

Notes from Wisconsin Food Pantries: “Transitioning to a New Normal”

Friday, June 11, 2021 from 10:00AM to 11:30AM.

Co-hosted by Feeding Wisconsin and Wisconsin TEFAP, food pantry operations experts were invited to answer questions and discuss their experiences during the continuing pandemic. We asked about their plans this fall as beginning October 1, 2021, food pantries emerge from the necessary public health safety restrictions of COVID. All seasoned food pantry operators, the panelists were:

- Donna Ambrose, Executive Director; The Neighbor’s Place, Wausau (Marathon County)
- Susan Hughes, Co-Director, The Walworth County Food Pantry and Diaper Bank, City of Elkhorn
- Marty Lee, Director; The Waushara County Food Pantry, City of Wautoma
- Liz Seefeldt, Director; The Brick Ministries; Ashland & Mellen (Ashland); Cornucopia & Cable (Bayfield)
- Mark Thompson, Director; The Sun Prairie Emergency Food Pantry (Dane County)

1. What lessons have you learned from maintaining safe food distribution during this pandemic?

Donna Ambrose, Wausau:

Know your continually changing ability to store perishable food and have a back-up: We needed to be keenly aware of our capacity to store perishable foods. We also needed a list of approved storage partners (arranged in advance) so we know where food is being held if we can’t hold it on site. We need to make sure our foods are stored safely.

Food safety training: Some staff and volunteers lacked a level of essential food safety training; i.e. don’t overfill freezers or pack haphazardly; don’t put boxes of food on the floor. This was somewhat surprising and we could have avoided some additional cleaning.

Mary Lee, Wautoma:

Put a greater focus on equipment maintenance. With our nine mobile distributions each week and the substantial volume of households (up to 2,500 per week) and food, we gained a greater appreciation that trucks, trailers and equipment need maintenance. Ensuring this as an important part of operations is necessary and needs to be part of the operations plan.

Liz Seefeldt, Ashland

Social media posts and effective communication of public messages were essential to quash rumors about the pantry closing/folding. Environment very susceptible to misinformation.

Decreasing participation rates were surprising and dismaying (because food was readily available and distributions were planned). Increases in FoodShare, stimulus checks and other assistance decreased usage. Good for households but unexpected challenges for the pantry.

Mark Thompson, Sun Prairie

- **Pandemic brought out the best in people** with donations and gratitude from people we helped.
- **Social media and having email addresses** for all volunteers incredibly helpful.
- **Food network needs to be more coordinated** to receive/recover and store enough food.
- Operationally, **we separated our restocking and food recovery functions from our food distributions to households.** We had distinct teams for each function and they worked on alternate dates. This worked well.

Susan Hughes, Elkhorn

- **What needed changing became more apparent.** We realized we needed a healthier approach to food recovery and more emphasis on fresh food, especially produce. The vulnerability of seniors made us more aware of the age of some of our volunteers.
- **We used the drive-through distribution method as a way to begin some healthier changes.** It was easier, faster and more confidential to serve households and we arranged for them to self-select fresh produce, which we began purchasing in greater quantity and variety.

2. What resources (people, authorities, tools, etc.) have been most helpful to you? What information/resources/support do you need going forward?

Mark Thompson, Sun Prairie

- The Dane County Department of Human Services was a tangible resource for specific questions.
- Collaboration between pantries, Community Action and Second Harvest was important.

Liz Seefeldt, Ashland

- Hunger Task Force in Milwaukee has a ton of information about food pantries and food insecurity as well as advocacy and programs for low-income people.

Mary Lee, Wautoma:

- Feeding America and the Hunger Task Force have been helpful to us building an infrastructure. So has the Central Wisconsin Community Foundation.
- We need continuous strengthening going forward including donations.
- We plan to apply for a separate 501c3 in the future. Our Wautoma County Board thanked us twice. That’s pretty rare.

Susan Hughes, Elkhorn

- We had donations spurred by Feeding America and the Hunger Task Force.
- We would love to see dairy recovery continue. Fresh milk from USDA through TEFAP has been invaluable.

Donna Ambrose, Wausau

- Media exposure was very important.
- Collaboration between Feeding America and Hunger Task Force is important and needs to move in that vein.
- We have a Board members from the Health Department; they were a valuable asset.

3. What distribution strategies have been using during the pandemic that might impact your future service model? What strategies are you either using or considering to offer client choice now and in the future?

Donna Ambrose, Wausau

- We are likely to continue with a hybrid model, continuing drive-up and also invite people in when the time comes.
- Our numbers went up; we had many new people we’d not seen before.
- Economic recovery from the pandemic will be slower for our service population than for others.

Susan Hughes, Elkhorn

- We will continue drive-through in the future and offer on-line registration.
- We can now double the households we serve per hour (from 25 to 50) using drive-through.
- Folks will be able to hand-select produce (which is our most costly purchase for the pantry).
- We have glass barriers in the lobby, and intake windows more than 6’ apart.
- Prepacking we do for drive-through service has opened up new volunteer opportunities for us; many of our volunteers are younger.

Marty Lee, Wautoma

- We’re going to continue outdoor mobile pantries. We’re also going to continue to use shopping carts to circulate and offer options to drive-up folks. They will have some selection of meat and produce. I don’t see that changing even in the fall.
- We’ve had no volunteers with colds or flu this year because of masks.
- Folks who are frail or have chronic conditions can call in and get set up with food that works for them.
- We also do discretionary deliveries to people who can’t get there. And we’ve been working with discharge staff from the hospital to send food home.
- We continue to wear masks on our mobile pantries, and we will continue to do mobiles. I don’t see any changes as far as going back inside – our building is too small.

Liz Seefeldt, Ashland

- Our participant numbers are dropping
- Our pantries are receiving lots of free food from TEFAP and Northern Lakes.
- We don’t have lots of capacity for Choice while we are distributing outdoors.
- We have a low number of volunteers. It is a challenge to be fully staffed.

Mark Thompson, Sun Prairie

- We are considering on-line ordering for the future and perhaps a more robust delivery system.
- We’ve worked on a model set up for Choice and done everything we can to make this pantry experience like a grocery experience.
- We are no longer following people around with clip boards. We let people shop. It reduces the stigma.

4. Assuming you are preparing to allow participants back inside your facility this fall, what specific safety measures will you keep, add or alter to accomplish this? How will you make those determinations? How will you communicate this to pantry participants?

Mark Thompson, Sun Prairie

- Additional space in our pantry will allow for more distancing.
- We will be more conscious about allowing fewer people in at a time.
- We will no longer restock while we are serving clients.
- We hope get to people who can’t get to us through delivery, working through schools and finding other ways of expanding the pantry beyond a single point.
- It would be helpful to strengthen the food security system so that smaller pantries that need more help and more rural and challenged pantry operations can benefit with more help.

Liz Seefeldt, Ashland

- Local vaccination and infection rates will determine how and when we allow people indoors. We live in a high tourist area and will be watching the influx of new COVID variants.
- We will limit the number of people we will allow indoors at a time at all four locations so we can allow space between consumers.
- We are looking at how to serve people who won't wear masks inside.
- We have a meeting of pantry operators and pantry users this summer. Every September we have civil rights training. We're planning an in-service and will discuss what it means to open the doors with needed safety measures.
- We need donors not to forget about us; we're still here and working no matter what.

Marty Lee, Wautoma

- We will be flexible and mobile.
- We will continue to develop infrastructure.
- We need a new building in order to increase service.
- We have worked together well; everybody has shown leadership.

Susan Hughes, Elkhorn

- We plan to retain most of the current model (drive through distribution) except for our fresh produce market.
- Drive through has ended the problem/debate of who was first in line.
- We may allow 2-3 people in the pantry at a time.
- We're mailing about 2,000 households – all those in our database. We believe their feedback is valuable.

Donna Ambrose, Wausau

- We are still wearing masks.
- The non-food programming that our agency does will resume in fall.
- We have started a delivery service. Marathon County is the largest land mass county in the state.
- Keeping up with sanitation and communication will be a challenge.
- We are following the Safe and Healthy Food Pantry Model. We will have four trainings to kick it off in the fall and an open house when folks start coming back.

Moderator & co-host: Stephanie Jung Dorfman, Executive Director, Feeding Wisconsin

Co-host & note taker: Kitty Kocol, Wisconsin TEFAP Coordinator, Wisconsin Department of Health Services

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