

# Transportation-Related Barriers to Accessing Emergency Food Assistance

Justine Lindemann and Kristina Brant



## What is the issue?

Across over 120 interviews with food bank staff, food pantry volunteers, and food recipients in Pennsylvania, transportation was one of the most frequently stated challenges related to accessing emergency food assistance.

In this brief, we outline how transportation-related barriers that can inhibit both urban and rural residents from accessing emergency food assistance, introduce adaptations that residents use to overcome these barriers and innovations that food banks and pantries have developed to reduce these barriers, and provide policy and program recommendations to support these practices.

## Transportation barriers

Access to personal, shared, or public transportation is essential to ensure resident access to emergency food services. While we typically think of transportation as a barrier in rural places, this study identified transportation-related barriers across urban and rural geographies.

- In rural communities:
  - Public transportation is often sparse or non-existent, making access to a personal vehicle a necessity;
  - Some residents do not have their own personal vehicle, or their vehicle may not be consistently reliable;
  - Residents must sometimes travel 15 miles or more to their nearest pantry, which can be expensive due to the cost of gas or difficult during winter weather.
- In urban and suburban communities:
  - Public transportation can be more accessible but requires residents to have the physical capacity to carry food boxes, which can especially disadvantage older adults and those with mobility-related limitations;
  - Some public transportation systems enforce restrictions on how many bags or boxes riders are allowed to carry onboard, limiting how much food assistance someone can receive;
  - Residents might have to take two or more busses and still walk considerable distances to reach their nearest pantry, which can be time-intensive.

Transportation assistance programs do exist in Pennsylvania. However, there is a need for more consistent and effective communication to ensure that people who use emergency food assistance are aware of the transportation resources available to them.



## Adaptive practices

**Recipient networks:** Food recipients often leverage their social networks to pick up extra food boxes for family members, neighbors, and friends who lack transportation. Nevertheless, many food banks and pantries limit the number of boxes any one individual can pick up. For example, a common limit is two families per car. These limits are not practical for many situations. For example, individuals in low-income or older adult housing developments may desire to pick up boxes for many of their neighbors.

**Volunteer networks:** Food pantries will often rely on their volunteers to deliver food boxes to people in need. This practice is especially common for the Senior Food Box Program. Yet, this practice requires sufficient volunteers to reach everyone who cannot travel and relies on volunteers to use their own resources (time and gas). Volunteers may have to choose which residents to deliver food boxes to, given limited resources, which can perpetuate inequities.

**Mobile pantries:** Some food banks have begun to operate their own “mobile pantries” to help resolve some transportation barriers. In this model, a food bank delivers food boxes to drive-through sites, typically a parking lot of a church or government building. Volunteers then load food boxes directly into food recipients’ cars. The mobile pantry model is closing geographical gaps in food access by serving places where there are no brick-and-mortar food pantries or where a pantry has recently closed.

**DoorDash:** Project DASH, a partnership with DoorDash, has provided grant funding to food banks to have Senior Food Boxes delivered by DoorDash workers to older adults with limited mobility. Several food banks and pantries report that this program has been a great success for those who were able to enroll. However, funding for the program is limited, eligibility is not guaranteed, and DoorDash does not serve the most rural areas of Pennsylvania.

*“We have food drivers who work with DoorDash [...] but if you're not in that program, and you need food and you live in one of these rural communities, you're in a very difficult situation. You're left to the devices of finding a ride [...] if you live in a rural community, you can't walk two, three, four miles.” (Staff member at a food bank)*

## Policy and program recommendations

1. Pantries should loosen restrictions on the number of food boxes a proxy individual can pick up for others. The state could also mandate loosening such restrictions for programs they fund or administer, like TEFAP (monthly food distributions at pantries) and the Senior Food Box Program.
2. Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture should work with the Department of Transportation and Department of Aging to ensure that older adults and people with disabilities who qualify for transportation assistance programs are aware that they can utilize these programs to access food distributions. County governments should work to expand public awareness of these programs that are specific to their counties.
3. County governments should work with local public transportation authorities to ensure that people can effectively utilize these modes of transit to transport food from emergency food distributions (i.e., not limiting the amount of food riders can bring onboard).
4. Hunger Free Pennsylvania, the current grant partner with DoorDash, should work to expand funding for food box delivery not only to all rural areas of Pennsylvania, but to residents with a demonstrated lack of transportation as well.

---

**Suggested Citation:** Lindemann, J. & Brant, K. (2025). *Transportation-Related Barriers to Accessing Emergency Food Assistance* (Brief #12). Penn State's Center for Economic and Community Development. [aese.psu.edu/cecd](http://aese.psu.edu/cecd)

This report is part of a series of policy briefs on the provision of emergency food assistance across Pennsylvania. The full report can be accessed at <https://rural.pa.gov>, or by sending a request directly to the authors. This series was created by Penn State's Center for Economic and Community Development in partnership with Penn State Extension. For questions about this report, please contact the authors at [jlindemann@psu.edu](mailto:jlindemann@psu.edu) or [kbrant@psu.edu](mailto:kbrant@psu.edu).

This study was funded by a research grant from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, an office of the Pennsylvania State Government. Additional support comes from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture and Multistate Research Project #W5001 Rural Population Change and Adaptation in the Context of Health, Economic, and Environmental Shocks and Stressors (#PEN04796, Accession #7003407).

Penn State's **Center for Economic and Community Development** is an applied research and engagement center dedicated to strengthening local and regional development in Pennsylvania and beyond. The Center works with and for communities to address pressing issues they face by connecting them with information about the issues facing their communities. The Center is housed in the College of Agricultural Sciences' Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology, and Education. Visit us online: [aese.psu.edu/cecd](http://aese.psu.edu/cecd)

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

The University is committed to equal access to programs, facilities, admission and employment for all persons. It is the policy of the University to maintain an environment free of harassment and free of discrimination against any person because of age, race, color, ancestry, national origin, religion, creed, service in the uniformed services (as defined in state and federal law), veteran status, sex, sexual orientation, marital or family status, pregnancy, pregnancy-related conditions, physical or mental disability, gender, perceived gender, gender identity, genetic information or political ideas. Discriminatory conduct and harassment, as well as sexual misconduct and relationship violence, violates the dignity of individuals, impedes the realization of the University's educational mission, and will not be tolerated. Direct all inquiries regarding the nondiscrimination policy to the Office of Equal Opportunity and Access, The Pennsylvania State University, 328 Boucke Building, University Park, PA 16802-5901, Email: [oeoa@psu.edu](mailto:oeoa@psu.edu), Tel (814) 863-0471.

© 2025 Center for Economic and Community Development, The Pennsylvania State University