

NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF THE RURAL AND REMOTE MEMBER FOOD BANKS OF THE CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION OF FOOD BANKS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Nutrition Policy Institute (NPI) at the University of California worked with the California Association of Food Banks (CAFB) and their Rural and Remote Committee members over the period June 2016 to February 2017 to conduct a needs assessment of 15 selected rural and remote Food Banks in California. The purpose of the assessment was to identify strengths, challenges and priority strategies to increase the food banks' capacity to better meet the needs of their communities.

The assessment focused on four broad categories: formal organization, organizational capacity, organizational practices and community need, with multiple indicators for each category. Research methods included an online survey gathering quantitative data on the food banks' operations; compilation of service area profiles presenting sociodemographic and food-related indicators; and interviews with staff at site visits to each of the 15 rural and remote food banks. Key findings are presented below:

Despite their common status as "rural and remote," there is considerable variation in the scale of operations of these food banks, with budgets ranging from \$150,000 to \$1.9 million, staff numbers ranging from 0 to 23, service areas encompassing one to six counties and significant variations with respect to proximity to urban areas and main highways. Of the 15 food banks, nine are standalone 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations, five operate under the umbrella of Community Action Agencies (CAA), and one is affiliated with a large, not-for-profit healthcare organization. All food banks except one are Feeding America Partner Distribution Organizations.

The rural and remote food banks face many common challenges, including insufficient funding, particularly for infrastructure and operation costs, challenging logistics for transporting food long distances or to areas not on main routes, low levels of foundation support, limited corporate donor base, and limited access to retail donations to name a few.

KEY PRACTICES OF RURAL AND REMOTE FOOD BANKS

Food Procurement

- Survey respondents reported procurement of between 1.1 and 4.4 million pounds of food annually from three main sources: donated (55%), government (25%), and purchased including Farm to Family (15%) and other purchased (5%). Procurement of this quantity of charitable foods are a notable achievement for these food banks given the resource constraints they face.
- Food bankers expressed overall high levels of satisfaction with TEFAP (government) foods, noting that quality has improved in recent years. Concerns included receiving insufficient amounts of food to meet community need, overly large packaging of frozen meat and fish making those items hard to distribute, and excessive amounts of unusual items such as cranberry products and grapefruit juice, the latter being inadvisable for individuals on certain medications.
- Satisfaction with food obtained from Feeding America regional affiliates was low, including concerns about a preponderance of processed items and difficulties obtaining higher quality, nutritionally dense items.
- Satisfaction with food obtained from Feeding America partner stores was generally high. Concerns included stores donating to other agencies and an inability to obtain sufficient food in small counties where there is only one significant sized supermarket.
- Food bankers participating in the Farm to Family program expressed high levels of satisfaction and gratitude for the opportunity to access fresh fruits and vegetables at an affordable price. While noting that quality can be variable, food bankers are understanding of the constraints associated with distributing F2F produce statewide.
- Most food banks participate in community food drives primarily to raise community awareness about hunger; nonetheless, only a small proportion of donated food comes from these drives. Some food banks have been conducting virtual food drives as a means of obtaining cash, rather than food donations, allowing them to purchase higher quality items to supplement donated foods. This is a model that other food banks are encouraged to explore.

Food Distribution to Clients

- The food banks distribute food directly to clients and through a network of member agencies. Direct distribution is conducted in a variety of ways: at food bank warehouses; at locations throughout the service areas; at school-based backpack and snack programs; and at summer youth feeding programs.
- Distribution styles include pre-bagged and farmers market style, with two food banks offering “client choice” style distribution.
- All food banks distribute a portion of their food via pantries. Food bankers cited pantry storage and distribution capacity as a limiting factor affecting the quantity, quality and safety of food, as well as the frequency of distributions. Most food banks did not have frequent or regular meetings or communications with pantries and were unclear regarding the extent to which pantries are able to meet community need.

Fundraising

- Obtaining adequate funding to cover operating costs is one of the biggest challenges facing rural food banks.
- Virtually all food bankers noted that it is much easier to obtain funds for food and capital expenses than for operating costs such as salaries and benefits, utilities, and vehicle maintenance and fuel.
- Barriers include limited access to large cash donors including corporate, foundation and individual philanthropists and high levels of competition for scarce resources in rural areas. Food banks in agricultural regions reported challenges obtaining cash donations from growers, who are often the most affluent members of their communities.
- While EDs are typically the main fundraisers, they have multiple obligations and often cannot devote as much time to fundraising as they would like.
- Food bankers also noted limited success obtaining grants from Feeding America.

Client Services

- Most food banks report offering some level of nutrition education and referrals to health and social services, while some conduct CalFresh outreach.
- Nonetheless, the provision of nutrition education at food distribution sites is limited, with few food banks reporting that it is provided at all or most food bank or member agency sites.

Advocacy and Awareness Raising

- Most food bankers acknowledge that advocacy is an important role for rural and remote food banks, while a few did not believe advocacy was within their responsibilities.
- Most food bankers report a desire to conduct more advocacy, however EDs cite limited time as a barrier to greater engagement.
- Nonetheless, some food banks have been working to raise awareness of the causes, prevalence and consequences of hunger in their communities, as well as who hunger affects, among local elected officials, community groups and community members in general.

Disaster Planning

- All food banks are aware of the need for disaster planning and are at different stages of preparation.
- Most are in communication with county disaster service departments, but have received disparate instructions. One maintains a 90-120 day supply of food, while most say they have been told to keep doing what they always do.
- Some food banks note that while disaster plans are helpful they have learned that they can only plan to a point, nothing that things did not go according to plan during recent fires affecting some regions.

CAPACITY OF RURAL AND REMOTE FOOD BANKS

Leadership and Governance

- The food bank EDs and program managers are hardworking and dedicated, striving to serve their communities despite significant challenges.
- Most food banks are understaffed and face challenges hiring qualified staff to whom they can delegate, with greater ED involvement in day-to-day operations than is typically the case for their urban counterparts.
- EDs and senior staff noted that they are stretched thin covering all aspects of running the organization, wearing multiple hats ranging from working in the warehouse to fundraising.
- New EDs describe difficulties “learning the ropes” regarding aspects of food banking such as procurement and rules and regulations.
- In addition, EDs from outside the area reported challenges associated with being an “outsider,” including mistrust from community stakeholders, limited access to “good old boy” networks and reduced ability to compete against “locals” for donations.
- ED succession planning presents an additional challenge. A number of EDs are close to retirement, however, none seem to have a clear succession plan in place.
- Most EDs cited a desire to develop more effective and active Boards of Directors, including more active engagement in fundraising, raising community awareness, and networking to attract more local resources. While the EDs would like assistance in that regard, several cautioned against assistance from consultants unfamiliar with issues facing rural areas.
- Food banks that are part of Community Action Agencies do not have dedicated boards, with impacts on Board support. Some have addressed them by developing dedicated sub-committees that support the food bank.

Staff and Volunteers

- All food banks cited dedicated staff and volunteers as an important asset.
- Nonetheless, most are understaffed and would like to increase their FTEs.
- All would like to provide more competitive salaries and benefits in order to recruit and retain a more stable and well-trained workforce.
- All food banks rely heavily on volunteers, who are key to successful operations.
- A number of challenges working with volunteers were reported, including the following:
 - Variable and unpredictable volunteer schedules, making reliable access challenging.
 - Many volunteers are retirees with limited capacity for strenuous work.
 - Many food banks have access to short-term volunteers through court-ordered community service. Those volunteers typically work out well, however, high investment in training coupled with high turnover is a challenge.
 - Most food banks must rely on volunteers, rather than paid staff, to fill Volunteer Coordinator positions.

Facilities & Equipment

- Most food banks report that they do not have sufficient dry storage, cooler and/or freezer space

- In addition to limiting the amount of food they are able to distribute, several reported a need to sometimes dump items or distribute more than they normally would to free up space for incoming shipments.
- Some food banks use narrow freight cars that have been converted to coolers or freezers. That can require significant labor in the form of “pallet shuffling” and rotating to distribute food on a “first in, first out” basis.
- Some food banks have expanded their facilities with funds from grants, loans or capital campaigns. In addition to expanded storage space, some expansions have included commercial kitchens. One food bank, which is in the process of expansion, plans to create a “Whole Foods type atmosphere”.

Information Technology Infrastructure

- While some food banks are satisfied with their IT infrastructure, many expressed frustration with their current capacity.
- Main areas of need reported by food bankers include electronic inventory management, client tracking and donor/donations management software. Use of the IT system for tracking member agency orders was not mentioned.
- Several food banks auspiced under Community Action Agencies cited challenges with being required to use agency-wide inventory systems, which are typically not well-suited to the needs of food banks.
- Food bankers expressed an interest in IT technical assistance, albeit at an appropriate scale and price.

Meeting Community Need to Reduce Hunger, Promote Food Security and Protect Health

- Recent data compiled for this report show that the majority of counties served by the food banks have higher rates of diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, food insecurity and WIC uptake compared with California state averages.
- Most food bankers reported good geographic coverage and felt they were able to serve the principal population centers in their counties. Nonetheless, many expressed concerns that they were unlikely reaching all food insecure residents, particularly homebound seniors, homeless and undocumented residents, individuals on SSI who are not eligible for CalFresh and residents of outlying areas with no access to a car.
- A few food bankers noted that they have had to discontinue food distributions in outlying areas due to limited pantry and/or volunteer capacity.

Realistic Expectations of Rural Food Banks

- Several food banks cited a need for greater sensitivity and more realistic expectations among their urban counterparts and food bank organizations including CAFB. The greater challenges of food procurement and transport, coupled with considerably more limited access to resources of all types, means that food banks in rural and remote settings are not likely to be competitive with urban food banks with regard to the provision of comprehensive client services and the same models of operation.

- Food bankers in rural areas would like to see increased awareness of the constraints limiting their capacity (smaller budgets, limited access to financial and other resources, geographic constraints and limitations in terms of ED time, staffing, fundraising and advocacy).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Over 60 recommendations were made throughout the report. Below we include 15 as examples of key areas for consideration and action.

Fundraising

- Provide food banks with timely information regarding funding opportunities.
- Consider writing collaborative grants to address common needs across multiple food banks.

Nutritional Quality of Food

- Help food banks advocate to obtain higher quality products from Feeding America affiliates.
- Food banks should reach out to regional affiliates to help mediate difficult conversations with local stores regarding the quality of donated products and donations to other entities.
- Help food banks with messaging to increase the quality of food donated through community food drives and encouraging cash donations in lieu of food.
- Help food banks transition from food drives to cash contributions that support purchasing foods of choice.

Transportation

- Transportation is a significant challenge for rural food banks and partner agencies to enable procurement and distribution of foods. CAFB could usefully focus on developing creative ways to use existing transportation resources in rural areas, as well as developing new strategies and resources. Specific suggestions to consider are:
 - Disseminate the “RRFB8 Fleet, Lg Equip, Facil, Infrastructure” training module developed by CAFB rural and remote members via email, webinar and in-person trainings at the CAFB conference and regional meetings, when possible.
 - Explore utilizing commercial trucking partnerships (FEDEX, Roberts Trucking, UPS, etc.) and trucking routes to back haul food to food banks and partner agencies when trucks would normally have no cargo on return trips.
 - Assess the feasibility of partnering with existing government run transportation outlets such as United States Postal Service, public school buses, and bus services to transport food among food banks, to partner agencies, or directly to clients.
 - Explore the success of the Pittsburgh-based Food Rescue Hero app that is connecting volunteer drivers to food donations and local food pantries. Assess feasibility of connecting rural commuters to urban areas with local food banks and pantries.
 - Explore how rural food banks can work with other food systems in the region to become the central warehouse and logistics center (food hubs) and how this could benefit multiple stakeholders in the region including the Emergency Food Network.

- Explore centralizing transportation scheduling and logistics for remote food banks in order to optimize transportation routes and donations.

Pantries

- Identify mechanisms to increase local pantry capacity to store and distribute food.
- Help food banks improve their connections with pantries to monitor and improve their capacity to meet community need.

Leadership

- Provide training and orientations to help new EDs and food bank managers get up to speed more quickly.
- Provide networking opportunities to connect new EDs and food bank managers with more experienced colleagues, particularly in the same region.
- Encourage Community Action Agencies to create advisory committees that are dedicated to the food bank.

Networking and Sharing Positive Practices

- Create a forum for rural and remote food banks to network, ask questions, share positive practices and explore ways of solving common problems.
- Create opportunities to allow food banks, especially those in the same geographic region, to visit with and learn from one another.
- Consider publishing an annual “best practices” report, which could include categories such as fundraising, special events, programming, rural distribution, etc. Ask food banks send in submissions for each category, compile, and share with members.

CONCLUSIONS

CAFB commissioned this needs assessment of its rural and remote member food banks in California to better understand the full range of problems and issues, with a view to helping food banks to find solutions to the most serious of these. While many of the issues raised by food bankers are outside the scope of work of the CAFB, they are keen to support and facilitate problem solving by promoting dialogue among the key stakeholders.

There are also many actions that foodbanks themselves can initiate to obtain support, ideas for best practices, expansion of procurement opportunities, including logistics for transporting food to rural and remote areas. Becoming more familiar with and taking advantage of opportunities and resources available to food banks through CAFB, Feeding America, and other groups would be well worthwhile.