitation to provide personal information. Participants were made aware that they did not have to complete the survey, and they could stop at any time if they wanted. Some surveys were completed with the help of a friend, and one survey was done verbally, so reading level should be taken into account.

Results

From direct conversations at Mission of Hope, I have gathered some suggestions to improve the functioning of the organization. Currently, clients are allowed to visit the clothes closet to pick out donated clothes as well as receive food from the pantry every two weeks. To do so, each client must sign in with their ID and wait in line. However, some clients try to come in more often than they should, which leads to a situation where a volunteer must determine if their situation warrants an extra visit. This can be difficult if a client continually comes in more often than allowed, but the system is not

closely monitored. This is of further issue if the supplies in the pantry or clothes closet are insufficient to sustain the extra allowance. A clearer understanding of how often clients can come in may allay the issue. There is often an influx of clients coming in on warmer days, and Mission of Hope has been serving more people than before, likely due to the improved location. Children are commonly seen at Mission of Hope, and I have heard clients ask for diapers and other children's needs. Catering to these younger clients may be important as more visit Mission of Hope. Clients have suggested improvements such as incorporating exercise or coordinating athletic activities, furnishing showers for clients, and constructing ramps in the building to give easier access to the services Mission of Hope provides. Recently, the clothes closet and food pantry have been relocated to a lower level for easier access, so this transition can be further analyzed for success.

Twenty-six participants agreed to complete the survey. The surveys were distributed and collected during the free lunch service. The following provides a profile of respondents. Seventeen of the respondents were female and nine were male.

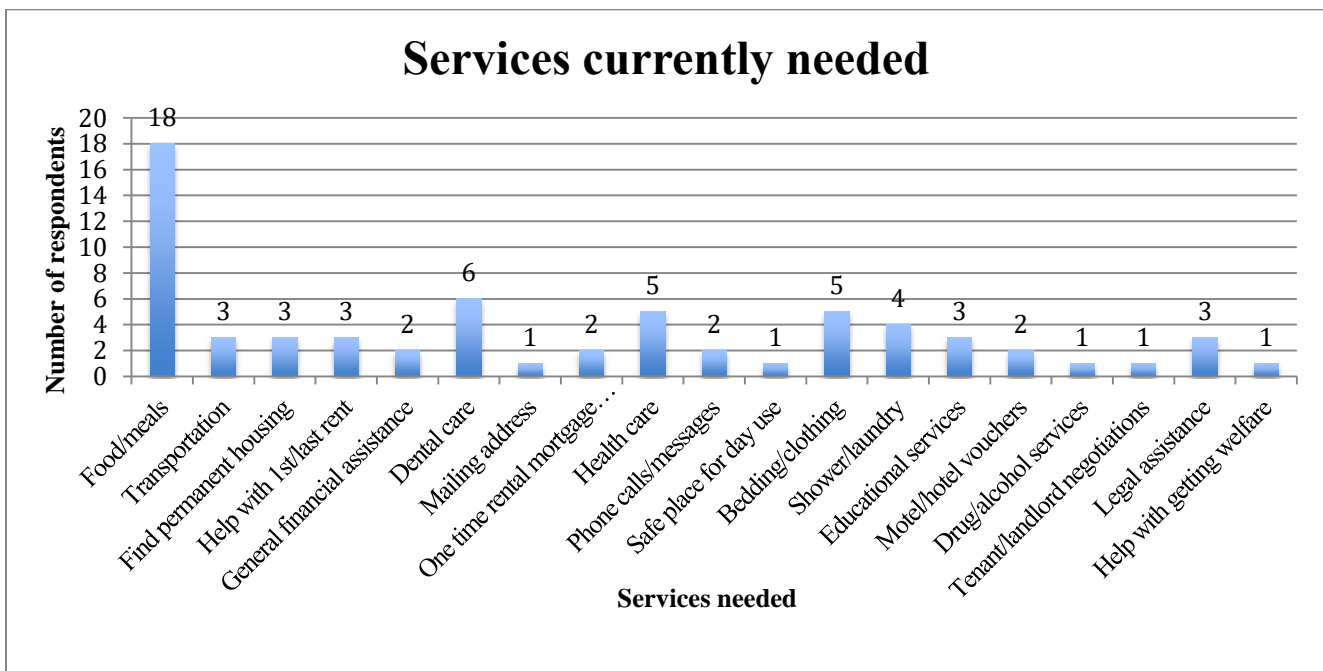
Age	%
20-29	35%
30-39	11.5%
40-49	11.5%
50-59	27%
60-69	15%

Ethnicity	%
Caucasian	69%
African American	11.5%
American Indian/Caucasian	11.5%
Hispanic/Latino	4%
Other	4%

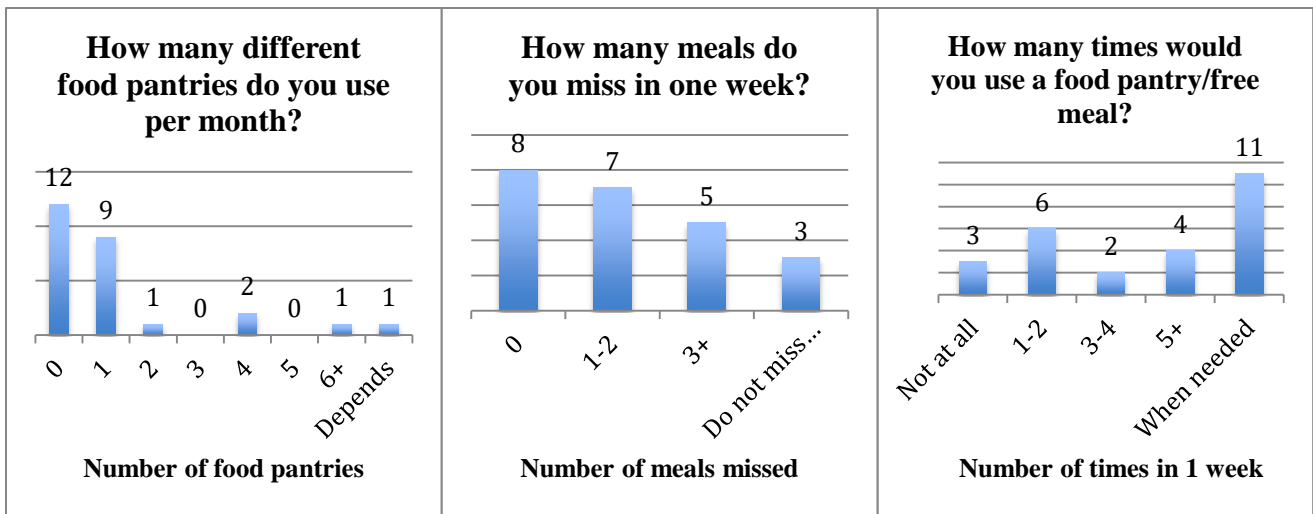
Current place of residence	%
Home	58%
With friend/relative	15%
Transitional Housing	8%
Condemned Building	4%
Other	15%

73% of respondents reported having a disability or health condition. 54% of respondents reported having a mental health problem. Mission of Hope currently offers services and referrals, so these services could be more advertised and encouraged. 11.5% of respondents reported having a drug or alcohol problem. Less than 1% of respondents were veterans. 35% of respondents reported being victims of sexual violence, and 15% responded they preferred not to answer or skipped the question. 11.5% of

respondents reported they had been released from a correctional institution within the last 12 months. 12% of respondents reported having less than twelve years of education, 46% reported having a high school education, and 42% reported having completed college. 65% of respondents reported being unemployed, with 35% of them reporting it being due to disability. Five (5) of the 26 respondents, or 19%, reported themselves as homeless. Those responding as homeless reported the reasons being eviction (2), not enough money to pay rent/mortgage (4), and problems with drugs/alcohol (1). Other agencies participants reported visiting in the past three months include Waypoint Services, Foundation 2, Catherine McAuley Center, Housing Resources, Willis Dady Emergency Shelter, House of Hope, Bridgehaven Pregnancy Support Center, HACAP, and The Safe Place Foundation.



This graph shows the services respondents reported needing. There was a strong need for food/meals. Services that Mission of Hope may want to focus on include help for dental care, transportation, finding first and last rent, health care, bedding/clothing, shower/laundry, educational services, and legal assistance.



For potential barriers stopping clients from using a food pantry/free meal, participants reported transportation (7), the number of times services can be accessed (2), hours of service (4), location of pantries (3), income limit (1), awareness of different pantries/meal sites (3), and other (5). This shows a need for more food services. Additionally, the question for using multiple food pantries indicates it may be valuable to assess the feasibility of allowing clients to visit the food pantry more often.

Eleven participants responded that if they were not eating lunch at Mission of Hope, they would not be eating lunch. Those who answered yes said they would be eating at locations such as at home, a restaurant, or at HyVee. Only one participant responded that they have had a negative experience at Mission of Hope. For the open-ended questions about benefits from Mission of Hope, respondents indicated they had received services including food, clothes, a phone, worship, a job, support, friends, networking and a sense of purpose. Participants that responded to the question about how Mission of Hope is different from other organizations they have visited commented how each client is not just a number, no one looks down on anyone else, and how welcoming Mission of Hope is. To give a sense of the community Mission of Hope provides between all clients, volunteers, and workers, one participant commented, "I have never experienced a more helpful service anywhere, anything you need the Mission will find a way for you with some of the great people that work here." Other comments again stressed that coming to Mission of Hope is now a pleasant experience that is fulfilling in many aspects of their lives.

When improving the survey for future use, some improvements could be made to encourage more informative answers. To provide flexibility, several questions listed “other” as an option. However, it seemed that this may have been an option to simply avoid provide information, so a blank space next to the option “other” may encourage more open-ended information. The question about being a “single individual” or “adult member of a family” seemed to produce confusion. This could be altered to more directly ask about being single, married, with children, etc. Open-ended questions did provide some clients the opportunity to expand on any topic they wanted, however they could be edited to provide more insightful responses. Questions such as “have you had any negative experiences” led to answers of only yes or no, and “how has your life changed since using Mission of Hope” received many answers of “better.” The question preceding it, “what benefits have you gotten from Mission of Hope” seemed very similar and led to repetitive responses. The two questions could be combined or made more clear and specific to solicit different answers. Other questions that could be added may be related to if an unemployed person is job searching, if they have a car, and if they have a phone. These topics would direct Mission of Hope to these specific services such as transportation, phones, and job availability that they may have the resources to provide. Further, homelessness could be defined in the survey and near-homelessness could be included in the survey, since many participants indicated they were not homeless. The Iowa Council on Homeless defines homelessness as “A person without fixed, regular and adequate nighttime shelter, a person whose primary nighttime residence is a supervised shelter designed to provide temporary accommodations or a public or private place not designed for a regular sleeping space for humans.” They further define near-homelessness as “a person or household in imminent danger of eviction, a person or household in imminent danger of having their utilities disconnected, or a person or housing seeking housing assistance.” Clarifying these words and providing a baseline would provide more accurate results and understanding of the clients. To fully understand the successes of some clients over others, a question could be added about the client’s beliefs and hopes about what they

will accomplish in life. This step may also aid in the vision to help clients verbalize and reach their goals.

Conclusions

The survey I developed will help to understand the nature and extent of the trends in homelessness in Cedar Rapids and aid in meeting the needs and gaps in services for homeless individuals. As Mission of Hope continues to settle into their new location, they will continue to adjust to serve the needs of the community. Currently, it is valuable for the organization to adjust to filling the space available in their new location and cater to their increasing number of clients. It seems likely that as the weather gets warmer and more people are outside, free daily lunches will be more utilized. It seems wise to ensure the main services are equipped for this influx of people. With the adjusted location of the food pantry and clothes closet, more signs are being displayed about the allowance of items to take. As this becomes clearer and the system becomes more understood, the clients will hopefully be more compliant with the rules. Once that service is steady, more analysis can be done to potentially expand to offer computers and a workspace for those in school.

Through my surveying and conversations with many benefited by Mission of Hope, I have come to understand and feel a part of a passionate organization. Generally, clients are especially appreciative of the services Mission of Hope provides. The new location has been very beneficial for the organization. Many improvements have been made already over the course of the past year as Mission of Hope caters to more clients and builds a community.

Steps for the Future

The next step for the survey would be to update it, asking additional informative questions to clients. Once the survey is improved, it can be redistributed to the clients of Mission of Hope. As more surveys are completed, a more complete picture of the population Mission of Hope serves is visualized.

More respondents will also lead to more suggestions as to how to improve the services Mission of Hope offers, and instill a sense of purpose for more clients. The data collected from the survey can be formatted into an updated report. Additionally, the data may be used for informational pamphlets, grants applications, or to overlay in informational videos. A goal of action research is to instill this sense of achievement simply by participating. In turn, allowing more clients to tell their story and goals, more lives can hopefully be benefited.

Services to consider for the future of Mission of Hope are a workspace for students, a tutoring program for young children, exercise programs or smoking intervention programs to encourage good health for all clients. Incorporating more physical or mental health rehabilitation may be beneficial for the clients of Mission of Hope to lead happy, healthy lives.

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Appendix.

Mission of Hope Consent Form.

You are being asked to participate in a study for Mission of Hope. Your participation is voluntary. There is no negative consequence to you if you do not participate. You may choose to stop your participation at any time and the notes will be returned to you. Please ask questions if there is anything you do not understand. You will not benefit directly from participating in this study. There are no known physical or psychological risks nor is there any cost to you for participating in the study.

Your answers will be kept confidential. All data will be processed anonymously. Notes will be responsibly disposed of following the study. The final results may be presented to Mission of Hope and at a research presentation at Coe College. Your name will not be used in any report that may result from this study.

The person who asked you to participate, Emily, is a student in the Action Research class at Coe College. Questions about this study or concerns about research-related injury can be directed to Professor Roger Johanson in the Department of Education at Coe College. If you have general questions about being a research participant, you may call Professor Nükhet Yarbrough, the Chair of the Human Subjects Committee for Coe College.

I have read the above information about this study and have been given an opportunity to ask questions. I agree to participate in this study.

Print your name or initials

Signature or initials

Today's date

Impact of Action Research at a Local Homeless Organization

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My community-engaged research project was conducted in the context of an Action Research course, facilitated through the Coe College Scholar's Program. Previously, the course was taught in Coe's education department at the graduate level where the research focus was on the local K-12 school district. Due to both a need expressed by several community partners to complete survey research and an increasing demand from Coe students to work in and with their community, this undergraduate Action Research course was formed as a pilot project. Three main objectives of the course were to: introduce the principles of action research on the undergraduate level, allow College Scholars to be leaders in building research partnerships with local non-profits, and teach students about the impact of action research in a community-engaged context. In the academic portion of the course, we completed readings from our textbook and conducted discussions on our readings within the class of six students. The course was centered on a large-scale investigative research project and culminated with presenting our findings both to our community partners and to the campus community.

Action research is a cyclic process of organized inquiry that is completed in a collaborative way. No longer separate, the "researcher" and "client" must work as one to understand the situation, identify problems, and find solutions. This empowering, participatory process can be easily focused on community needs, which was the focus of this course. Rather than applying the action research framework to a for-profit entity, our class elected to apply our coursework in the community on systematic inequalities. A crucial piece of this undertaking was to listen to community needs. The course faculty member partnered with Coe's Director of Community Engagement to identify non-profits with research questions. Potential community partners were identified, and the organizations sought out our course in response, replying that they would be interested in partnering with students. This community reciprocity was important to ensure our projects would be related to real questions in the community that needed to be answered, an important aspect of community-based research. Each of the six students in our class was offered potential projects, and each of us chose a nonprofit organization in the community to partner with based on the fit and our personal interests. My chosen project was partnering with a local community center that aids in the fight against hunger and homelessness.

I took this course because I aspire to do research with biostatistics. I entered the process with a strong interest in research, data, and human behavior, only having previous experience with empirical research. As a math and psychology major familiar with scientific, quantitative methods, I did not realize the significance of this type of research. I knew this course would offer a new perspective, perhaps widening my view while looking at data, as action research is less commonly used in the scientific realm. I entered the course with the traditional expectations of number crunching, required readings, presentations, and a final grade. However, it soon became so much more than that. The value of action research as a legitimate method to help the community became apparent. Trying to improve the efficacy of an organization and help people who are suffering is no small feat, especially not having had personally dealt with the issues at hand. Engaging myself in the complexity and delicacy of this organization was as fascinating and challenging as other coursework. In this community-based project, I was no longer the "researcher," but a participant. No longer looking for a significant likelihood in a set of data, I

was looking to make a viable difference in the lives of those at the organization and in the community at large. Fortunately for me, I was paired with an organization that made as much of an impact in my life as I hope I have for them. I now understand the value of community-based research. This has allowed me to view research from a different perspective and motivates me to do research that directly benefits people. It is evident that research with the community has the potential to be just as impactful as empirical research.

My community-based research landed at the intersection of hunger and homelessness. Working with Mission of Hope has been an opportunity to understand, but more importantly, witness how the Cedar Rapids community is being served. Partnering with this assemblage brought its challenges. My first hurdle was recognizing the complexity of building trust with all members of the community. Typically, the clients of Mission of Hope are anonymous and relatively transient. This creates difficulty when building trust, which is necessary to have personal conversations about homelessness and needs. This process was further complicated with my presence as a young, female student from a private college. It was important to convey to clients my intentions in surveying and interviewing them. My goals were to find answers to questions not yet realized and stimulate needed change to help in the long run. Mission of Hope allowed me to serve with the volunteers and workers while gaining insight. Amid speaking with clients and hearing their voices, I have learned how to be ethical, nonjudgmental, and supportive. I was able to work outside of my comfort zone by learning how to appropriately receive sensitive information from the clients. Over time, I became a familiar face, which added to my credibility and aided in clients sharing personal and difficult experiences with me. I have heard many stories and tribulations from clients; however, only those who were aware my project was taking place and that they were participating in it were included in my results. Balancing casual participation, while being ethical, and gaining consent for the Institutional Review Board was an important lesson in this research. Empowering these clients to share their stories enables them to improve their own lives. By sharing their trials with me, I've gained a firsthand observation and knowledge of the Cedar Rapids homeless community. Surprisingly, yet appreciatively, while getting immersed in helping others, I found it actually grounded me and brought purpose and perspective to things in my own life. These changes in the clients and myself are more than can be measured in a survey or tested through calculations.

My efforts were more than just academic. I have continued visiting Mission of Hope to volunteer in its clothes closet and food pantry. Each day that I entered Mission of Hope inspired me to further work within the community. I am grateful this project gave me a better understanding of the Cedar Rapids homeless community. As action research and community-based research aim to give voice, I believe I have done that and intend to further share in the successes of this organization and its clients. Presenting my process and findings at our annual research symposium allowed me to spread and hopefully instill the challenges and successes I have found in this project in others. One of the directors at Mission of Hope has even helped me to network with a foreign exchange student from China, who is currently attending a university across the state and is interested in philanthropy and psychology. The impact of this community research continues to expand and amaze me.

I am grateful for the directors of Mission of Hope, Martin Dwyer and Pat Ralston, who steadfastly encouraged and applauded me. Their selfless dedication has clearly made the difference at Mission of Hope and in the lives of many. With their goals and passion, I was able to create and execute a research project with my community that will support the work of Mission of Hope and improve the lives of many.

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I would like to thank Dr. Roger Johanson for leading our action research course at Coe College. I would also like to thank Kayla Lyftogt for her expertise in the field and persistent encouragement with this endeavor. I would like to thank those associated with the Undergraduate Journal of Service Learning and Community-Based Research for this opportunity to share this work and further give voice to the clients of Mission of Hope. Lastly, I would like to thank my family for their endless support in all of my pursuits.