

Food Banks and Food Shelves



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Introduction

The following report is an exploration of a narrow field within the broad context of health and human services work. It is not an exhaustive treatment of all effective programs or approaches within the field, but rather a narrow investigation of a topic of interest.

The subject matter of this paper does not necessarily represent an area of financial investment, grant funding, or other programmatic pursuit for United Way of Olmsted County. Rather, this report reflects on a specific type of intervention that allows individuals to reach their full potential, and presents related research.

There may be a wide variety of programs or services that address individual and community needs, and this report is not designed to enumerate all possibilities. United Way of Olmsted County hopes that readers will think creatively about the ways in which the ideas and experiences contained within the report might inform programs, services, and community changes in Olmsted County.

What do We Mean by Traditional Food Access?

A food bank is a non-profit that distributes food to those facing insecurity. A food bank may distribute food directly to individuals, or it may operate as a 'warehouse,' supplying food to distributors such as food pantries, homeless shelters, schools, and soup kitchens. Food banks were established in 1967, but the distribution methods that they operate through were established much earlier ("Feeding America," 2017a).

When we refer to traditional food access, we refer to a food bank as well as their traditional distribution partners.

Why is Traditional Food Access Important?

In terms of scale and efficiency, it is hard to find a model that can put more food in the hands of hungry people at a lower cost. The food distributed may come from public donations, government programs, or by partnering with for-profit companies to distribute unsold food which would otherwise go to waste. In other words, outside of tax dollars and administration, the food distributed by a food bank doesn't cost anything. Food banks often rely on volunteer labor, as do many of their distribution partners, which serves to keep administrative costs low.

Food banks serve over 3.6 billion meals a year, serving 1 in 7 Americans

("Feeding America," 2017b). The network connecting food suppliers, food banks, and distributors is both well-established and formalized, with over 200 banks and 60,000 programs included in the Feeding America network, America's third-largest charity (Barrett, 2016). In terms of addressing food insecurity, food banks are nearly as influential as the federal assistance programs, SNAP and WIC (formerly referred to as food stamps). Food banks serve 46 million individuals annually ("Feeding America," 2017b) while SNAP and WIC serve 44 million and 8 million individuals respectively (United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, 2017a, United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, 2017b)¹. Most individuals that utilize food assistance programs, such as food pantries, do not treat them as temporary relief but use them as a consistent, supplemental food source. More than half of all food pantry clients use food pantries for at least six months out of the year, and more than a third use them twelve months out of the year (Echevarria, Santos, Waxman, Engelhard, & Del Vecchio, 2009). In short, food banks and their partners are essential components of society's response to domestic hunger.

Why is Food Innovation Important?

While the food bank model has been hugely successful over the last 50 years and continues to be a key model for addressing food insecurity, the traditional model did not address issues of culture, education, fresh produce, or accessibility. Within the Feeding America network itself, there has been an acknowledgement of these issues. There is a push for innovative program solutions to these challenges, such as through the backpack program, mobile food pantries, awareness programs, and community kitchens ("Feeding America," 2017c).

¹ A number of food bank meals are collected by SNAP recipients: in 2016, 200 million (out of 4 billion) meals distributed by food banks were SNAP meals (<http://www.feedingamerica.org/our-work/our-approach/>)

Successful Traditional Models

Good Shepherd Food Bank is a warehouse-style food bank in Main, with a total of three different warehouses. The agency has over 600 partner agencies and servers nearly 200,000 Mainers each year, reaching every county in the state (Good Shepherd Food Bank, 2016).

The Banquet is an on-site meal program (soup kitchens) in Sioux Falls, SD, that serves over 600 meals a day – or in total, 196,000 meals a year. The food is donated and purchased by volunteers, and all meals are served by volunteers (“The Banquet,” 2017).

The Burlington-Hampshire Area Food Pantry has been serving the community of Hampshire, Illinois for over 30 years. The pantry provides non-perishable food to church members as well as residents of the local community. Donations, sorting, stocking, and distribution is done by an all-volunteer staff from 11 churches and 4 businesses, as well as local community members (“Burlington-Hampshire Area Food Pantry,” 2017).

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