An Examination of Emergency Food Supply and Distribution in Rural Pennsylvania

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Abstract: According to Feeding America, over 10 percent of Pennsylvanians are food insecure, meaning they lack access to adequate and affordable food. Determining how Pennsylvania's emergency food network can best meet residents' needs is essential to mitigating food insecurity. This study examines the strengths and challenges faced by the emergency food network in meeting the needs of residents, particularly those in rural areas. We collected and analyzed survey, interview, and observational data from a sample of 22 food banks, 35 of these food banks' "partner agencies" (e.g., food pantries, soup kitchens), and 65 residents served by these partner agencies. This report outlines the major findings of this study. Residents overwhelmingly report positive experiences with emergency food assistance. Accessing food through this network reduces their experience of food insecurity. However, food banks and their partner agencies face several challenges in adequately reaching rural residents, including insufficient infrastructure, transportation, volunteer base, and quality and quantity of emergency food. Due to these challenges, many service recipients remain underserved, meaning they continue to experience food insecurity despite accessing services. Additionally, many food-insecure people—especially older adults, veterans, children, non-English speakers, the unhoused, and those in the most remote rural areas—remain entirely unserved. We highlight innovations employed by food banks to overcome these challenges and provide policy recommendations for state and local governments.

Keywords: Emergency food system, food assistance programs, food banks, food pantries, food insecurity

Executive Summary
Background and Purpose

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*. Our 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.

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

Results

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, 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. At the 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.

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 ten 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 existing 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

We propose policy recommendations to bolster the emergency food network's ability to reduce food insecurity. We focus here 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.

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.

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.

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

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.

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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Introduction

Food insecurity—the limited or uncertain access to adequate and affordable food—is a critical social, economic, and political challenge both in Pennsylvania and across the United States (USDA, 2022). For people of all ages, food insecurity is linked to adverse physical health effects, like diabetes and high blood pressure (Gunderson & Ziliak, 2015), and mental health effects, like depression, anxiety, and stress (Wolfson et al., 2021).

Many believe there is simply a moral imperative for countries as wealthy as the U.S. to ensure that their citizens have adequate access to food (Miller & Thomas, 2020). Others argue that reducing food insecurity is necessary for the public good. Food insecure individuals tend to have higher health care expenditures because they face higher rates of chronic conditions (Berkowitz et al., 2019; Dean et al., 2020). Thus, high levels of food insecurity can impose burdens on national and local health care systems and lead to increased health care costs (BMC Medicine, 2023). Ensuring people have adequate access to food allows them to become more productive members of society (BMC Medicine, 2023). According to this argument, an investment in meeting people's food needs creates a net benefit for both the state and the country.

There is an urgent need to examine the current state of food insecurity in Pennsylvania, consider the Commonwealth's strategies to reduce food insecurity, identify gaps in these strategies that allow food insecurity to persist, and craft solutions to close these gaps.

Food Insecurity in Pennsylvania Before and After the Pandemic

Over time, food insecurity has remained a constant feature of U.S. society. Since 2000, the national food insecurity rate has never fallen below nine percent (USDA, 2023). However, it has shifted according to economic and social trends. National food insecurity ranged between 14 and 15 percent amid the Great Recession due to high unemployment rates, low access to credit, and high food prices (Andrews & Nord, 2009). After reaching a peak of 14.9 percent in 2011, the rate began to decline as the country began its economic recovery (USDA, 2023). Nonetheless, food insecurity remained a common experience. Right before the start of the pandemic, 1.4 million Pennsylvanians, or nearly 11 percent of the population, experienced food insecurity (Feeding America, 2021a).

Despite a decade of decline, the food insecurity rate jumped again at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, national food insecurity skyrocketed to 38 percent due to sudden losses of income and supply chain challenges (Kakaei et al., 2022). In Pennsylvania, the number of food-insecure individuals reached as high as two million early in the pandemic (Feeding America, 2021b). Yet, these rates were reined in within relatively short order. By March 2021, the national food insecurity rate was 8.9 percent—lower than it had been in the entire 21st century (Kim-Mozeleski et al., 2023).

This rapid decrease in food insecurity over one year can be attributed to national policy responses and local community galvanization. During the pandemic, families enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) received a second round of benefits each month (USDA, 2023). Economic impact payments and the

expanded Child Tax Credit also improved families' food purchasing power (Lê-Scherban et al., 2023). People were donating to local hunger-relief organizations at increased rates, growing the local emergency food supply for those in need (Haynes-Maslow et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, this decrease was temporary. The national food insecurity rate increased from 10.2 percent in 2021 to 12.8 percent in 2022 (Hall, 2023), and the rate in Pennsylvania increased from 9.4 percent in 2021 to 12.0 percent in 2022 (D'Onofrio, 2023). These increases resulted from a combination of factors. First, the expanded benefit amounts, which decreased food insecurity during the pandemic, ended, decreasing families' funds to purchase food (Just Harvest, 2022). Second, we saw the highest inflation rates since 1981 (U.S. BLS, 2022). In 2022, food prices increased by 9.9 percent, and in 2023, they increased by an additional 5.8 percent (USDA, 2024). Thus, families saw their benefits reduced as their purchasing power also plummeted.

Furthermore, many households facing food insecurity are not eligible for SNAP benefits. In Pennsylvania, between 32 and 46 percent of food-insecure individuals were ineligible for SNAP over the period 2017 to 2021 (Feeding America, 2021).[1] These households, therefore, faced these steadily increasing food prices without any cash assistance for food.

There are also specific demographic groups and geographies that experience higher rates of food insecurity than others. Indigenous, Black, and Hispanic/Latinx populations have far higher food insecurity rates than white and Asian American populations (Hall, 2023). This disparity reflects differences in poverty rates, but it also points to differences in how well these groups are served by both the governmental and non-governmental social safety net in America (Bowen et al., 2021).

Rural counties, both in Pennsylvania and the broader U.S., also tend to have higher food insecurity rates than urban counties (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021). In 2019, the food insecurity rate across Pennsylvania's rural counties was 11.8 percent, compared to 10.8 percent in urban counties (Mckie et al., 2022). Yet, these statistics mask the significant heterogeneity that exists across rural places. Within Pennsylvania, there is considerable diversity, with some rural counties facing much higher needs than others (Chandler, 2020).

The pandemic and its aftermath deepened these inequities in food access (Larson et al., 2020; Leone et al., 2020). Post-pandemic, rural areas saw larger increases in food insecurity than urban areas. In 2022, 14.7 percent of rural households across the nation were food insecure, compared to 12.5 percent of urban households (Food Research and Action Center, 2023). Thus, while need is expanding across the board, rural residents—and especially rural residents of color—are bearing the brunt of increased food needs.

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[1] More recent estimates on the percentage of food-insecure individuals who are ineligible for SNAP in Pennsylvania had not been released at the time of this report.

The Emergency Food Network in Pennsylvania

Food insecurity is currently mitigated through both a governmental and non-governmental food safety net (Schenck-Fontaine et al., 2017). SNAP, which provides monthly benefits for low-income households to purchase food, is the most notable component of the governmental safety net. For families who receive SNAP, estimates suggest that these benefits reduce the likelihood of being food insecure and very food insecure by 30 percent and 20 percent, respectively (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010).

A number of other government programs also provide food or funds for food directly to different target populations. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Children, and Infants (WIC) provides nutritious foods for low-income women who are pregnant, postpartum, or breastfeeding and their children up to age five. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) provide free meals to low-income children at schools. The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides reimbursements to childcare centers and adult daycare centers that serve nutritious meals and snacks to low-income children, older adults, and adults with disabilities.

These programs are federally funded but are administered by states. States decide how these programs work for their residents. With SNAP, for example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) sets guidelines, but state governments have flexibility within those guidelines. States determine eligibility, create application procedures, and administer benefits to residents.

For families who are ineligible for SNAP and these other benefits, and for those with greater need than these programs provide, the non-governmental food safety net—or the *emergency food network*—helps to fill remaining gaps in food needs. This network consists of food banks, pantries, and other hunger-relief organizations that collect and distribute food to individuals and families in need. As outlined in Figure 1, food banks tend to acquire the bulk of emergency food and supply it to pantries and other local organizations, who then distribute it to residents. Nonetheless, there are some variations: sometimes food banks provide food directly to residents, and sometimes pantries acquire food directly from suppliers.

Figure 1: Schematic of Emergency Food Organizations
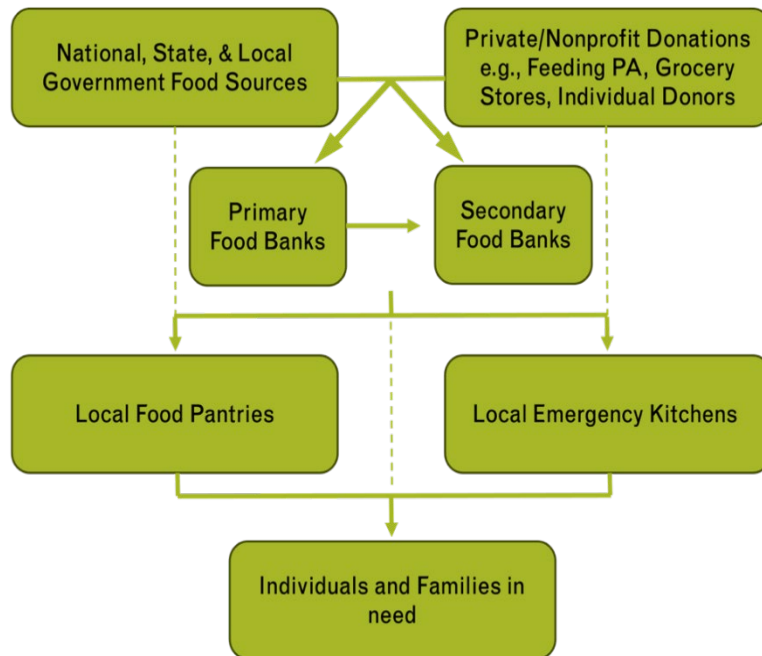
Note: Adapted from Ohls and Salem (2002).

Food banks can be classified as "primary" or "secondary" based on their food sourcing, distributing, and provisioning relationships. Primary food banks have direct contracts for government programs and/or source food directly through purchase agreements, grant funding, and private or corporate donations. Secondary food banks may also receive food directly through grant funding, donations, and government contracts, but they also rely on their relationships with primary food banks for sourcing food.

There are also "network" organizations that partner with food banks to support their work. One such network, Feeding America, partners with over 200 food banks across the country. These network organizations conduct many activities. For example, they may connect food banks with retailers seeking to provide food donations, or they may consult with food banks to develop new methods for food sourcing and distribution. Often, joining a network comes with a membership fee or something similar.

Food banks rely strongly on grants and private donations. However, in Pennsylvania, four government programs also provide a significant amount of food and funds:

The **Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)** is a federal program by which the USDA makes commodity foods available to states. The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture (PDA) provides food to one "lead agency" in each county, which then distributes food to pantries and other local hunger-relief organizations. These organizations either distribute this food to eligible recipients or use it to prepare and

serve meals. Household consumption of these foods requires falling below 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL).

The **State Food Purchase Program (SFPP)** is a state program by which the PDA provides funding to one lead agency in each county for the purchase of emergency food provisions. These agencies may purchase food wholesale and distribute it to pantries and other local hunger-relief organizations, or they may provide funds directly to these organizations to purchase food themselves. Purchased foods are to be distributed to families who fall below 185 percent of the FPL.

The **Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System (PASS)** is a state program operated by the PDA that facilitates the transfer of food donations from over 200 Pennsylvania agricultural producers to 13 food banks, which then distribute these donations to pantries and other local hunger-relief organizations. State funds reimburse the producers for harvesting, processing, packaging, and transporting costs. PASS products include fruits like apples, vegetables like corn and squash, dairy products like butter and milk, and animal products like eggs and beef, and can be given to families who are eligible for TEFAP and SFPP foods.

The **Senior Food Box Program** draws on federal funds from the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) to serve older adults at least 60 years old who have incomes below 130 percent of the FPL. The USDA distributes commodity foods and administrative funds to the PDA, which then handles distribution to food banks that cover different portions of the state. These organizations distribute the food either to pantries or directly to residents.

These collaborations between governmental and non-governmental organizations provide more comprehensive food assistance than either type of entity could provide alone (Ohls & Saleem-Ismail, 2002). However, they also make emergency food distribution more complex. Organizations must keep track of different service recipients' eligibility for foods acquired through these programs. Recipients who do not meet eligibility requirements can only receive food that organizations acquire through donations or purchase themselves.

The emergency food network significantly reduces food insecurity by providing food directly to people in need (Bazhergi et al., 2016). Nonetheless, existing research points to challenges faced by both emergency food organizations and service recipients. Emergency food organizations struggle to source nutritious foods (Simmet et al., 2017) and, thus, cannot provide for service recipients to the best of their abilities. Many people in need are also not served by the emergency food network at all (Zepeda, 2017). Rural residents are most likely to lack access to emergency food organizations, and government funds for emergency food assistance may not reach rural communities to the same extent that they reach urban communities (Whitley, 2014; Hamel & Harman, 2023). Addressing these challenges could help to further reduce food insecurity rates across the state and country.

Overview of the Study and Report

Determining how Pennsylvania's emergency food network can best meet expanding needs is essential to mitigating food insecurity. While scholars have extensively detailed

the experience of hunger (Fielding-Singh, 2021), little is known about how organizations adapt to growing food insecurity (Gunderson & Ziliak, 2018). The research that does exist tends to treat organizations independently (Mabli et al., 2010), even though they act in tandem to provide food assistance. Our study addresses these shortcomings by examining the strengths and challenges faced by *food provisioning networks* in meeting the needs of Pennsylvania residents—particularly those in rural areas.

This report proceeds as follows. First, we outline the goals and objectives of the study. Second, we describe the methods used to collect and analyze survey, interview, and observational data from food banks, partner agencies, and service recipients. We then turn to the results. We: 1) illustrate how food banks in Pennsylvania acquire and distribute emergency food; 2) outline how emergency food assistance benefits service recipients; 3) list challenges faced by the emergency food network in serving rural communities and barriers that rural residents face accessing emergency food services; 4) examine unmet food needs across Pennsylvania; and 5) highlight innovations that food banks are using to overcome challenges and better meet remaining needs. Finally, we provide policy recommendations for the federal, state, and local governments, and we provide brief concluding thoughts.

Goals and Objectives

Research has pointed out the crucial role that the emergency food network plays in helping to meet U.S. residents' food needs. Nonetheless, this network is complex, and sufficient attention has not been paid to the ways that hunger-relief organizations work together. There is a need for research to consider gaps in the emergency food network that can leave both people and places either *un*served or *under*served. To achieve this aim, this study was guided by two overarching goals and seven embedded objectives.

Goal 1: To conduct an inventory of food bank operations in Pennsylvania.
- Objective 1.1: Collect surveys on food banks' operational structure, funding sources, and distribution outcomes.
- Objective 1.2: Conduct interviews on food banks' outreach efforts, distribution processes, and service provision decisions.
- Objective 1.3: Create a map of food banks' work and their service areas' needs.

Goal 2: To examine four case studies of food provisioning networks and identify gaps and barriers in their food distribution efforts.
- Objective 2.1: Conduct interviews with partner agencies on food bank interactions and community needs.
- Objective 2.2: Conduct interviews with service recipients on emergency food utilization and individual needs.
- Objective 2.3: Visit partner agencies to observe food distribution processes.
- Objective 2.4: Compare case studies' strengths and challenges in meeting rural residents' needs.

Methodology

To meet these goals and objectives, we employed a multi-level, multi-method research design. We outline the methodology below and provide additional detail in Appendix 1.

Food Bank Operations and Challenges

We focused on the 22 organizations defined as food banks by the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS) (2022). To conduct an inventory of their operations (Goal 1), we conducted a web-based survey and an in-depth interview with food bank leadership. These tools examined food banks' operational structure; supply processes from national, state, and regional funding and food sources; and distribution processes to partner agencies and service recipients.

We first conducted the survey (see Appendix 1 for protocol). We collected publicly available contact information for the Executive Directors at each food bank. We reached out to Directors via email and phone to explain the study and seek participation. Once Directors confirmed their participation, we sent them a Qualtrics survey link. Some Directors filled out the survey themselves; others forwarded it to an appropriate staff member. Despite seeking expert advice on the survey protocol, some food banks struggled to assemble the requested information. We received completed surveys from 13 food banks (59 percent). We filled in gaps using data shared by Hunger-Free Pennsylvania and publicly available tax information.

After receiving the completed surveys, we conducted interviews. This sequence allowed us to ask any clarifying follow-up questions regarding the survey data. Interviews were most often conducted with Executive Directors but were sometimes conducted with another member of the leadership team (e.g., an Operations Manager). Some food banks assembled multiple staff members for the interview who could discuss different themes. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted via Zoom or phone. Interviews followed the protocol provided in Appendix 1; however, they were semi-structured, meaning we asked different follow-up questions to different interviewees. We conducted interviews with all 22 food banks (100 percent).

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. We used the transcriptions to write participant-level memos, highlighting salient themes. We then conducted a thematic analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2016), building a list of recurring themes by reading across participant memos. These themes are enumerated and discussed in the results.

Food Provisioning Network Case Studies

Following food bank interviews, we selected four food banks to serve as focal points for case studies. We selected the case studies to attain diversity in geographical scope, concerning both service area size and rurality. Our case studies included: Central Pennsylvania Food Bank, which serves 27 counties across the urban-rural continuum; Helping Harvest, which serves one urban (Berks) and one rural (Schuylkill) county; Mercer County Food Bank, which serves a single larger rural county (Mercer); and Corner

Cupboard, which serves a single smaller rural county (Greene). Figure 2 includes a map of these food banks' service areas.

These food banks provided us with a list of their partner agencies with contact information. We contacted a sample of partners, aiming for diversity in *type* (i.e., food pantry, soup kitchen, shelter, etc.) and *geography* (i.e., degree of urbanicity or rurality). We explained the study's purpose and requested participation in an interview on agency operations, their relationship with the food bank, and interactions with service recipients. In total, we conducted interviews with 35 partner agencies. Table 1 displays the number of partner agencies interviewed by type and geography. Figures A1-A4 in Appendix 1 provide maps of each food bank's service area, noting the locations of the interviewed partner agencies.

Figure 2: Service Areas of Food Banks Selected as Case Studies
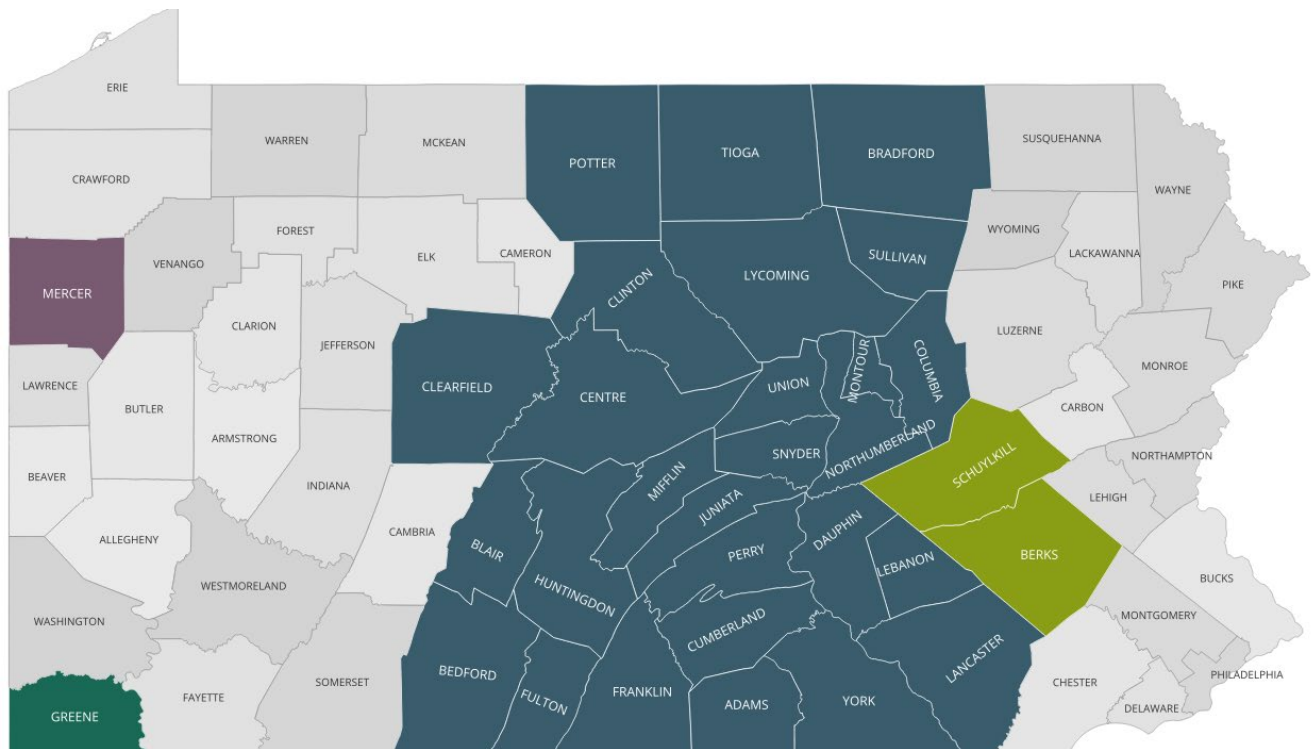
Table 1: Number of Partner Agencies Interviewed by Agency Type and Geography

Type of Partner Agency	#	Geography of Partner Agency	#
Central Pennsylvania Food Bank			
Food pantry	2	Rural	4
Multi-service agency	99	Urban	7
Helping Harvest			
Food pantry	8	Rural	4
Multi-service agency	3	Urban	7
Mercer County Food Bank			
Food pantry	6	Rural	8
Soup kitchen	1		
Youth program	1		
Corner Cupboard			
Food pantry	5	Rural	5

Most interviewees were directors of partner agencies, although some were other key staff or volunteers. Interviews were conducted via Zoom or phone and lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were again semi-structured and followed the protocol provided in Appendix 1.

We also visited two partner agencies per case study, again seeking to attain diversity in the *types* and *geographies* of the agencies visited. Table 2 displays the number of partner agencies visited by type and by geography. During the visits, we conducted participant observation to witness different models of food distribution and interactions between staff, volunteers, and service recipients. We jotted notes on paper or on our phones and typed jottings into full-field notes after visits.

Table 2: Number of Partner Agencies Visited by Agency Type and Geography

Type of Partner agency	#	Geography of Partner Agency	#
Central Pennsylvania Food Bank			
Multi-service agency	29	Rural	2
Helping Harvest			
Food pantry	2	Rural	1
		Urban	1
Mercer County Food Bank			
Food pantry	1	Rural	2
Soup kitchen	1		
Corner Cupboard			
Food pantry	2	Rural	2

While conducting site visits, we also recruited service recipients to participate in interviews. These interviews were conducted at a later date via phone and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Interviews were semi-structured and followed the protocol provided in Appendix 1. In total, we conducted interviews with 65 service recipients. Table 3 lists the distribution of selected demographic characteristics and places of residence among service recipients in the sample.

Table 3: Characteristics of Service Recipients

Demographics	%	Place of Residence	%
Gender		**Rural Counties**	
Male	26	Greene	17
Female	74	Lycoming	35
Race		Mercer	15
Black	16	Schuylkill	15
White	80	**Urban Counties**	
Multi-racial/Other	5	Berks	8
Age		Dauphin	8
18-59	46		
60+	54	**Food Assistance**	**%**
Has Children		**Snap Recipient**	
Yes	31	Yes	55
No	69	No	45
Education Level			
Less than high school	32		
High school diploma/GED	54		
BA+	14		
Employment Status			
Employed	22		
Caregiver	5		
Retired	37		
Disabled	18		

Note: All case study interviews were recorded and transcribed. As with our food bank interviews, we wrote participant-level memos for each case study interview, and we again conducted a thematic analysis for each case study (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). We specifically looked for differences between urban and rural partner agencies and service recipients within each case study, and we looked for similarities and differences across case studies.

Food Bank Operations

We now turn to the study's findings. In this first section, we draw on survey and interview data from food banks. We summarize the missions of food banks in Pennsylvania, and we outline how they work in tandem with the state government, other food banks, suppliers, and partner agencies to meet their missions.

Food Bank Missions

Food banks report that their primary mission is to *reduce food insecurity and hunger* in their service area. Traditionally, food banks have met this mission by providing emergency food. Yet many food bank leaders described this current moment in emergency food provisioning as transformational, and their activities now extend beyond just providing food. Doing anti-poverty policy work has become central to the work of many food banks, as reducing poverty also reduces hunger.

Reducing or ending hunger is not as simple as it may appear. To reduce hunger, food banks may provide people food directly to reduce hunger on an ongoing basis; the government may provide cash assistance programs such as SNAP or WIC for people to purchase food; and the government or other agencies might implement poverty reduction strategies involving economic and community development tools to increase household purchasing power so that people can purchase more food themselves.

To reduce poverty and thereby reduce hunger, food banks may operate call centers for people experiencing acute crises, offer job training programs, and run other support programs such as utility assistance programs. Central Pennsylvania Food Bank calls this "root cause" work, as it aims to address the root causes of hunger, "truly ending hunger at the household level." Through this lens, hunger is seen as only one of many symptoms of poverty that food-insecure households experience.

As a part of their mission to reduce hunger, many food banks conduct extensive outreach to help enroll service recipients in SNAP. SNAP applications are handled at the county level and can vary widely. Food banks report that many residents do not apply for SNAP because the application process is complex. To combat these challenges, many food banks assist with SNAP applications. Second Harvest Food Bank of Northwest PA, for example, has a designated SNAP coordinator. The majority of the 11 counties Second Harvest serves are very rural, so extending information about eligibility and application assistance can help bridge gaps in enrollment. This is especially important since COVID-era policies that eliminated or reduced SNAP renewal requirements have ended, meaning that people who are unfamiliar with the renewal process may have lost benefits entirely.

Food Bank Structures

Food banks in Pennsylvania vary greatly in scope and reach. There are large, regional food banks like Central Pennsylvania Food Bank which serves 27 counties, and there are smaller, more localized food banks like Mercer County Food Bank, which serves a single county. Table 4 lists the 22 food banks included in the study. The table notes whether each is a primary or secondary food bank and whether each is affiliated with Hunger-

Free Pennsylvania and/or Feeding Pennsylvania. We explain what these distinctions mean in the following sub-sections.

Table 4: List of Food Banks Included in the Study

Primary Food Banks	Secondary Food Banks
Central Pennsylvania Food Bank*+	Armstrong County Community Action Program
Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank*+	Bucks County Opportunity Council Inc.*
Helping Harvest*+	Chester County Food Bank*
Mercer County Food Bank*+	Community Partnership, Inc.*
Philabundance*+	Corner Cupboard
Second Harvest Food Bank of Lehigh Valley & NEPA*+	Fayette County Community Action*
Second Harvest Food Bank of NW PA*+	Food For Families*
SHARE Food Program*	Food Helpers*
Weinberg NE PA Regional Food Bank*+	Indiana County Community Action Program*
Westmoreland County Food Bank*+	Salvation Army of Beaver County
	Tableland Services
	York County Food Bank*

*Note: *Affiliated with Hunger-Free PA, +Affiliated with Feeding PA.*

The Networks: Hunger-Free Pennsylvania and Feeding Pennsylvania

As we explained in the introduction, most states have "network" organizations that partner with food banks to support their work. There are two main network organizations in Pennsylvania that partner with the majority (18) of the 22 food banks in our study: Feeding Pennsylvania and Hunger-Free Pennsylvania. Both network organizations offer unique services to their affiliated food banks.

Hunger-Free PA was founded in the 1960s to network the disparate organizations doing hunger-relief work in Pennsylvania. Today, it holds several government contracts to coordinate emergency food work. It is the contact point for senior food boxes and

manages some larger grants that can benefit food banks, pantries, and service recipients. For example, Hunger-Free PA received a grant from DoorDash for an initiative called Project DASH, which delivers senior food boxes to older adults who are homebound or have limited mobility. We discuss this more in depth in the section on innovations.

Feeding Pennsylvania (Feeding PA) is a subsidiary of Feeding America, which began in 1979 to collect, store, and redistribute unwanted food from grocery stores, gardeners, and farmers to people in need. A food bank must pay a membership fee to become an affiliate, and membership confers numerous benefits. Most notably, Feeding PA distributes food directly to member food banks. Feeding PA also has exclusive donor relationships with certain food retailers, meaning that member food banks get priority for donated food over other food banks.

Both networks require regular reporting from food banks, which includes—at a minimum—data on pounds of food distributed and households served. According to many food banks, Feeding PA's membership requirements are more extensive than Hunger-Free PA's and include expectations for operations in addition to reporting requirements. Feeding PA requires that a minimum of 25 percent of the distributed food be fresh produce. Feeding PA food banks must also charge partner agencies a shared maintenance fee based on the pounds of product they receive from Feeding PA. According to documentation, this fee must be between one and 19 cents per pound. Feeding PA also requires documentation of service recipients' income eligibility. And finally, food banks must submit monthly distribution reports, including reports from all partner agencies. These records must be kept for three years and include the total product received and distributed on a monthly basis.

Different Types of Food Banks

Our sample includes 10 primary food banks and 12 secondary food banks. The primary food banks tend to be larger, multi-county organizations that source food directly from government programs, retailers, wholesalers, and donors and then redistribute it to secondary food banks and partner agencies in their service areas. Only two of the primary food banks serve a single county. The secondary food banks also receive food directly from government, retail, and donor sources, but they rely on the primary food banks for a significant percentage of the food they distribute. All of the secondary food banks serve only a single county.

Figure 3 provides two illustrative schematics outlining these relationships. In the top panel, we show the food supply and distribution operations of Mercer County Food Bank, a primary food bank serving a single county. Mercer County Food Bank receives food and funds to purchase food from the four main government programs, along with private donations and foundation/NGO grants. It distributes some of this food directly to service recipients and some to partner agencies, which then distribute it to service recipients.

In the bottom panel, we show the food supply and distribution operations of Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank (GPCFB), a primary food bank covering 11 counties,

and Corner Cupboard, a secondary food bank serving Greene County. GPCFB receives food and funds to purchase food from the four main government programs, along with private donations and foundation/NGO grants. Corner Cupboard also receives food and funds to purchase food from two of the government programs, private donations, and foundation/NGO grants. GPCFB distributes food to secondary food banks in its service area, including Corner Cupboard. These secondary food banks distribute this food to service recipients and partner agencies in their own service areas. GPCFB also distributes some food to its own partner agencies and some food directly to service recipients.

While the larger, primary food banks tend to focus exclusively on reducing food insecurity and hunger, many have the capacity to dedicate resources to other activities outside of food distribution, like political advocacy, research, and building networks with other service providers. Multi-county, primary food banks also partner directly with single-county food banks, other hunger-relief organizations, and food assistance programs such as SNAP and WIC.

Figure 3: Models of Food Supply and Distribution for Primary and Secondary Food Banks
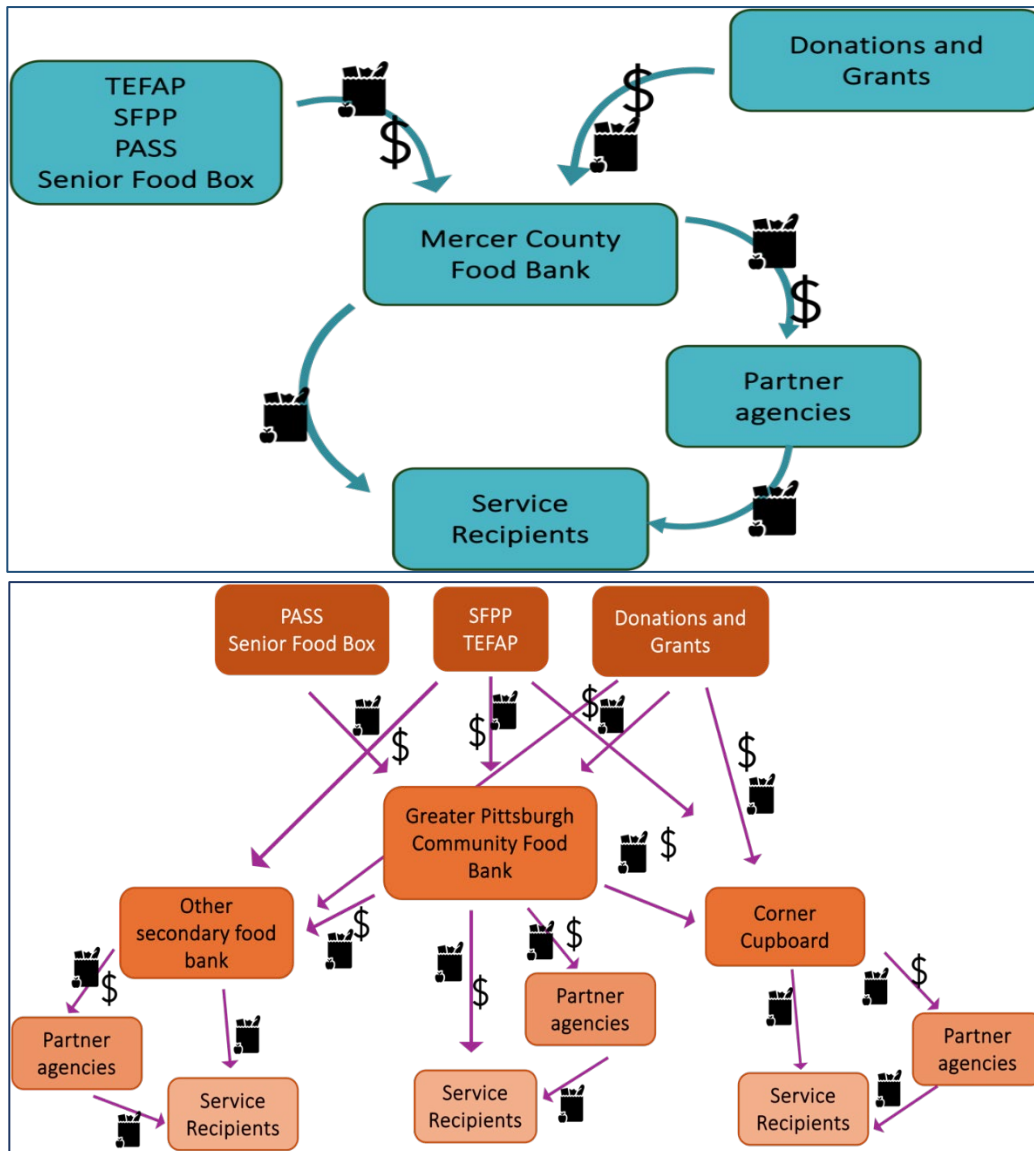
Note: Primary food banks have relationships with many secondary food banks and partner agencies across their service area, contributing to the complexity of their organizational structure and functions.

Often, single-county food banks operate within a Community Action Agency (CAA). This means that food distribution constitutes only a part—albeit a significant part—of that organization's operations, working towards an overarching mission of poverty reduction. Bucks County Opportunity Council, for example, estimates that their food bank programs make up about 20 percent of what the larger organization does. A CAA might also offer other anti-poverty services related to housing, utility assistance, economic self-sufficiency, and job training. Many traditional food banks that have

historically focused on emergency food are also now engaging in a wider mission of poverty reduction, connecting residents to some of the above services as well.

The operational overlap of primary and secondary food banks can be complex. As an example, Helping Harvest distributes food in both Berks and Schuylkill counties at over 300 distribution sites. It serves as the lead agency for TEFAP and SFPP only in Berks, meaning it only distributes food from these two government programs in Berks. Helping Harvest distributes foods from the other two government programs, PASS and Senior Food Boxes, in both counties. One of Helping Harvest's partner agencies is Schuylkill Community Action, a CAA that serves as the lead agency for both TEFAP and SFPP in Schuylkill. Thus, Schuylkill Community Action receives food from Helping Harvest and the USDA, but it also receives about $225,000 annually from PDA to purchase food.

These complexities have emerged, in part, because the emergency food network has expanded organically over time to meet the urgent food needs of residents. Some food banks existed before the advent of emergency food government programs, while others emerged after. The network has had to adapt and respond to different demands across time and geographic location.

Food Bank Activities

In our interviews, food bank leadership described their operations in several ways: through the *programs* they run; the logistics of *sourcing*, *warehousing*, and *distributing* food; their navigation of *policies and protocols*; and the other work they must do to ensure their success and longevity. This latter aspect can include *grant writing and fundraising*, managing a *volunteer base*, and overseeing the many *external partnerships* that allow food banks to run successfully.

Mapping Hunger and Estimating Food Need

For food banks to know how much food to source and distribute, they must first be able to estimate demand. It is crucial that food banks map geographies of hunger and estimate changes in need over time and space to meet the needs of food-insecure residents. Many food banks have developed programs to conduct resident surveys and manage data, and some even have staff members specifically dedicated to this task. At the very least, all food bank directors analyze data they receive from partner agencies, gauging changes in need and predicting what need will look like over the following weeks and months.

Food bank leadership told us they spend substantial time trying to understand hunger across their service areas. The federal government only collects food insecurity data at the state level, so finer-grained estimates, such as at the county level, do not exist. What's more, the official food insecurity measures are only collected in December, and data are released several months after. As one food bank explained, "The challenge is that there's always that data lag." By the time data comes in, it is already out of date. Thus, many food banks rely on triangulating alternative sources of data, such as newspapers, to learn about grocery store closures, demographic shifts, and changes in school districts. Estimates of need come from a combination of data patterns, intuition from experience, and collaboration between food banks and pantries to establish

informal algorithms for how much food to order each month. Based on these analyses and resulting estimates, food banks source and distribute food to partner agencies across their service area.

Sourcing Food: From Suppliers to Food Banks

   Government Food. According to our survey, the four main government programs (TEFAP, SFPP, PASS, and the Senior Food Box Program) provide approximately half of the food that most food banks distribute. We describe these government programs in the introduction. There are a series of Congressional acts that govern the level and scope of federal and state government spending on these programs. What is colloquially known as the Farm Bill—the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018—is central to the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service. The Farm Bill governs TEFAP, the Senior Food Box Program, and SNAP. The current Farm Bill is up for reauthorization in 2024.

   In most counties in Pennsylvania, TEFAP accounts for a much larger percentage of the total food distributed (as measured in pounds) than the Senior Food Box Program, although of the *total* poundage of food distributed, TEFAP foods generally account for around one-quarter. Senior Food Boxes include only shelf-stable items, like boxed pasta and canned tuna, while TEFAP provides a broader variety of foods, including fresh produce, dairy, meats, and eggs. Food banks use state funding (through PASS or SFPP) as well as grants and cash donations to purchase additional food to supplement the TEFAP product.

   Households must have an income below 185 percent of the FPL to receive TEFAP or SFPP-purchased products. But food banks and pantries told us they rarely turn people away who do not fall below this line. This creates a logistical challenge: food banks and pantries must ensure that these individuals only receive foods that were donated or purchased with private funds, and no foods that were provided via TEFAP or purchased via SFPP.

   Donated Food. Food donations, including those from retailers, wholesalers, individuals, and community food drives, are vitally important to the emergency food network. Nonetheless, food banks explained that donated items do not always match their goal of providing recipients with nutrient-dense foods. That said, food banks recognize the importance of striking a balance between "healthy" foods and less nutrient-dense "snack" foods. Food banks also rely on donations for non-food items, including diapers, hygiene items, and household cleaning products like laundry and dish detergent.

   Some food banks also rely on food rescue as a source of donated food. Food rescue organizations source food that would otherwise be thrown away by participating restaurants or retailers. Food rescue can be a great way to divert food waste, but food banks explained that they must be especially aware of expiration dates and freshness, and that the collection of this food can be labor- and time-intensive.

   Purchased Food. Food banks directly purchase much of the food they distribute using a combination of donations, grants, and/or state funds through SFPP and PASS. Generally, these purchases cover foods they do not receive through government

programs or food donations and tend to include dairy products (especially fresh milk), meats, and produce. Some food banks that serve a high proportion of different racial or ethnic groups told us they use donations or grants to purchase culturally appropriate foods. Other food banks told us that they will purchase foods to meet special medical dietary needs (e.g., gluten-free, dairy-free, diabetic, or low-salt diets).

Distributing Food: From Food Banks to Pantries and Households

Food banks serve as a warehousing place for food and act as an intermediary between food sources and residents in need. Many food banks own trucks and have drivers on staff to deliver to partner agencies, whereas some agencies will pick food up from food banks themselves. Smaller, predominantly rural food pantries rely on volunteers to pick up food from the food bank in advance of distribution. Some food banks will deliver food directly to pantries for no cost, while others have a minimum delivery requirement.

All food banks in our sample, except one (Food Helpers of Washington County), partner with local agencies for distribution. Sometimes a "pantry" is not a physical location but simply a distribution run at a firehouse, church, library, or parking lot. Some partner agencies are larger organizations, and the pantry is just one of many services. Food banks are also increasingly operating their own mobile distributions to give food directly to service recipients. All food banks also have some form of on-demand, emergency food available for those experiencing an immediate food crisis. Nonetheless, our survey revealed that, except for the case of Food Helpers, partner agencies still do most of the distribution to recipients.

Trunk Model vs. Choice Model. Partner agencies like pantries utilize two main models of food distribution. In the trunk model, volunteers place pre-packed boxes of food directly into a service recipient's car. Food banks told us that this model became quite prevalent during the pandemic to reduce contact between volunteers and service recipients. They explained that this model has persisted in many areas because of the perceived efficiencies it offers; fewer volunteers and less time are required for a pantry to conduct a distribution. But food banks described how these efficiencies simultaneously created other challenges, including a lack of service recipient choice in the food they receive. There are also inefficiencies in this model—food gets wasted because recipients do not want to eat it or cannot eat it, and service recipients waste time and gasoline while queuing for box pickup.

In the choice model, service recipients go into pantries and choose which items they want with the assistance of a volunteer. Nearly all food pantries we spoke to implemented some form of the "choice" model before COVID. During the height of the pandemic, public health and safety measures necessitated the switch to a "trunk" model. While some pantries we interviewed have kept the "trunk" model, many recognize the importance of choice and have since returned to the "choice" model.

Importantly, pantry managers noted that no single model of food distribution is preferred by all residents. Some service recipients prefer the anonymity and convenience of having food placed in their car and having less contact with pantry volunteers. Others prefer being able to choose which foods they receive, enjoy, or even rely on the social

relationships they develop at food pantries, and see the "choice" model as offering respect and dignity. In our interviews with service recipients, we also heard people express preferences for both models.

Emergency Food Boxes. All food banks and some pantries offer some version of an "emergency food box." Food banks explained that emergency food boxes can serve to fill emergency gaps in service recipients' needs between regular food distributions. While there are standard distributions of TEFAP, CFSP, SFPP, PASS, donated, and purchased foods, there is widespread recognition that this (usually) monthly distribution might not last. Households in crisis who need food beyond this standard distribution can access an emergency box, but this box is usually smaller than the regular distribution and consists only of shelf-stable foods (i.e., no produce or meat). This access is not expected to be a regular occurrence. Some food banks told us that households can access emergency food only once per year, or even once in a lifetime.

Mobile Distribution. In our interviews, food banks discussed that needs are not being met through traditional pantries alone. Thus, several food banks have begun to operate "mobile pantries" or "mobile markets" to close gaps in emergency food access. Mobile pantries employ the trunk model, except it is operated by the food bank itself instead of by a partner agency. The food bank takes their own truck out to a central location—like a church parking lot, a fairground, or a park—and provides food boxes directly to residents.

Feeding Pennsylvania recommends that their affiliated food banks start mobile pantries to help them expand their reach. Weinberg NEPA Food Bank, for example, was aided by Feeding Pennsylvania to begin operating mobile distributions in Susquehanna and Wyoming counties, the two most rural counties in their service area.

Figure 4 provides an illustration of the supply and distribution processes employed by food banks in Pennsylvania. This figure serves to summarize the numerous methods described in this section and the prior one. However, not all food banks receive food from all of the sources in the illustration, and not all food banks employ all of the distribution methods.

Figure 4: Sources of Food Supply and Methods of Food Distribution

Figure 4
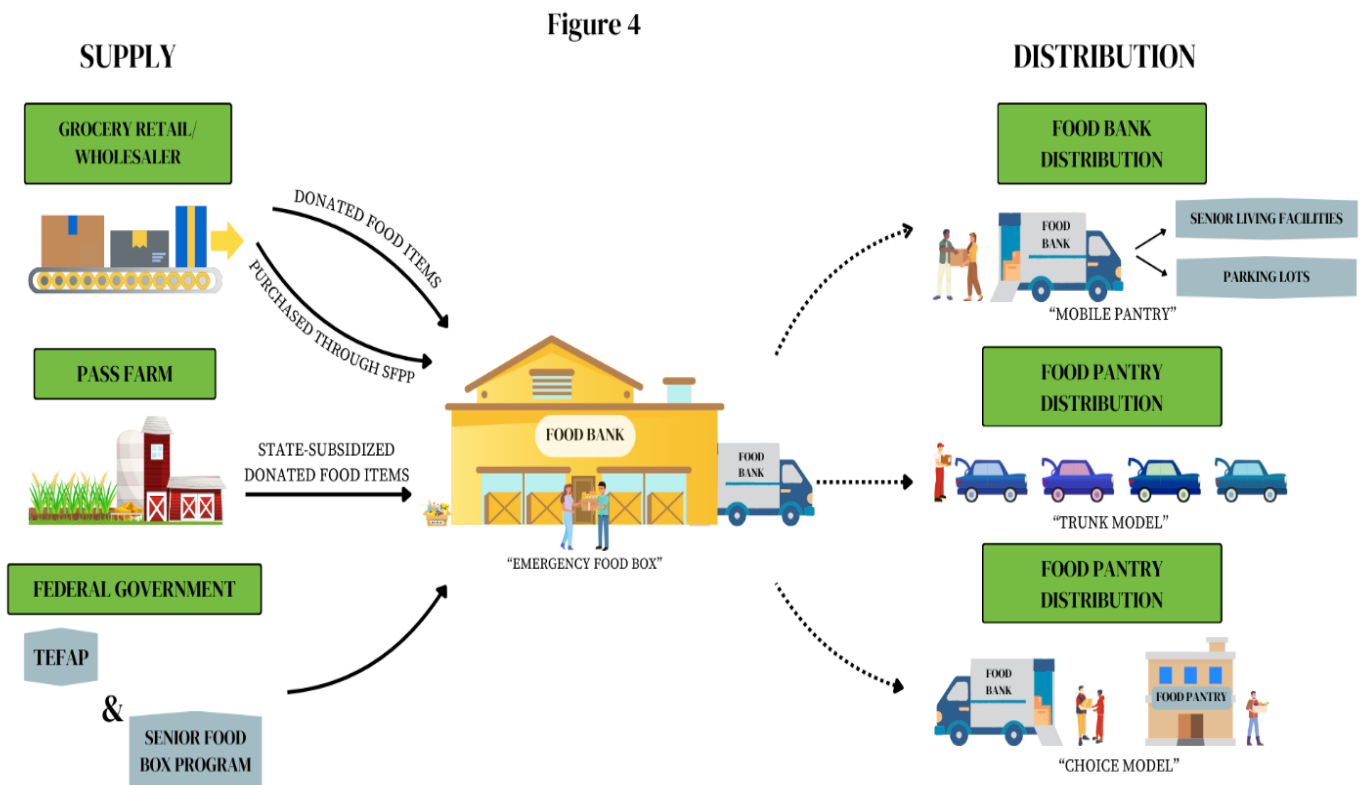
Securing Funding

A significant part of food banks' operations includes securing funding. Food banks report that funding needs have increased annually since 2019. Some have seen their budgets expand by 100 percent or more. To meet expanding funding needs, food banks rely heavily on donations. Cash donations generally come from individuals, local businesses, and larger corporations, while grants come from nonprofit organizations, foundations, and government agencies.

Larger food banks explained that donations and grants generally comprise the most significant share of their general operational budgets. In our survey, the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank, for example, reported that only 10.9 percent of their budget entails government funds. Single-county food banks tend to rely more on government funds for their operating budgets simply because their capacity to write grants is smaller and there are fewer donors across a smaller service area. Mercer County Food Bank, for example, reported that 23.6 percent of their budget entails government funds. Single-county food banks operated by CAAs have especially large percentages of their budgets provided by government funds since CAAs operate a host of government programs. The Indiana County Community Action Program reported that 74.2 percent of their operating funds come from the federal and state governments.

Despite the need that all food banks have for donations, some food banks told us that individual or corporate donors are more likely to donate money to larger, regional food banks rather than smaller, single-county ones. Larger food banks often have greater visibility in their service area, and there are also misconceptions about funding relationships between primary and secondary food banks. One food bank told us that donors likely think their donations to a primary food bank will trickle down to secondary food banks, which is not always the case. Smaller food banks must work hard to attract both food and money donations to support their operations.

Recruiting and Managing Volunteers

All of the food banks in our sample have paid staff, although the number of staff varies greatly. According to our survey, Corner Cupboard has the fewest paid staff at five, while Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank has the most at 161. Yet regardless of staff size, all food banks rely heavily on volunteer labor. Corner Cupboard reports relying on approximately 150 regular volunteers annually, while Greater Pittsburgh relies on nearly 19,000. In food banks themselves, volunteers help to sort and pack food, preparing boxes to go out to partner agencies. Volunteers also typically help to facilitate food banks' mobile distributions by directing cars, tracking service recipients, and loading boxes into cars. Partner agencies, especially those in rural areas, are even more dependent on volunteers. Partner agencies may not even have a single paid staff member, meaning that volunteers manage all aspects of food distribution.

Volunteers are crucial to all aspects of food bank and food pantry operations. Food banks told us that the emergency food network would simply not run without the power of volunteers. But in addition, volunteers also have their finger on the pulse of residents' needs. As such, they serve as a crucial source of data for food banks and food pantries in the hunger mapping work they do.

Providing Other Social Service Assistance

Several food banks—particularly CAAs—report engaging in other general needs work. Some of the services we heard about include Medicaid enrollment assistance, utility or rent payment assistance, first-time home-buyer programs, and technology education for older adults. The "anti-poverty" or "root cause" approach taken by many larger food banks and by CAAs allows organizations to address service recipients' needs holistically. According to Tableland Services in Somerset County, a person might approach them for help because they are homeless, and their need for food emerges later in the conversation. Or this might happen the other way around. As they explained, experiencing hunger can prevent a person from focusing on getting a job or ensuring that their rent or utilities are paid. These organizations believe economic and food insecurity are intertwined, and they seek to address them as such.

Food banks that do not commit resources directly to other social services have often built relationships with other organizations, so that if people come in with an expressed need that the food bank cannot meet, they can connect them to appropriate resources.

Some invite these other organizations to their food distributions to provide information directly to service recipients.

Residents' Positive Experiences with Food Assistance

As outlined in the methodology section, we interviewed 65 people across seven counties who receive food from one of the four case study food banks. Service recipients reported several reasons why they utilize food pantries and other hunger-relief organizations, and they expounded upon the numerous benefits that these organizations provide.

Helps to Fill Food Gaps

Some of the service recipients we spoke to fall above the income cutoff for SNAP benefits but cannot always afford to purchase sufficient food. These individuals reported that emergency food distributions are the only consistent food resource available for them. Other service recipients we spoke to receive SNAP, but the benefits they get are not sufficient to meet their needs for the whole month. These individuals reported that emergency food distributions often fill the remaining gaps in their needs.

Whether or not they receive SNAP benefits, service recipients told us that, when they experience food insecurity, they must choose between paying rent or a utility bill and purchasing food. Some have foregone medication to afford food. Jess, a service recipient in Greene County, explained: "You have to call the utilities and ask them if they'd be okay with waiting on a payment until next month, because you have to decide whether to buy medication and food over paying a utility bill." Emergency food distributions allow many service recipients to avoid these types of situations. Jess continued, "We don't have to do that now with having the food pantry available to us... It's such a relief and such a stress reliever."

Emergency food distributions become especially important for people navigating changes in their financial situations. Kimberly, a service recipient in Lycoming County, saw her SNAP benefits decrease from $900 to $200 a month when she added her husband to her case. She got a part-time job to make up for this loss in benefits, but that additional income caused her SNAP benefits to decrease even further to $121 a month. She reported visiting food pantries a lot more frequently after these decreases.

In the operations section earlier, we explained that food banks are working to diversify the foods they provide. In particular, most food banks have been focusing on sourcing and distributing fresh produce and other nutrient-dense foods. Service recipients reported that receiving these foods was especially helpful. Grace, a service recipient in Schuylkill County, described how she benefits specifically from accessing these foods. She explained that it "puts less pressure on your wallet when you go to the store. Meats are always expensive. Fresh produce is always very expensive, things like that." Grace explained that receiving nutritious foods at distributions not only allows her to eat healthier, but also allows her to spend her own money on remaining items that are cheaper in the stores.

Reduces Social Isolation

The biggest non-food benefit provided by the emergency food network entails the social connections and relationships that service recipients can form. Many service recipients described feeling respected by pantry volunteers. Visiting a pantry could make them feel supported and seen. Calvin, a service recipient in Greene County, told us that visiting his local pantry is a dignifying experience. He said, "It makes the people feel like... they're human again. Instead of telling your kids, 'We can't eat this week," you could tell 'em, 'Well, we can eat this week because the food is there, they're taking care of us.'"

Service recipients also interact with other service recipients when accessing emergency food assistance. Older adults in particular told us that food pantries and soup kitchens offer a level of social interaction that they would otherwise not have in their lives. Some described the other people attending a soup kitchen as their friends. Others explained that the experience of visiting a food pantry or soup kitchen was so positive that they decided to become regular volunteers there as well.

During our site visit to one multi-service agency, we met with the director as well as several volunteers and service recipients. While giving us a tour, the director greeted several service recipients and asked about their families and other details of their lives. The agency's soup kitchen (which they call a "café") operates every weekday, and conversations we had with volunteers and service recipients made clear that the café is a place where people feel welcome. We interviewed one retiree who said he visits the café nearly every day it is open because it gives him a chance to leave his house and socialize with other people, which he said is "really important."

But for forming these social relationships to be possible, service recipients must be able to enter a place and spend time with volunteers and/or other service recipients. The distribution model of each pantry has a big impact on the possibility of and depth of relationships that can be formed. Volunteers at soup kitchens and "choice" pantries demonstrated in their interviews and at site visits how well they knew the "regulars" who visited their pantries. Service recipients reported that the community in these spaces was so important to them that they became volunteers themselves. Especially in rural areas, food pantries are a key source of information, support, and social interaction, especially for older adults, who often rely on food pantries and the social networks they develop there.

Brokers Connections to Other Services

As we described in the section on food banks' missions, food banks engage in hunger reduction and anti-poverty work beyond food distribution. Because food insecurity is a symptom of poverty and access to food is intimately related to access to other services (e.g., transportation), food banks either offer assistance directly to residents or offer connections to services in other sectors, such as housing or healthcare. We heard from service recipients how important this source of information can be, especially since these services can free up extra income to spend on food or relieve them of the decision between paying rent or buying food.

Jess, for example, the service recipient from Greene County, explained that the volunteers at her local pantry distribution always check in on her and offer to connect her with other assistance she may need. She told us, "When you go there, it's like, "Hi, how are you doing? Is everything okay? Can we do anything to help assist you better? They ask a ton of questions. I've never had somebody do that before... I've never felt so, so welcomed."

As the stories of Jess and other service recipients showed us, the role that food banks and pantries play as information hubs and connectors to other social services cannot be understated.

Common Challenges and Barriers in Rural Pennsylvania

Having outlined the key work of Pennsylvania's food banks and the many benefits that residents experience, we now turn to discuss the challenges that food banks and pantries face serving rural residents and the barriers rural residents face to accessing emergency food services. For challenges facing food banks and pantries, we draw on interviews with food banks and pantries. For barriers facing residents, we rely on interviews with service recipients themselves, but also on interviews with pantry staff and volunteers who often have close relationships with service recipients and speak to their experiences as well.

Insufficient Quantity of Food

The need for increased funding to purchase more food (quantity) and fresher, more nutritious food (quality) is at the top of the list of challenges facing food banks. In the introduction, we explained that, shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic began, a series of federal and state policies were enacted to reverse the rapid expansion of food insecurity. These included increasing SNAP allocations, reducing barriers to accessing SNAP,[2] and expanding the Child Tax Credit. As a result of these anti-poverty policies, food insecurity in 2021 was lower than it had been in decades (Llobrera, 2022).

In their interviews, food banks, pantries, and service recipients all asserted that the expansion of SNAP benefits during the pandemic was a game changer, alleviating people's stress about where or how they would be able to afford food. Katy, a service recipient and mother of five in Greene County, told us, "When we had the extra [SNAP] benefits from the pandemic, oh my gosh, that helped tremendously... It was a big blessing for my family." The Operations Manager of Mercer County Food Bank explained, "When they had all the pandemic SNAP benefits, they had all the extra money coming in, we actually saw a huge decrease [in numbers of service recipients at distributions]. Our agencies really were not that busy." In other words, the expanded SNAP benefits reduced food insecurity, thereby reducing people's need for emergency food.

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[2] Pennsylvania allowed families to continue receiving SNAP benefits without reapplying or for the maximum amount of time under program rules, waived work requirements for most people, temporarily suspended the three-month limit on SNAP benefits for unemployed adults under 50 without children in their home, and expanded eligibility for college students.

But these COVID-era policies expired at the same time that inflation was at its highest rate in decades. This confluence of events caused a jump in poverty rates in 2022 (Hall, 2023) and an increase in the rate and severity of food insecurity. Consequently, food banks reported seeing a significant rise in the need for emergency food services. The Operations Manager at Mercer County Food Bank continued, "It [numbers of service recipients at distributions] just exploded once those benefits were gone... We're up 73 percent from last year... Fuel prices are high, inflation's high, and the benefits are going down, and people just don't know what to do."

However, food banks and pantries have been struggling to source an adequate quantity of food to match the rising demand for their services. Leadership at Food Helpers in Washington County told us that, during the pandemic, "money was flowing into communities... Almost daily, trucks were dropping off food at the warehouse here." Comparatively, after the pandemic, "the funding to communities [and] to individuals has dried up." In addition to losing their own COVID-era support, food bank leadership reports that inflation is impacting their ability to purchase food. One food bank estimated that they are paying twice what they paid for food just a couple of years ago. Pantries also report that inflation is compromising their ability to serve people. The lack of availability of certain staple foods—especially milk, butter, and eggs—is further increasing costs.

Like Mercer County Food Bank and Food Helpers, many food banks and pantries reported serving record numbers of people, but said they were doing so with fewer resources. Helping Harvest told us that they saw self-declarations of need increase by over 15 percent between 2022 and 2023, but simultaneously, they did not have as much food to distribute. Speaking of their food supply challenges, Chester County Food Bank said, "It never seems to be quite enough from all different funding streams." Every single food bank we spoke to expressed similar experiences with a rise in demand and a decrease in supply. The solution many food banks and pantries are employing is to serve everyone who asks for help, but to provide less food for each family than they did in the past.

On the resident side, service recipients also reported an inability to obtain the quantity of food they need. Especially in rural areas, service recipients explained that the lack of pantry options can constrain their ability to meet their food needs. We learned that in some rural counties like Somerset and Greene, households are assigned to a single pantry based on their place of residence. Service recipients in these counties said they are only allowed to visit that one pantry. Rural residents in other counties, like Schuylkill and Mercer, said there still may be only one or two pantries that are within easy driving distance.

Yet even when residents can physically access multiple pantries, they may still be constrained in the amount of food they can receive. There is no statute in Pennsylvania that limits how often households may receive TEFAP food each month. However, individual food banks and pantries have adopted varying formal policies and informal practices that perpetuate differential access to emergency food across the state. Some of the service recipients we spoke to live in counties where they can visit two or three

separate monthly distributions. Others we met live in counties where they are constrained to only receiving one monthly distribution of food.

Sometimes, even when food banks and pantries do not limit TEFAP distributions, volunteers might not understand or agree with the practice. At one distribution in Berks County, where there is no formal limit to the number of TEFAP distributions a household may receive, a volunteer told us that many recipients were "greedy"—they saw the same cars at multiple distributions where they volunteered. Another group of volunteers questioned whether these "repeat customers" were really in need.

These sentiments impact recipients' experiences. Grace, a service recipient in Schuylkill County, told us: "A volunteer brought me to tears one time... There was no restriction or limit. You was allowed to go to more than one. I was going through a pretty bad period, and I went to a couple different ones... And there was a volunteer that was very nasty about it. She said, 'I saw you at such and such. Whatcha doing with all this food? You don't need all this.' It's humiliating enough. You're petrified, you're going to run into somebody and things like that. You don't need to be humiliated by the volunteers on top of that." Because of this experience, Grace told us she stopped attending multiple monthly distributions, despite her need: "I've been too embarrassed."

For residents with regular working hours, the operating hours of their local pantries can also pose a constraint. Service recipients told us that pantries in rural areas are generally open only once a month, or even once every two months, for two or three hours. Pantry hours fall at the same time and day each month, usually during normal business hours. If there is only one pantry that is physically accessible to an individual, it might become logistically inaccessible because of the constrained timing of the distribution. Some service recipients reported going hungry in months where they missed the monthly distribution window for their local pantry.

Another challenge with these limited pickup windows is that food can run out. Unless recipients get there as soon as the pantry opens, or even before, there might not be enough food. Theodore, in Dauphin County, described the stress this imposes: "If you don't get there and miss that, you won't get nothing to eat. Or no groceries." To avoid this, service recipients at trunk model pantries report lining up in their cars hours before the pantry opens. Many service recipients noted the challenge this imposes in terms of extra costs of time, gas, and money—resources they cannot afford to waste.

Finally, emergency food boxes can help service recipients when facing acute needs in between regular distributions. However, we learned that many pantries in rural areas do not have the capacity to provide them. For example, only some of the pantry sites in Greene County have the capacity to store emergency boxes. One pantry manager we spoke with operates out of a church, which allows them to store leftover dry food for people to come by and get in emergencies. Another pantry manager operates at a local fairground and said there is no such place at this site. Many service recipients told us they do run out of food from their standard distributions and could use more, but due to access issues, emergency boxes are not able to fill this gap.

Insufficient Quality of Food

In addition to struggling to source the quantity of food needed in their service area, food banks face challenges related to the quality of the food they source. Quality-related challenges concern the types of food that food banks receive and what they can provide to pantries for distribution.

Food banks told us they will "take whatever they can get," but donations from retailers and wholesalers do not always align with their goal of providing nutrient-dense foods like produce. We also heard that many shelf-stable foods are not consistently available for order through TEFAP, which means that pantries may not receive those staple foods for distribution. A pantry manager in rural Clearfield County explained that this can lead to strange assortments of food in their distribution boxes: "If you look at this emergency box, there's really not meals inside that. You have a lot of random different types of products." Many pantry managers commented that they are not receiving the quality of food that was available pre-pandemic or even during the pandemic.

Some foods are simply not consistently available year-round. While the PASS program helps food banks source produce during the growing season in Pennsylvania, during the winter months, food banks must use their own budgets to purchase produce from other distributors. Leadership at one food bank called the PASS program "a double-edged sword." While they find it important that the PASS program allows them to build relationships with local growers and farmers, they often find themselves short of softer produce—like greens—during the "lull seasons." Many food banks told us they would also like to receive more protein-rich foods. We consistently heard that "the amount and variety of meat that is available, as well as fish and other protein options" need to be expanded to meet the dietary needs of service recipients.

Funding restrictions can also present a challenge for food banks to provision the varieties of food that service recipients desire. Until recently, SFPP funds could not be used to purchase cooking oil, but several food banks successfully advocated to lift that restriction. Spices and seasonings still cannot be purchased with SFPP funds. Food bank leadership explained to us that spices are an important component of many recipes and help people to incorporate a wider variety of foods, especially produce, into their diets. They asserted that being able to provide these items is necessary to ensure service recipients benefit from the other foods they provide.

Another issue commonly cited by food banks was the struggle to attain sufficient food to meet the cultural and dietary needs of service recipients. Saskia, an immigrant from the Caribbean, spoke to the lack of familiar foods at her local pantry, saying, "People eat different stuff from different places. But the stuff that they send is just generic... It would be great if they would actually pay attention to who the people are that come to the pantry and tailor the stuff they offer."

For Saskia, available foods do not align with her cultural preferences. For others, available foods may not align with their dietary needs. This is particularly true of foods provided through the Senior Food Box Program. Both food banks and service recipients relayed that some items are just not practical for the senior population. The director at

Food Helpers in Washington County told us they get some of these foods donated back to them: "There are several items that... may be shelf stable, but it's not what they want, and it's not what they are accustomed to eating." Some older adults we spoke to did not use shelf-stable milks and canned beans, in particular, due to the difficulty of digesting them.

In a more dire example of quality issues, several service recipients told us about times they had received food that was past expiration or rotten. Emily, a service recipient in Greene County, told us she throws a lot of food out because "a lot of stuff is rotten. Sometimes it's moldy." One service recipient reported even getting food poisoning from deli meat in a donated sandwich that was expired. Food banks explained that retailers often donate food at the end of its shelf life, and there is simply not enough volunteer labor to effectively sort through every item of donated food.

Finally, in the previous section, we explained that rural residents, in particular, are often limited in the pantries they can visit. Residents may be assigned to one specific pantry or may only have a few pantries within local driving distance. A lack of pantry options in effect imposes a particular model of food distribution on residents. A household assigned to one food pantry does not get to choose what type of distribution they attend, whereas a household with multiple nearby pantries might choose to visit a choice model or trunk model pantry based on their personal preferences.

Need for Non-Food Items

In addition to the quantity and quality of foods they provide, food banks consistently report struggling to meet the non-food needs of households, and residents echo this by citing a consistent need for non-food items. Things like diapers, menstrual products, sanitary items, household cleaners, detergents, and hygiene products (including toothpaste and toothbrushes) are in constant demand, especially because these items cannot be purchased with SNAP benefits. These items also cannot be purchased with SFPP funding, so the only way food banks can source non-food items is through direct donations or by purchasing them with grant money or donated funds.

Many pantries try to offer such personal and household items, but high demand means it can be hard to keep these items on the shelves. Grace, a service recipient in Schuylkill County, expressed her wish for household and personal items but understood that they fall outside the purview of the pantry she visits. She conceded, "I'd rather be stinky than starving."

Lack of Infrastructure

Food banks also report facing challenges related to their physical infrastructure. Sourcing and provisioning food and other items requires that food banks have complex infrastructure. Food banks' infrastructure needs fall into three main categories.

- Warehousing: Food banks require extensive storage (including cold storage) capacity, accessibility features, and climate control.

- Transportation: Food banks must move food from storage facilities to other locations. They need to be able to handle palletized food, to load and unload it on trucks, and to unpack and repack boxes of food for different purposes.
- Multi-use facilities: Food banks often require warehouse space, office space, and a space for individuals to visit for information and services.

Many food banks told us they are working to expand storage capacity or to expand their footprint across their service area. Leadership at several food banks commented that establishing storage or administrative infrastructure in rural areas of their footprint would enable them to better serve those populations. But finding adequately sized and affordable spaces that are built to meet the specific needs of food banks poses unique challenges. In Butler County, for example, Community Partnerships, Inc. wanted to move to a new space closer to its population centers, but they could not find a suitable building: "The warehouse space was there. There was office space attached to it, but there was no [loading] dock... The renovations were going to be about a million dollars." Most smaller food banks simply cannot afford to install such infrastructure.

The multiscale and stepwise nature of sourcing, warehousing, delivering, and distributing food also means that emergency food operations take place across multiple different facilities. Finding pantry locations that can handle large amounts of food—and for "trunk model" pantries, long lines of cars—represents another challenge. A church food pantry has a different capacity for food storage than a library or a firehouse, and even different churches have variable capacity, layout, and accessibility. Thus, even if a food bank does not face infrastructure challenges, their partner agencies may.

Another challenge in finding pantry sites is that the places with infrastructure to handle food deliveries (firehouses, schools) might not have the storage capacity (space, refrigeration), meaning any leftover food must be transported back to the food bank after each distribution. If a food bank delivers food on pallets but a pantry does not have a loading dock or a double door with a removable mullion[3] for inside delivery, then palletized food needs to be depalletized outside and carried inside by hand.

The frequent mismatch between food bank infrastructure and food pantry infrastructure points to the need for food banks to be adaptable. It also points to a greater need for labor on both ends. Yet, as we describe later in the section on labor, maintaining an adequate volunteer base is a major challenge for food banks and pantries.

Lack of Transportation

Trucking and/or transportation needs are another of the main challenges we heard from pantries,[4] as well as one of the main barriers to access we heard from service recipients. At Tableland Services of Somerset County, for example, food distributions from the food bank to pantries require a bit of creativity. Referencing a recent

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[3] A mullion is the vertical support part of the frame that serves as a division between double doors.

[4] Refrigeration capacity is another common need. See the policy recommendation for SFPP.

distribution, Tableland Services' Director told us, "The one pantry sent six guys and they had three of their own personal pickup trucks that they used. Another pantry partnered with the borough and the borough brought their dump truck, and they [...] had the borough worker there helping to load and unload. They all find a way."

Smaller food banks like Tableland Services may not have the resources to deliver food to partner agencies, but even when food banks can deliver, pantries do not always have the capacity to receive deliveries. One pantry manager in Berks County described a former pantry location that could not accommodate the new, bigger trucks their partner food bank used: "The truck just couldn't get down the alley to get behind our church where we were doing the distribution, and there was no other way, just the way our church is set up, there was just no other place for them to go, so [the pantry] just stopped."

Residents also face issues with accessibility and transportation. This refers not only to the ability to get to and access food distribution sites, but to their capacity to transport food back to one's place of residence. For older adults, people with limited mobility, and people who do not have reliable transportation, this may require having access to public transportation or living near a pantry that can offer delivery.

Access to public transportation was a common barrier mentioned by service recipients, pantry managers, and food bank leadership alike. Public transportation is especially limited in rural communities. Leadership at Westmoreland County Food Bank noted that this can limit rural residents' ability to get to nearby pantries: "If you live in Greensburg, you can get on a bus. If you live in Donegal... you cannot get a bus. And if that is your only way to get to a pantry regardless of the day, you are in a difficult situation... You're left to the devices of finding a ride." He acknowledged that public transportation is not always easy in urban communities because it can be time-consuming. But it makes access possible, which is not always the case in rural places. He told us, "If you live in an urban area, you take a bus, and it could be burdensome, or you could walk down the street, that could be burdensome. But if you live in a rural community, you can't walk 2, 3, 4 miles."

Being able to carry the food one receives can also be a limitation, regardless of transportation. Pantries told us that older adults sometimes turn away the senior food box because they cannot transport a standard TEFAP box *and* a senior food box at the same time. Community Partnerships, Inc. told us that there is a two-bag limit on buses in Butler County that effectively restricts the amount of food any recipient can take home from a distribution. Thus, even if service recipients can physically get to pantry locations, accessibility barriers can still limit their ability to access the food they need.

Strained Partnerships Between Organizations

In the operations section, we described the many ways food banks and partner agencies work together. In our interviews with both food banks and partner agencies, we asked what makes for a good partnership and what creates challenges between partners. In general, food bank and pantry leadership told us that partnerships run smoothly, both between primary and secondary food banks and between food banks and pantries.

But the resources available to food banks are finite, and there are logistical and spatial challenges that can negatively impact partnerships between food banks and partner agencies. For example, food banks may have hundreds of partner agencies to manage, or they may be physically distanced from partner agency locations. In these situations, some pantries report feeling unable to adequately source the food they need from food banks or receiving other logistical support they need.

For example, CPFB has two warehousing and distribution hubs located in the largest population centers in their service area—one in Harrisburg and one in Williamsport. It is easiest to serve partner agencies that are relatively close to one of these hubs. However, the director acknowledged, "The more challenging areas are the rest of the territory... It gets increasingly more challenging when you get further away from our hubs."

We also learned that the relationships between primary and secondary food banks can be impacted by which organization serves as the lead agency for TEFAP and SFPP in the counties they both serve. TEFAP was established in 1981 and SFPP in 1983, and many regional food banks did not yet exist and thus could not be appointed lead agencies. These regional food banks have since grown in size, scope, and capacity, but they may still serve as lead agencies in only some of the counties where they operate. In other counties, particularly in many rural counties, lead agencies are local organizations, like the Salvation Army, or the county government itself.

We heard differing perspectives over who should fulfill the role of lead agency. This debate centers on whether the economy of scale of larger, regional food banks or localized knowledge of smaller, single-county food banks is more important to effectively serve as a lead agency. One larger, regional food bank told us that county governments, while well-intended, may simply not be "particularly skilled in food provisioning." They explained, "Their methods of acquiring food are just simply more expensive than a regional food bank." Conversely, a single-county food bank told us, "We know the needs of our county better. We live here, we work here, we know what's going on, versus somebody coming into a rural county trying to tell us, maybe, which pantry needs a bigger portion of the dollars." Often, a regional food bank's local partner agencies may serve as lead agencies in some of the counties they serve. Both parties told us that this dynamic can introduce tensions.

We also heard instances of poor communication between food banks over changes in funding streams or the distribution of responsibilities. In one instance, there was confusion among food bank staff, pantry volunteers, and service recipients when a Senior Food Box Program contract was switched from one food bank to another. Pantry managers and service recipients both told us that this switch, and the lack of communication about it, resulted in many older adults losing access to the Senior Food Box Program.

Because of the complexity of the emergency food network, adequately serving residents requires close collaboration between primary food banks, secondary food banks, and partner agencies like pantries. Communication challenges and tensions over government contracts can challenge this delicate balance.

A Shrinking and Aging Volunteer Base

As we explained in the Operations section, both food banks and their partner agencies depend heavily on volunteers. Volunteers do everything from packing food boxes to interacting with service recipients. Especially in rural areas, very few food pantries have paid staff. Some of the pantry managers we interviewed are volunteers themselves—they spend scores of hours each month managing and operating distributions in their free time.

Most regular volunteers are older adults who are retired and have the time to dedicate to this work. This poses challenges when it comes to volunteers' abilities and the length of time, they will be able to be involved. One pantry manager explained, "We worry about people not being able to do it anymore, passing away, and who's going to continue later on?" Some pantries have seen heavy turnover in their volunteer base. Another pantry manager told us, "The people that volunteer now, nobody's there that was there when I started. A lot of 'em died off there. Like I said, it's older people."

The aging out of volunteers can have lasting impacts on service recipients' access to emergency food. The director at Helping Harvest told us that pantries in their service area have had to close as the volunteer base ages out. He told us, "We had churches that were distributing food that probably needed ten 40, 50, or 60-year-olds to do it, who were trying to do it with four 70- year-olds. And we were starting to lose pantries." He explained that food distribution work is physically challenging, and while older adults play a crucial role in keeping pantries going, younger volunteers are also needed for some tasks. But pantries across the state told us they struggle to recruit younger volunteers.

Pantry managers told us that the time commitment required for volunteering poses a challenge to having a sufficient volunteer base. Pantries typically run distributions during the workday, so volunteers need to be available during those hours. One workaround employed by some food banks involves partnering with corporate volunteer programs to host events for offices to volunteer at together. However, food banks and pantries in rural areas that lack larger employers do not have as large of a pool of offices to draw from as those in high-density population areas. Even still, food banks explained that these volunteers tend to be transient and not regular. While they can provide temporary manpower for a food distribution, they cannot provide the time and logistical work needed to manage regular distributions.

Many volunteers—and the pantries themselves—are also religiously affiliated. Some research estimates that upwards of 60 percent of pantries are faith-based (predominantly Christian), with church services functioning as a recruitment tool for volunteers (Riediger et al., 2022). When asked how they reach out to new volunteers, the manager of one church-based pantry described how the church itself serves as a site of recruitment. She said, "There's something online for us on the [church] website. And then a lot of it is just word of mouth... [The] pastor might be talking about the food pantry, let's say, during a worship service... He'll say, Deb is in charge, so you can go see her."

But leadership at both food banks and pantries relayed their growing concerns that this religious volunteer base is not sustainable either. One pantry manager in Mercer County described how the aging and shrinking church population means that they are

having to look elsewhere for pantry volunteers. He explained, "Church [populations] are aging, and there are not the volunteers that there used to be... We've had to do a lot of active outreach and partnering with community groups, just people that want to help."

Because of the demographics of volunteers—mostly older adults and churchgoers—leadership also told us the volunteer base for pantries was substantially impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pantry managers said that many of their volunteers died, and church congregations were also significantly diminished. A pantry manager in Lycoming County who is also a pastor said church populations in their area are down by almost a third. He described how many volunteers at his pantry also volunteer at other local outreach services, which creates overlapping demand for the same volunteers.

Because of this combination of factors, the Chester County Food Bank director told us that the most rural areas in her county have lower volunteer capacity and lack a "community advocate," a volunteer who is "able to stand up for that community and really be able to make sure that the resources are getting to those parts, those areas of the county where the need does exist." Her perspective is that the most impoverished rural areas are doubly impacted by high levels of food insecurity and low volunteer capacity.

Food banks told us that another challenge inherent in relying on a volunteer base to manage and run pantries involves a lack of training. Volunteers may not know how much food to order or when to give out extra food to service recipients. Pantry managers might not order enough food for the number of people they are serving, or they may need extra training on what a three-day supply of food looks like. And, given the challenges we outlined above regarding sourcing adequate food, volunteers might operate from a scarcity mindset even when they have an excess of certain foods. One food bank explained that they must continually encourage pantry volunteers to give out perishable foods that would otherwise go to waste.

Finally, volunteers at food banks and pantries often do not have the same lived experiences as service recipients. Many of them have never experienced food insecurity and may unintentionally stigmatize or shame service recipients through their words or actions. While many service recipients told us of the very positive and supportive interactions they have with volunteers, some—like Grace, whom we quoted earlier—still report instances where volunteers were not sensitive to their needs, discouraging them from returning to a food distribution.

Continued Stigma of Food Assistance

Both pantry managers and service recipients told us that internalized and experienced shame and stigma can prevent people from seeking emergency food assistance. The stigma that some people experience when visiting a pantry or soup kitchen shows up in multiple ways. Sometimes it stems from an internal place of embarrassment. One pantry manager described how, even in places where there is widespread need, people want to preserve their dignity. They explained that sometimes "[families] won't want to be seen out at a distribution or something like that." Some

organizations shared that this sense of internalized stigma was particularly strong in rural communities.

Service recipients also told us about the stigma that they felt approaching emergency food organizations for the first time. Michael, a service recipient in Lycoming County, started visiting pantries after he retired. He relayed, "At first, I was a little embarrassed. I'd always been able to take care of my own, things like that. And, of course, when you retire, you realize what little of a 401k you had is already gone early." Michael did eventually approach a pantry for assistance. However, he delayed doing so because of the stigma associated with asking for help.

Some recipients told us that a pantry's distribution model can mitigate some of these feelings of shame or embarrassment. For example, Deborah attends a trunk model pantry. She told us, "I like that I don't have to be embarrassed because I really don't have to leave the car. I think if I had to go inside of a building, I might be a little ashamed to do that." Deborah explained that less social interaction with volunteers helps her to avoid the stigma she associates with seeking emergency food assistance.

Other service recipients, however, told us they find dignity in being able to choose food items from a pantry. Martin, a service recipient in Lycoming County, told us that the first time he visited a pantry was when facing the strain of his Social Security retirement benefits to cover his food needs. While he was embarrassed to approach the pantry at first, that sense of embarrassment disappeared completely once he walked in the door. He recalled that it was "like going a grocery store. They have everything out on shelves, and you walk in, and they fill your bag with only the things that you want. They don't give you things [you don't want]." Echoing Martin, one pantry manager described how the resemblance of a choice model pantry to a grocery store "makes it so that it can be an experience that's not as shameful as people think that it is... You come in and you get the freedom to choose things that your family can use."

While some service recipients told us about the internalized shame they felt, others reported that stigma can come from external sources, such as through interactions with pantry volunteers. A few service recipients shared how they have felt judged by volunteers or other people who see them accessing emergency food. Sharon, a service recipient in Schuylkill County, shared, "They [the volunteers] start thinking they're better than you, (but) they don't know what it feels like [to need food]."

Our biggest takeaway about shame and stigma is that these experiences *can* be mitigated. The different ways that choice shows up in the emergency food system can help people feel comfortable. For some, the choice model feels more dignified. Others prefer the relative anonymity of the trunk model. For many, building genuine relationships with volunteers and other service recipients can also help to create a sense of welcome, belonging, and respect that alleviates stigma or shame.

Unique Challenges and Barriers Across Rural Pennsylvania

The above section outlines the challenges facing food banks and pantries in providing food in rural communities and the barriers that rural residents generally face in

accessing food. We report patterns seen in the interview data across all food banks, partner agencies, and service recipients.

However, as we described in our methodology section, in addition to seeking patterns across all respondents, we also compared respondents specific to the four case studies. Each case study consists of a food bank and a sample of partner agencies and service recipients in their service area. Our case studies shed light on the ways that food bank size and service area geography shape how challenges and barriers are experienced.

Impacts of Food Bank Size

The four case studies on food banks have very different scopes. Central Pennsylvania Food Bank (CPFB) employs 140 full-time staff and serves over 1,300 partner agencies. Helping Harvest employs 33 full-time staff and serves 320 partner agencies. Mercer County Food Bank (MCFB) employs nine full-time staff and serves 28 partner agencies. Corner Cupboard employs three full-time and two part-time staff and serves 11 partner agencies.

Through our interviews with the case study food banks and their partner agencies, we found that larger food banks generally have greater capacity to take on innovative initiatives, while smaller food banks can establish closer, more personal relationships with partner agencies.

Leveraging Economies of Scale for Innovation

CPFB is the largest food bank in the state. Certainly, scores of full-time employees are necessary to carry out the basic operations of food provisioning on such a large scale. CPFB has large teams dedicated to the typical tasks of sourcing food from wholesalers and agricultural producers and supplying food to partner agencies. But CPFB explained that they also leverage their considerable capacity to take on unique initiatives that expand the effectiveness of their operations.

As we discussed in the operations section, many food banks see SNAP outreach as an important part of their work. Food banks believe they should not just provide food but use every tool at their disposal to serve residents in need. To achieve this goal, food banks may encourage their partner agencies to serve as a resource for service recipients to learn about or apply to SNAP. CPFB has the capacity to provide hands-on SNAP application assistance to anyone in their service area. The director explained, "We have a team that operates a public help line... we screen [people] to see if they're eligible for SNAP benefits and some other benefits. And then also, our team does the application process for them, which is a great help because it's actually pretty complex." Helping Harvest operates a similar program in their service area. MCFB and Corner Cupboard do not.

CPFB's capacity also allows them to provide enhanced support to partner agencies. Many food banks explained to us that different communities have differing abilities to support their local pantries. More affluent communities tend to have extensive donor networks and local foundations that can fund pantries. Communities with higher needs

and those in more rural locales typically do not. CPFB told us they address this disparity in two ways.

First, CPFB leverages its own capacity to apply for grants on behalf of partner agencies. Leadership explained, "We write a lot of grants that are passed through... We will seek funders for specific counties, and we're a pretty attractive recipient for grantors because we have sophisticated grant systems. We're very versed in grant reporting." CPFB's capacity helps local organizations be competitive for funding that they may not be otherwise. Second, CPFB operates its own mini-grant program, "Bold Goal Grants," creating another mechanism by which partner agencies can request funding. Smaller food banks like Corner Cupboard, which struggle to fund themselves, do not have the same capacity to assist partner agencies.

A final benefit unique to CPFB's size is its ability to collect and analyze needs assessment data. As we explained in the operations section, the government does not adequately collect data on food insecurity. Food insecurity data is only collected at one time point each year, and rates can only be calculated at the state level. Consequently, food banks must develop their own systems to assess need. However, CFPB explained that most public funding and grant funding cannot be used for activities outside of sourcing and distributing food. Thus, CPFB uses its own private donation dollars to fund employees whose job is to map hunger needs. One significant task of this team involves surveying residents across CPFB's service area to identify those in need who are not being reached.

According to CPFB leadership, these surveys have demonstrated that their current services are not adequately meeting needs. They have been using these data to adapt their services and expand their reach. For example, the surveys identified locations where residents cannot access emergency food due to pantries' limited hours. CPFB has taken these findings to partner agencies to advocate for shifts that can broaden access. The director explained, "When we talk to [our partner agencies], we can get adjustments sometimes in their hours simply because they're not aware of what we are finding in our surveying. Because if you think about it, if you're an agency with volunteers and you're used to serving certain neighbors that you see all the time, you're not talking to the people you're not seeing, right? Our surveying methodology is reaching people that are not coming to those pantries."

CPFB's hunger mapping efforts are the most extensive we have seen. While all food banks told us that they recognize the importance of tracking the need to best serve residents, some, like Corner Cupboard, simply do not have the staff and funding to dedicate time and labor to these tasks. They must dedicate every resource they have to the primary task of getting emergency food to people in need.

Being a part of the statewide hunger-relief networks can help smaller food banks learn from and benefit from the larger ones. MCFB specifically mentioned how belonging to Feeding PA allows them to liaise with CPFB and leave networking events with new tricks and tips to food sourcing. However, attending annual conferences and joining network organizations costs time and money, which can pose a challenge for smaller food banks. While MCFB has the capacity to join Feeding PA, Corner Cupboard does not.

MCFB expressed that ensuring these networking opportunities are available for smaller food banks is especially crucial for knowledge and resource access.

Trading Scope Limitations for Close Relationships

Smaller food banks do not have the staff and funding capacity to carry out the extensive activities executed by larger food banks like CPFB. Whereas CPFB can assign staff members to very specific activities like policy advocacy, social media, or hunger mapping, Corner Cupboard's three full-time staff wear many hats. The director told us: "Having a small staff, I gripe about it... Sometimes if we see another much larger organization and they have 15 people in one department, I'm like, 'Oh, cool'... If I'm having a conversation with somebody from, say, a company, and they're like, 'Oh, okay, who's your accountant?' I'm like, 'Me.' 'Do you have a fundraising person?' You're like, 'No, we do that together.'"

However, our case studies also introduced us to the benefits that a smaller scope can offer. MCFB and Corner Cupboard both acknowledged the limitations of their small size but pointed to unique strengths in their models and expressed pride in what they accomplish.

Leadership at both food banks explained that they know their county geography well and can closely examine gaps in their reach. The food banks do not have the capacity to formally survey residents across their counties, but leadership stressed that their staff live and work in these counties and know intimately the geographies and characters of their communities. These personal experiences make them aware of specific locations and populations that are not reached as well as others, and they are actively working to expand their reach by seeking new partner agencies. While more formal surveying would certainly be useful, they feel they have a better understanding of local needs than larger food banks because of their proximity to the people they serve.

Leadership also explained that their small size and proximity allows them to maintain close, personal relationships with all their partner agencies. For MCFB, their roster of partners is diverse, with Salvation Armies, early childhood education programs, and shelters, in addition to traditional pantries and soup kitchens. The partner agencies we spoke to confirmed that these relationships are indeed strong. One pantry director in Mercer County told us, "I think they're all very open to any feedback we have. I think there's a great line of communication, and they're open to any of our needs. They try to assist as best they can." Similarly, a pantry director in Greene County shared, "We have a really good relationship with the food bank. I'm friends with them too... We're in constant contact with them, and they're just a lot of nice people."

Differences Across Geographies

The four case studies of food banks also serve diverse geographies. CPFB serves 27 counties, including 22 rural counties and five urban counties (Harrisburg, its suburbs, and some outlying Philadelphia suburbs). Helping Harvest serves two very distinct counties—one urban and one rural. Mercer County Food Bank serves one rural county, but it has a relatively large population (110,652) and includes several urbanized centers (U.S. Census

Bureau, 2020a). And Corner Cupboard also serves one rural county, but it has a smaller population (35,954) without any urban centers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020a).

Through our interviews with the case study food banks' partner agencies and their service recipients, we learned that both the quality/variety and quantity of emergency food available to residents tends to decrease moving along the urban-rural continuum.[5] However, Helping Harvest offers an interesting solution that can leverage urban capacity to better serve nearby rural locales.

Food Quality/Variety Across the Urban-Rural Continuum

The diversity of food options available to service recipients varies across the urban-rural continuum. A wider variety of foods tends to be available in less rural places (i.e., places with higher populations and population densities), while variety tends to be less, the more rural a place is (i.e., in places with lower populations and population densities).

Depending on their location, partner agencies have varying abilities to provide culturally relevant items to residents from specific ethnic groups. CPFB's partner agencies in urban York and Lancaster counties told us they prioritize recruiting and employing bilingual staff and volunteers and sourcing items like rice that are central to Hispanic/Latinx cuisine. They report that these efforts allow them to better reach local immigrant populations.

By contrast, CPFB's partner agencies in rural Lycoming, Centre, and Clearfield Counties told us they have very limited interactions with local immigrant populations—including both Hispanic/Latinx and Asian immigrants. These partner agencies explained that these immigrant populations are growing, and they believe that reaching these groups will become increasingly important. Nonetheless, sourcing culturally specific foods and conducting more concerted outreach to these groups is outside the scope of what they can take on.

Similarly, partner agencies have varying abilities to provide dietary items to residents with specific medical needs. More rural pantries (i.e., pantries in counties and municipalities with lower populations and population densities) are less likely to carry specific dietary items—like gluten-free products—as compared to urban, or even less rural, pantries (i.e., pantries in counties and municipalities with higher populations and population densities).

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[5] The Center for Rural Pennsylvania (n.d.) uses a binary definition of urban and rural based on population density. A county is rural when the number of people per square mile is fewer than 291, which is the average in the state. A municipality is rural when the number of people per square mile is fewer than 291, or when the municipality is in a rural county and has fewer than 2,500 residents. In this section, we introduce a different concept—that of the "urban-rural continuum." We utilize the Center's definitions to denote when a county or municipality is urban or rural. However, we acknowledge that there is diversity within each group. We refer to a county or municipality as being "more rural" when its population or population density is lower than other rural counties or municipalities. We refer to a county or municipality as being "less rural" when its population or population density is higher than other rural counties or municipalities. Using this finer-grained approach helps to identify heterogeneity across rural places.

Centre County is considered a "rural" county generally. However, Central Pennsylvania Community Action explained that pantries in less rural areas of Centre County (i.e., higher population and population density municipalities) are more likely to carry dietary items than pantries in more rural areas of the county (i.e., lower population and population density municipalities). Pantries in the less rural areas receive these items from local grocery stores. More rural pantries either do not have grocery stores nearby, or their local grocery stores do not carry these items. Central Pennsylvania Community Action recognizes the value of providing these items, however they do not have the capacity to take this initiative themselves. They said they struggle just to get enough food of any kind to the more rural areas.

We learned that these geographic challenges can also intersect with the limitations imposed by food bank size. Pantries in rural Mercer County explained that MCFB's relatively small size further limits the types of specialty items available to them. One pantry director explained, "We never get anything in kosher food or [for] people on specific diets. That's just not possible. It's not available. The government doesn't make it available, and [the food bank] can't get the amount of funding that it takes to do something like that." The pantry always has some kind of food to give out. No one ever leaves their pantry emptyhanded. But people must take what they can get. MCFB is starting a new initiative to provide special "dietary boxes" at one pantry, but their capacity currently does not allow for this to be rolled out widely across all sites.

Service recipients echoed the limited choice available at more rural pantries. Rhonda lives in a smaller town in Mercer County which has just one pantry. Rhonda lives with her two special needs adult children who both have strict dietary needs. One has celiac disease and must avoid gluten. The other depends on Ensure drinks to maintain his weight. While Rhonda's pantry helps provide for her own food needs, her children's unique needs are not well-served. She explained, "It does help that I can go there. But a lot of the food that I would usually get for my son... they don't have that kind of stuff there... It's not like I get a whole lot when I go down there because it's not something that we can actually eat."

There are certainly other localities around the state where Rhonda's family's needs may be better met. But in her smaller hamlet of Mercer County, her local pantry can only provide limited individualized support.

Food Quantity Across the Urban-Rural Continuum

Like variety, the quantity of food available to service recipients also varies across the urban-rural continuum. In general, urban residents are better able to meet their food needs than rural residents by frequenting multiple pantries or food distributions. But beyond the binary, residents of less rural areas (i.e., counties and municipalities with higher populations and population densities) tend to have access to more emergency food than residents of more rural areas (i.e., counties and municipalities with lower populations and population densities).

Saskia is presently unhoused and lives about a 20-minute walk from downtown Harrisburg. Without access to refrigeration, Saskia must conduct careful planning to

meet her food needs each week. She told us, "I can't store food, so I have to go twice a week somewhere just so that I can actually have food for the entire week." She also faces health issues, like diabetes, that limit what she can eat. She tries to eat fresh food and avoid hyper-processed items. Despite these limitations, she reported that she meets her food needs fairly well. Certainly, things are not easy—Saskia must time her trips to pantries when she knows they will have greater supply of items she can eat. However, she does not regularly go hungry and can visit pantries frequently enough to sustain herself.

Residents of less rural municipalities and less rural counties have similar experiences. Michael is an older adult living in a high-rise apartment in Williamsport. Michael can access six different pantries via public bus lines. Being able to access different pantries throughout the month is important because supply is not always dependable. He told us, "Sometimes if you don't go the right day, there's very little there." But he explained that he is typically able to meet his food needs through the month by visiting the six accessible pantries at different times.

Service recipients reported having far less flexibility in more rural municipalities and more rural counties. Pantry managers in Centre and Clearfield Counties, for example, told us that residents in more rural areas may have only one pantry they can visit. This pantry may also be open only once or twice a month. Since residents are unable to attend multiple distributions, the pantry managers relayed that residents in these areas are more likely to tell them that they run out of food at some point each month.

The heterogeneity of rural areas is underscored by our case studies of MCFB and Corner Cupboard. Mercer County is classified as a rural county, but it is geographically diverse. Residents live in a few larger towns, several smaller towns, and farmland in between. Like Saskia and Michael, service recipients in municipalities with higher populations and higher population densities, like Sharon and Hermitage, told us they can access multiple panties each month. Service recipients in municipalities with lower populations and lower population densities, like Greenville and Grove City, told us they may not have access to multiple pantries, but have at least one pantry nearby. Often, these pantries are well-resourced and can even open multiple times a week, providing more flexibility. Conversely, MCFB told us that there are residents in the county who live in between municipalities who may have to drive upwards of 30 minutes to access a distribution. MCFB is especially concerned with these "emergency food deserts."

We learned that these geographic challenges again interact with the challenges imposed by food bank size. To remedy gaps in their service area, MCFB told us they have begun a series of mobile pantries. The Operations Manager acquired a large county map, using a pushpin to note the location of each partner agency. He identified many large swaths of land without a local agency, but the food bank could only pick three underserved localities where they could host one mobile distribution each month. Helping Harvest also told us that they started mobile distributions to expand their reach. However, Helping Harvest's greater capacity allows it to run a larger number (10) of mobile pantries in rural Schuylkill County, filling more geographic holes in the rural landscape than MCFB can.

While pockets of Mercer County remain underserved, residents can still, generally, access more food than Greene County residents. Corner Cupboard has 11 pantry sites that operate for a single two-hour window each month. Residents must visit their closest distribution. Service recipients told us that these temporal limitations can be constraining. But distributions are entirely dependent on volunteers. Corner Cupboard explained that some municipalities are so small that volunteer capacity is limited, and offering longer windows or more frequent distributions is impossible. Mercer County's municipalities, by contrast, house pantries that open multiple times a week. Greenville, for example, has 5,000 residents; the town's volunteer base can keep their pantry open 3 days each week. Carmichaels, one of the largest distribution sites in Greene County, houses just 500 residents. Piecing together volunteers to sustain a two-hour window is as much as the township can do.

In this context, service recipients told us that allowing neighbors and family members to pick up food boxes for one another is crucial. However, many pantries told us that they limit the number of pick-ups per vehicle to two or three, hindering the benefits of this adaptation. Corner Cupboard said that they allow service recipients to switch their pantry location, say, if there is another one at a time or date that fits their work or appointment schedule better. However, our conversations with service recipients suggest that this flexibility is not common knowledge.

Service recipients in Greene County also report that some pantries provide more food than others, based on varying community capacity. We visited Greene County in November, when all monthly distributions include a WalMart gift card to purchase a Thanksgiving turkey. Recipients bemoaned that they were only receiving a $15 gift card, while a neighboring township was providing $40 gift cards. This difference, they explained, was due to the differential community donations that the two pantry sites receive.

Corner Cupboard acknowledges that achieving fairness through this diffuse pantry network is difficult, if not impossible. Corner Cupboard explained that they take in donations from businesses across the whole county and redistribute them to panties. If pantries were to receive donations directly from local businesses, pantries in more rural parts (i.e., pantries in municipalities with lower populations and lower population densities) would have less food. However, Corner Cupboard relayed that they cannot, in good conscience, keep pantries from running their own fundraisers. They explained that, if residents continue to be in need, and if the supply of food received from public sources continues to be inadequate, pantries will have to supplement public supply to best serve their communities. But Corner Cupboard noted that this can reproduce inequalities across localities, leaving more disadvantaged localities behind.

Subsidizing Rural Geographies

In sum, residents in more rural areas (i.e., areas with lower populations and population densities) may have less access to both the variety and quantity of food provided to residents in less rural areas (i.e., areas with higher populations and population densities). This inequality stems from differences in community and

organizational capacity. Helping Harvest told us about an interesting solution to this dilemma that leverages urban capacity to better serve nearby rural locales.

Helping Harvest serves two distinct pockets of need: racially and ethnically diverse areas with high poverty rates in urban Reading, remote areas, and declining small towns in rural Schuylkill County. But Helping Harvest's service area also includes communities with considerable wealth, like the suburbs outside of Reading. Helping Harvest explained that they can draw on the wealth of their more affluent communities to help sustain their work across their service area. They believe the lack of tribalism to keep dollars within one's own community stems from the food bank's branding and community relationships. People want to support Helping Harvest across the entire scope of their work.

In the Operations section, we described how food banks have different requirements for their partner agencies. Some charge an annual membership fee. Some charge "shared maintenance," meaning they charge partner agencies some number of cents per pound of food they are given. Helping Harvest told us that they have eliminated all mandatory fees for their partners. They believe these mandatory fees created a relationship where partner agencies "were beholden to us for the food, and we were doing them a favor." They wanted agencies to feel more like true partners on a level playing field. To do so, they made fees voluntary.

However, they acknowledged that a voluntary payment system has its challenges. Some pantries are located in areas with greater need than they can afford. These pantries are ordering more food than they did in the past, as they are no longer constrained by fees. These pantries cost Helping Harvest money. However, some affluent pantries in areas with less need are giving more money than before. Their relatively larger payments subsidize the smaller payments of the pantries with fewer resources and greater need.

The Executive Director of Helping Harvest explained: "The issue of charging [shared maintenance] was really related to geography. The churches in the poorest areas of our service territory are pretty much also the poorest churches, while the Wyomissing churches can afford to send us more money. What we do then is we take the families from Reading, and we force them to drive to Wyomissing to get food. And if we just did a better job at convincing the churches in Wyomissing that they should be supporting us as a philanthropic endeavor, we could do better, because the food system needs the money it needs. And if we don't raise it, we're just kicking the can down the tree (sic) a little bit."

What's more, Helping Harvest explained that larger foundations in Berks County believe in the mission of Helping Harvest. They appreciate Helping Harvest's shift to give more food at less cost to pantries. To support this shift, they have increased their own financial support for Helping Harvest, with no strings attached: "While we probably have seen... less money coming to us from our agencies, we have seen more money coming to us from the charitable community and our philanthropic partners. So, for example, the United Way has made very substantial grants to the food bank. Every time they do, they ask me, "You're still not charging anybody, right?" because they understand that [is important]."

By shifting away from the mandatory fee model, Helping Harvest has expanded the capacities of pantries in the most disadvantaged communities in their service area by leaning on the capacities of pantries in the most advantaged communities.

We saw that the "subsidizing" of Helping Harvest's high-needs areas also extends to volunteer manpower. At one mobile distribution in Berks County, Helping Harvest volunteers explained that the volunteer base is concentrated in Berks. Because of that, some told us they also volunteer at mobile distributions in Schuylkill. Drawing from a singular volunteer base spanning both counties provides a possible solution to the volunteer recruitment issues that face rural pantries across the state.

Remaining Unmet Need Due to Challenges and Barriers

The findings we have laid out thus far strongly suggest that the emergency food safety net is not meeting the food needs of all Pennsylvanians. Older adults, children, the unhoused, veterans, people with limiting disabilities, immigrants, and rural residents were among the most frequently cited groups that food banks and pantries struggle to reach. These populations likely constitute much of the invisible—or unaccounted for—hunger within the footprint of Pennsylvania's food banks.

As we have already discussed in the Challenges section, the end of COVID-era anti-poverty measures has resulted in a surge of unmet need. Leadership at food banks and pantries experienced first-hand the effectiveness of anti-poverty policy tools deployed during the COVID-19 pandemic. As more individuals and families were able to meet their food needs, the number of households attending emergency food distributions decreased. Some service recipients told us it was the first time in years where they did not go hungry, or they did not have to forego another important bill to buy food. Because of the decreased numbers attending their distributions, food banks and pantries told us they were better able to meet the remaining need in their communities.

Since the end of these COVID-era benefits, food banks and pantries have told us that needs have expanded drastically. Service recipients told us they are finding it challenging to once again be unable to adequately feed themselves and their families. Katy, a service recipient and mother of five in Greene County, explained that she can no longer adequately meet her family's nutritional needs and has been going hungry herself to make sure her children have food. This takes an enormous toll on her mental health. She said, "There's times where I go into the bathroom, and I cry not knowing what to do."

Food prices are still rising (Picchi 2024), and evidence suggests that food inflation will continue to outpace inflation of other goods. Extreme weather events caused by climate change and conflict or war in areas of agricultural production are predicted to drive food prices up considerably over the coming decades (Edmond and Geldard 2023). Closing gaps in the emergency food network will ensure that our communities are better prepared to survive challenges to both the global and local food systems in the coming years.

Unserved and Underserved Geographies

Our results suggest that geographies can be both *un*served and *under*served. Unserved communities may lack any close access to a food distribution site. If no food bank or pantry serves a particular community, a resident would need to travel to the nearest distribution—sometimes 20 miles or more away. Underserved communities may be served by a food bank or pantry, but residents may still have constrained access due to a limited time window of that distribution.

Across our interviews with food banks and their partner agencies, we heard a common theme: the most remote communities in Pennsylvania are those with the most extreme lack of emergency food access. Pennsylvania's smallest towns may lack local agencies to host distributions, and folks who live in the space between towns—be that on expansive farmland or tucked in mountain hollers—are most likely to live an insurmountable distance from a hunger relief organization. The director at one pantry operating in Centre and Clearfield counties summarized: "The largest pool of hunger in Pennsylvania is in rural Pennsylvania. In urban areas, you have so many more agencies that are able to feed people. In rural areas, you don't have those agencies due to travel and everything else."
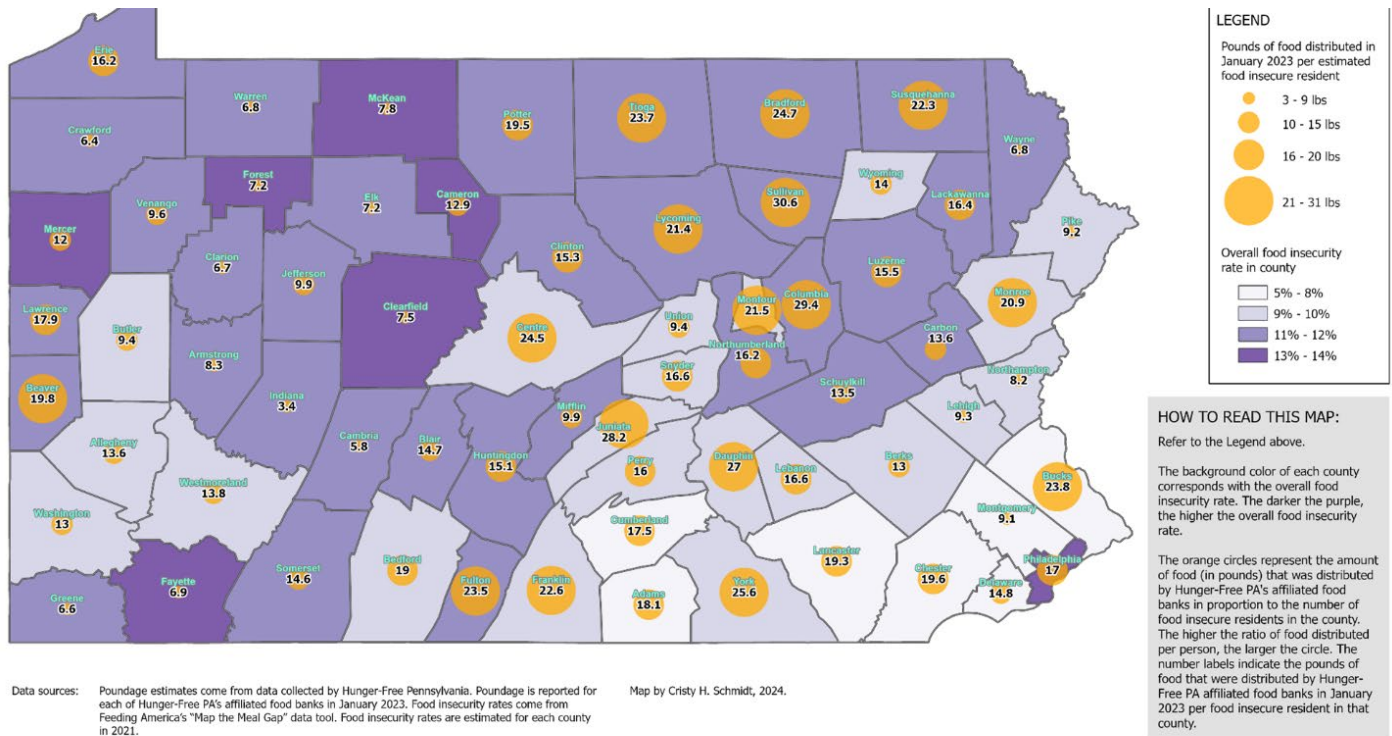
But he told us the situation is even more complex than lack of organizational infrastructure. Even connecting with residents in these particularly remote locales can pose a challenge. He relayed, "I'm a lifelong resident of Centre County. And during COVID, I found parts of Centre County that I did not know existed... We run into a lot of pocketed areas, where there's a lot of people living out in the mountains and things like that that are very difficult to find. And the bad part is all these areas lack [public] transportation."

A lack of partner agencies in remote locales and a lack of opportunities to contact and communicate with residents of remote locales creates a perfect storm that isolates the most rural residents from emergency food services. The director of Tableland Services in Somerset County told us, "I'm sure there's a lot of people out there [in need that we don't already serve], but we don't know about them. How do you reach them?"

Yet, the challenges encountered in the most remote communities should not overshadow the difficulties faced in other geographies. Our case study of Corner Cupboard showed that, even for those who live in small towns with a pantry, limited organizational capacity can result in limited distribution hours. If a person cannot make the two-hour distribution window in their town, then they may not receive food assistance that month. Our case study of Mercer County Food Bank showed that better-resourced pantries in larger towns with greater volunteer bases can sustain more frequent distribution windows that allow greater flexibility. Nonetheless, having just one local pantry can still limit people to only accessing one food distribution a month, even if they have greater need.

Figure 5 provides a visual representation of differential emergency food access across the state. It overlays food insecurity rates with the poundage of emergency food distributed in each county, demonstrating how certain areas with high food needs see greater amounts of emergency food distributed than others.

Figure 5: Pounds of Food Distributed by Food Banks Per Capita Food Insecure

Data sources: Poundage estimates come from data collected by Hunger-Free Pennsylvania. Poundage is reported for each of Hunger-Free PA's affiliated food banks in January 2023. Food insecurity rates come from Feeding America's "Map the Meal Gap" data tool. Food insecurity rates are estimated for each county in 2021.

Map by Cristy H. Schmidt, 2024.

Food banks have found ways to expand emergency food access to unserved and underserved geographies—at least for a short window once a month. Later in the Innovation section, we discuss how mobile markets can bring food directly to communities that lack a partner agency. Determining how to scale up this effort to reach more remote rural areas should be a crucial focus of policymakers and practitioners.

Unserved and Underserved Populations

In addition to pointing to geographic holes, our results suggest that there are populations *across* geographies who remain in need. We again identify groups of Pennsylvanians that are both *un*served and *under*served by the emergency food network.

Food banks and pantries told us that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals in need in each county who are not being reached. One key group is older adults. Despite programs that target older adults, like the Senior Food Box program, food banks and pantries believe this demographic is not being reached to the extent there is need. Official estimates also suggest that only 10 percent of seniors who are eligible for the Senior Food Box program are enrolled (Food Bank News 2022). Mercer County Food Bank told us, "There's over 3,000 seniors in need in our county alone. But trying to reach them and get to them—that's the challenge, is trying to get to people who are immobile and aren't able to get to us." The food bank organizes volunteers to

deliver food to homebound older adults. However, they can only do this for people already in their system. They worry about older adults with whom they have no contact.

Food banks and pantries explained that the reasons they struggle to serve older adults also impact their ability to serve younger people who have limiting disabilities. Those with limited mobility may struggle to get to pantries, and this is compounded in rural areas that lack public transportation. While there are programs aiming to deliver food to older adults, no such programs aim to deliver food to younger people with disabilities.

Another population of concern is veterans. As we explained in the Challenges and Barriers section, there is still a stigma attached to receiving food assistance. Food banks and pantries shared that internalized stigma about asking for help is especially common among veterans, leading to low rates of food assistance utilization. One pantry manager told us, "There's a large population that is not getting help because, 'Well, we just don't ask for help," kind of a mentality... You have a large percentage of the population that are veterans in our communities—there's no way that they're going to ask for help. It's part of their DNA."

Several food banks told us about "Military Share" programs which they operate to better reach veterans. These food distributions are held at organizations like VFWs or American Legions. This may be one promising way to better reach this population. However, these programs are concentrated among larger food banks, and there are limited locales participating.

Food banks and pantries also report difficulties reaching immigrants, especially those with limited English ability. Pantry leaders believe this demographic may be fearful of reaching out for help, especially if there are no bilingual staff or volunteers with whom they can communicate. One pantry manager told us, "One of the most dangerous things about food insecurity is education. And what I mean by that is it's the fear of not knowing; it's the unknown. They don't know if they qualify, or maybe there's a fear of going to it. That's really the hard part."

In the Unique Challenges and Barriers section, we shared how food banks and pantries find that reaching immigrant communities requires dedicating time and effort into building trust, translating materials, and recruiting bilingual volunteers. Many rural pantries told us they simply do not have the capacity—in time or skills—to do this.

Finally, food banks and pantries relayed concerns about reaching unhoused individuals. In Mercer County, for example, there are growing numbers of unhoused people in the county's larger municipalities. Mercer County Food Bank is working to source more items that can be eaten without refrigeration and cooking tools. The Operations Manager explained, "We've got a huge homeless population in Mercer County. So, one of the things that we got to make sure we carry is foods that maybe don't have to be cooked or things that... If there's not a pop top, then they can't use it."

Some unhoused people may also have substance use issues, and Mercer County Food Bank explained that this group is often turned away by local organizations. The Operations Manager continued, "We've got a couple of shelters here that do drug screening, and if you've got drugs in your system, you're not allowed to stay there." The Operations Manager explained that the food bank partners with shelters to get food to

unhoused people, but if these shelters turn away folks who use drugs, then the food bank can no longer reach unhoused people facing substance use issues.

Emergency food assistance, and the social support this assistance can come with, is a lifeline for many. But these insights suggest that some of the most vulnerable residents in our communities lack basic access to this assistance.

In this study, we interviewed Pennsylvania residents whom we recruited at food distributions. In other words, we met with 65 people who *are* currently being served by the emergency food network. But these interviews showed us that even those who *are* reached by the network can still be *underserved*.

Service recipients expressed overwhelming gratitude for the pantries, soup kitchens, and other organizations they visited. It is abundantly clear how much these organizations, and the people who run them, mean to them. Nonetheless, many continue to struggle *despite* using these emergency food services. We asked each service recipient whether they cut the size of their meals, skip meals, eat less than they should, or ever go hungry due to not having enough money for food. *Even despite accessing emergency food assistance,* 41.5 percent of interviewees cut the size of their meals or skip meals, 41.5 percent eat less than they should, and 29.2 percent go hungry. In total, 52 percent of interviewees experience at least one of these symptoms. These data show us that experiences of food insecurity persist despite accessing emergency food services.

Calvin—an 81-year-old former coal miner and current pastor in Greene County—told us that he often runs out of food, despite attending a monthly food distribution. There have also been times where he missed the monthly distribution because he did not have the money for gas or needed repairs on his car. He said, "Sometimes you need money for it [to even get to the distribution]. You need money to work on your car or money for gas or whatever." Suffering from a financial pinch could keep him from getting to the distribution. But then, not being able to get to the distribution made things even tighter.

Recall Rhonda, who takes care of her two special needs adult children in Mercer County. Despite visiting her local pantry monthly, she told us that she still faces economic difficulties every month that force her to choose between purchasing food and paying for another necessity. She has to rotate which utility she does not pay for in any given month to avoid shutoffs.

Interviewer: Do you ever sometimes have to let something else slide in order to make sure you can get enough food for the month? Do you sometimes have to make decisions like that?

Rhonda: I do every month. I do.

Interviewer: And so how do you make those kinds of difficult decisions? What might you let slide in order to make sure you can feed everyone?

Rhonda: It could be a utility bill. It all depends on which one did I let fly the month before. So, I'm not going to let that fly this month, but I'll let the other one go.

Grace, in Schuylkill County, told us that she uses these strategies too. But she also leans on credit when she is especially struggling and needs to find a way to feed herself and her grandchildren, whom she sometimes cares for. She told us, "When you're on a fixed income... if you don't have enough money to pay your bills and buy food and buy

medicine and all expenses that you have, something has to go... If you have, say, a utility that you could let go of for a month, you do that. This sounds just terrible, but if you have an unsecured bill, not a mortgage or something that's secure, you have a credit card or something like that, an unsecured bill—that kind of rises to the top of the list. You let them go, when you're picking and choosing, it's either let that one go, that there's not a whole lot of repercussion from, or have your electricity turned off. Sometimes it's pretty harsh decisions."

One volunteer who runs a pantry distribution in Greene County also reported hearing these kinds of stories. He said some older adults he serves "cut their pills in half to afford food." He told us, "I wish I could provide heat for their homes or help with their medicine. I wish I could give them enough food to last for a whole month. Really." Sometimes, when he hears of need among his service recipients in the weeks in between his monthly food distributions, he takes his own money to the grocery store to try to help them make it to the next distribution.

Service recipients told us that food distributions significantly decrease their experiences of food insecurity. However, these experiences remain. While they are accessing the emergency food network, they still cannot receive as much food as they need.

Innovations to Tackle Challenges and Barriers

Food banks reported that they are constantly looking to harness innovation to meet the expanding and shifting needs of the populations they serve. These innovations are sometimes as simple as expanding the scope of whom they partner with, shifting how they partner with particular organizations, and seeking out new sources of donations. Other innovations entail the use of new technologies or mechanisms for connecting service recipients with emergency food services.

Innovative Partnerships

Food banks told us they are always striving to increase the quantity of food they bring in. Often this means looking for new and different sources of food. Food banks explained that one avenue to increase food supply entails establishing partnerships with food rescue organizations. Traditionally, donated food is picked up at set times from partner grocery stores. New organizations like 412 Food Rescue and innovative apps such as Food Rescue Hero connect food banks to excess food from outlets such as restaurants and grocery stores. Rescued food can be picked up and distributed immediately to service recipients. Food rescue marshals' food that would otherwise be wasted, using innovative means to build connections between organizations.

The director of Bucks County Opportunity Council described two other innovations that expand access to food and deepen partnerships across their community. First, they partner with the health system to offer nutrition education and recipe cards at food distributions, especially during summer months when service recipients might be unfamiliar with some of the distributed produce. They also work with a food rescue organization, Rolling Harvest Food Rescue, that partners with local farmers to reduce

on-farm food waste[6] and provides recipe cards for the rescued foods. These kinds of innovations connect already existing programs, organizations, and sources of food, creating new pathways to get food to people in need.

In the Challenges section, we described how disagreements over lead agency contracts for TEFAP and SFPP can introduce tensions between primary and secondary food banks. To combat these tensions, Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank has started a pilot initiative in Armstrong, Butler, and Indiana Counties where they are working more "intensively and spending more time" on the ground with the secondary food banks in those counties. This initiative builds deeper partnerships between these food banks through working groups, listening sessions, and the co-creation of programs, encouraging food banks to collaboratively identify potential solutions to address food insecurity. Greater Pittsburgh has also made small-scale infrastructure and operations grants available to the secondary food banks in their service area, which both improves relations and ultimately better serves residents in need.

Leadership of the secondary food banks report finding this partnership with Greater Pittsburgh to be beneficial. The partnership has helped build relationships between these smaller food banks and new local partners. For example, one food bank has partnered with their local hospital system, connecting to patients in need. Another formed a new relationship with their county's drug and alcohol department, resulting in classes teaching participants to cook with unfamiliar ingredients and "stretch your dollars." While this pilot program is currently operating in just three counties, it offers insight into how primary food banks can partner with secondary food banks to share local knowledge and build local capacity.

Finally, we learned that some food banks partner with non-food, community-based organizations to better serve vulnerable or "hard-to-reach" populations. These food banks described that reaching these populations requires establishing relationships of trust. Leadership at Westmoreland County Food Bank said, "If people don't trust who you are, they don't care what you have in your hand." One staff member described the years-long process of building trust with the Latinx community in their service area. This process involved forging relationships with local Latinx community organizations—none of which had anything to do with food specifically. He told us that it took two years of building these relationships before he was invited to a community event. At this community event, he could then talk with community members about the food bank and encourage those in need to approach a local pantry for services.

Innovative Technologies

Innovative technologies have the potential to streamline food banks' operations and expand their reach to individuals and households that would otherwise remain

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[6] On-farm food waste often occurs because of a lack of labor to harvest the food, because prices are too low to merit another harvest, or because of the impacts of global supply chains on produce (Hitag, 2019).

underserved. Such technologies can also increase the efficiency and accuracy of data collection about food insecurity.

Food banks and pantries told us that they use technology in ordering, sourcing, and providing food, tracking hunger and need, collecting and storing data, and communicating with partner agencies. Feeding America, for example, offers an online grocery ordering system for food banks to place food orders, choosing their pickup time and location. Many food banks, too, now offer an online platform for their partner agencies to place weekly orders. These technologies can help food banks and pantries more efficiently meet residents' food needs by ordering food in real time. The challenge with many of these innovations, however, is that they can be difficult to implement in the most rural parts of the state. For example, rural pantries or smaller food banks might not have the technological infrastructure (e.g., tablets and Wi-Fi) or the funding to invest in that infrastructure.

We also learned of another important technological innovation that has expanded food banks' reach to older adults. A partnership between DoorDash and Hunger-Free PA, called Project DASH, provides a grant for food banks to pay for DoorDash to deliver Senior Food Boxes to older adults in their service area. York County Food Bank told us that this program has "been a game changer" for older adults who are homebound or for those with limited mobility. They told us, "The physical box is heavy. I mean, it's wonderful to be able to provide this to our seniors, but it's also a headache. They physically can't always carry the box. There's so many challenges. So, to be able to have that program and be able to serve our seniors in that way has been, it's been incredible."

However, we learned that the availability of DoorDash is inconsistent across regions, and Project DASH allows Dashers to drive only up to 15 miles away from the hub where they picked up Senior Food Boxes. Thus, this innovation is much more difficult to implement in rural areas. We spoke to some food banks and pantries who were hopeful when they first heard about Project DASH, only to find that their service area was too rural for this partnership to work for them. Corner Cupboard leadership explained, "There are some really, really rural parts of Greene County, and I just imagine some 18-year-old driving around trying to find... Betty Sue's house, and he can't even pull up an address."

Some food banks and pantries told us they could not envision Project DASH working, not just because of the mileage rule, but because DoorDash is not yet a popular service in their rural communities. In Indiana County, for example, the Community Action Program told us there is only sufficient demand for DoorDash when Indiana University of Pennsylvania students are in town. If they were to implement this program, they believed it would only work during the academic year; there would be no Dashers to deliver boxes in the summer.

In addition to these challenges in implementation, the financial resources from the grant are both limited in scope and timebound. Many food banks noted that, while the program has been extremely beneficial for their older adult clientele, they will not be able to sustain a $4 per box delivery fee once the grant expires.

There are lessons to be learned from the ways that food banks and their partner agencies innovate to stretch scarce or unreliable resources. Many new technologies could help food pantries streamline their operations; however, especially in rural areas, infrastructure, training, and resources are needed to fully implement these new systems and processes.

Innovative Infrastructure

In the Operations section, we introduced the concept of a mobile pantry—a practice where food banks themselves provide food directly to recipients through the trunk model. Partner agencies are not required in this model. Only a truck, a truck driver, and volunteers are needed. Food banks told us that they are increasingly relying on this practice to close organizational gaps in the emergency food network.

One of our case study food banks, Helping Harvest, operates 22 mobile markets, 12 in urban Berks County and 10 in rural Schuylkill County. For each market, distribution occurs once a month in a two-hour window. Leadership pointed out that the mobile market model can tackle entrenched food access challenges in both urban and rural areas.

In rural counties like Schuylkill, Helping Harvest explained that mobile markets can close gaps in the geographic landscape of pantries. The Director told us that Helping Harvest's Schuylkill markets operate in "areas where we don't think there's sufficient pantries to meet the need. We set up some mobile markets as agencies have closed. The Salvation Army in Tamaqua closed. So, we set up a market in Tamaqua. One pantry in Shenandoah closed. So, we set up a market in Shenandoah."

In urban counties like Berks, he explained that mobile markets can offer additional operating hours to meet the needs of residents whose local pantries have limited hours. He told us, "Even in some of the more urban areas, we really don't feel like there's enough availability, especially on the weekends... We [may] have six distribution locations in a particular neighborhood, but if none of them are in the evenings or on the weekends, someone who has a traditional job time can't make any of them... So, some of our mobile markets are run on a Saturday."

One Helping Harvest volunteer whom we met at a Berks distribution explained that three of the Berks markets are "walk-up", as opposed to "drive-thru" markets. These walk-up markets intend to serve people who lack cars. They are hosted in parks near low-income housing communities where residents can bring their own carts to pick up food boxes.

Mobile markets allow food banks to efficiently bring food to more places at more times. But, as we pointed out when introducing the trunk model earlier, mobile markets may not bring the additional social support and resource connections to service recipients that traditional pantries can provide. There is a need to consider how to merge the benefits of traditional pantries into the mobile market model, such as by passing out information on other food and non-food resources to service recipients as they wait in their cars.

Policy Recommendations

Throughout this research, we have privileged the voices of those most deeply implicated in emergency food provisioning: leadership at food banks across Pennsylvania, volunteers and staff at pantries and other local hunger-relief organizations, and residents who rely on emergency food services. We draw policy recommendations from a combination of our data from these key informants and research on the history and status of a variety of policies, systems, and structures that impact the effective provisioning of food.

These policy recommendations are directed at state and local public officials, while also recognizing that state and local officials have oversight regarding federal program implementation guidelines (especially for SNAP). We make recommendations related to program funding, program eligibility, information sharing or education, and program implementation. We do not rank these recommendations as a multi-pronged approach that is essential in the current landscape of record-high and increasing food insecurity rates.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

1. Certain households, especially older adults, are limited in their ability to receive SNAP benefits because of a Food Stamp Asset Test, which pushes many people's assets value over the limit in Pennsylvania. The asset limit has changed several times over the last 10-15 years.
   - The General Assembly should consider eliminating eligibility limits that include checking and savings accounts or other financial assets. Recipients should not be forced further into poverty by depleting their savings to feed themselves and their families.
2. During the COVID-19 pandemic, SNAP recipients could continue to receive benefits without reenrolling for longer periods of time, which reduced churning for beneficiaries (CBPP 2023).
   - The General Assembly should consider providing a buffer of one to two months between reenrollment deadlines and when benefits will be cut off.
3. Whereas the benefits SNAP recipients receive increase as a beneficiary's income falls further under the FPL, if their income level is just $1 above the cutoff, benefits disappear entirely (Ettinger de Cuba et al. 2019), creating a hunger cliff for the "near poor."
   - The General Assembly should consider gradually tapering benefits for beneficiaries between 200 percent and 300 percent of the FPL.
4. Many food banks and pantries connect people with information about SNAP or offer SNAP application assistance. In Pennsylvania, if a person is eligible for TEFAP, they are likely also eligible for SNAP benefits.
   - County governments should consider working with food banks to bolster resources for SNAP application assistance work, or to reinforce connections between food banks, pantries, and local government offices that can provide SNAP application assistance.

- DHS should consider simplifying and shortening the Compass SNAP so as not to deter potential beneficiaries.
5. Not all food banks have the capacity to spread awareness about food distributions, for example, through mailings in their service area. SNAP recipients also may not be aware of food distributions in their area that could supplement SNAP benefits.
    - DHS should consider including an option on SNAP applications for applicants' contact information to be shared with their local food bank so that emergency food assistance information can be shared with them.
6. SNAP work requirements, including work requirements for Able-Bodied Adult without Dependents (ABAWD), limit access to SNAP benefits and do not meaningfully improve employment rates. Confusion about these rules and inconsistent implementation can discourage people from applying or lead to erroneous denials.
    - The General Assembly should consider working with federal legislators to reduce SNAP ABAWD work requirements and age limits. These have a negative impact on food security in areas of high unemployment (Bauer & East, 2023).

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)
1. Food banks only provide TEFAP products to residents with incomes below 185 percent of the FPL. In Pennsylvania in 2021, 45.8 percent of food insecure households fell above 200 percent of the FPL threshold (Gundersen et al., 2023).
    - The General Assembly should consider raising the Pennsylvania eligibility requirement for receipt of TEFAP product to above 200 percent of the FPL. Some states, such as Oregon, have rates as high as 300 percent.
2. The amount of food USDA sends each state is calculated based on state poverty and unemployment rates. However, many people served by food banks and pantries are considered "near poor" and are not captured using this metric. These calculations may grossly underestimate the supply of food needed by states with lower poverty rates but greater numbers of near poor residents.
    - The General Assembly should consider supplementing TEFAP foods through more robust spending allocation for SFPP (see below).
3. Pennsylvania does not statutorily limit the monthly number of TEFAP boxes that people can receive. However, individual food banks and pantries have differing policies on how many boxes service recipients can receive each month.
    - Food banks and pantries should consider publicizing their policy on how many TEFAP distributions a household can receive each month.
4. Pennsylvania requires that recipients of TEFAP product visit the food bank or pantry whose service area they live in. Nonetheless, certain pantries have very limited distribution windows that can restrict some residents' abilities to attend.
    - Food banks should consider allowing service recipients to "switch" to another pantry if needed and that these requests be granted

automatically. This option should be widely published and shared so that people know this is possible.

5. Many states allow for automatic cross-eligibility for TEFAP for people who receive other governmental assistance programs. This automatic eligibility can streamline services and reduce administrative burden. Pennsylvania currently does not have automatic cross-eligibility for TEFAP for any other program.

   - PDA should consider allowing for automatic cross-eligibility for those receiving assistance programs such as SNAP, Medicaid, TANF, SSI, and WIC.

Senior Food Box Program

1. We find that income eligibility guidelines are too restrictive for this program. The eligibility for TEFAP and SFPP is substantially higher than for the Senior Food Box program (185 percent of the FPL versus 130 percent).

   - The General Assembly should consider raising the eligibility requirement for the Senior Food Box Program to match that of TEFAP and SFPP.

2. When service recipients must liaise with multiple food organizations to receive standard (e.g., TEFAP) food boxes and Senior Food Boxes, they face time burden or confusion that may prevent them from receiving the food for which they are eligible.

   - When possible, PDA should consider ensuring that older adults can receive Senior Food Boxes through the pantries where they receive other food.

3. In places where Project DASH operates, we heard overwhelmingly positive feedback. Nonetheless, there is growing concern for the sustainability of this innovation, and how it could continue to be funded in the future.

   - The General Assembly should consider providing $1 million in funding for distributions of Senior Food Boxes, either through DoorDash or to support food banks and pantries distributing boxes themselves.

State Food Purchasing Program (SFPP)

1. Since the program's creation in 1983, increases in funding for SFPP have not kept pace with food inflation. The proposed 2024-2025 state budget does not include any increase in SFPP funds, despite rising food prices.

- The General Assembly should consider increasing annual funding for SFPP. The Pennsylvania Hunger Action Coalition suggests an increase to $23 million per year.

2. When food banks and pantries face infrastructure needs (e.g., for refrigeration), these are often urgent. While pantries can apply to SFPP funds for infrastructure needs, funding cycles can be prolonged, preventing pantries from being able to adequately serve recipients for months.

- PDA should consider using SFPP funds to institute rolling grant applications and offer rolling emergency grant support for urgent infrastructure needs.

3. There is some tension between food banks about who should serve as lead agency. Larger food banks argue that they benefit from economies of scale, while smaller food banks assert that they more attune to local needs.
   - County governments should consider releasing Requests for Proposals to periodically reevaluate who serves as lead agency. This could allow food banks to make their case and allow counties to choose the organizations that will best serve their residents.

Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System (PASS)

1. Pennsylvania farms are constrained by a relatively short growing season. Summer months bring a variety of fresh produce while winter months are scarcer. In winter, pantries receive only root vegetables and storage apples through the PASS program.
   - PDA should consider allowing food banks to use PASS funding during winter months to purchase produce from other approved vendors such as the Mid-Atlantic Regional Cooperative (MARC) in Philadelphia.
2. Some counties do not have a local PASS vendor, including most counties in central Pennsylvania. Food banks in these counties must use their own budgets to access produce from local farms.
   - PDA should consider expanding the list of PASS vendors so that there are several farms in the service area of each food bank. This might be achieved through conducting greater outreach to farms, lowering the barriers to qualify as a PASS vendor, and/or expanding the capacity for the program. The Pennsylvania Hunger Action Coalition suggests an increase to $7.5 million per year.

Data Tracking and Hunger Mapping

1. The Current Population Survey tracks food security at the national and state levels. Ideally, these data would exist at the census tract level to enable food banks and pantries to respond to food insecurity at a much more granular level.
   - The General Assembly should consider collaborating with county governments to implement regular household food security screening surveys to more consistently and accurately track hunger in Pennsylvania over time and space. While this might not provide data on the severity or stage of food insecurity among households, it would be a consistent source of local level data.
2. There is no centralized data hub with up-to-date information about the locations and operating hours of food banks, lead agencies, or their local partner agencies across Pennsylvania. PA 211 offers some information on pantry locations and schedules; however, most pantries are not included on 211.
   - The General Assembly should consider partnering with United Way, perhaps through DHS and PA211, to create a centralized database of all food banks and affiliated local partners. This database should include

location, contact information, and operating hours for all listings. It should
be updated and maintained on a yearly basis and should be widely
accessible to the public, potentially in app form to be mobile-friendly.

Health-Related Initiatives

1. Produce prescription programs, where doctors write prescriptions for food
   insecure patients to "spend" at farmers market or other retail outlets, can
   increase access to nutritious foods by making fruits and vegetables more readily
   available to low-income people (Alyer et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2019).

   - The General Assembly should consider expanding produce prescription
     initiatives at the state level. This should include increasing investment in
     PA's Food Bucks' program that allows SNAP recipients to earn Food Bucks
     when used at a farmers' market or used to purchase fresh produce. The
     Pennsylvania Hunger Action Coalition suggests an additional $2 million
     annually for this program, which both helps to better meet the demand
     among Pennsylvania families and boosts revenue for many farmers and
     small businesses.

2. Food access and health care access are both social determinants of health and
   together have a multiplying effect on health and quality of life. Locating pantries
   at health care offices allows physicians to directly refer food-insecure patients to
   emergency food services (Reinoso et al., 2022).

   - The General Assembly should consider building upon the Farmers Market
     Nutrition Program to provide funding for pantries and small fresh food
     markets to open in health care settings for all low-income patients.
     Markets should be locations where SNAP benefits can be spent.

Local Transportation Infrastructure

1. Service recipients often leverage social networks to pick up food boxes for
   neighbors and friends who lack transportation. However, food banks and pantries
   often limit the number of boxes any one individual can pick up. These limits are
   not practical for many situations, including for individuals in low-income senior
   housing developments who could otherwise pick up boxes for many of their
   neighbors.

   - Pantries should consider loosening restrictions on the number of
     distributions per proxy individual or per vehicle. PDA could also mandate
     such loosening for programs they fund or administer, like TEFAP and the
     Senior Food Box Program.

2. Existing transportation services can help ensure that people who require
   emergency food assistance have transportation resources.

   - PDA should consider working with the Departments of Transportation and
     Aging to ensure that those who qualify for transportation assistance utilize
     these programs to access food distributions. The PA Department of
     Transportation, as well as county governments, should consider expanding

public awareness of their programs, including the state-wide Shared Ride program for older adults (65+).

3. Public transit systems, especially in smaller cities and towns, might restrict what can be taken on public transit systems, including the number of bags allowed onboard.
   - County governments should consider working with local public transportation systems to ensure that people can effectively utilize these modes of transit to bring food home from emergency food distributions.

Local Organizational Capacity

1. The pantry volunteer base has dwindled significantly, and recruiting new volunteers has become challenging. For pantries housed at churches that rely on volunteers from shrinking church congregations, some communities—particularly in rural counties—worry about their capacity to recruit necessary volunteer labor.
   - County and state governments should consider actively encouraging volunteerism to sustain local hunger-relief organizations. This could include working with local organizations to brand them as important community-based initiatives that require community support—both time and money—to serve neighbors in need.

2. Pantries or soup kitchens with no paid staff risk closure if the volunteer who keeps a distribution going "retires" or dies, and there is no one to step in and take over.
   - County governments should consider supporting overhead for local pantries. Even a part-time director could sustain the longevity of distributions.

Conclusion

In 1981 when TEFAP was funded, anger rose over cuts to the Food Stamp program, the Reagan Administration did not intend to establish a permanent financial backbone for a nationwide network of emergency feeding organizations. By the late 1980s however, TEFAP had emerged as a key mechanism for reducing food insecurity, and it has been funded ever since. This shift was evident in the changed name of the program: what began as the "*Temporary* Emergency Food Assistance Program" was rebranded as "*The* Emergency Food Assistance Program."

Indeed, food insecurity and hunger have never been temporary issues in the United States. These are structural issues impacting millions of Americans who often also face poverty, un(der)employment, and housing instability. And, as we have shown in this report, measuring and locating pockets of hunger is a complex endeavor, with a significant proportion of the most intense need falling in rural pockets of Pennsylvania and the United States.

While there may be greater unmet need in rural Pennsylvania, there are longstanding challenges across the Commonwealth that result in inefficiencies, gaps in service, and an uncertain future for Pennsylvania's emergency food network. Much of the emergency

food network has emerged over time to grapple with erupting crises in hunger. This uneven development has contributed to many of the organizational and structural challenges facing food banks and pantries in this informal and quasi-governmental system. The complexity of this system also contributes to the difficulty of gathering and communicating timely and accurate data about shifting geographies of hunger over time, as well as gathering and communicating information about the network itself (i.e. hours, locations, and contact information for food banks, pantries, and soup kitchens).

The challenge of provisioning food to residents in need has become increasingly pointed in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic put a spotlight on food insecurity and saw huge influxes of government and private spending into emergency food programs and infrastructure. Early 2023 saw a sudden end to expanded government resources, and donations also decreased. One food bank told us, "The pandemic may be over, [but] the need for food and the need to address food insecurity is even greater now than it was during the pandemic." Food insecurity dramatically increased at the same time that funding for emergency food programs, the volunteer base that supports the network, and the media spotlight on the struggles of millions of low-income Americans all shrunk.

COVID-era policies taught us valuable lessons about what works to reduce poverty and hunger for the most vulnerable populations in the U.S. In other words, we know what works; we now must sustainably dedicate the resources to support those solutions.

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List of Definitions

Community Action Agency: An organization that carries out the Community Action Program (CAP), an initiative founded during the War on Poverty. Every county is covered by a CAA, and there are 42 total CAAs in Pennsylvania. The work of CAAs varies, but many have grants to operate programs like Head Start or the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). Often, CAAs have a food banking component, and some hold state government contracts for The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and/or State Food Purchase Program (SFPP) to receive and distribute emergency food.

Emergency food assistance: Food that is distributed by hunger-relief organizations to individuals and families in need. While we use the term "emergency food assistance" in this report, you may also hear the term "charitable food assistance."

Emergency food network: The network of food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens, and other hunger-relief organizations that collect and distribute emergency food to individuals and families in need. While we use the term "emergency food network" in this report, you may also hear the term "charitable food network."

Emergency food box: A shelf-stable box of food that service recipients can obtain from a food bank or pantry on demand, in a time of immediate crisis. An emergency food box is different from a standard distribution of emergency food, which occurs at a specific date and time and constitutes the majority of the emergency food network's food distribution.

Food bank: An organization that operates as a warehouse to store emergency food. Food banks acquire food from government programs and donations, as well as purchase food from wholesalers using government funding, grants, and donations. Food banks distribute food to partner agencies, like food pantries.

Food pantry: A community site that distributes emergency food to individuals and families in need. Pantries can have a brick-and-mortar location, where residents physically go into a pantry building to select or receive food. Pantries can also be mobile, such that residents simply pick up emergency food, often without even having to leave their car.

Food provisioning network: The hunger-relief organizations that work in tandem to provide emergency food to residents in a specific service area. For any given community, the food provisioning network would include the local pantries and soup kitchens in the community, the food bank from which they receive food, and the suppliers that provide food to the pantries, kitchens, and food bank.

Lead agency: A food bank that holds the contract for TEFAP or SFPP in a given county. This food bank may be a primary food bank or a secondary food bank. It distributes food and/or funds from TEFAP and/or SFPP to pantries and other local hunger-relief organizations in the county.

Partner agency: An organization to which a food bank provides food. Partner agencies will then distribute this food to residents. Partner agencies include food pantries and soup kitchens, but also other organizations that distribute food, like youth service centers, some senior centers, multi-service centers, and shelters, among others.

Primary food bank: This type of food bank only acquires food from government programs, wholesalers, and donations. It does not acquire food from other food banks.

Secondary food bank: This type of food bank may acquire food from government programs, wholesalers, and donations, but it also acquires food (either for free or for purchase) from one or more primary food banks.

Service area: The communities served by a food bank, food pantry, or other hunger-relief organization.

Service recipient: An individual who receives food from a food bank, food pantry, or other hunger-relief organization.

Soup kitchen: A community site that serves hot meals to individuals and families in need. Often, soup kitchens will have a food distribution, so service recipients can have a meal and also take-home additional emergency food. While we use the term "soup kitchen" in this report, you may also see the term "emergency kitchen."

List of Abbreviations

- **ABAWD:** Able-Bodied Adult without Dependents
- **CACFP:** Child and Adult Care Food Program
- **CAA:** Community Action Agency
- **CAP:** Community Action Program
- **CSFP:** Commodity Supplemental Food Program
- **DHS:** Pennsylvania Department of Human Services
- **FPL:** Federal Poverty Line
- **NGO:** Non-governmental organization
- **NSLP:** National School Lunch Program
- **PASS:** Pennsylvania Agricultural Surplus System
- **PDA:** Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture
- **TEFAP**: The Emergency Food Assistance Program
- **SBP:** School Breakfast Program
- **SFPP:** State Food Purchase Program
- **SNAP:** Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
- **USDA:** United States Department of Agriculture
- **WIC:** Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

Appendices

Appendix 1: Additional Methodology Details

This study leveraged a multi-level, multi-method research design. To present statistics on the operations of food banks and information on their sourcing and distributing practices, we collected survey data from the 22 DHS-identified food banks. We contextualized these survey data with interviews conducted with key leaders from each food bank. To triangulate the observations and challenges reported by food banks, we then conducted interviews with key leaders from partner agencies—food pantries and other hunger-relief organizations—to whom these food banks distribute food. We also visited a sample of these partner agencies to witness food distribution methods and to meet service recipients. Finally, to triangulate the observations and challenges reported by these partner agencies, we conducted interviews with service recipients who acquire emergency food from these partner agencies. Together, these perspectives paint a comprehensive picture of the work of the emergency food network and point to the gaps which remain in serving Pennsylvania residents in need, particularly those living in rural communities.

Additional Food Bank Survey Details

As the first step in this study, we conducted a survey with PA's food banks. After designing the survey protocol (provided below), we sought feedback from practitioners and experts in the field. Once we incorporated the recommended revisions and additions, we programmed our survey protocol into Qualtrics. We collected publicly available contact information for the Executive Directors (or equivalent) at each of the 22 DHS-identified food banks. We reached out to these Directors via email (and in the case of non-response, by phone) to explain the study and seek participation. Once Directors confirmed their interest in participating, we sent them the link to the survey. Some Directors filled out the survey themselves; others forwarded the survey link to an appropriate staff member.

Despite seeking expert advice on how to phrase survey questions for ease of food banks' participation, some food banks still struggled to assemble the information we requested. In particular, smaller food banks, who lack specific staff members focused on data collection and reporting, did not have the capacity to fill out the entire survey. We received completed surveys from 13 food banks (59 percent). For the remaining food banks, we sent a pared-down list of the most important statistics to provide us, and we filled in remaining gaps using data shared with us by Hunger-Free Pennsylvania and publicly available tax information. We utilized survey data to create a series of food bank profiles (which we found to be more visually appealing and digestible than a "summary matrix," as originally proposed).

One difficulty in understanding food bank data is that the need for emergency food changes month to month and year to year. Absolute numbers mask changes in who attends weekly or monthly food distributions. Food banks collect data on unduplicated and/or duplicated households served, which can allow for a better understanding of how many households visit a distribution multiple times. But these statistics do not paint a

perfect picture of what food insecurity looks like in a place. The "unduplicated households" figures in our profiles report how many total food exchanges there were between an organization and a household, knowing that some households will come more than once. The "duplicated households" figures report how many households used an organization in a given period of time but do not show how many times they visited the organization. Both offer insights into levels of food insecurity in an area, especially when analyzed over time.

Additional Food Bank Interview Details

After receiving survey data from food banks, we conducted interviews; this sequence allowed us to reference survey data in the interviews and ask any clarifying or contextualizing follow-up questions regarding the data. To set up interviews, we contacted leadership once again, detailing the areas of their work which we wanted to discuss further. Interviews were most often conducted with Executive Directors. However, some Directors passed this task onto another staff member who could adequately discuss the themes we requested to cover in the interview. For example, Mercer County Food Bank's interview was conducted with the Operations Manager. Some food banks assembled a team of multiple staff members who could discuss different themes. Our interview with Westmoreland County Food Bank, for example, included six different staff members.

Interviews lasted approximately one hour. Most of these interviews were conducted via Zoom, but we conducted some via phone when requested by the interviewees. Interviews followed the Food Bank Interview protocol provided below. Interviews were semi-structured, meaning we ensured that we asked each interviewee all of the themes listed in the interview protocol to each interviewee. However, we asked different follow-up questions to different interviewees based on their responses.

We successfully conducted interviews with all 22 food banks (100 percent). These interviews were recorded with the interviewees' consent, and the interview recordings were sent to an online transcription service, rev.com. We used the transcriptions to write participant-level memos for each interview, noting important themes evoked by interviewee(s) in response to our questions. From these memos, we did a thematic analysis of interviews (Vaismoradi et al., 2016), building a list of recurring themes by reading across participant memos.

Additional Case Study Details

The second goal of this project entailed an examination of four case study food provisioning networks. For these case studies, we selected four food banks from the full list of 22 DHS-identified food banks. These four food banks served as the central point for the case study. These case studies involved sequential interviews and site visits (Small 2009). For each case study, we first collected data from a sample of the food bank's partner agencies to consider these food banks' interactions with their partner agencies. From partner agencies, we sought to learn about the benefits and challenges of working with their respective food banks, the processes they use to distribute food to

their communities, and the remaining barriers they see hindering their work. We then moved further outward to consider these partner agencies' interactions with their service recipients. For each case study, we visited a sample of the interviewed partner agencies to witness distribution processes and meet service recipients, and then we collected data from a sample of service recipients. From service recipients, we sought to learn about their experiences receiving food from the emergency food network, barriers they face accessing food, and remaining needs they have.

We selected the case studies to attain diversity in geographical scope—concerning both service area size and rurality—as these factors have been shown to impact food banks' work (Orgut et al., 2015; Bazerghi et al., 2016). Including food banks as case studies also required that the food bank be particularly interested in helping with the study, as serving as a case study required a few additional tasks from food bank staff.

Our first case study featured Central Pennsylvania Food Bank, a primary food bank covering the largest service area of any food bank in Pennsylvania. Its service area covers 27 counties in the central region, reaching from the northern to the southern border. It includes 5 urban counties—encompassing Harrisburg, its suburbs, and some outlying Philadelphia suburbs—and 22 rural counties. Across these 27 counties are over 1,300 partner agencies, and to more easily reach these partner agencies spread out over hundreds of miles, the food bank operates two distribution centers—one in its south-central urban core in Dauphin County, and one in its north-central rural core in Lycoming County. Central Pennsylvania Food Bank operates as the TEFAP lead agency and the SFPP lead agency for only 3 of the 27 counties in its service area, receiving state and federal food and funds to be used specifically in those 3 counties. It also holds a contract for the CSFP program, distributing senior food boxes to 26 of its 27 counties. It is a PASS distributor, using state funds to purchase foods from agricultural producers. And it leverages a large donor network to collect food donations from businesses and funds from individuals and foundations to purchase food from wholesalers.

Our second case study featured Helping Harvest, a primary food bank serving Berks and Schuylkill Counties, one urban and one rural county located in the Southeastern region of the state. Helping Harvest is somewhat of an intermediate organization in the realm of food banks in the Commonwealth—its service area is considerably smaller than many of the regional food banks. However, with over 350 partner agencies spread out across its two counties, it has a much larger network than single-county food banks. Helping Harvest is the lead agency for Berks County for the TEFAP and SFPP programs, while one of its partner agencies, Schuylkill Community Action Agency, is the lead agency for both programs for Schuylkill County. It holds a contract for the CSFP program, receiving senior food boxes from the government to distribute throughout both counties. It is a PASS distributor, using state funds to procure foods from agricultural producers. And finally, it uses public and private funds to purchase food directly from wholesalers, and it collects food donations from businesses throughout both counties.

Our third case study featured Mercer County Food Bank, a primary food bank serving Mercer County, a single rural county located along the Ohio border in the Northwest region of the state. Mercer County Food Bank is one of only two single-county primary food banks, meaning it sources all of its own food, rather than sourcing from a larger,

regional food bank. Mercer County Food Bank is the lead agency for Mercer County for the TEFAP and SFPP programs, receiving food and funds to purchase food from the federal and state governments. It holds a contract for the CSFP program, receiving senior food boxes from the government to distribute throughout the county. It is a PASS distributor, using state funds to procure foods from agricultural producers. It uses private funds to purchase food directly from wholesalers, and it collects food donations from businesses throughout the county.

Our final case study featured Corner Cupboard, a secondary food bank serving Greene County, a single rural county located in the Southwest corner of the state. Unlike Mercer County Food Bank, which, as a primary food bank, sources all of its own food, Corner Cupboard falls under Greater Pittsburgh Food Bank's service area. Corner Cupboard is the lead agency for Greene County for both the TEFAP and SFPP programs, receiving food and funds from the federal and state governments. It leverages those state funds and private donations to purchase food from Greater Pittsburgh. And it collects food donations from businesses throughout the county to distribute across its partner agencies.

We began each case study after conducting the interview with the respective food bank's leadership. At the conclusion of this interview, we asked whether the food bank would be willing to help us connect with some of their partner agencies. Each food bank we asked to serve as a case study was willing to do so. We then requested that the food bank provide us with a list of their partner agencies with contact information. From this list, we contacted a sample of partner agencies, aiming for diversity in *type* of partner agency (i.e., food pantry, soup kitchen, multi-service center, etc.) and in the *locations* of these agencies (i.e., including both urban and rural partner agencies for food banks covering both geographies). In our initial contacts, we explained the purpose of the study and requested that leadership at the partner agency participate in an interview focused on their operations, relationship with the food bank, and interactions with service recipients.

We aimed to conduct approximately 10 interviews with partner agencies per case study. Nonetheless, reaching this target number was not possible for those case studies which had low overall numbers of partner agencies (for example, Corner Cupboard has only 11 partner agencies total). In total, we conducted interviews with 35 partner agencies. Figures A1-A4 provide maps of each case study food bank's service area, noting the locations of the interviewed partner agencies.

Most interviewees were directors of the partner agencies; sometimes interviewees were other key staff or volunteers. Most interviews with partner agencies were conducted via Zoom; however, some were conducted by phone when requested by the interviewee. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. Interviews followed the Partner Agency Interview protocol provided below. Interviews were again semi-structured, meaning we ensured that we asked all of the themes listed in the interview protocol to each interviewee. However, we asked different follow-up questions to different interviewees based on their responses. We recorded these interviews with the interviewees' consent and sent these recordings to rev.com to be transcribed.
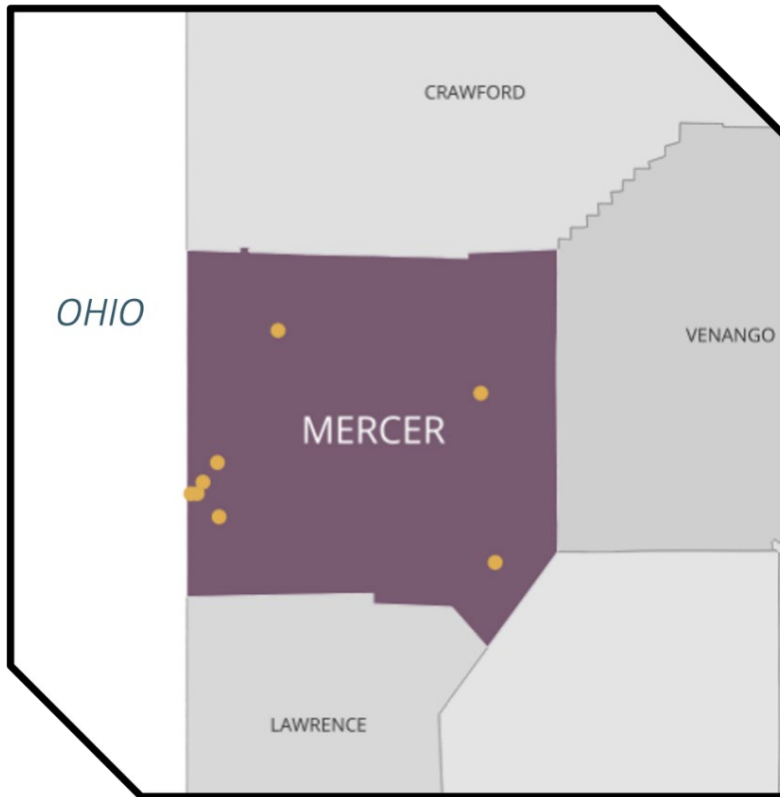
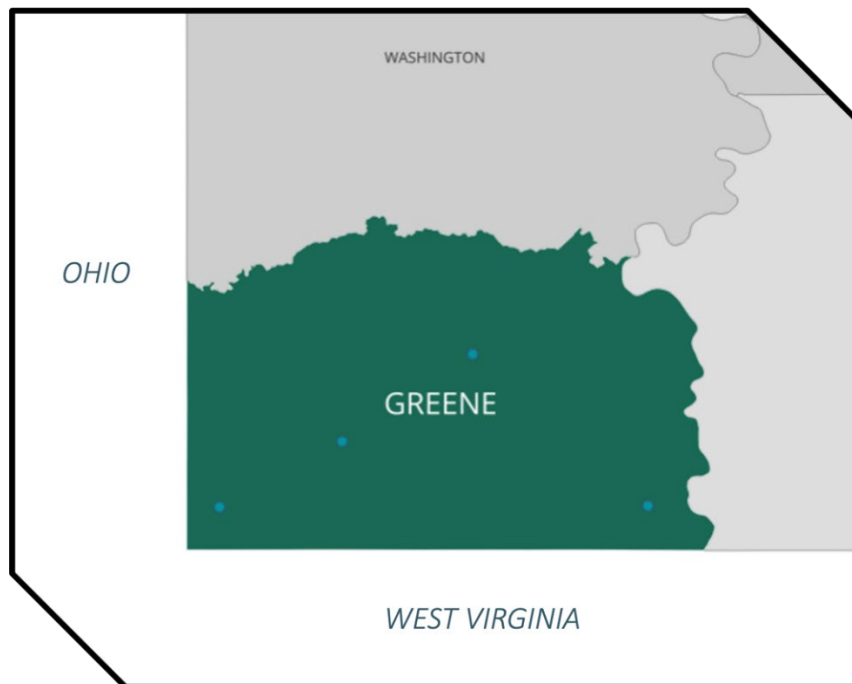**Figure 6: Partner Agencies Interviewed Within Central Pennsylvania Food Bank's Service Area**
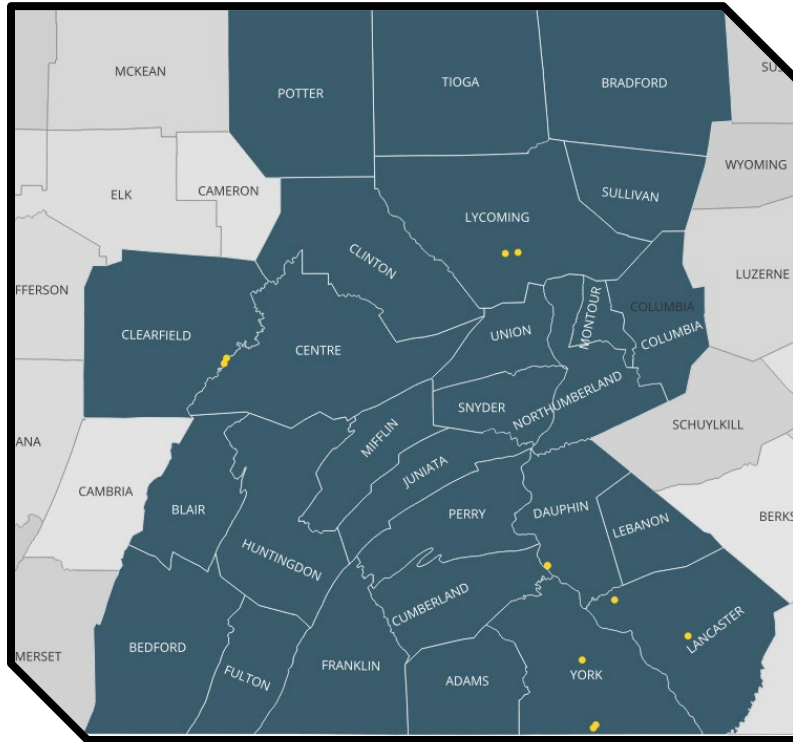
Figure 7: Partner Agencies Interviewed Within Helping Harvest's Service Area
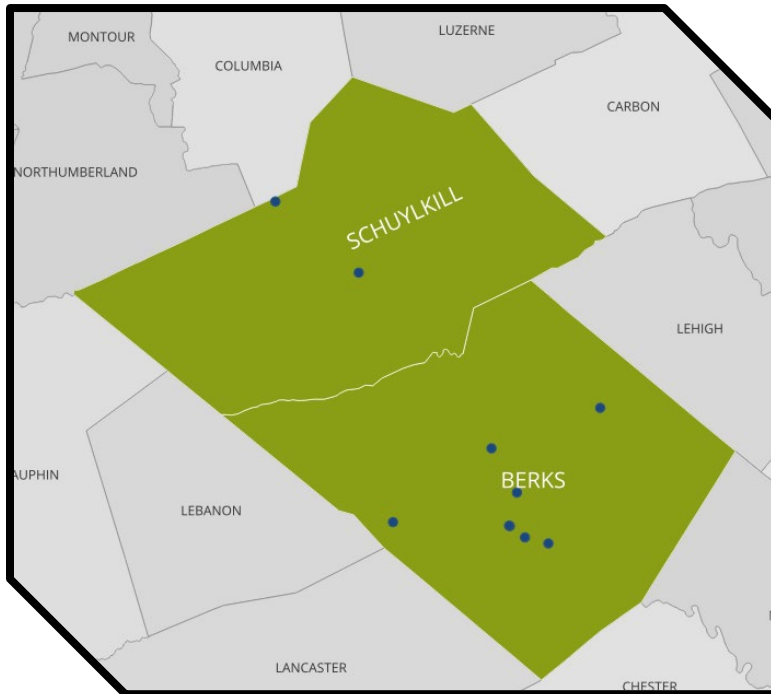
Figure 8: Partner Agencies Interviewed Within Mercer County Food Bank's Service Area

Figure 9: Partner Agencies Interviewed Within Corner Cupboard's Service Area

After conducting interviews with partner agencies, we reached back out to two partner agencies from each case study to request to visit. We again sought to attain diversity in the *types* of partner agencies and *locations* of agencies that we visited. Each partner agency whom we asked to visit was willing to allow us to do so. Through these site visits, we conducted participant observation to witness different models of food distribution, and interactions between staff, volunteers, and service recipients. While conducting these visits, we jotted notes regarding these themes either on paper or in an app on our phones, and then we typed these jottings into full field notes at the conclusion of the visit. While observing the food distributions, we also had casual conversations, or "ethnographic interviews" with service recipients to gain insight into their experience with and opinions on the partner agency (Rinaldo & Guhin, 2019).

Before conducting these visits, we also obtained permission from the partner agency to tell service recipients about our study and recruit them for formal interviews. We collected contact information from interested individuals and called them at a later date to set up phone interviews. We aimed to conduct approximately 10 interviews with service recipients per case study. However, due to significant interest, we ended up conducting 65 total interviews.

Interviews with service recipients were conducted over the phone and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Interviews followed the Service Recipient Interview protocol provided below. Interviews were again semi-structured, meaning we asked all of the themes listed in the protocol to each interviewee. However, we asked different follow-up questions to different interviewees based on their unique stories and experiences. At the end of the open-ended interview questions, we also included a series of closed-ended demographic questions, including items on SNAP receipt and food insecurity, that we asked verbatim. We recorded interviews with interviewees' consent and again sent these recordings to rev.com for transcription.

As with our food bank interviews, we used the transcriptions to write participant-level memos for each partner agency and service recipient interview, noting important themes evoked by interviewees in response to our questions. We again did a thematic analysis of these interviews (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). However, this time, we took a specific eye towards noting differences between the themes reported by urban and rural partner agencies and service recipients within each case study, and we looked for similarities and differences in the themes reported by partner agencies and service recipients across case studies. The findings we report are grounded in this rigorous analysis.

Data Collection Instruments

FOOD BANK SURVEY

There are 5 sections to the survey: service area, food supply, food distribution, operations and finances, and households served. You will answer approximately 25 total questions; the exact number will depend on your answers.

You will have a chance to elaborate on your survey answers in your interview. If there is any question which does not make sense for your organization, or you cannot answer without clarification, please skip the question. There will be a free response section at the end of the survey where you can answer any skipped questions in your own format and/or explain why you skipped them.

Service Area

1. In which counties does your food bank operate? *List 67 counties with checkboxes.*

2. In which counties do you have food storage facilities? *List counties checked in question 1 with text boxes.*

3. In which counties do you have facilities which serve purposes other than food storage (e.g., administrative offices, offices where you carry out programming for residents, etc.)? *List counties checked in question 1 with text boxes.*

Food Supply

4. In the following questions, we will ask about your fiscal year. Which fiscal year does your organization use? *Multiple choice: calendar, state, federal.*

5. In your last fiscal year, how many pounds of food did you receive from each of the following sources? (This should add up to your total pounds received in your fiscal year.) *List the options below with a text box.*
   a. PASS
   b. SFPP (pounds purchased with SFPP funds)
   c. TEFAP
   d. CSFP
   e. Other governmental sources: _____
   f. Donated by retailers
   g. Donated by wholesalers
   h. Donated by manufacturers
   i. Donated by farms (not PASS)
   j. Donated by the public (e.g., food drives)
   k. Transferred from another food bank
   l. Purchased from any source
   m. Other non-governmental sources: _____

6. How many of each of the following sources contributed food to your operations? (I.e., list the total number of manufacturers where you sourced food.) *List the options below with a textbox.*
   a. Retailers
   b. Wholesalers

c. Manufacturers
d. Farms

Food Distribution

7. In your last fiscal year, how many pounds of food were distributed in the following ways? (This should equal your total pounds distributed over the fiscal year.) *List the options below with a text box.*
    a. Delivered direct to residents either alone or with partner agencies (e.g., JIT)
    b. Delivered to partner agencies (e.g., food pantries, shelters, senior centers, etc.)
    c. Picked up by residents at your site
    d. Picked up by partner agencies (e.g., food pantries, shelters, senior centers, etc.)
    e. Transferred to another food bank
    f. Other: _____

8. *<If delivers direct to residents in question 7>*: How do you do food delivery to residents? *Multiple choice: By yourself, with partner agencies, some other way.*

9. *<If delivers food to partner agencies in question 7>:* Do you have a minimum requirement for delivery? If yes, please report the minimum. If no, please mark as "no minimum".

10. *<If delivers food to partner agencies in question 7>:* Do you charge for delivery? If yes, please report how much you charge or how you calculate this charge. If no, please mark "no charge".

11. *<If listed multiple counties in question 1>:* In your last fiscal year, how many pounds did you distribute to partner agencies and residents in each of the following counties? *List counties checked in question 1 with text boxes.*

12. To how many of each of the following partner agencies did you distribute food? (I.e., list the total number of food pantries where you distributed food.) *List the options below with a text box.*
    a. Food pantries
    b. Soup kitchens
    c. Shelters
    d. Senior programs
    e. Youth programs
    f. Multi-service agencies
    g. Other agencies outside of the above

13. Do you have a waitlist for partner agencies right now? *Yes/No.*

14. Do you or your partner agencies participate in any of the following food distribution programs? *Multiple choice, can select multiple:*

a. Grocery co-op
b. Free fridges
c. School pantries
d. Summer feeding programs
e. Backpack programs
f. Kids Café (after school programs)
g. Senior food box programs
h. SNAP incentive programs (e.g., produce prescriptions, nutrition incentives, etc.)
i. Drive-thru pantries
j. Mobile pantries
k. Other (please list other notable programs)

15. Do you or your partner agencies help register beneficiaries for SNAP? If yes, please check off the counties where you or your partner agencies do so. If no, then do not check off any counties. *List counties checked in question 1.*

16. Must partner agencies meet any of the following requirements to receive food from your food bank? *Multiple choice, can select multiple:*
    a. Partner agency must provide this food free for residents
    b. Partner agency must pay a fee for food distribution (e.g., cost per pound of food)
    c. Partner agency pays "membership" dues to food bank
    d. Partner agency must operate a minimum number of hours or days per month
    e. Other (please list any remaining requirements)

17. *<If partners pay a fee in question 16>*: How much is the fee that partner agencies must pay for food distribution?

18. *<If partners pay a fee in question 16>:* What do you call this fee?

19. *<If partners pay dues in question 16>*: How much are the dues that agencies must pay to partner with you?

20. *<If partners have minimum open hours in question 16>*: What are the minimum requirements for partner agencies' hours/days of operation?

Operations and Finances

21. In your last fiscal year, what was your total operational budget?

22. How much of your operational budget was utilized for the following needs? You can list the dollar amount or the percentage of your overall budget. *List the following options with text boxes.*
    a. Employment costs
    b. Facility and operations costs

  c. Food purchases
  d. Contract services (e.g. legal and accounting fees)
  e. Awards and grants to partner agencies
  f. Other: _____

23. In your last fiscal year, how much funding (non-food $$ donations) did you receive across all sources?

24. How much of this funding came from the following sources? You can list the dollar amount or the percentage of your overall incoming funds. *List the following options with text boxes.*
  a. Governmental grants and programs
  b. Foundation or non-governmental grants
  c. Individual and corporate donations
  d. Earned revenue
  e. Dues from partner agencies
  f. Other: _____

25. In your last fiscal year, how many total employees worked within your organization? *List the following options with text boxes.*
  a. Full-time employees
  b. Part-time employees

26. In your last fiscal year, how many total volunteers helped with your organization's work?

27. In your last fiscal year, how many total hours did this pool of volunteers work?

Households Served

28. Do you collect data on the numbers of duplicated households, unduplicated households, or both served by you and your partner agencies? *Multiple choice, can select multiple: duplicated, unduplicated.*

29. *<If unduplicated for question 28>* In your last fiscal year, how many unduplicated households did you and your partner agencies serve through your food distribution?

30. *<If unduplicated for question 28 and if listed multiple counties in question 1>:* How many unduplicated households did you and your partner agencies serve in different counties? *List counties with text boxes.*

31. *<If duplicated for question 28>* In your last fiscal year, how many duplicated households did you and your partner agencies serve through your food distribution?

32. *<If duplicated for question 28 and if listed multiple counties in question 1>:* How many duplicated households did you and your partner agencies serve in different counties? *List counties with text boxes.*

FOOD BANK INTERVIEW

Activities and Services

We first want to start off with some basic questions about your organization, especially considering the types of programs and services you all offer.

1. First, can you tell me what you see as the organization's mission?
2. What are the types of activities or services that you provide to fulfill the food-related aspects of your organization's mission?
3. Does your organization engage in any other types of activities beyond food provision? If so, what are they?
4. In your survey, you told us that your service area includes *<insert response here>*. Are there parts of your service area where more of your activities are concentrated, or are there parts of your service area where you have less of a presence?
   a. *If yes:* Why do you think that is the case?
   b. *If no:* Why do you think you all are so successful at serving all parts of your service area so equally?
5. Are there specific types of organizations or populations you would like to serve more but have trouble reaching? If so, who are they?
6. We know that people and their needs change over time. How do you keep track of the changing hunger needs across your service area and ensure that you are reaching the most vulnerable groups or people?

Food Supply

Next, we want to dive a bit deeper into the specifics of how your food bank acquires food supply.

7. Are there any types of foods that you do *not* receive which you would like to have? Think about the types of foods which residents typically want or need.
8. Are you able to meet special dietary needs in the foods you provide? (E.g., gluten-free, dairy-free, halal, kosher, cultural products, etc.)
9. Are there any types of foods that you typically receive too much of? Think about the types of foods which residents might find less desirable.
10. We know that you partner with the government through *<list programs from survey>*, as well as non-profits, religious organizations, and probably other types of organizations and programs to source food. If you think about all of the places where your food bank receives food from, which types of programs or partnerships tend to run the smoothest? Why?

11. If you think about all of the places where your food bank receives food from, which of those partnerships or programs tend to be the trickiest to work with? Why?
    a. Is there anything that might help these partnerships or programs run better?
12. Are there any other types of partnerships or programs that you wish your organization could receive food from?
    a. *If yes:* Do you know why you do not currently work with them?
13. In your survey, you told us about the places where your food bank receives funding from. Are there specific needs you all have which you struggle to find funding for, like infrastructure for food storage or transportation or labor needs?
    a. *If yes:* Why do you think you struggle to meet these needs – is it related to not having enough grant writers, funding having specific stipulations or strings attached, or something else?

Food Distribution

Now, we want to turn to the distribution side of your food bank's work and think about the specifics of how you provide food.

14. In your survey, you told us that your food bank distributes food to *<list categories of recipients here>*. Is there anyone else that you distribute to?
15. Thinking about all aspects of what it takes to get food to these partners, what do you think makes a partnership run smoothly?
16. What are some of the challenges you face in working with these different partners?
17. In your survey, you told us that you have a few eligibility criteria to determine where you can give food: *<insert response here>*. Are there other eligibility criteria that we missed?
    a. Why do you all utilize these criteria?
    b. Do you think they ever create barriers to fulfilling your mission? Why or why not?
18. *If the organization operates their own pantry:* On what days and during which hours can residents come pick up food?
    a. Are there other times you wish you could be open?
    b. Do you have rules on how often people can visit? If so, what are these rules?
        i. *If yes:* What are the positives and negatives about having these rules?
19. *If the organization operates mobile delivery:* On what days and during which hours do you provide mobile food delivery?
    a. Are there other times you wish you could operate the delivery service?
    b. Do you have rules on how often people can utilize the mobile delivery service? If so, what are these rules?
        i. *If yes:* What are the positives and negatives about having these rules?
20. *If the organization operates pantry or mobile delivery:* Do you keep track of persons or households that you serve over a particular period of time?
    a. *If yes:* How do you do so, and why?
21. *If the organization does not provide food directly to residents:* Do you all wish you could provide food directly to residents, or do you prefer a model where you do not do so?

a. *If yes:* What keeps you all from providing food directly to residents, and what would make it possible for you to do so?

22. Are you aware of any barriers that people or organizations may face in reaching your services? If so, what are some of these barriers?
    a. *If yes:* Do you have any ideas on how we could lower some of these barriers?

23. Besides food, are there any other types of items your organization distributes to partner organizations and/or individuals? If so, what are these items, and where do you get them from (i.e., direct purchase or donated?)
    a. Are there any [other] non-food items you wish your food bank could provide the communities you serve? If so, what are they, and what would make it possible for you to provide these?

24. Have you seen the demand for your food bank's services change over time? If so, why do you think that is?
    a. *Probe:* Have you seen any impacts created by the end of expanded SNAP benefits?
    b. *Probe:* How do you measure or estimate this changing demand?

25. When it comes to the people and places your food bank serves, what do you see as any remaining unmet food-related needs?

26. Are there any other important relationships or partnerships that your food bank has with organizations, stores, community groups, etc. that you haven't yet mentioned? If so, what are they and why are they important to you?

27. Before we end the interview, is there anything else you would like to share about your food bank's operations, the places where you get and distribute food, how you think the food safety net in general could work better, or some other topic?

PARTNER AGENCY INTERVIEW

Activities and Services

We first want to start off with some basic questions about your organization and the programs and services you all offer.

1. First, can you tell me what your role is in the organization?
2. What do you see as your organization's mission?
3. What are the types of activities or services that you provide to fulfill the food-related aspects of your mission?
4. Do you engage in any other types of activities outside of food provision?
   a. *Probe:* What are these other activities?
5. What do you define as your service area, and are there certain parts of your service area that are harder for you all to reach?
   a. *Probe:* Why is it harder to reach these areas?
6. Are there specific populations you have trouble reaching, like seniors, unhoused people, people with disabilities, or another group?
   a. *Probe:* Why is it harder to reach these groups?

Food Supply

Next, we want to dive a bit deeper into how you acquire food for your hunger-relief programs.

7. Beyond the *<list food bank here>*, where else do you receive food from?
8. Can you talk a bit about the best parts and the most challenging parts about your partnership with *<list food bank here>*?
9. Are there any types of foods that you do not receive much of which you would like to have?
    a. *Probe:* What are these foods?
    b. *Probe:* Do you get foods which can meet special dietary needs, like gluten-free or dairy-free diets, halal or kosher products, or cultural products for specific immigrant groups?
10. We know that to provide food to residents, you need more than just food; there are other infrastructure necessities along with labor needs. Are there specific needs which you currently struggle to find funding for?
    a. *Probe:* What are these needs?
11. Do you participate in any government programs, such as TEFAP, the Senior Food Box Program, the Summer Food Service Program, or something else?
    a. *If yes:* Is there anything that works particularly well or is particularly difficult about these programs?

Food Distribution

Finally, we want to turn to the distribution side of your work and think about how you provide food through your hunger-relief programs.

12. What are the different ways that you provide food to residents, and are there benefits and challenges associated with these different methods?
    a. Regarding food distribution, are there any innovative things you are doing that you are proud of and would want to share with a wider audience?
13. Are there specific days and times during which you provide food to residents?
    a. *Probe:* What are these days and times?
    b. Do you think this schedule is sufficient, or are there additional days and times that you think residents need?
14. Are there any eligibility criteria you use to determine who can receive food? Or do you have rules around how often people can get food?
    a. *Probe:* What are these criteria?
    b. *If yes:* Do you think these criteria or rules ever create barriers to fulfilling your mission?
        i. *Probe:* Why or why not?
15. Besides food, are there any other types of items you distribute to people or any other items you wish you could provide?
    a. *Probe:* What are these other items?
16. Do you keep track of the people or households that you serve over a particular span of time?

    a. *If yes:* How do you do so, and why?

17. Are you aware of any barriers that people face reaching your services?
    a. *Probe:* What are these barriers?

18. Have you seen the demand for your food distribution services change over time?
    a. *Probe:* Why do you think this is?
    b. Have you seen any impacts created by the end of expanded SNAP benefits?

19. How do you keep track of the changing hunger needs across your service area and ensure that you are reaching the most vulnerable groups or people?

20. The purpose of this project is to provide policy recommendations to the state legislature about how we can better meet people's food needs, particularly people in rural areas. Before we end the interview, is there anything you would want to convey to the legislature about policies or programs that would help you better serve your community?

SERVICE RECIPIENT INTERVIEW

1. To start, can you tell me what organizations you get food from? These can be soup kitchens, a youth or senior center, or something else.

2. Can you tell me what is useful about these programs – why do you go to these specific places?
    a. Where do you live in relation to the organizations you go to?

3. Different organizations have different models they use to distribute food. Like some provide you with a box of food that you just pick up. Others might have you walk through the pantry with a volunteer and select the things that you're interested in. Which of these models have you experienced?
    a. What do you like or do not like about them?

4. I know that some people help each other out by picking up food for other people who can't make it to the pantry. Have you ever helped someone out like this or has someone else ever done that for you?
    a. *If yes:* How has this worked out for you?

5. How do you feel about the way you are seen and treated by the pantries where you receive food? For example, maybe you feel that you are really cared about and respected, or maybe you don't enjoy or aren't comfortable with your interactions. Maybe it's a combination.
    a. What makes you feel that way?
    b. *Ask for a specific story or example.*

6. Do you like the food that you receive from these pantries? Is it food that you enjoy cooking and eating?
    a. *Ask for examples of what they receive that they like.*
    b. If you have children, is it food that your children enjoy eating?

7. Do you ever get items that you don't want or need?
    a. *Ask for examples of what those items are.*
    b. *If yes:* What do you do when that happens?

8. Are you able to get as much food as you need from the pantries that you visit?
    a. *If yes:* How many pantries do you visit each week or month to meet your needs?
    b. *If no:* How do you get the rest of the food, you need?

9. Do you ever have to let another bill or expense fall through the cracks in order to get the rest of the food you need?
    a. *If yes:* Can you tell me how you make those difficult decisions?
10. Are there foods you would like that you aren't able to get from the pantries you visit?
    a. *Ask for examples of what they would like.*
    b. *If yes:* Are you able to get these foods some other way?
11. Thinking about the organizations where you get food, do they help you in any other way – for example, helping you access other items you need or other services?
    a. *Ask for examples of what other help they provide.*
    b. *Ask for a specific story or example.*
12. Are there items other than food you need that you *wish* the pantries would provide?
    a. *Ask for examples of what other items they would like to have.*
13. Can you tell me any other challenges you face with these pantries that we haven't discussed so far?
14. How does receiving food assistance from a pantry affect other aspects of your life, such as your financial situation or overall well-being?
    a. *Ask for a specific story or example.*
15. Do you receive SNAP or WIC?
    a. *If yes to either*: What do you like about the SNAP (or WIC) program? Is there anything you don't like?
    b. *If yes to either:* How does receiving SNAP (or WIC) compare to using services like food pantries? Which do you prefer?
    c. *If no to SNAP*: Why don't you receive SNAP?
16. Have you seen changes over time in the food services in your area, for example what services are available, how they operate, or what foods are available?
17. During the COVID pandemic, there were a number of extra benefits extended to people, like the expanded SNAP benefits and the stimulus payments. Did you receive any of these extra benefits?
    a. *If yes:* What did those extra benefits mean to you?
    b. *If yes:* How did it impact you when those extra benefits were no longer available? How are you making it day to day?
18. In your opinion, what changes could be made to the food pantry system to better meet the needs of people in your community?

To wrap up, we have a few quick survey-type questions.
1. First, can you tell us what town you live in?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your race or ethnicity?
4. What is your age?
5. Do you have any children under the age of 18? How many?
6. How many adults and children, including yourself, currently live in the same place as you?
7. Do you speak a language other than English at home? What is it?
8. What is the highest level of education that you've completed?
9. What is your current employment status?

        a. *If currently employed:* What is your job?

        b. *If currently in school:* What kind of program are you enrolled in?

10. I'm going to present you two statements that people have made about their food situation. It is, "The food that I bought just didn't last, and I didn't have money to get more." Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you and your household in the last 12 months?

11. The second statement is, "I couldn't afford to eat balanced meals." Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you and your household in the last 12 months?

12. In the last 12 months, did you or other adults in your household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?

        a. *If yes:* How often did this happen? Did it happen almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only 1 or 2 months?

13. In the last 12 months, did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food?

14. And lastly, in the last 12 months, were you ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food?

Thank you so much for the time you shared with me and for sharing your experiences. We hope that this study will help improve policies and programs related to food insecurity and hunger, and your experience and knowledge is really valuable to that goal. Before we end, is there anything else you would like us to know or to share about some of what we talked about?

Appendix 2: SNAP Policies and Food Banks

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has great potential to serve as a poverty-reducing tool and is especially effective in reducing poverty for children (Tiehen et al., 2012). In fact, together with other economic assistance programs, the expansion of SNAP benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic kept a record 53 million people out of poverty and reduced childhood poverty from 21.8 percent to 5.2 percent (Trisi, 2023).[7] In general, however, many people who are eligible for SNAP fall through the cracks, whether because they do not apply or because their applications are incorrectly denied. Additionally, SNAP has long been used as a political bargaining chip (Poppendieck, 2014), which often results in the reduction of SNAP or other social welfare benefits and an increase in the conditions that households must meet to qualify.

One example of this is the recent increase in SNAP work requirements in Pennsylvania. The Able-Bodied Adult Work Requirement (ABAWD) was reinstated in 2016 for adults between the ages of 18-49.[8] As a part of the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023, the ABAWD age range was expanded from 18-49 to 18-52 starting in October

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[7] These figures rely on the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) rather than the FPL, which, among other modifications, takes geographical differences in cost of living into consideration. The FPL, by contrast, is static across geographies.

[8] ABAWD SNAP work requirements, which are much stricter than the general work requirements for SNAP, were initially put in place in 1996 following welfare reform. These requirements were paused during the Great Recession, and then reinstated once the federal government deemed the Recession over.

2023 and will go up to 54 on October 2024. The age range will revert to 18-49 in 2030, barring other policy interventions (Bauer & East, 2023). Bauer and East find in their 2023 Brookings Institute report that increases in work requirements for SNAP do not meaningfully increase employment; rather they significantly decrease SNAP enrollment and participation. Food banks, which are already struggling amid COVID-era SNAP benefits reduction and food inflation, will likely see even greater demand as ABAWD changes go into effect.

Furthermore, there is a significant gap in support services for the "near poor", whose incomes are slightly above SNAP eligibility, which is usually set somewhere between 130 and 200 percent of the FPL. While SNAP benefits increase depending on how far below the FPL a household's income is, there is no "tapering" of SNAP benefits if incomes rise above the eligibility cut off. This means that many people who classify as near poor face a "hunger cliff", with significantly higher rates of food insecurity than those who fall just under the SNAP cutoff. Food banks become especially crucial for this segment of the population who fall just out of SNAP eligibility.

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