

# MISSOULA FOOD BANK AND COMMUNITY CENTER



missoula food bank  
& community center

The [Missoula Food Bank and Community Center](#) (MFBC) has become an organization that puts the people it serves at its center. The change happened because MFBC realizes that emergency food assistance is necessary to address short-term need, but it doesn't end hunger. True change would require that systems change – including the systems at the food bank. Some of the actions MFBC took are listed below.

## ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT & LEADERSHIP

MFBC leadership and staff committed to their time, energy, and resources to finding ways to bring the people they serve into the core of the organization. They were guided by their organizational values of equity, empathy, and dignity. The goal was to live up to their established mission: "We lead the movement to end hunger through advocacy, volunteerism and healthy food for all. We nourish community."

*"As leadership staff, we're intentional. We rarely look up and go, 'Wow! Look at where we are!' We are constantly talking about where we want to be and how we get from here to there. Intentional direction finding: that's all it takes to figure out where you want to be, and then work backwards on how you are going to get there."*

— Aaron Brock, Executive Director

## CODE OF CONDUCT

MFBC adopted a new code of conduct. Previously the code was implied as part of the culture. Now the written code of conduct is signed by each staff member, board member, and volunteer. In the code of conduct, MFBC committed to being an anti-racist organization and an ally to the LGBTQ2S+ (2S stands for Two-Spirit) community. The written code transformed the goal from being an aspiration to an actual intention.

## LIVED EXPERIENCE IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

MFBC facilitates leadership opportunities for people with lived experience to share what their reality really looks like and to be a part of impactful change. For MFBC, engaging with lived experience means transparently and intentionally including people with characteristics similar to customers walking through the food bank's doors. Including individuals with lived experience in decision-making roles reduces stigma in meaningful and sustainable ways.

Intentional changes included a shift to make sure that 50% of board members have lived experience. The board is the highest level of leadership in the organization. Leadership was patient with the process of shifting to add representation of lived experience on the board. Everyone got a chance to air their concerns. MFBC held a listening session led by a neutral and knowledgeable third-party community member where staff and board could safely share their concerns, questions, and perceived barriers to the change. The session allowed staff and board members to thoughtfully work through the difference between actual and perceived barriers.

*"It's one thing for someone who didn't grow up in a food insecure household to try to make decisions. It's another thing to say, 'Oh, this is what stigma really looks like, here's how we really break it down,' from people who have experienced it in a very functional way. [That shift] just makes us better and more accessible ... How dare we decide what's best for that family if we haven't had a conversation with them."*

— Aaron Brock, Executive Director

## LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FOR PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

MFBC also created the Lived Experience Voices and Leaders (LEVL) program, which builds power and capacity

in a small group of women and non-binary people through advocacy and leadership opportunities. LEVL participants have the opportunity to share their experiences with city and state policy makers, testify in legislative committee meetings and hearings, and advocate in their local communities for improved systems for all people.

*“If we’re intentional, if we are pursuing our missions, we have to end the power over, the ‘here, let me do this for you, and you can be grateful to us for it’ paradigm. I don’t know that we can continue to say that it is an ethical or moral way of delivering services. This feels like the right thing to do.”*

— Jessica Allred, Director of  
Development and Advocacy

To encourage equitable participation, board and LEVL meetings are scheduled after working hours, include a meal, creatively address transportation needs, and happen when emPower Place staff can tend to participants’ children. In addition, LEVL participants receive a small reimbursement for their time.

*“For many people, time is your most valuable commodity, and we want to make it possible for people to participate.”*

— Jessica Allred, Director of  
Development and Advocacy

## OPENING UP TO THE COMMUNITY

When MFBCC designed its new building, they added “community center” to their name and intentionally designed a place where community would want to visit and gather. It is an attractive place where people want to be, and that works to destigmatize the services and people here. MFBCC can act as a great equalizer, a level playing field – you could be here for any reason and enjoy the community and the people.

## PRACTICING TRUST & RESPECT

Executive Director Aaron Brock is quick to identify two important values of engaging lived experience: trust and respect. “One of the reasons that we have been successful at engaging people with lived experience is because there was already a trusting relationship there. That has always been part of our culture and made the shift pretty darn easy,” Aaron states. In an average week, “more than 500 different people are helping out downstairs, and those people are from all walks of life and work side by side, and that’s been a part of the fabric for decades. We prioritize making every single person feel welcome and valued and respected when they come into these doors, from customers to volunteers to cooking classes.”