Policies and Programs to Support Non-Food Benefits of Emergency Food Services

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What is the issue?

Policymakers may assume that food banks, pantries, and soup kitchens serve a necessary but narrow function of simply providing food to individuals and households in need. However, these local food agencies offer important non-food benefits, including social, health, and economic benefits, which should be recognized and supported.

In this brief, we outline several non-food benefits that residents may gain when accessing emergency food assistance, and we describe the unique role that local food agencies can play in helping residents access these benefits. Finally, we provide policy and program recommendations to support and expand these non-food benefits.

Non-food benefits: social, health, economic

Social connections and relationships

Food recipients describe the social connections and relationships they develop at food pantries and soup kitchens as incredibly important. We frequently heard stories about positive interactions and friendships formed with other food recipients or volunteers. Amid increasing rates of social isolation, pantries and soup kitchens are filling an important role in bringing people together.

But spending time in a physical place with the other people there is what makes these social relationships possible. As we discuss in Brief #7 in this series, the "trunk" or "drive-through" model of food distribution reduces or eliminates this interaction between people.

For older adults especially, food pantries and soup kitchens may offer opportunities for interaction that don't exist elsewhere. One person explained that he enjoys eating lunch with others at his local soup kitchen because he lives by himself. We heard this sentiment frequently.

For some, food pantry interactions are meaningful enough that they decide to volunteer as well. One woman we interviewed began volunteering at her food pantry after her husband passed away. She explained that volunteering provided her important ongoing social connection. Another told us she had been volunteering with her pantry's school backpack program for over five years.

> *"...since I get to meet these people to talk to, it all works out. Like I said, I'm single. I'm by myself. And I don't cook. And I don't really stay at home much. I can't stand to stay at home and watch soap operas and stuff at home... I'd be dead in a week."*
> *(Food recipient, Lycoming County)*

Non-food items

Non-food items—like diapers, toilet paper, personal hygiene products, and household cleaning products—are essential for both personal and household hygiene and overall health and well-being. Nonetheless, these items can be expensive to purchase and cannot be purchased with SNAP benefits.

Food recipients frequently talked about the importance of these items and their inconsistent availability at local agencies. Pantry staff explained that these items are sometimes donated, but donations do not cover need. Food banks and pantries can also purchase these items with grant money or their discretionary budgets, but no government programs support their acquisition.

Non-food items like those listed above are necessary for people's health and dignity. The economic and health benefits to food recipients could be extensive if food banks and pantries could more consistently source these items.

Connections to other services

Food pantries and soup kitchens interface frequently with residents who have other service needs as well. Pantry staff and volunteers have the potential to provide food recipients with information and connections to other services during their interactions. While food banks tend to have less direct interactions with residents, many are engaging in other anti-poverty and general needs work. Community Action Agencies (CAAs) have always functioned as more holistic "anti-poverty" or "poverty-reduction" organizations; however, other food banks are increasingly serving as a connector between residents and social and economic services.

A regional food bank in northeast Pennsylvania, for example, has the broad mission of "people helping people." They offer weatherization programs, a first-time home buyers program, assistance with Medicaid and SNAP applications, transportation assistance programs, and nutrition education programs. Other agencies offer technology literacy programs for older adults.

Food banks and pantries that don't have the capacity to offer such programs themselves can link residents to other organizations who offer these services. However, not all pantries are connected to information about local and state services, and most food banks don't have systems for sharing information broadly among food recipients.

> *(Local) agencies…build a relationship with (residents). They have time to sit down and talk to the folks and get to know them a little bit. So we've really started depending on them to give us that information and ask people, 'Hey, what are you looking for that we've not been offering you?' (Staff member at a food bank)*

Policy and program recommendations

1. To the extent possible, restrictions on state and local funding programs (e.g., SFPP) should be amended so that pantries have more flexibility to purchase necessary non-food items.
2. Pantries moving to the "trunk" or "drive-through" model of food distribution should consider alternative ways to facilitate positive social interactions or relationships between and among food recipients and volunteers.
3. Food banks and pantries should facilitate connections to other relevant social service agencies and programs in their communities by sharing information through flyers and word of mouth and by inviting agency representatives to food distributions.

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