

# An Examination of Emergency Food Supply and Distribution in Rural Pennsylvania

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According to Feeding America, over 10 percent of Pennsylvanians are food insecure, meaning they lack access to adequate and affordable food. The emergency food network aims to reduce food insecurity by helping individuals and households better meet their food needs. This network consists of food banks and their local partner agencies (e.g., food pantries, soup kitchens) that, together, collect and distribute food to people in need.

Emergency food organizations are non-governmental, but they rely on support from both the federal and state governments. Two federally funded, state-administered programs—The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and the Senior Food Box Program—and two state-funded and run programs—the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP) and the Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System (PASS)—provide significant food and funding to food banks. These collaborations allow both the government and network to provide more comprehensive food assistance than either could provide alone.

The emergency food network is complex, and there is a need to consider gaps in the network that can leave both people and places either unserved or underserved. This study examines the strengths and challenges faced by the emergency food network in meeting the food needs of Pennsylvania residents, particularly those in rural areas.

## Methods

This study aimed to: 1) conduct an inventory of food bank operations in Pennsylvania, and 2) identify gaps and barriers in emergency food distribution in rural Pennsylvania. The researchers employed a multi-level, multi-method research design, focusing on a sample of 22 food banks. For Goal 1, the researchers conducted a survey and in-depth interview on operations, supply processes, and distribution processes with leadership at each food bank. For Goal 2, they chose four food banks to serve as case studies. Across these case studies, they interviewed 35 partner agencies and 65 service recipients about their experiences distributing and receiving food. The researchers also visited two agencies per case study to observe food distribution procedures. Following data collection, they conducted a thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and assess similarities and differences across the case studies.

## Key Findings

**Food banks' operations.** Food banks' overarching mission is to reduce food insecurity and hunger. To do this, food banks operate as warehouses for food sourced from government programs and corporate, wholesaler, retail, and individual donations. Food banks supply food to local partner agencies, who in turn distribute it to residents through a variety of distribution models. Some food banks also supply food directly to residents at their locations or through mobile distributions. Food banks and their partner agencies receive funding from government programs, foundation grants, and private donations, and they rely heavily on volunteer labor. Due to poor data on food insecurity, many food banks also

conduct "hunger mapping" to track need in their service areas.

**Residents' positive experiences with food assistance.** Service recipients overwhelmingly report positive experiences accessing emergency food. They explained that pantries serve as a consistent resource to reduce experiences of food insecurity. Many service recipients cannot afford high-cost, nutrient-dense items like produce and meats and especially rely on pantries for these foods. Service recipients also discussed receiving non-food benefits, like information about services such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and rent, utilities, and transportation assistance. These services help reduce financial vulnerability, further mitigating food insecurity. For service recipients, pantries are not only a source of food but also a locus of anti-poverty assistance.

**Common challenges and barriers in rural Pennsylvania.** Nonetheless, food banks and pantries face challenges meeting the needs of rural residents, and rural residents face barriers to accessing emergency food services. Top of the list of challenges is food banks and pantries' need for increased funding to purchase more food (quantity) and fresher, more nutritious food (quality). Relatedly, rural service recipients face barriers to obtaining the quality and quantity of food they need, due to limits around when (time), where (place), and how (distribution model) they can receive emergency food. For food banks and pantries, reaching the most remote communities is a challenge, while for recipients, transportation remains a barrier to access. Some rural food banks and pantries also cannot acquire adequate space and refrigeration to support their operations.

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Rural food banks and pantries also struggle to maintain a stable and consistent volunteer base. It is crucial to have volunteers who are knowledgeable about emergency food operations and who treat service recipients with respect and dignity. Food banks and pantries note that stigma diminishes benefits to service recipients and may prevent some people in need from accessing services at all.

*Unique challenges and barriers across rural Pennsylvania.* The size and geography of food banks shape which communities face these challenges. While larger food banks have greater capacity to take on innovative initiatives to meet residents' needs, they may not serve their rural partner agencies as well as urban agencies. Smaller food banks can establish closer relationships with all their partner agencies, but they may lack the capacity to integrate innovations and new programming into their operations.

Both the quality and quantity of emergency food available also vary greatly along the urban-rural continuum. Rural counties with lower populations and population densities (e.g., Greene) tend to have less variety and quantity than rural counties with higher populations and population densities (e.g., Lycoming). Within rural counties, communities with lower populations and population densities also tend to have less variety and quantity than those with higher populations and population densities.

*Remaining unmet need.* Due to these challenges and barriers, service recipients continue to face food insecurity, despite receiving emergency food. 52 percent of interviewees told us they cut the size of their meals, skip meals, eat less than they should, or go hungry. Food banks also report that thousands of food-insecure residents in each county are not being served at all. The most remote rural areas are most likely to be unserved, as they may lack the infrastructure to meet residents' needs. Residents may need to travel 10 or more miles to a pantry, or operating hours may be limited. Food banks also struggle to adequately serve seniors, veterans, children, non-English speakers, and the unhoused.

*Innovations to tackle challenges and barriers.* Food banks are constantly looking to harness innovation to meet residents' needs. Innovations can be as simple as expanding to new types of partner agencies,

shifting how they work with these agencies, and seeking new sources of donations. Other innovations involve harnessing new technologies or mechanisms for connecting service recipients with emergency food, such as using DoorDash to make home deliveries. These innovations make headway in overcoming the challenges and barriers, but unmet needs remain. These innovations help to inform our policy recommendations to expand food banks' capacity to meet remaining needs.

### Policy Considerations

The researchers propose policy recommendations to bolster the emergency food network's ability to reduce food insecurity. They focus on key recommendations for the five main government programs that provide emergency food assistance. In the full report, other recommendations concern data tracking and hunger mapping, integration of food assistance into health care, transportation infrastructure, and organizational capacity.

*1) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP):* The General Assembly (GA) should consider providing a time buffer between reenrollment deadlines and benefit termination; tapering benefits for

those between 200 and 300 percent of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL); and reducing work requirements and age limits.

*2) The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP):* The GA should consider raising the eligibility threshold to 300 percent of the FPL; increasing flexibility on pick-up locations and how many TEFAP boxes households can receive; and instituting cross-eligibility for other government programs.

*3) State Food Purchase Program (SFPP):* The GA should consider increasing annual funding (\$23 million) and creating rolling grant support for urgent infrastructure needs.

*4) Senior Food Box Program:* The GA should consider raising the eligibility threshold to match TEFAP and SFPP; ensuring that older adults can receive boxes from the pantries where they receive other foods; and providing funds (\$1 million) for box distribution.

*5) Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System (PASS):* The GA should consider allowing food banks to use PASS funding to purchase produce from approved non-farm vendors during the winter months and expanding the list of approved vendors to include farms in all food banks' service areas.

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