

ABUNDANT IN HEART, SHORT ON RESOURCES: Need and Opportunity at NYC Food Pantries



Photo: Melanie Dunea/CPI

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ABOUT FOOD BANK FOR NEW YORK CITY

Food Bank For New York City has been the city's major hunger-relief organization working to end hunger throughout the five boroughs for more than 30 years. Nearly one in five New Yorkers relies on Food Bank for food and other resources. Food Bank takes a strategic, multifaceted approach that provides meals and builds capacity in the neediest communities, while raising awareness and engagement among all New Yorkers. Through its network of more than 1,000 charities and schools citywide, Food Bank provides food for more than 64 million free meals for New Yorkers in need. Food Bank For New York City's income support services, including food stamps (also known as SNAP) and free tax assistance for the working poor, put more than \$150 million each year into the pockets of New Yorkers, helping them to afford food and achieve greater dignity and independence. In addition, Food Bank's nutrition education programs and services empower more than 44,000 children, teens and adults to sustain a healthy diet on a low budget.

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INTRODUCTION

When an unprecedented, across-the-board reduction in benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) went into effect on November 1, 2013 – a date now known as the “Hunger Cliff” – food pantries and soup kitchens across the city reported an immediate and widespread increase in visitor traffic. Nearly two years later, in September 2015, 90 percent of food pantries and soup kitchens were still experiencing increased visitor traffic, and approximately half (49 percent) reported having run out of food that month.

At the time of this writing, tens of thousands of New Yorkers stand at the precipice of a second Hunger Cliff: on April 1, 2016, non-disabled, childless adults who rely on SNAP will lose those benefits if they have been jobless since the start of the year – regardless of their ability to afford food. Recent experience suggests that many of these New Yorkers, upon the loss of their benefits, will turn to the emergency food network, the food pantries and soup kitchens that serve as the resource of last resort for New Yorkers at risk of hunger. What is the capacity of this network, which has been forced to shoulder additional need for emergency resources with every new policy that weakens our public safety net? What is its potential? This research brief examines the resources with which food pantries operate in New York City at a moment when new benefit cuts could test their capacity once again.

A SECOND HUNGER CLIFF

As the nation’s economic recovery from the Great Recession¹ gradually yields gains, a provision of welfare law from the mid-1990s requiring states to cut off certain SNAP recipients from their food benefits after three consecutive jobless months is beginning to take effect in states throughout the country. Called the ABAWD (Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents) provision, it targets non-disabled adult SNAP recipients between the ages of 18 and 49 who do not have minor children or other dependents in their home. Upon the loss of a job, individuals receiving SNAP who meet the ABAWD criteria are subject to a time limit of three months to find a new job of at least 20 hours per week – or, if available, participate in a state-approved employment and training program or volunteer (workfare) program – in order to preserve their benefits.

Federal law gives states the option to request a waiver from the ABAWD time limit during times of high and sustained unemployment. This year, 19 states no longer qualify for a statewide waiver; another four are electing to re-impose the time limit². While some states, including New York, have requested and received partial waivers for the counties and cities that continue to experience high and sustained unemployment, it is estimated that more than 500,000 – and as many as one million – low-income Americans will lose their SNAP benefits this year, regardless of their ability to afford food³.

¹ According to economists’ definition, the Great Recession began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009.

² Bolen, E., D. Rosenbaum, S. Dean & B. Keith-Jennings. “More Than 500,000 Adults Will Lose SNAP Benefits in 2016 as Waivers Expire.” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Jan 21, 2016.

³ Ibid.

Based on local unemployment rates, New York State has secured a waiver for 20 counties – including every borough but Manhattan – eight cities, and four Manhattan community districts, as shown in Table 1.⁴ An estimated 53,000 individuals in the non-exempt areas across the state could be subject to this time limit⁵, resulting in the loss of approximately 31 million meals over the course of a year.⁶

Table 1. New York State jurisdictions subject to, and exempt from, ABAWD time limits in 2016.

| Waived from ABAWD Time Limits | Not Eligible for ABAWD Time Limit Waiver |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| <i>Counties</i> | <i>Counties</i> |
| Bronx | Albany |
| Clinton | Allegheny |
| Delaware | Broome |
| Essex | Cattaraugus |
| Franklin | Cayuga |
| Fulton | Chenango |
| Greene | Columbia |
| Hamilton | Cortland |
| Herkimer | Dutchess |
| Jefferson | Genesee |
| King (Brooklyn) | Livingston |
| Lewis | Madison |
| Montgomery | Nassau |
| Orleans | Onondaga |
| Oswego | Ontario |
| Queens | Orange |
| Richmond (Staten Island) | Otsego |
| St. Lawrence | Putnam |
| Schoharie | Rensselaer |
| Sullivan | Rockland |
| | Saratoga |
| <i>Cities</i> | Schenectady |
| Binghamton | Schuyler |
| Buffalo | Seneca |
| Elmira | Steuben |
| Jamestown | Suffolk |
| Lockport | Tioga |
| Niagara Falls | Tompkins |
| Rochester | Ulster |
| Syracuse | Warren |
| Utica | Washington |
| | Wayne |
| <i>Other Jurisdictions</i> | Westchester |
| Manhattan Community District 9 | Wyoming |
| Manhattan Community District 10 | Yates |
| Manhattan Community District 11 | |
| Manhattan Community District 12 | |

4 New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.

5 Estimate provided by New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Services at December 2015 SNAP Task Force meeting.

6 Food Bank For New York City analysis based on monthly SNAP participation and benefit data as reported by the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, and meal costs derived from Gunder sen, C., A. Satoh, A. Dewey, M. Kato & E. Engelhard. Map the Meal Gap 2015: Food Insecurity and Child Food Insecurity Estimates at the County Level. Feeding America, 2015.

More than 140,000 food-insecure New Yorkers reside in the portions of Manhattan where the time limit is in place. They face a Meal Gap of more than 25 million meals over the course of a year – meaning, they lack the financial resources to purchase 25 million needed meals.

For those subject to the time limit who are unable to afford food without SNAP, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) simply suggests they contact their local food bank.⁷

EMERGENCY FOOD RESOURCES IN NEW YORK CITY

What of these local food banks? How much help can they provide? Emergency food, supplied by food banks to local food pantries and soup kitchens, is often called the last line of defense against hunger (in contrast to SNAP's first line of defense). Since the Great Recession of 2007, New York City's emergency food network of community-based food pantries and soup kitchens has struggled to meet increased need with limited resources. The five years between 2007 and 2012 saw New York City's emergency food network shrink by 25 percent – a loss of nearly 250 food pantries and soup kitchens – with remaining programs trying to fill the gaps.⁸

It was this Recession-weakened network that responded to Super Storm Sandy in October 2012, and then the Hunger Cliff in November 2013. Even as those SNAP cuts were approaching, food-insecure New Yorkers were facing an annual shortfall of 241 million meals in 2013.⁹ Emergency food programs, approximately 850 of which currently serve the five boroughs as part of Food Bank For New York City's network, work to fill this meal gap, but current distribution falls more than 100 million meals short of the need.¹⁰

In a post-Hunger Cliff New York City, the emergency food network has shown additional strain. Compared to the months prior to the Hunger Cliff, nine out of ten (90 percent) food pantries and soup kitchens in New York City were reporting an increase in the number of visitors nearly two years later in September 2015, suggesting that a sustained, elevated need for emergency food has set in. Nearly half (49 percent) of food pantries and soup kitchens reported food shortages, and 45 percent of food pantries reported having reduced the number of meals provided in their pantry bags that month.¹¹

⁷ See, for example, the Frequently Asked Questions document at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/snap/ABAWDS-1-2016.pdf>.

⁸ Serving under Stress Post-Recession: The State of Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens Today. Food Bank For New York City, 2012.

⁹ Gundersen, C., A. Sato, A. Dewey, M. Kato & E. Engelhard. Map the Meal Gap 2015: Food Insecurity and Child Food Insecurity Estimates at the County Level. Feeding America, 2015.

¹⁰ Food Bank For New York City estimate based on FeedNYC data.

¹¹ "Hunger Cliff NYC: Bridging a City's Monthly 5.3 Million Meal Loss." Food Bank For New York City, Nov 2015.

SURVEY FINDINGS

Having already demonstrated evidence of the need for additional food at local emergency food providers, Food Bank For New York City surveyed food pantries about their non-food resources and services in order to provide insight into this network's capacity to shoulder the additional need that could result from thousands of New Yorkers falling off a second Hunger Cliff.

People Served

An average New York City food pantry serves 1,800 people per month.

- The median number of people a food pantry serves monthly is 1,110.

Budgets

Approximately half (52 percent) of food pantries in New York City operate on a budget of less than \$25,000 per year.

- Nearly one third (31 percent) have an annual operating budget of less than \$10,000, as shown in Figure 1.
- The median annual operating budget for a food pantry is between \$10,000 and \$24,999.

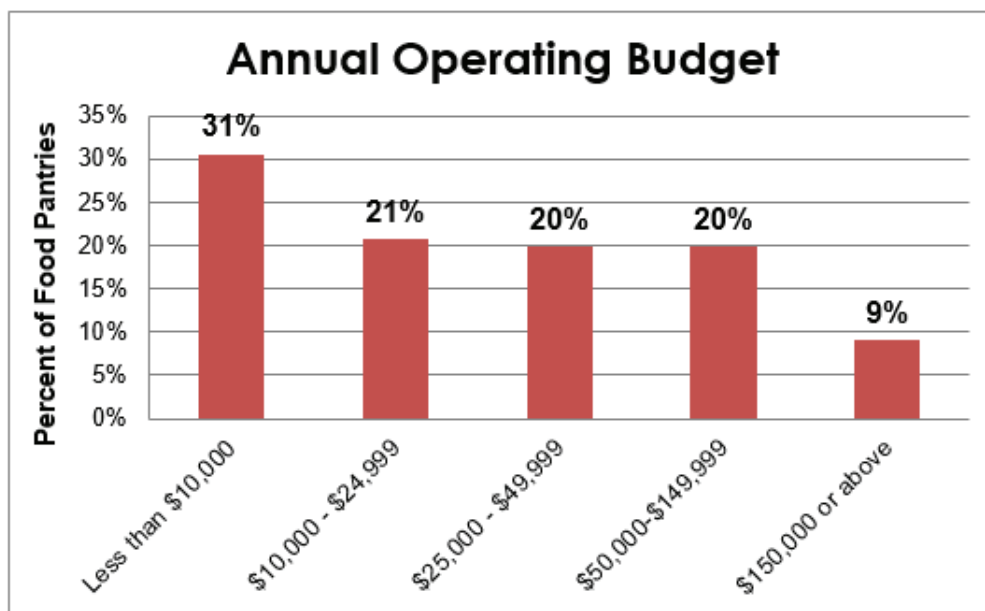


Figure 1.

Staffing

Approximately half (52 percent) of food pantries are completely volunteer-run, with no full-time or part-time paid staff.

- Whether they have paid staff or not, one third (33 percent) of food pantries have at least one volunteer who is considered full-time.
- One in five (19 percent) food pantries rely solely on part-time volunteers to operate.
- The average number of full-time pantry volunteers is 2.9.
- The average number of part-time pantry volunteers is 10.8.

Approximately one third (32 percent) of food pantries have at least one full-time paid staff person.

- Approximately one third (31 percent) have at least one part-time paid staff person.
- The average number of paid full-time staff positions in a food pantry is 1.
- The average number of paid part-time staff positions in a food pantry is 0.9.
- One in five (20%) food pantries have at least one staff person earning the legal minimum wage.

Technology

Nearly half (48 percent) of food pantries either have no computer on site or are unable to consistently access an on-site computer.

- Approximately one in four (24 percent) food pantries do not have on-site access to a computer, as shown in Figure 2.
- An additional one in four (24 percent) food pantries have a computer on-site, but the computer is not consistently available for use by food pantry staff or volunteers.

Approximately seven in ten (69 percent) food pantries have reliable and consistent internet access.

Non-Food Programs and Services

More than three in five (63 percent) food pantries have dedicated staff or volunteers providing non-food services.

- Two in five (40 percent) food pantries provide SNAP assistance on site.
- Two in five (40 percent) make benefit referrals using Food Bank For New York City's Tiered Engagement Network (TEN) Tracker tool.
- Approximately one third (32 percent) of food pantries provide nutrition education on site.
- More than one in six (18 percent) provide tax assistance services on site.

Computer Access at Food Pantries

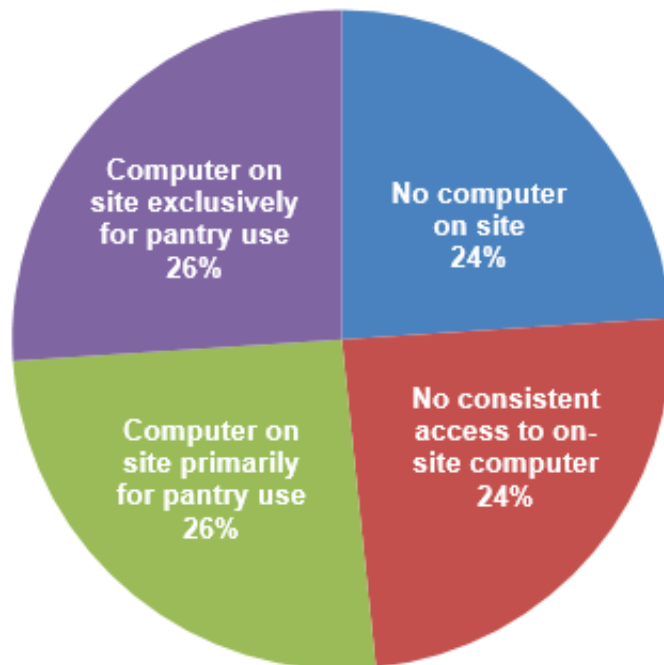


Figure 2.

CONCLUSIONS

Survey findings evidence that the average New York City food pantry operates under considerable constraints: meager cash resources, few paid staff, and without access to the basic technology that most workplaces take for granted. It should be noted that food pantries' reported operating budgets typically do not account for the food they distribute, as most of the emergency food supply is available to emergency food programs at no cost.

The lack of access to an on-site computer at nearly half of pantries is also noteworthy in light of the fact that almost all use an online system to order the food they receive from Food Bank, and all must report their monthly service statistics to FeedNYC, the online database developed by the Policy Committee on New York City Hunger Resources.¹² Anecdotal reports from many Food Bank members indicate that food pantry staff and/or volunteers often do this administrative work from home computers rather than on site.

The survey results also showcase the incredible resourcefulness of this network – their ability to accomplish much with very little. That an organization can manage to serve more than 1,000 people per month with food and other services on an annual budget that would leave a family of four near poverty is nothing short of remarkable.¹³ Despite limited resources, for example, more than three in five food pantries dedicate at least one staff person or volunteer to help address more than their visitors' immediate food needs – providing referrals to other resources, and such on-site services as benefit assistance, nutrition education and tax services.

These data are consistent with Food Bank's experience that relatively small cash grants to emergency food providers can yield powerful results: last year, for example, Food Bank disbursed \$385,000 in programmatic grants, with grant amounts averaging approximately \$4,500; this strategy leveraged the reach of its community-based charity network to expand services in high-need communities and drive results in SNAP application submission, free tax assistance services and other benefits work.

¹² The Policy Committee on New York City Hunger Resources is comprised of government and non-profit organizations that seek to coordinate, maximize and enhance resources accessible at emergency food programs. The participating organizations are City Harvest, Food Bank For New York City, the New York City Human Resources Administration Emergency Food Assistance Program, the New York State Department of Health Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and United Way of New York City.

¹³ The federal poverty level for a household of four is \$24,300.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The re-imposition of the three-month time limit for SNAP recipients who meet ABAWD criteria puts them on the brink of a second Hunger Cliff — at the bottom of which they may have no resources for food. While our state and local governments have worked with the USDA to secure the broadest possible waiver to preempt benefit losses, they should ensure that adequate resources for the emergency food system are a key component of their response. As the SNAP cuts of November 2013 revealed, increased need for emergency food and a deep loss in the ability of low-income New Yorkers to afford food coincide.

There is an undeniable reality that the network providing services to the most vulnerable New Yorkers is itself quite vulnerable. While additional food is of course essential for the emergency food system to meet the need, the gaps in operational resources must be addressed in order to strengthen and enhance this last line of defense against hunger. Government grant programs that provide support to this network should integrate, wherever possible, funding for staff and/or general operating support. An exemplary recent response to this need is the New York City Human Resources Administration Emergency Food Assistance Program, which is making staffing expenses eligible for Administrative Grants this year, the first time in the more than 30-year history of the program. The resourcefulness with which food pantry staff and volunteers are able to apply scant resources to serve their communities – and integrate new programs and services for their clients – suggest the returns on these investments could be great.

This year's ABAWD time limit will put an estimated 53,000 unemployed New Yorkers at risk of losing food assistance on April 1st, regardless of their ability to afford food. Next year, as economic conditions in our country continue to change, additional counties and cities may find themselves no longer eligible to waive the time limit, and more low-income New Yorkers will face the loss of food assistance. This same process will play out every year, each time creating new geographies of inequity: for an unemployed, non-disabled adult without children, the ability to access food assistance will depend less on individual circumstances and need than on which side of a state, county, city or community district line he or she happens to reside.

Since job opportunities or placement in an approved Employment and Training program might be harder to secure than a three-month time limit assumes – the average duration of unemployment nationally, for example, is still longer than six months¹⁴ – federal legislation requiring states to provide SNAP recipients who fit the ABAWD criteria access to opportunities to retain benefits (whether through a job, an employment and training program, or workfare) before imposing the time limit is an important corrective to a punitive policy that will place vulnerable individuals in deeper need.

¹⁴ United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics. January 2016.

METHODOLOGY

To generate survey findings, an online survey was sent to all active food pantries for which Food Bank For New York City had an email contact (a total of 549). The survey responses were collected in January 2016. After rejection of duplicated and incomplete responses, a total of 242 completed surveys (comprising 44 percent of food pantries) made up the sample for analysis. Unless otherwise noted, the confidence interval for all reported survey results, at the 95 percent level, is plus or minus 5 percentage points.

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