

INTERNAL PANTRY NETWORK REPORT

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FOOD PANTRIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: SUPPLEMENTAL REPORT ON CLIENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE FOOD PANTRY EXPERIENCE



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OVERVIEW

During fall 2020, Feeding Wisconsin partnered with University of Wisconsin – Madison to conduct a survey of visitors to food pantries and food distribution sites throughout Wisconsin affiliated with Feeding Wisconsin network food banks. The purpose of the survey was to learn about the circumstances, experiences, and perspectives of people using food pantries and food distribution sites during the pandemic. A discussion of the survey methodology, and characteristics and circumstances of pantry visitors are included in the main report. [1] This supplement provides an overview of additional information that is particularly relevant to food banks and food pantries rather than to a broader audience. It provides a summary of what respondents reported about their food pantry experience. Specifically, it includes responses to questions about finding and accessing food pantries and the kinds of foods received, as well as how well respondents liked and felt able to use the food. It also includes an overview of the feedback about food pantries that respondents offered in response to a general open-ended question about challenges and experiences in meeting food needs. The comments summarized in this report touch on their experiences at the pantry, the kinds and quality of foods received, observations about pantry practices and policies, and the ways they use the food.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FOOD PANTRY EXPERIENCE

Learning about and accessing pantries

The survey asked how respondents had learned about the pantry, and how long it takes them to get there. The most common way respondents learned about the food pantry that they had visited most recently was from friends or family (35%) or word of mouth (24%); other sources included information from a community site (10%), a communication from the food pantry or food bank (9%), or from their child(ren)'s school (5%). The remainder of respondents cited a range of sources including the media, an online search, noticing it while walking/driving, social media, church, or from having worked there, with each reported by fewer than 5% of respondents.

It took respondents an average of 15 minutes to get to the food pantry, ranging from less than a minute to two hours. 11% of respondents indicated attending a food pantry in a different county from their home, and for that group, the average travel time was 24 minutes.

Food received at pantries

The survey included several questions about respondents' most recent pantry visit, including whether the food received was pre-boxed or chosen; the kinds of foods included in pre-packed boxes; and the extent to which the food received was things respondents liked and/or knew how to use.

Consistent with the prevailing ways pantries have been providing food during the pandemic, over three-quarters of respondents had received a pre-packed box of food, 21% chose their food when they arrived, and 1% indicated they had pre-ordered. Those receiving pre-packed boxes generally received a variety of food types: 89% received fresh food, 91% frozen food, and 78% shelf stable food.

Respondents generally knew how to use the foods they received, although they were less uniform regarding whether they liked the foods: 84% of respondents reported that they got mostly foods they and their household knew how to use; half reported getting mostly foods that they or their household like to eat. These patterns were similar across household types – including households with and without children, and with and without seniors. Clients of mobile pantries were more likely to get foods they liked (59% vs 46% reported getting mostly foods they liked to eat).

CLIENT PERSPECTIVES ON PANTRY EXPERIENCE

The survey included an open-ended question in which respondents were invited to share challenges and experiences in meeting their food needs. Many used this as an opportunity to comment specifically on their food pantry experience. We summarize themes from those responses here. These comments touched on respondents' feelings about using pantries, their views on pantry rules and processes, and on the kind, quality, and amount of food received. Other responses, not discussed in this report supplement, are focused on respondents' general circumstances and non-pantry-related experiences.

Feelings about using food pantries

Gratitude

The most frequent theme that respondents shared about the pantry experience was gratitude, expressed through thanks and appreciation for the pantry services. Some examples of these comments include:

“Just would like to say thank you for the food we have been able to get. It's an amazing burden lifted.”

“I am really grateful for the food shelf, because if we didn't have one in our county me and my husband would not have enough food. Thank you.”

“The Feeding Wisconsin distribution has been so beneficial in feeding my household; it's greatly appreciated and has made a big impact on our food needs. We are thankful that this program exists and continues to help as the pandemic continues to rise and affect each and every one of us.”

“The food shelf has been a God send. We appreciate the help. With bills to pay it is hard to make sure we have all the food we need”



Respectful treatment

In addition to gratitude for the pantry services, respondents commented that, while the experience of accepting food from the pantry was difficult, and could feel embarrassing, the volunteers and staff at the sites were very welcoming, supportive, and respectful. Being treated with dignity at the pantry sites impacted clients' overall experiences, as can be seen in the following sample of comments:

"Thank you to the Feeding America members who made me feel welcome at the food drive up, even though I felt embarrassed to be there."

"I never felt belittled or looked down upon as I have reached out for help with food."

"The people volunteering there need to be told what a great job they do. VERY organized with all the traffic. In addition, those that I have dealt with are so pleasant. Often with a sense of humor... which I appreciate. AND, they have never made me feel bad that I am using this service. Thanks to all of you."

"We never thought we'd have to ask for help so at first it was very embarrassing to even apply but as we were treated with respect, we felt less stressed and more appreciative for the help."

Supporting others through the pantry

Clients also appreciated being able to help others with the food received from food pantries. A number of respondents reported that they regularly shared the food they received from the pantry with friends and extended family members. Additionally, some clients would pick up food at the pantry for others in the community during their visit.

"I share some of the goods received with other family members or friends -- I never waste any of the food received and I hope other people that receive this food appreciate it as much as I do and share it if possible."

"I know my family has been doing food pantries to save on my food stamps and folks that I know that are new to my area I give them locations on where our food pantries are and if I get more of some veggies or other can goods... I get a box ready to give to that new neighbor with directions and phone numbers to where they can get help for whatever their family needs. I was raised to share things and even my knowledge."

"I was able to get four grab and go lunches and help another family in need who was not able to sit in line for an hour and a half."

"I feel I have been able to help provide meals for friends and family who have been struggling also."



Client suggestions for improving pantry processes

Pantry clients also suggested a variety of ways to improve the food pantry process. These suggestions related to expanding accessibility of services, increasing the frequency of services, reducing the wait time, and providing more choice in food options. Comments that captured the main suggestions are listed below:

“It would be nice to have some way to have the food delivered for those of us who do not drive or have total access to a ride.”

“Although I qualify for the pantry, I can no longer go there due to the amount of standing and sitting time while waiting to be served due to my health condition.”

“I want to be able to pick my own food. That way I would get stuff I want and need and not what they just give out. Its wasteful.”

“A concern I have with receiving food from the area food pantry is that they limit you to only one visit per month.”

“We have not been able to get to the pantry when we needed to because they were either closed at the time or no vehicle to get there.”

“Figure out a line for cars. The system sucks! People were butting in line in front of me and others who were waiting over an hour. Others who just got there were in line ahead of me.”

“We appreciate the food help, but the nearest distribution sites are miles away from where we live”

Perspectives on food received

A common theme found in the open-ended survey comments related to the quality, quantity and kinds of food clients received.

Variety & quality

While some clients found the food to be of high quality and variety, other clients reported receiving expired food products and concern about the dietary/health content of the food products.

“I am thankful you can make my family have decent well-balanced meals. I wouldn't know what to do without the help and food.”

“This food program has given healthy food options for my family.”

“We are grateful and appreciative of the food we receive and are thankful. The food we do receive though, many times comes to us already molded and has dates way past expiration that smells or has to be thrown.”

“Sometimes we get food that a person on a special diet like a diabetic or heart patient cannot have. Cakes and candy are grand but to a family with a diabetic child they can be a nightmare.”

“Biggest challenge is getting fresh fruit, vegetables and meat. I cannot eat pre-packaged stuff because of allergies to preservatives.”

“We have Food Allergies & Celiac Disease. 50 to 75% of the processed foods, we can not eat. It is not that we do not like it, it is because it is Not Gluten-Free or Free from food allergens.”

Quantity

Additionally, clients commented on the quantity of the food received, reporting receiving too much or not enough of certain food products.

“We have received an abundance of a particular type of food (chicken sausage) and given the somewhat limited nature of frequency of use, it seems to be piling up. Even eating them every day for breakfast, we can't keep up.”

“We been told that there is enough packed and given to us to feed a family of five for a whole week and there is absolutely not enough at all.”

“We run short on meat and vegetables. We cook from home and can do a lot more homemade and from scratch but often receive foods we don't want such as bags of raisins and dried fruit. I could use such things as butter, eggs, lentils, water, flour, sugar, and more fruit and vegetables.”

Specific foods offered

Some clients also mentioned that the foods offered were not culturally relevant or familiar food products.

“In the pantries they don't offer tortillas or vegetables that Latinos eat, like jalapeños or dried chiles.”

“I sometimes get things I do not know how to cook and I would not buy, but I try to search and describe on google to find the name of the vegetable or product and then search recipes.”



“We receive a lot of spicy foods from the backpack program and we can't eat it so we end up giving it to other families who can have spicy foods.”

Non-food needs

Lastly, pantry clients reported a variety of non-food needs that would be beneficial to receive at the pantry.

“We would like more toilette items such as potty paper, facial tissues, toothbrushes\toothpaste.”

“Toilet paper would be greatly appreciated. We cannot purchase toilet paper with foodshare and with no money coming in we are forced to cut up t-shirts to use. With cold weather coming we have no Kleenex to blow nose.”

“Could use toilet supplies & female supplies (if possible??)”

“We need help with other household supplies. Everything is priced outrageous! Disinfect, masks, gloves, sanitizer, paper towels, toilet paper, hand soap, dish soap and laundry soap also.”

CONCLUSION

Findings from Feeding Wisconsin's survey of food pantry visitors during fall 2020 highlighted the wide range of households seeking food from pantries during the pandemic, and the central role of food pantries in supporting both food security and economic security. Those findings are documented in the primary report on that research initiative. This supplement complements the main report, highlighting clients' perspectives on their experiences with pantries as distinct from their own circumstances.

As documented here, the food visitors received was greatly valued and appreciated: common themes included the gratitude visitors felt for the food, the respectful treatment from pantry workers, and the appreciation of being able to use the pantry not only on their own behalf but to help support family and friends. Visitors also shared a range of perspectives about factors that could improve the pantry experience and value, ranging from a greater focus on healthy food and foods suitable for people with dietary restrictions; efforts to ensure the quality of food provided; more variety and choice in the kinds of foods received; greater availability of essential household and personal items in addition to food; fewer restrictions on frequency of access; and streamlined processes for food distribution. In practice, there is tremendous variety across pantries in the nature, quantity, and variety of food and other items available, as well as in operational decisions around how – and how often – visitors can receive food. These factors reflect a complicated interplay among pantry capacity, external constraints, and operational priorities and choices. Insight from visitors themselves can, hopefully, provide valuable perspectives to pantries and food banks as they continually work to meet community needs.

