

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)

Overview

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) is a Federal program that supplements the diets of low-income Americans by providing them with federal commodities at no cost. States provide the food to coordinating agencies, which in turn, distribute it to food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters that directly serve the public. TEFAP is administered at the Federal level by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and in Wisconsin by the Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS). DHFS contracts with 16 agencies to coordinate administration and regional distribution of TEFAP to nearly 300 food pantries, meal sites and shelters statewide. DHFS contracts with the Wisconsin Community Action Program Association (WISCAP) to manage food ordering, outlet monitoring and data reporting, and with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to deliver TEFAP to counties in tandem with school commodities.

Eligibility

Wisconsin households are eligible to receive federal commodities at TEFAP food pantries if their self-declared gross monthly income does not exceed 185 percent of the federal poverty level and they live in the food pantry's service area. Individuals seeking meals at participating TEFAP meal sites and shelters are automatically considered income eligible.

Access/Participation

Households usually visit TEFAP food pantries once a month and receive a 3 - 5 day supply of groceries that include commodities and privately donated and purchased foods. Food packages are as nutritionally balanced as possible. Meal sites typically serve prepared meals on a fixed weekly schedule. Shelters serve prepared meals on a regular basis but only to their residents. In FFY 06 the 237 TEFAP food pantries served a monthly average of 125,000 people. The 60 TEFAP meal sites and shelters served a monthly average of 148,000 meals.

Benefit Details

TEFAP includes “*Entitlement*” and “*Bonus*” foods, which are purchased under different authorities and for different purposes. States use Entitlement funds to buy “Entitlement” foods from a standard USDA menu to help low-income families meet their nutritional needs. The USDA purchases “Bonus” foods using Section 32 funds with the goal of stabilizing food prices by removing surplus agricultural products from the market.

- In FFY 06 Wisconsin received 7.3 million pounds of TEFAP worth \$3.77 million dollars. Of this amount Entitlement food totaled 3.9 million pounds (\$2 million dollars) & Bonus food totaled 3.4 million pounds (\$1.77 million dollars).
- Wisconsin received \$1,329,700 in TEFAP administrative funds (\$964,000 in federal administrative funds and \$365,700 in state tax dollars).

Program Impact

FSC Topic Paper – Emergency Food

TEFAP provides high quality, nutritious foods at no cost to food insecure households with minimal bureaucracy. By supplementing the 18 million pounds of privately donated food distributed by TEFAP food pantries, the program has increased the network's capacity to meet local demand for emergency food assistance by nearly 40%. It has also created an infrastructure for collecting monthly service statistics on emergency food, established standards of excellence for food providers, and promoted client referrals and enrollment in other service programs.

Positive Developments & Trends

- Access to emergency food assistance has increased as the result of the ACCESS website and the 211 Telephone Hotline referrals and other outreach efforts.
- The TEFAP Advisory Council provides a valuable forum where DHFA, WISCAP, and regional agencies can network and discuss policy. The Council has supported efforts to obtain additional private food to meet rising demand.
- There has been a 5% increase in TEFAP outlets over the past 5 years so more Wisconsin households have ready access to commodities at participating pantries & meal sites.

Concerns, Problems & Negative Trends

- Community donations and commodities vary greatly from month to month in amount, variety and nutritional quality. Providing food packages to needy households once a month is no guarantee their food needs will be met. Food packages are not equally nutritious and households with special dietary needs may not get the food they need.
- Since 2001 the number of household visits to TEFAP food pantries has increased 57% but the amount of commodities has declined 36%. This is due to sharply declining quantities of Bonus food and an 18% increase in the cost of Entitlement food.
- Bonus foods (as opposed to Entitlement foods) cause many problems: (1) when Bonus food volume drops in response to robust Ag markets the size of food packages drops; (2) Bonus volume is unpredictable; (3) Bonus is susceptible to delays & cancellations; (4) Bonus may include less desirable food; and (5) communities have no input into purchasing decisions.
- The cost of local administration, food storage & transportation has increased but TEFAP administrative funding to pay these costs has not increased.
- Participation in TEFAP requires outlets to operate according to federal/state standards. Some outlets have declined to participate because they don't want to comply with requirements.
- Many pantry clients don't enroll in federal food programs that could reduce pantry demand.

TEFAP would be more effective if...

- There were sufficient TEFAP foods to provide all food providers with free commodities.
- Any person needing emergency food assistance could get immediate & adequate food.
- Entitlement funding was increased. This would diminish the impact of variable Bonus food supplies, give communities a more stable and predictable food supply, increase food volume, provide more desirable food, and give communities more control over food purchases.
- TEFAP administrative funding was increased. States and local partners would have sufficient funds to store, transport and distribute commodities.