

# Connecting Underserved Groups with Emergency Food Assistance: Immigrant Communities

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## What is the issue?

In recent decades, growing numbers of immigrant and refugee families have relocated to Pennsylvania. While larger cities like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh have long been home to immigrant populations, other places have become “new immigrant destinations.” There is a need for targeted support and services to effectively connect immigrant communities to food assistance resources.

In this brief, we outline barriers that inhibit food banks and pantries from adequately serving immigrant communities, highlight initiatives and innovations that food banks and pantries have developed to reduce these barriers, and provide policy and program recommendations to support and expand these practices.

## Barriers serving immigrant communities

Immigrant families are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity due to factors like nuanced migration statuses and limited social infrastructure for immigrant inclusion. Accessing emergency food assistance through food banks and pantries could help reduce food insecurity rates, but immigrant communities often face difficulties in accessing such assistance.

- **Language barriers:** Some immigrants with limited English proficiency may struggle to read outreach materials that share information about pantry services or to communicate with volunteers at pantries. Limited English proficiency can also lead to hesitancy in accessing services because of concern about shame or stigma.
- **Cultural barriers:** Certain immigrant groups could have cultural differences that reduce their willingness to approach pantries. For example, some may hold stigma towards asking for help or assistance, or avoid seeking out food assistance because culturally appropriate foods are not frequently distributed
- **Misinformation and fear:** Immigrants have diverse migration statuses. Food pantries serve refugees, undocumented individuals, mixed-status families, seasonal workers, and non-citizen students on F1 or J1 visas. Those without citizenship may believe they are ineligible for emergency food assistance or worry about legal consequences should they ask for help.
- **Identification barriers:** Immigrants with uncertain migration statuses may lack certain forms of identification like driver’s licenses. They may not approach pantries that require certain forms of proof of residence to receive assistance.
- **Heightened risk of other barriers:** Due to issues related to migration status, like driver’s license restrictions, immigrants may face other challenges - like transportation barriers - more acutely.



It is important to note that immigrant communities are diverse. Immigrant families who speak different languages, hold different cultural values, and have different statuses encounter unique barriers to obtaining food assistance. Different types of innovations may support different groups.

## Initiatives and innovations

**Multilingual services:** Some food banks and pantries are ensuring that their services are accessible to non-English speakers. One best practice involves actively recruiting bilingual volunteers to assist immigrant families when visiting their distributions. While this is preferred, some pantries find themselves unable to recruit volunteers who speak less common languages. In this case, some pantries use interpretation phone call services as an alternative.

**Culturally appropriate food options:** Food banks and pantries are also expanding their offerings to include culturally appropriate food options that resonate with the dietary preferences and cultural backgrounds of local immigrant families. This includes staple foods commonly consumed in immigrant communities (e.g., tortillas or pita bread) or religiously and culturally appropriate items (e.g., kosher or halal meats). Others try to stock foods that are common across different cultures (e.g., rice, beans, and fish).

**Acceptance of alternative identification:** Recognizing that certain immigrants—like those with undocumented status or new refugees—may lack drivers' licenses, some pantries are

accepting alternative forms of proof of residence, such as utility bills. Others do not ask for information that is not required, like Social Security Numbers, to limit fear.

**Targeted outreach alongside trusted community organizations:** Some food pantries are partnering with community organizations trusted within immigrant communities, such as immigrant rights groups and cultural centers, to conduct targeted outreach efforts. By building genuine relationships with these organizations, pantries can leverage their networks and credibility to better connect with and serve immigrant families.

**Education about food assistance eligibility:** Food banks and pantries are taking proactive steps to educate immigrant families about their rights and entitlements. This includes providing information about policies like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Dispelling myths that may deter immigrant families from seeking assistance and providing support through the application process can better ensure equitable access to food assistance.

*"We have a small international section [for immigrant clients]... [for] like the masa and the rice, which we always have, and the types of spices that they like. We have a lot of requests for plantains, but we don't ever get plantains and stuff like that. When we intake a new person, we do try to ask if they have any dietary needs, and we see if we can try and meet those." (Coordinator at a food pantry)*

## Policy and program recommendations

1. Food banks should encourage the formation of coalitions between pantries, social services, and immigrant support organizations. Such coalitions could facilitate stronger relationships with immigrant communities. This could also streamline referral systems to allow immigrant families to more easily navigate the complex landscape of available services.
2. Food banks should assist pantries in accessing culturally appropriate foods and subscriptions to phone interpretation services. Food banks could also provide trainings for pantry partners whose volunteers wish to learn how to better support immigrant clients.

3. Pantries should make an effort to recruit volunteers and staff with backgrounds, including language capabilities, similar to immigrant groups in their communities. Food banks could also assist pantries in translating outreach materials to reach non-English speaking audiences.
4. Pantries should limit the identifying information they collect from recipients to what is required. If they must assess proof of residence, they should accept alternative forms of proof beyond state-issued identification. They should also explicitly state the protection of all data they collect, reinforcing trust within immigrant communities.

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