

Food Pantries

Overview

Food pantries are non-profit, community-based organizations that provide food packages monthly to low-income people at risk of hunger. The majority of food pantries are operated by faith-based organizations - such as churches, synagogues, Salvation Armies, St. Vincent de Pauls - either working individually or in partnerships with other local congregations. However, a significant number are run by secular organizations like Community Action Agencies, neighborhood and community centers, divisions of local government, and local service organizations. These community-based, volunteer organizations are central to preventing hunger in local communities and serve as a nutritional safety net for food insecure families.

Food pantries provide predominately shelf-stable food packages free to households for home preparation and consumption. Food is obtained from a variety of sources including local community food drives and donations, purchases, donations from manufacturers, retail stores, wholesalers, farmers, Second Harvest and independent food banks, USDA commodities, gardens, and increasingly prepared foods from restaurants, cafeterias, and other establishments that serve prepared meals. There is no single network serving all pantries, but can be broadly grouped into three categories: those served by Second Harvest food banks, those distributing USDA commodities under the administration of the Wisconsin Division of Public Health (DPH), and unaffiliated food pantries. There is considerable overlap among the first two networks, which provide food, training & technical assistance to their members.

Eligibility

While there is no uniform eligibility criteria, most Wisconsin food pantries serve households with income below 185% federal poverty level (FPL) - although many will also serve anyone who requests food assistance. Income eligibility at most food pantries is self-declared, but some require clients to bring proof of income. Virtually all require that recipients reside in the pantry's service area, but will typically serve first-time visitors who live outside their service area.

Access/Participation

The Wisconsin Community Action Program Association (WISCAP) database currently lists 815 Wisconsin food pantries, although it is estimated there may be as many as 900 food pantries statewide. The vast majority operate all year, although some provide only seasonal assistance during the holidays. Food pantries typically allow households to receive food assistance once per month, although a few pantries serve returning households as often as once per week. Most are open to the public according to a fixed schedule – which vary widely from daily to once per month. A limited number of sites, primarily in rural areas, are open only by appointment. Based on complete data from 237 food pantries that distribute commodities from The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)¹, and partial data from an additional 345 Second Harvest food pantries, WISCAP estimates 225,000 to 250,000 low-income people receive food assistance each month from Wisconsin pantries. In the past 5 years TEFAP pantries report serving 56% more

¹ The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) is a federal nutrition program that distributes USDA commodities to emergency food providers in each state to supplement privately donated and purchased food.

FSC Topic Paper – Emergency Food

households – a roughly comparable figure to Minnesota food shelves, which report a 50% increase since 2000.

Benefit Details

There is no standard pantry food package because the amount and type of food provided depends on inventory, allocation policy, storage & refrigeration capacity, and food purchasing funds. However pantries endeavor to provide nutritionally balanced and diverse food packages. Food packages are comprised primarily of shelf-stable foods, although many also offer perishables like breads, pastries, as well as fresh fruits and vegetables, especially during the summer. There is frequently a limited availability of meat and dairy items, usually due to high cost, limited food purchase funds (since these items are not usually donated), or limited cold storage. Special foods - low-fat, low-salt, low-sugar, kosher, and ethnic foods – are typically in limited supply. However many food pantries with Hispanic or Hmong clients will provide ethnic food packages.

A general rule of thumb is that pantries provide a 3 to 5 day food supply based on one pound per person per meal. Households typically receive 9 to 15 pounds of food per person per visit, although there is considerable variation. TEFAP food pantries, which report data on distributed food, provide an average of 45 pounds of food per household visit. While there are no comparable data on the total amount provided by all Wisconsin pantries, WISCAP estimates that food pantries distribute about 50 million pounds of food annually from all sources.

Historically pantries have provided fixed food package with minimal choice - but increasingly they permit clients to select all or most of the food they receive. Thirty-two percent TEFAP food pantries report they allow clients to choose “all or most” of the food they receive.

Program Impact

Food pantries provide direct and immediate food assistance on demand to low-income households at risk of hunger, and accomplish this with limited paperwork and administrative requirements and few or no paid staff. Families receive diverse, nutritious food at no cost to supplement their monthly food budgets. Pantries also make referrals to link clients to other resources including health and nutrition programs, energy, housing, crisis centers, Head Start, homeless and domestic violence shelters and other programs. Effective referrals can link families to significant supplemental resources, sometimes beyond the value of food packages.

Positive Developments & Trends

- Community food donations have generally increased over the past 5 years.
- More pantries allow their clients to choose 100% of the food they receive (Client Choice). Clients feel greater control and satisfaction and get food they prefer, which reduces waste.
- More pantries utilize “grocery store gift cards” to enable clients to obtain certain foods – like meat, dairy, cheese, and fresh produce. Others don’t specify what foods to buy. Gift cards give clients complete choice and control, and save the time & cost of handling donated food.
- There is increasing use of the internet. For instance “virtual food drives” enable donors to “purchase” cases of food online and pay with a credit/debit card. The pantry uses the donated funds to buy food from their grocery or food bank or buy grocery gift cards.

FSC Topic Paper – Emergency Food

Concerns, Problems & Negative Trends

- Many food pantries report rising demand that is increasing pressure on limited resources.
- Research shows there is increased “chronic use” as more people rely on pantries as a regular food supplement than an occasional safety net in emergencies.
- Many eligible clients don’t utilize federal food programs or other government assistance that could reduce pantry demand. Despite 90% of pantry clients being FoodShare eligible, according to the GAO less than half participate. This means pantry clients by-pass tens of millions of dollars annually they could use to shop for food in retail grocery stores.
- Although the ACCESS website enables people to apply online for FoodShare and other programs, many pantry clients need help to apply, lacking internet access or computer literacy.
- Food donations are inherently unstable and vary greatly from month to month in volume, variety and nutritional quality, which directly impacts food packages.
- The size and quality of food packages varies from pantry to pantry, depending on location, volunteers, financial resources and the level of community support.
- Some families are unable to get sufficient food during pantry visits to meet their needs.
- Poor people are at higher risk of obesity, in part due to the high cost of nutritious food. Some food pantry packages may contain items high in sugar, salt and carbohydrates, which can contribute to obesity. Those with special dietary needs may not find the foods they need.
- Many pantries report a lack of new, younger volunteers and a high average age of volunteers.
- There is no statewide association or coalition linking and serving all food pantries.
- Rural areas face particular challenges, including fewer local sources of food and cash donations, and higher transportation costs. Although rural poor have higher food insecurity rates than their suburban counterparts they may not have any access to a local food pantry or may need to drive long distances. The stigma associated with visiting pantries may discourage some rural households from seeking local assistance.

Food Pantries would be more effective if...

- Wisconsin provided state funding – as many other states do - to support food pantry operations, including equipment, food purchase, staff costs, facility operations, etc.
- Wisconsin developed a surplus agriculture purchase program like Ohio and Minnesota to buy surplus farm product (otherwise wasted), and package it for emergency food distribution.
- There was a statewide association or network of food pantries to facilitate communication and sharing among pantries, advocate for policies, and seek improvements to the network.
- There was an annual campaign – like in Minnesota – by faith-based and secular organizations to increase hunger awareness and raise local donations of food and funding for pantries.
- More food pantries had computers with internet access and staff/volunteers whose primary responsibility is to assist clients to apply for nutrition and health programs.
- A study was conducted to determine: (1) whether and where unserved or underserved geographic areas are located, and (2) the differing needs are of rural and urban communities.
- Pantries invited local Public Health offices to assess the nutritional quality of food packages.