MetroWest Health Foundation Book Group Guide

Food Fighters: DC Central Kitchen’s First 25 Years on the Front Lines of Hunger and Poverty
By Alexander Justice Moore

Purpose: The group is designed for staff and volunteers of nonprofit and government agencies to gather and discuss issues related to the health of the region, nonprofit management, and other issues relevant to their work in the community. Discussion will be informal and driven by participants. It is an opportunity for professionals to learn from each other as well as to build professional relationships.

Participants: All those work or volunteer for nonprofit or government agencies in MetroWest are invited to participate. Professionals can attend some of the groups with no commitment to attend all meetings. It is an open group.

Location: MetroWest Health Foundation, 161 Worcester Rd., Suite 202, Framingham
Date and Time: Thursday, November 10th from 12:00-1:00pm

Summary: Robert Egger wasn’t impressed when his fiancée dragged him out one night to help feed homeless men and women on the streets of Washington, DC. That was twenty-five years ago, and it wasn’t that the cocky nightclub manager didn’t want to help people—he just felt that the process was more meaningful to those serving the meals than those receiving them. He vowed to come up with something better. Egger named his gritty, front-line nonprofit DC Central Kitchen, and today it has become a national model for feeding and empowering people in need. By teaming up with chefs, convicts, addicts, and other staffers seeking second chances, Egger has helped DC’s homeless and hungry population trade drugs, crime, and dependency for culinary careers—and fed thousands in the process. Written by a DC Central Kitchen insider, The Food Fighters shows how Egger’s innovative approach to combating hunger and creating opportunity has changed lives and why the organization is more relevant today than ever before. This retrospective goes beyond the simplistic moralizing used to describe the work of many nonprofits by interviewing dozens of DC Central Kitchen leaders, staff, clients, and stakeholders from the past two-and-a-half decades. It captures the personal and organizational struggles of DC Central Kitchen, offering new insights about what doing good really means and what we expect of those who do it.
Suggested Discussion Questions

These are meant to help start the discussion. The group may decide to talk about some of these themes or other themes participants find relevant and interesting.

1. Why was Egger’s model so innovative? What lessons can we learn from how he presents his vision to diverse stakeholders?

2. Egger takes a step back from the day-to-day operations at two points in the narrative. Is this important for founders or long-time directors to do? What are the pros and cons?

3. DC Central Kitchen was able to scale their model through a number of different avenues. What lessons about scaling programs can we take from their model?

4. Egger was able to gain the trust of the nonprofit community as well as funders, in part, by being a good partner and thinking about the big picture of how services in the community complement each other. Are MetroWest nonprofits thinking about collaboration and service delivery in the same way? How can we improve collaboration in our region?

5. In its early years, DC Central Kitchen prided itself on the ability to use handed down equipment, not pay for space and operate on a lean budget. Eventually it became clear that they need to strategically use resources for infrastructure to do their work well. Nonprofits always seem to be trying to do more with few resources. Is there a better way to think about investments in capacity?

6. DC Central Kitchen begins as a hunger relief agency with no focus on the nutritional value of their food. Eventually they become a leader in providing healthy food to low-income folks in the community in a variety of ways (homeless shelters, school lunches, corner stores). What can we learn from how they made this transition?

7. DC Central Kitchen makes an effort to employ as many of their culinary program graduates as possible. What are the pros and cons of employing former or current consumers of your services?