



NEW JERSEY
PANDEMIC
RELIEF FUND



**The Tepper
Foundation**

HUNGER & CRITICAL NEEDS OUTREACH

Project Summary & Recommendations: April 2020 – September 2021



This report was produced by The Tepper Foundation

Creating a Statewide Relief Organization to Meet an Unprecedented Crisis

In late March 2020, nearly immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic struck New Jersey, approximately 20 New Jersey-based family foundations, corporate foundations, and private philanthropists came together to establish the [New Jersey Pandemic Relief Fund](https://njprf.org) (“NJPRF” or the “Fund”). The state’s First Lady, Tammy Murphy, was named the Fund’s Chair. It laid out a mission to “raise funds and organize and coordinate resources to fight the medical, social and economic impact of COVID-19 on New Jersey’s most vulnerable.”¹ To accomplish this mission, the Fund endeavored “to identify needs, fill in gaps and remove roadblocks to deliver aid where it was most urgently needed.”²

In order to avoid any delay in supporting its neighbors, it did not incorporate as a separate 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Instead, the Community Foundation of New Jersey, based in Morristown, New Jersey, housed the Fund as one program under its purview. The Fund hired a

small number of employees; otherwise, it relied on staff members loaned from several of the foundations which helped form the Fund as well as subject matter experts from partner non-profit organizations.

This report is based on the work of the New Jersey Pandemic Relief Fund’s Critical Needs Outreach team (the “Outreach team”) from April 2020 through September 2021. The purpose of the report is to describe the scope of the Outreach team’s work, document its findings and its impact, and offer recommendations of two kinds:

- (1) Recommendations for next steps in in research and investment in New Jersey’s emergency food network, and
- (2) Recommendations for funders across the United States and beyond who may benefit from the team’s experience and the lessons it learned.



Photo Credit: Christopher Francois

¹ <https://njprf.org>

² <https://njprf.org/about>

I. SPRING 2020 – WINTER 2021: ESTABLISHING A GROUND-LEVEL OUTREACH STRATEGY TO ASSESS VULNERABILITIES IN NEW JERSEY'S EMERGENCY FOOD SYSTEM

A. Spring 2020: First-Round Grants & Initial Charge to Outreach Team

The Outreach team formed in mid-April 2020, not long after the creation of the Fund and the beginning of the pandemic. The team initially was charged with assessing the viability of New Jersey's emergency food system in light of the twin shocks of the COVID-19 public health emergency and the economic devastation caused by an indefinite statewide shutdown.

Overriding first-order questions included:

- *Is emergency food making it to every corner of the state?*
- *What portion of emergency food providers have closed their doors in each region? Have any closings created a "run" on other nearby providers, and if so, is that sustainable?*
- *Are the still-operating food pantries and soup kitchens equipped to remain open? If so, for how long?*

And above all: *Are the most vulnerable residents in any community at risk for more pronounced malnutrition or hunger?*

The fund set out to contact emergency food providers across the state that received food from various food banks. Food pantries represent a majority of the agency partners, which also include soup kitchens, homeless and other shelters, social service agencies which operate food pantries either for the public or specifically for their clients, and various other senior centers, crisis centers, group homes, and rehabilitation facilities.

In March 2020, the earliest members of the Critical Needs team circulated an email survey with emergency food providers across the state. The survey, which is included below in Addendum 1, asked a short series of questions about increases in client demand and spending on food, and the providers' viability to keep their doors open as the pandemic set in. Instead of creating more work (in the form of a separate grant application) for already-overwhelmed pantry and soup kitchen leaders, the survey results were used to assess which emergency food providers were in danger of being unable to meet the spike in community need for emergency food. With survey results in hand, the fund verified the non-profit status of survey respondents and then quickly issued checks to those which served more clients or spent more money as a result of the pandemic. Grant amounts ranged from \$5,000 to \$25,000, and 128 organizations received an aggregate sum of more than \$1.7 million.

In April 2020, the Outreach team developed a series of questions and conversational prompts to deploy in a standard telephone interview with emergency food provider leaders. Two of the team members, Shelley Skinner and Adele LaTourette, created a coalition with the large emergency food providers, while the rest of the Outreach team began to contact small- and medium-sized providers, dividing the calls by county. The team first called pantries and soup kitchens which had not responded to the March survey. In some cases, these providers

had not completed the survey because their organizations closed their doors (or, at least, shuttered their food distribution) when the pandemic hit. In many other cases, these agencies' leaders worked day and night to maintain their food distribution and serve all who needed it, and they simply did not have time to read every email or complete a survey.

On average, the telephone interviews lasted 20 to 30 minutes. In many cases, a contact was especially animated about one or more topics or challenges and elected to speak in greater detail, which meant some calls continued for 60 to 90 minutes. McKinsey & Company, who provided pro-bono services to the Fund, created a reporting system for capturing information from the Outreach phone surveys into a shared Google Form document so that answers later could be compared and aggregated. The data compiled from the Outreach team helped to create a reporting system for the outreach team that could be used to drive decisions on where relief funds were needed urgently.

B. Spring – Summer 2020: Early Findings

The Outreach team's early findings in the spring and summer of 2020 illustrated four categories of grave challenges to food pantries and soup kitchens, any of which one of these challenges alone could place a major strain on a provider's ongoing viability or cause it to shut down. These included spikes in client demand, vast changes in food distribution operations, disruptions to the emergency food supply chain, and significant loss of volunteer support.

Increase in Client Demand

Most importantly, in the vast majority of New

The interviews probed the extent to which local providers either had made changes due to the pandemic or had observed changes attributable to the pandemic. Conversations focused on changes in operations, including the introduction of any new distribution methods; fluctuations – in either direction – in days and hours of service, client numbers, and types of clients; and any other trends in what pantry leaders were hearing or noticing from their clients.

In addition to logging call notes, the Outreach team also faithfully met for one hour via Zoom every Friday afternoon to share what members were hearing from the field, including emerging themes and issues. The weekly meeting process provided an added benefit of refining the survey questions to drill deeper into developing issues and glean more nuanced insights to share with Fund partners, including the food banks.

Jersey communities, the number of families seeking free food from emergency providers increased significantly. The most extreme spikes were reported in the northern urban core, the tourism-dependent Shore region, and areas with higher percentages of undocumented residents. Rural communities in southern New Jersey also suffered, as pandemic-related lockdowns isolated their residents from employment and services.

New Jersey's urban core includes Newark and neighboring cities such as East Orange, Orange,

and Irvington in Essex County; Jersey City and Union City in Hudson County; Paterson and Passaic in Passaic County; and Elizabeth in Union County. This region lies in the geographic footprint where coronavirus outbreaks struck New Jersey first. The virus spread rapidly and did more serious damage there due to higher percentages of high-density and congregate housing, combined with a higher incidence of pre-existing health conditions and risk factors exacerbated by inequitable access to quality healthcare.

In casino- and tourism-dependent regions such as Atlantic, Cape May, and parts of Ocean and Cumberland Counties, the sudden shutdown of all casinos resulted in mass layoffs not merely at casinos themselves but also at restaurants, hotels, event spaces, and all the businesses which cater to guests and employees of any of those establishments. With 33.8% of people in Atlantic County unemployed in April, the county rate doubled that of the state (16.3%) and nation (14.7%).⁴ Whereas some portion of the state's populace remained employed remotely at the start of the pandemic, these areas experienced a much higher rate of layoffs. Similarly, undocumented New Jerseyans were among the most vulnerable when the economy shut down: their jobs were more likely to be in-person only (especially restaurant work, cleaning and hospitality, construction, and landscaping); they were less likely to have any savings; and they were more exposed to unsafe and illegal working conditions.

In the rural southern part of the state, in addition to the economic shutdown, a flimsy public transportation system experienced service cuts which rendered it either non-operational or so sparse that it ceased to be a realistic option

for many residents. Fewer taxi drivers were on the road. Even informal transportation systems – neighbors and relatives carpooling to jobs, food pantries, or social services agencies, for instance – broke down as fear of COVID left residents unwilling either to offer rides or to accept rides from others.

Impacts from these place-specific shocks to the system frequently were felt beyond affected communities themselves. For instance, desperate Essex County families did not seek emergency food only in Essex County, but also in Union, Morris, and Middlesex Counties: anywhere a relative or friend knew about a food source, anywhere one passed on the way to or from a job, or anywhere one found free food advertised on the internet or social media and had a way to travel there and home. Cumberland County families did not visit pantries only in Cumberland County, but also in Salem, Atlantic, Gloucester, Camden, and Burlington Counties. And so on.

Finally, a jump in motel resident clients highlighted an existing inefficiency: the shortage of motel- and homeless-friendly food items available from food pantries. The difference in cold storage and cooking access for those temporarily housed in motels – not to mention living in cars, barns, or outdoors – means that while a whole frozen chicken may be a godsend for a family in an apartment, that same chicken could be worth very little to an individual whose accommodations offer neither oven nor stove, and only a dormitory-style mini-refrigerator ... or nothing at all.

Near-Universal Changes in Provider Distribution & Operations

Food pantries and soup kitchens statewide

⁴ Stockton University, "The Coronavirus's Impact on Food Security in Atlantic County," p. 3, <https://stockton.edu/hughes-center/documents/2020-0916-the-coronavirus-impact-on-food-security-in-atlantic-county.pdf>

quickly changed their food distribution operations nearly universally at the outset of the pandemic. In most cases, agency leaders viewed this less as a choice and more as the only way they could remain open at all. The primary reason for these changes was to comply with protocols to keep clients, staff, and volunteers safe. Most commonly, providers moved their operations outdoors and changed to a pre-packed, nearly contactless “grab-and-go” distribution. Distributors with a primarily driving client base had volunteers carry food boxes or bags directly to clients’ open car trunks, while distributors whose clientele mainly visited on foot placed food boxes or bags onto an outdoor table, from which clients could pick up the packages and go on their way.

Prior to the pandemic, while some pantries already pre-packaged their food allotments, many used a “client choice” model in which visitors had some opportunity to “shop” and select food from shelves or tables inside a pantry’s building. Soup kitchens experienced



an even more drastic change, as their pre-pandemic system involved a “dine-in” model in which clients could come indoors, warm up or cool off, relax with a cup of coffee, and enjoy conversation and community over a hot meal at a table alongside other guests. When they were forced to switch to an outdoor grab-and-go system, their clients frequently expressed sadness or decreased interest due to the loss of so many non-food benefits like community, warmth, and the chance to sit down and relax.

Pantries also changed operations or locations due to spikes in demand or simply to stay open. Local police departments asked pantries to move their distribution sites when heavy demand snarled traffic on small residential streets. The need for safe vehicle ingress and egress or larger parking lot space to accommodate pallets of food and increased traffic caused other pantries to relocate.



Some pantries opted to continue service when their parent organization (e.g., church, or social service agency) shut down all in-person activity and locked its doors – leaving those pantries with no choice but to stage distributions at alternate sites. And moving outdoors caused other pantries to change their hours in order to set up, distribute, and break down during daylight hours; to avoid the coldest or hottest temperatures of the day; or to operate during times in which blocking off their parking lots would not interfere with other programs or events.

Food Supply Chain

Insufficient food supply to accommodate all pantry clients was one of the most frequent and stark findings from the first round of telephone interviews. Rather than turn guests away empty-handed or provide food bags that lacked sufficient protein or nutritional value, hundreds of pantry leaders performed heroically, going to incredible lengths to secure the food they felt their neighbors needed. Volunteers and staff donated money out of their own pockets. Because no one store held sufficient supply, or to work creatively around store-imposed maximum per-customer quantities of meat, eggs, and other popular items, leaders risked their health by regularly visiting multiple supermarkets to supplement their pantry's stock with retail purchases. They spent far above their pantry's or church's annual budget without knowing how they would make up the shortfall.

The food items reported to be in shortest supply included fresh or frozen (non-canned) meat, especially chicken; fresh produce; cereal, milk, eggs, and other breakfast items; bread; and other dairy items. Many pantries sought shelf-

stable milk in particular, both for ease of storage in pantries, and because their clients could take it home and use it over the course of the entire following month. Cereal was in extreme demand because children now home from school consumed it in higher quantities, and because family members of any age could and did eat it for breakfast, dinner, or a late-night snack.

Volunteer Shortages and Loss

A decrease in available volunteers was a final significant finding from early provider surveys. A clear majority of New Jersey's small- and medium-sized pantries relies heavily on senior citizen volunteers. When the pandemic began, physicians and family members strongly urged seniors to cancel in-person activities and stay home. Sadly, many volunteers contracted the coronavirus and either died or were rendered unable to serve. Other seniors, including many pantry heads, insisted on continuing their pantry work, often viewing it as "doing God's work," and often perceiving that if they closed their pantry, their community may offer no other alternatives for families in desperate need. With that said, a huge percentage of pantries reported decreases in available volunteers.

Cruelly, pandemic-related operational changes meant the volunteer workload would have risen sharply even if volunteer capacity had remained constant. Increased client demand led many pantries to expand hours and days of operation, often moving from one to two or more distributions per month, or from two per month to weekly. Higher volumes of food required more pantry volunteer physical labor in receiving, storing, pre-packing, and distributing. New spacing protocols in storage and preparation areas, in addition to outdoor service, created

extra steps and more cumbersome processes for volunteers to accomplish the same goals. Food shortages left more volunteers making many more trips between retail stores and their pantries. More frequent distributions sometimes led volunteers to pick up fresh food from food banks more frequently, if and when that became available. The combination of extra labor and the sudden drop in volunteer availability generally left a shrinking number of people to shoulder a much larger load than ever.



C. Fall 2020 – Spring 2021: Developments & Discoveries

The pandemic showed no signs of slowing as summer moved into fall. Pantry leaders around the state became resigned to the fact that they were in this for the long haul. Between Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, the Outreach team identified three distinct developments: new operational challenges, evolving food supply issues, and more unpredictable client demand.

Operational Challenges

Weather-related challenges were quite common. Nearly all emergency providers quickly moved their operations from indoors to outdoors, to comply with pandemic-related social distancing guidelines. Usually, they moved to the same building's parking lot or yard. Snowfall caused many pantries to cancel distribution dates, or to delay opening (and spend additional money) as they summoned snowplows to clear enough space to proceed. Even when providers stayed open, cold weather or treacherous walking and driving conditions had a significant negative impact on client turnout. This is understandable, as senior citizens and single mothers with young children are two of the most common pantry client subgroups.

Clients were not the only group affected by bad weather. Volunteers and staff were subjected to the same elements, and pantry leaders worried about older volunteers staying safe in the cold or spending their own money on appropriate cold-weather gear. Some volunteers bore even more of the brunt of cold weather, as they spent one day outdoors receiving a delivery or picking up and unloading from the food bank, and then an additional day outdoors preparing for and executing a food distribution.

Conversations about winter-related challenges also revealed the opposite side of the coin: challenges from the heat and sun in summer months. Just as parking lots bore no relief from cold wind, they also yielded no relief from the pounding sun on hot days. One pantry leader described kneeling down behind a pallet stacked high with food boxes for a short break on a long, hot distribution day, because the stack of boxes created a small corner of shade.

The pandemic and spiking client demand caused other **semi-permanent or permanent changes in location**, unrelated to weather. Many pantries' sponsoring organizations closed

their buildings to all programs and services at the start of the pandemic. When some of these pantries elected to continue operating, they were forced to find alternate storage and distribution sites. In other cases, spikes in client demand caused traffic or parking problems to such an extent that the local police department or municipal officials asked the pantry to relocate. Still more pantries recognized that the semi-permanent client increase meant they simply had outgrown their existing storage or distribution site, and they decided on their own to move someplace larger. Finally, others moved temporarily to accommodate more efficient outdoor distribution or grab-and-go ingress and egress.

Evolving Food Supply Issues

An inability to access specific food items from partner food banks continued to burden emergency providers in the fall, winter, and spring of 2020-2021. The evolution of these shortages is described in more detail in Section IV.

Fluctuating Client Demand

While client demand remained high across the state, pantries encountered more difficulty predicting turnout from week to week or month to month. As pantry clients received a series of new or fluctuating federally-funded public benefits, they gained spending money and grocery flexibility, but when they were cut off from benefits, they sought more emergency food. These benefits included temporary increases in the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (“SNAP”)**, formerly known as food stamps); **Pandemic EBT (“P-EBT”)**, a new program designed to steer grocery money to families whose children missed out on free school meals during school closings; and Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, which significantly increased weekly unemployment payments, but was unavailable to many New Jerseyans early in the pandemic due to technical issues with the state’s application system, unanswered phone calls, and lengthy delays in processing claims.



Photo Credit: Christopher Francois

The first P-EBT payments in late summer and fall of 2020 caused particular havoc. These benefits only could be used for groceries (like SNAP) and arrived in a lump-sum payment of more than \$400 per child, meaning larger families received \$1,000 to \$2,000 or more. Early government estimates suggested these benefits would be issued in June or July 2020, but many families did not receive them until August, September, or October. Therefore, pantries did not know when these payments would reach families and could not plan around them, and then afterward, pantries could not forecast how soon their clients would return.

The emergence of **local “pop-up” food distributions** often exacerbated emergency food providers’ frustrations with trying to meet demand with an appropriate supply of food and volunteers. Private citizens, local elected officials, and religious and social service organizations who previously were not in the emergency food space certainly had their neighbors’ best interests at heart in arranging one-off or temporary distributions.

However, many long-term providers voiced frustration with a lack of coordination or communication as a major challenge to their operations.

They commonly cited gearing up for a big rush of clients, based on analysis of their own recent distributions, only to experience an unusually low turnout, leaving them with an excess of fresh food and volunteers who felt unneeded and may not return again. They later learned another distribution down the street may have been the cause. These providers did not begrudge clients receiving food elsewhere, but repeatedly expressed their wish that pop-up organizers had surveyed the pantry landscape first and coordinated to offer options on another day or in a different section of town. In addition, media attention on these temporary events steered local food and monetary donations away from community anchor pantries – food and money which could have gone a long way to help these pantries sustain operations through the pandemic.

D. Strengthening Connections, Sharing Innovations

In the course of connecting with so many emergency providers around the state, the Outreach team identified and tested several ideas to leverage its insights and contacts on behalf of its growing network.

Email Newsletter

The Outreach team sent a well-received **email newsletter** to all providers in its network in June 2020, highlighting three innovative practices implemented by individual pantries to serve their clients more effectively in the face of the pandemic.

Facebook Group

Building on the newsletter, the Outreach team hoped to use shared innovations to jumpstart ongoing dialogue among pantry leaders. In July 2020, it established a “New Jersey Food Pantries” **Facebook group**. As of September 2021, the group had 78 members, but repeated efforts to engage the group in conversation fell flat. Nearly all posts from individual pantries advertise their own upcoming food distributions, rather than using the group as a “pantry-to-pantry” resource to ask questions or share ideas.

Packaging & Food Ordering Contact

As described above, the vast majority of “client choice” providers converted to pre-packaged food boxes or bags at the outset of the pandemic. Grab-and-go packaging – boxes, bags, and wrapping for individually-packaged food portions – emerged as a new and unbudgeted agency expense. Many reported receiving a bulk packaging donation from a local retailer early on, or else spending what they need to spend to keep operations going, but many also remained uncertain about how they would keep up with the unanticipated expense.

The Outreach team identified an industry vendor contact which offered to provide packaging products to New Jersey emergency



food providers at a discount below its regular wholesale prices – which, in turn, already were well below the retail prices many pantries paid at ShopRite, Staples, and the like. The team shared this contact information with 10 agencies which expressed interest in learning more, and an additional six agencies via the New Jersey Soup Kitchen Working Group.

Interestingly, the same vendor also offered to sell food items which local agencies could not secure from their affiliate food bank. Moreover, it promised a scheduled, refrigerated delivery as long as the order met a very achievable minimum dollar or weight amount. To some pantry leaders, reliable delivery – saving them the hassle of driving around to multiple retailers and packing bulk purchases into their personal vehicles – was worth exploring further on its own, even before accounting for the cost savings.

Pandemic EBT Information

In the summer and fall of 2020, the New Jersey Department of Human Services (NJ DHS) issued its first round of P-EBT payments to families, covering missed school days from March to June 2020. Then in Spring 2021, NJ DHS announced its plans to issue another round of benefits, retroactive to the start of the 2020-21 academic year. In light of a host of obstacles that delayed or prevented eligible New Jersey parents from receiving the first round of benefits – chief among them, a widespread lack of awareness of the program – Hunger Free New Jersey produced a series of [P-EBT flyers and social media graphics](#) in five languages. These were intended to inform families that more P-EBT payments would be coming, and how to ensure they receive these benefits.

The Outreach team incorporated discussion of this program into its telephone interviews and follow-up conversations. It offered to share the P-EBT materials with pantry leaders, who could spread the word to their clients by including flyers in food boxes and posting on social media. Agency leaders greatly appreciated these resources, and more than 40 providers ultimately shared them in their communities.

Community Colleges as a Pantry Volunteer Resource

The team piloted an innovative **volunteer collaboration between small pantries and community colleges**. As described above, dwindling numbers of volunteers felt increasing strain as summer moved into autumn. At the same time, a few pantries shared stories about valuable summer boosts from college students who could not find a summer job or internship, and who turned to volunteering as a way to get out of the house and contribute (and in some cases, to help their grandparents or parents who were regular pantry volunteers).

Putting these two insights together, the Outreach team connected in the fall of 2020 with Dr. Jacob Farbman, Executive Director of the New Jersey Council of County Colleges' Center for Student Success, who agreed to

help spread the word about the need for young, healthy volunteers at local pantries. After circling back to pantry leaders who previously had expressed a need for more volunteer support, in December 2020 the team provided Jacob with a list of 30 pantry leaders in 14 of the state's 21 counties, along with a sample flyer to help promote the volunteer opportunity. All 30 pantry leaders agreed to share their information with local community college staff in support of a collaboration. Jacob distributed the information to the community colleges in appropriate counties, and staff at those schools agreed to engage in outreach to students about this volunteer opportunity.

Unfortunately, the college departments which handle service activities were hard-hit by pandemic-related furloughs and layoffs. This meant the college staff member who received this information from the statewide association likely was juggling the usual responsibilities of several employees, and thus had less time to devote to discussion with local pantry leaders on the one hand, and follow-up with prospective student volunteers on the other hand. The Outreach team's lack of direct contact with the individual colleges also hamstrung our ability to engage in targeted follow-up.

II. FEBRUARY – MAY 2021: STRENGTHENING NETWORK RESILIENCY THROUGH ENDURANCE GRANTS

A. Three Categories of Need

Through analysis of statewide feedback, including survey results and more in-depth conversations, the Outreach team identified three overarching categories of need among small and medium-sized emergency providers in particular:

- (1) Emergency food beyond the type and quantity accessible from partner food banks, plus basic personal items (toiletries, hygiene products, diapers, etc.);
- (2) Storage and transportation equipment and other infrastructure costs; and
- (3) weather-related upgrades and other outdoor distribution needs.

The team also noted a distinct dichotomy between larger and smaller emergency food providers. Professional non-profit staff led larger organizations. They leaned on their strategic, advocacy, and fundraising experience to weather the storm and keep their doors open, or to design a plan to reopen after an initial closing. Smaller, volunteer-led organizations, meanwhile,

often lacked the sophistication or well-placed contacts to keep up with increased spending. Many of them spent into a hole or borrowed from their parent organization without knowing how they would recover, or how they would continue to serve their clients only months down the road. They reported they feared imminent closure if they did not come up with a solution soon, while many volunteer leaders dug into their own pockets to keep food and supplies coming.

As a result of the Outreach team's analysis, the team designed its "Endurance Grants" program to help pantries be resilient in the face of what was likely to be a prolonged period of community need as well other challenges such as extreme weather, break downs in the supply chain and lack of volunteers and staff. To meet these needs in as flexible and equitable manner as possible, the program was limited to agencies with less financial and fundraising ability. To this end, eligible applicants needed to have annual budgets of \$500,000 or less.

B. Subgrants

Rather than requesting proposals or grant applications directly from pantries around the state, NJPRF made the decision to issue Endurance Grant awards to the food banks, each of which were invited to solicit and screen applications and issue subgrant awards among their respective small- and medium-sized

network partners. Several key NJPRF partners also contributed funding for these grants. As a condition of these grants, the food banks agreed to contribute a significant amount of additional money to their respective Endurance Grant funding.

NJPRF and the Tepper Foundation each contributed \$750,000; other NJPRF partners added a total of \$250,000; and three food banks put up a total of \$1.05 million, for an Endurance Grant fund of \$2.8 million. Funding from NJPRF and the non-food bank partners was divided among the three food banks using a formula which accounted for their respective numbers of clients served. CFBNJ received roughly two-thirds of NJPRF and NJPRF partners' contributions, and FBSJ and Fulfill each received approximately one-sixth.

Both CFBNJ and FBSJ announced the subgrant opportunity to their network partners in early February through a combination of email, messages via their portals, and phone calls. They invited their local partners to apply for a funding award in whichever category or categories the partner agency deemed to be most helpful. Fulfill approached the subgrant process much differently. It did not request grant applications, but instead circulated a survey around the three categories of need. Based on responses, it purchased equipment and supplies for its network partners, and it even covered delivery and installation costs.

Though quite distinct, both of these approaches yielded important benefits. Fulfill realized significant savings through the economies of bulk purchasing from single vendors, which stretched its Endurance Grant dollars further. Its early movement helped avoid supply chain issues with suddenly popular goods such as refrigerators, freezers, and outdoor canopies, and it expedited moving new equipment into place at local partner sites sooner. This approach also proved to be equitable, in that it allowed Fulfill to fortify the infrastructure of any pantries in its network, regardless of that

pantry's capacity to complete a satisfactory grant application within a relatively tight timeframe. Within Fulfill's smaller catchment area of two counties, the approach appeared to serve its partners well.

CFBNJ's and FBSJ's open call for applications offered other benefits. Rather than deciding for their partner agencies which upgrades would work best, this choice was left entirely in the hands of the agencies. This proved to be a boon to the agencies, as the food banks – each with a somewhat larger coverage area – likely would not have known in advance the finer points of which of their partners required a pallet jack, which had been seeking funding for a new outdoor covering, or which relied on a vehicle which was near the end of its useful life. The agencies also took full advantage of the option to request funds for emergency food and necessities on a custom basis, which also would not have been possible under the pre-purchase approach.



C. Grant Award Numbers, Percentages, and Dollar Amounts

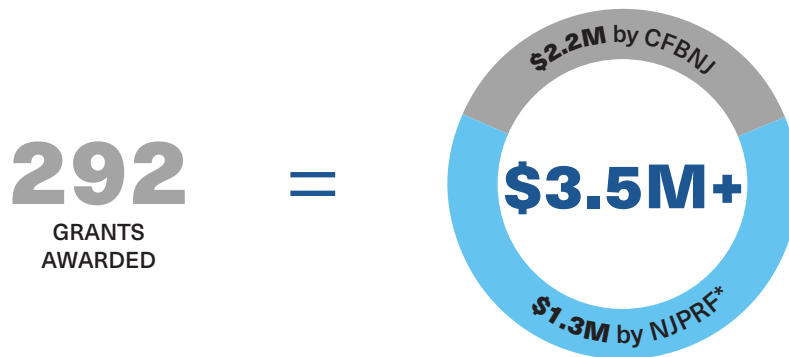
Total Grants by Food Banks

The Community Food Bank of New Jersey (CFBNJ) issued 292 grants totaling just more than \$3.5 million. Of those awards, CFBNJ contributed about \$2.2 million, while the additional \$1.3 million came from NJPRF and other partners via the Endurance Grant program. CFBNJ approved 93% of the subgrant applications submitted by its partner agencies.

Fulfill awarded 85 subgrants in a total amount of just more than \$750,000.

The Food Bank of South Jersey (FBSJ) awarded 37 grants totaling just more than \$450,000. FBSJ received 55 grant applications, meaning it approved 67% of applications received.

Community Food Bank of New Jersey (CFBNJ)



* and other partners via the Endurance Grant program

Food Bank of South Jersey (FBSJ)



Fulfill



Allocation of Grants by Category of Need

Endurance Grant Awards by Food Bank (Rounded Numbers)

	Emergency Food / Personal Items		Equipment / Infrastructure		Winterization / Outdoor Distribution		Total Awarded
	\$ Awarded	% of Total \$ Awarded	\$ Awarded	% of Total \$ Awarded	\$ Awarded	% of Total \$ Awarded	
CFBNJ⁵	\$700,000	28%	\$1,500,000	61%	\$270,000	11%	\$2,470,000
Fulfill	\$270,000	36%	\$280,000	37%	\$200,000	27%	\$750,000
FBSJ	\$100,000	22%	\$300,000	67%	\$50,000	11%	\$450,000

CFBNJ awarded about \$700,000 to at least 160 partners for **emergency food and personal items**, representing 28% of the money it paid out in subgrants. Fulfill awarded about \$270,000 to 63 partners, representing 36% of its subgranted dollars. FBSJ awarded nearly \$100,000 to 26 partners in the same category, representing 22% of the money it sent out via Endurance Grants.

For **equipment and infrastructure**, CFBNJ awarded approximately \$1,500,000 to 229 partners, Fulfill awarded approximately \$280,000 to 72 partners, and FBSJ awarded about \$300,000 to 32 partners, all for refrigerators and freezers.

And for **winterization and outdoor distribution** costs, Fulfill subgranted more than \$200,000 to 36 partners. CFBNJ awarded subgrants for more than \$1,650,000 to 141 partners. FBSJ awarded more than \$50,000 to 21 partners, and it funded snow shovels, heaters, and outdoor canopies.

CFBNJ's Additional Award Categories Outside of Endurance Grants

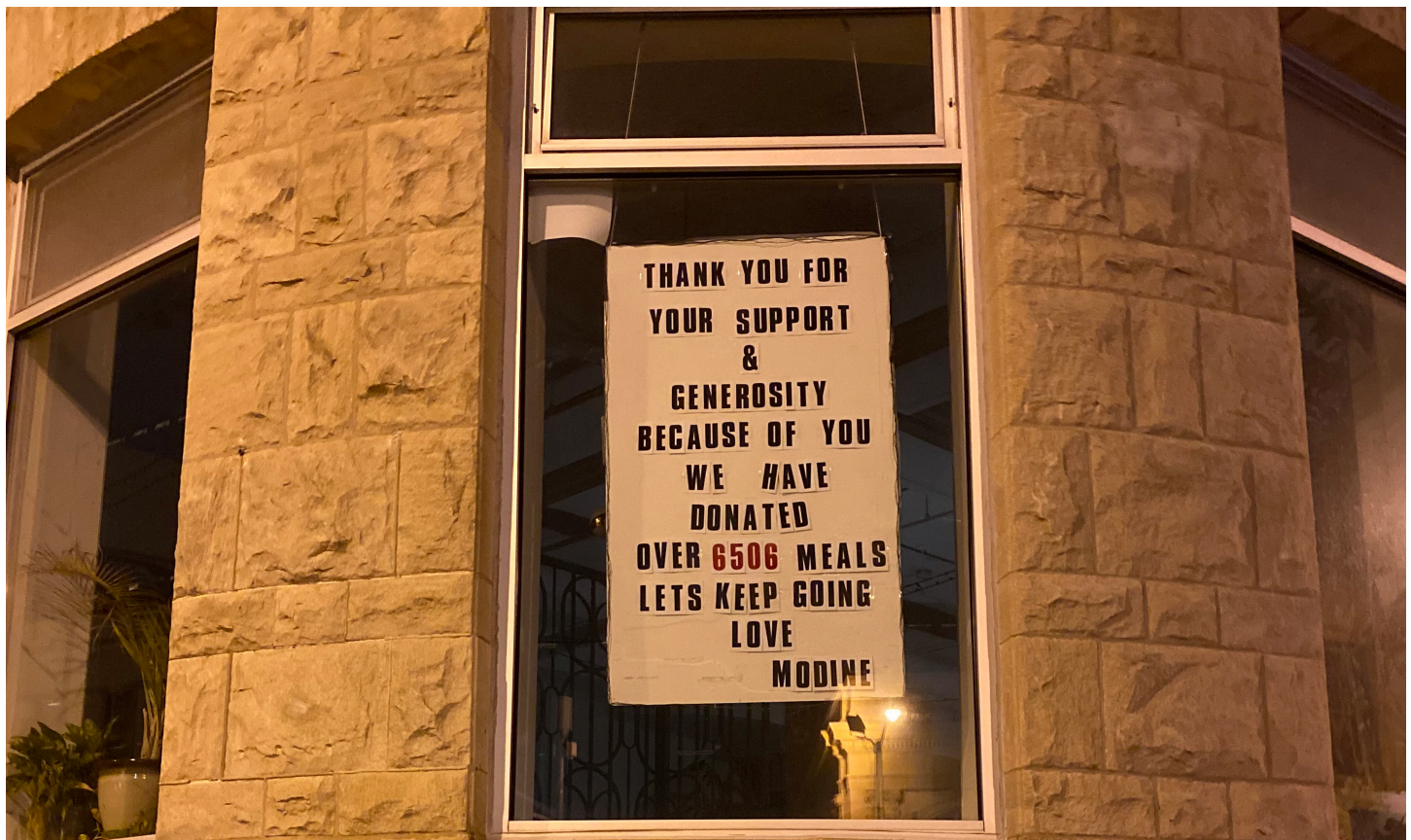
Of the \$3.5 million it disbursed, including both Endurance Grant funds and additional funds it contributed, CFBNJ awarded 76% (approximately \$2.67 million) to projects which fall under the eligible categories under the Endurance Grant criteria. The additional 24% supported what it termed “emergency operating support.” The most common usage of these funds included volunteer stipends, and payment of organizations’ rent and utility bills.

⁵ CFBNJ percentages reflect the number of subgrants supporting each category of need divided by the total number of subgrants, as dollar amounts by category were not available from this food bank.

D. Agency Perspective: Impact of Grants

Feedback from providers was overwhelmingly positive regarding the impact of improvements made possible by the subgrants. Perhaps most commonly, agencies raved about tangible improvements in the nutritional value and quantity of the fresh and frozen food they served their clients due to increased cold storage capacity. Due to these upgrades, pantries accepted more fresh food based on increase freezer and refrigerator space, served perishable food more predictably (e.g., at scheduled distribution dates rather than last-minute produce or dairy giveaways, sometimes pulled together based on the sudden availability of soon-to-expire perishable product), and spent less money on fresh food at retail stores. Another

frequent pantry report involved the impact and versatility of outdoor canopies and tents: while important in winter months, leaders indicated the difference canopies made at summer distributions – for clients and volunteers alike – was even greater. Finally, pantry volunteers throughout the state sent their appreciation for the reduced physical burden resulting from more efficient on-site movement of food. Whether unloading and storing deliveries or moving food from indoor storage (sometimes up or down stairs) to outdoor distributions, the introduction of carts, dollies, pallet jacks, and occasionally forklifts and conveyer belts make a world of difference for the volunteers completing these tasks.



III. GRANTS FOR DIAPERS & PERSONAL HYGIENE PRODUCTS

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Prior to the pandemic, diaper availability varied widely within the state. Non-profit organizations such as [The Maker's Place](#) in Trenton and [AngelaCARES](#) in Jersey City provided thousands of free diapers to families in their areas, but many other parts of the state had no similar programs. Some food banks offered diapers to a limited number of network partners, but not on an ongoing monthly basis and not always in sufficient quantities to meet partner agencies' needs.

Through the first year of the pandemic, and especially in Spring and Summer 2020, statewide demand for diapers, baby wipes, and pull-ups was as high as the demand for any food item, and local providers frequently reported the need for diapers was particularly urgent. At many pantries, demand for feminine hygiene products has been nearly as high. However,

unlike diapers, no pantries reported access to an available supply from their partner food banks, and fewer pantries or other non-profit organizations offered these products free of charge.

In total, NJPRF disbursed \$2.55M among CFBNJ, FBSJ, and Fulfill to purchase and offer diapers and feminine hygiene products to local providers. The first phase of funding dispersed in October of 2020 consisted of a \$550,000 grant to CFBNJ which they then redistributed to the other food banks. The second phase of funding released in June and August of 2021 included a total of \$2M given to CFBNJ, FBSJ, and Fulfill. Some food banks shared plans to use this grant award to launch new or more robust diaper and period offerings to their clients as part of an ongoing program.



IV. FEEDBACK LOOP: FOOD BANKS AND LOCAL PARTNERS

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As the Outreach team gathered information from its emergency providers, it remained in regular contact with multiple food banks' leadership. Early in the pandemic, pantries understood the challenges in the food supply chain and the urgent need to move more food and resources to hungry people. By Summer 2020, after several months of desperately trying to keep up with demand and no end in sight, emergency providers grew more frustrated about food supply shortcomings, and more fearful about how they would face the next few months. These shortcomings first included fresh food such as whole chickens and other meats; cereal, milk, eggs, and other breakfast items; produce; and bread. As time went on, stock of some of these improved, but rice and pasta fell into short supply, and meat generally remained an issue.

To convey more directly the local agencies' inability to secure these important food categories, the Outreach team worked in partnership with CFBNJ and FBSJ, respectively, to arrange network partner "town halls" facilitated by non-profit consultant and NJPRF volunteer Marian Stern of [Projects in Philanthropy](#). In later months, upon the invitation of some food banks, the team also connected agencies reporting challenges directly with respective food bank leaders for individual troubleshooting.



V. OVERALL FINDINGS, LESSONS LEARNED, & RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

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Analysis of the Outreach team's findings over the first 18 months of the pandemic yields a series of important and sometimes under-the-radar conclusions, lessons learned, and recommendations for next steps in research and investment. These are organized by subject area and summarized below. The order of topics does not represent an order of priority; the Outreach team deems each worthy of further exploration on its own merits.

A. Funders, Food Banks, & Pantries: Information Gathering & Knowledge Base

One-on-one Open-ended Conversations Yield More Informative Results

The Outreach team conducted electronic surveys, question-and-answer telephone calls, and more extensive conversational telephone calls to gauge the needs and challenges of New Jersey emergency food providers over the course of the 18-month period described in this report. Electronic Google Forms surveys circulated via email provided quick snapshots and undoubtedly proved most effective in answering discrete questions. For example, just days after sending out a survey, the ability to share with partners, "X% of responding pantries statewide are at least somewhat concerned about their spending levels in 2020," or "Y% of providers report receiving sufficient levels of protein in the last two months," brings a concise and tangible benefit.

In probing more deeply into providers' experiences during the pandemic, open-ended phone conversations yielded significantly greater return than the other two options, despite the additional time required for each call. Benefits include a richer and fuller understanding about each challenge, a more complete picture of the reality on the ground, and a window into topics which neither the team nor its contacts previously had considered.

Allowing a conversation to follow a natural course—without rushing the speaker along or cutting off points about which the speaker was more animated – built a degree of trust, which in turn elicited more candid feedback. It may sound simple, but the demonstration of interest in the speaker's pantry and its mission, operations, clients, and volunteers often came as a breath of fresh air to the speaker. After all, the speaker most often served in a volunteer capacity, and whether in a paid or unpaid role, cared deeply enough about the cause to continue operating it through the danger of a pandemic. This pantry leader usually was quite proud to go into detail as to how their team adapted to remain open for their clients, at great sacrifice in some combination of effort, time, money, and even risk to health. Notably, the prospect of financial or any other assistance from the caller's organization – despite the presence of the word "Fund" in the name of the caller's employer – only rarely was a factor in the respondent's willingness to engage.

Finally, a free-flowing conversation allowed for further probing into whichever topic proved to be a hot button for the pantry leader. In some cases, this involved the communities from which their newer clients were coming, while in others the "spark" involved budget concerns, volunteer

V. OVERALL FINDINGS, LESSONS LEARNED, & RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

shortages, hard-to-find food items, or an innovation or workaround of which the speaker was especially proud.

Conversely, a more stilted “Thank you, next question” sort of call lent an air of a telemarketer checking boxes and hustling to the end of the call. At times, this caused the pantry or soup kitchen leader to work toward the same goal – get to the end of the call as quickly as possible – and offer the minimum amount of information required to move along.

Recommendation 1

In seeking insights and feedback from pantry leaders, investing the time in an **open-ended conversational format** rather than firing through a simple list of questions is time well-spent. This allows the listener to gather facts, but also to learn which topics most animate the speaker. Additionally, this format allows for introspection about what is going well, and not merely what may be improved.



Alleviating Power Dynamics through Third-Party Entities & Supporting Capacity Building via Technical Assistance

The use of a third-party entity to conduct these interviews – rather than food banks themselves – also likely contributed to a fuller understanding of challenges faced by emergency food providers. This analysis has nothing to do with the skill or openness of any individual food bank or its staff; to the contrary, New Jersey’s anti-hunger community can boast that its food banks’ respective management teams are among the most innovative, forward-thinking, and dedicated anywhere. In fact, pantry leaders consistently raved about the responsiveness and friendliness of their key contacts at their partner food bank.

However, the inherent power dynamic between food banks and local partners appeared to cause partners to hold back from sharing frustrations or “bad news” in their feedback to their food banks, whereas conversations between these partners and the Outreach team (the third party, in this case) yielded a different and at times more candid perspective. The team frequently heard some version of these sentiments from pantries statewide – especially smaller, volunteer-run organizations: “You don’t bite the hand that feeds you,” “We wouldn’t want to get put to the back of the line,” and “We could never feed our community without their help.” They expressed these sentiments while verifying that the Outreach team member was not employed with the food bank, would not “report back” to the food bank what they shared without prior approval, and would not interpret any commentary as criticism of the food bank employees with whom they worked.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, pantry leaders who are immigrants, members of racial or ethnic minority

V. OVERALL FINDINGS, LESSONS LEARNED, & RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

groups, or represent pantries in impoverished areas (both urban and rural) were significantly more likely to allude to this power dynamic. In one case, a pantry head discussing a long-term strategic obstacle bluntly declared, “We’re poor. And it’s challenging for poor people because we don’t have any ‘friends in high places’ to help us get things done.” Viewing the world through this lens, it is understandable that some providers would hesitate conveying any information which could jeopardize their access to the food and support upon which they rely.

It is worth emphasizing here that the Pandemic Relief Fund and food banks across the state were not similarly situated in the first 18 months of the pandemic. While the Fund’s primary objective was to gather information and direct resources where needed most, food banks were forced to scale up nearly overnight to move exponentially greater volumes of food, in the face of public health and economic emergencies and all ensuing disruptions. The Outreach team therefore enjoyed the luxury of being one step removed from the “front lines.” Its staff had the benefit of time to engage in longform conversation, whereas food bank representatives were more likely to be pulled into “all hands on deck” triage.

Recommendation 2

Technical assistance to volunteer-run and other small agencies is recommended on the topics of **fundraising, governance, and succession planning**. NJPRF and other grants have fortified and strengthened local providers through the pandemic, but long-term sustainability may depend on their ability to continue to make capital improvements and turn operations over to a well-prepared next generation of leadership.

The Need is Real, & Government Benefits Made a Difference

As restrictions were loosened around eligibility to receive emergency food from food bank partners, some stakeholders have voiced concern about clients taking more food than they actually need, including visiting multiple pantries to “double-dip” from the system. Other stakeholders have countered that families picking up from more than one provider incur significant time and expense on each visit, and they may need to do so in order to stave off hunger, eviction, mounting bills and debts, and other conflating life obstacles. For this reason, pantry leaders’ reports on the impact of public benefits on their operations are instructive as real-time feedback.

First, food pantries report that both before and during the pandemic, their attendance creeps upward as each month goes on. Across the state, they attribute this to the fact that their eligible clients receive SNAP and other benefits at the beginning of each month. Next, throughout the pandemic, pantry leaders shared that they experienced occasional or intermittent drops in client numbers. They frequently tracked these changes to increases in SNAP benefits or to the distribution of Pandemic EBT cards, which mirrored SNAP cards in their provision of grocery money. The logical counterpart of this feedback is that these clients do not visit the pantry when they have enough grocery money, but only do so when their food budget runs short. If clients truly were “gaming the system” in large numbers, their receipt of SNAP and P-EBT benefits would have little bearing on their decisions to wait in line at emergency food distributions.

B. System Relies on Older, Shrinking Volunteer Base

The pandemic's initial shock, which resulted in a shutdown of nearly all aspects of the economy, served as a "stress test" of the statewide emergency food system. On the whole, the system mostly held. At the local level, extreme efforts by pantry and soup kitchen volunteers, non-profit staff, and local communities were vital in meeting vastly increased need in the face of decreased volunteer availability.

The pantry volunteer base skews toward senior citizens. This has worked reasonably well in non-pandemic times. These volunteers are available regularly on weekdays, they enjoy social interaction with fellow volunteers, and they bring a high degree of dedication in line with their belief in the mission. They also may offer years or decades of pantry experience. However, the recommendation that seniors remain home to avoid exposure to COVID-19 had a debilitating effect on many pantries' operations. The Outreach team heard story after story about a pantry's volunteer base plummeting from 22 to 6, or from 8 to 3, and so on. Even worse, the remaining volunteers received, stored, and distributed a markedly higher volume of food, often more frequently each month. Numerous pantry leaders told tales of physical exhaustion, in addition to the psychological toll inflicted by the ominous and ongoing feeling that if they let up, members of their community may miss meals or worse.

Recommendation 3

Volunteer-run emergency food providers should be encouraged to engage in intentional, targeted **succession planning and volunteer recruitment**. This includes identifying and on-boarding the next generation of pantry

leadership, as well as cycling in a larger cohort of trained, available volunteers to help offset potential sudden absences and balance the workload now borne by older members.

Recommendation 4

Potential **partnerships between New Jersey college and high school student groups and food pantries** should be revisited after student affairs staff have returned to regular work schedules and high school staffs return to more "normal" (non-pandemic) operations. The Outreach team's analysis of its attempt to facilitate such partnerships is that the idea is sound, interest is mutual, but the strength of the idea could not overcome poor timing and schools' temporary lack of capacity to build out such a program for the first time.



C. Investment in Infrastructure

System Relies on Aging Pantry Infrastructure

The pantry system also has relied on an aging physical infrastructure. In many cases, its equipment is at or beyond its expected life. Outdated appliances such as refrigerators and freezers can be dangerous (faulty wiring or emission of chemicals), inefficient (higher electric bills or inconsistent temperatures), and unreliable. To add color to the latter concern, numerous pantry leaders shared an ever-present fear that, one day, their old freezer – or van, etc. – will give out, and they have no real backup plan when that happens. The February 2021 Endurance Grants jump-started the process of retiring obsolete equipment, increasing capacity, and adding outdoor distribution-friendly resources. This is only a start; investment in the system’s physical infrastructure must continue.



Many pantries had three or four needs but met one or two of these via 2020-2021 NJPRF or related food bank grants. Future investment should account for the new ways in which providers will serve their clients through the remainder of the pandemic and beyond.

Improved equipment and infrastructure can improve both capacity and efficiency. Improved efficiency, in turn, can increase volunteer retention. For instance, an increased reliance on pallets and pallet jacks reduces the need for multiple volunteers to move and stack heavy food bags and boxes. Those volunteers then are freed up to perform other duties, avoid the physical strain and potential injury caused by lifting heavy items, or simply spend fewer hours at the pantry. Easing the time burden on pantry leaders also creates more time for strategic planning and goal-setting, moving from the mindset of “I’m just looking to get through next week!” to “We spend some time setting up at the pantry, and then we talk through how to approach next year.”

New and more professional equipment also can create greater dignity in the pantry experience for clients as well as volunteers. One subgrant recipient pantry used Endurance Grant funds to replace the worn and tattered tables and push carts they used at their outdoor distributions with sturdier new tables and carts, which happened to be much brighter and cleaner. The pantry’s coordinator eagerly described the pride her volunteer crew felt when a pantry client admired their tables and carts and commented, “Wow, you guys are coming up!” Eventually, the volunteers

V. OVERALL FINDINGS, LESSONS LEARNED, & RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

and nearby clients agreed, “We’re all coming up!” The Outreach team had not considered this benefit in the design stage of the Endurance Grants, but in a time of such fear and uncertainty, a change as simple as new tables and push carts brought feelings of pride and hope.

Recommendation 5

NJPRF’s 2021 Endurance Grants should be viewed as the first step in a **multi-year process** of replacing obsolete equipment and **building out a pantry and soup kitchen infrastructure** sufficient to handle operations in a pandemic and post-pandemic world. Significant further investment will be required for agencies to be resilient during potential future economic downturns or disasters.

Long-Term Shift to Outdoor Distribution

Prior to the pandemic, the vast majority of New Jersey food pantries and soup kitchens operated indoors. When the pandemic struck, many providers closed their doors; virtually all of the rest immediately switched to an outdoor distribution model. The Endurance Grants sought to address challenges associated with this overnight transition, and numerous pantries took advantage of this opportunity. The Outreach team’s working model referred to these as “winterization costs.” After pantries purchased tents, installed overhangs, and created other covered spaces, the Outreach team repeatedly received this unexpected feedback: “Sure, this will help us through the winter, but what we’re really excited about is how much of a difference this will make next summer.”

Many providers now have returned to indoor distribution, even if modified from their pre-pandemic operation. However, others have no plans to go back indoors. They have redesigned

and upgraded their parking lots, purchased canopies, and built porte-cochères, and installed new client flows. They have grown comfortable with the safety afforded their staff, volunteers, and clients by a “touchless” or drive-through system, and their clients have become accustomed to the anonymity and ease of receiving food without ever leaving their cars. Finally, these providers point to the increase in their numbers served per hour or per distribution thanks to the outdoor, grab-and-go model.

Recommendation 6

Infrastructure upgrades associated with the outdoor distribution model should be publicized and continue to be funded. Because few pantries operated outdoors prior to the pandemic, and many pantry leaders have not had a breather since the pandemic began, they may not have thought through or may not be aware of the ways in which certain outdoor equipment items can create meaningful efficiencies and upgrades to the client and volunteer experience.

Recommendation 7

As pantries have eclipsed the two-year mark for outdoor distribution, funders should continue to gather, analyze, share, and seek to replicate or scale **innovations and best practices in outdoor distribution**.

Home Delivery Needs & Challenges are Uncovered, Heightened

Food pantries across New Jersey described rising numbers of clients who were homebound due to illness, COVID safety precautions, the loss of a personal vehicle, and other reasons. This was unsurprising to the Outreach team. However, numerous local providers also reported that this need existed for many clients before the pandemic, and that their pantries only

V. OVERALL FINDINGS, LESSONS LEARNED, & RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

connected recently with these clients due to the increase in media coverage and awareness of food resources caused by the pandemic. In some cases, clients learned about and contacted food pantries on their own. In other cases, social workers, religious institutions, and concerned friends and neighbors connected emergency food providers with homebound residents.

Providers also noted valiant volunteer efforts to meet this need had become increasingly unsustainable as the pandemic moved into its second year. No one wanted vulnerable community members to go without food, so they pitched in with their own personal vehicles and on their own time. When weeks turned to months, and months grew beyond a year, many volunteers returned to their jobs and no longer were available for weekly or monthly food deliveries. Moreover, many of those who remained available simply could not afford the ongoing gas and mileage costs. Some pantries allocated a portion of their Endurance Grant awards toward reimbursements for gas and mileage. They reported to the Outreach team that they viewed this as more of a “patch” to thank volunteers for previous efforts, and not necessarily as a model which they could sustain in the medium and long term.

Finally, in a couple of instances, the Outreach team engaged in dialogue with smaller providers about the concept of a “joint application” for grant money to cover one vehicle (e.g., a van) to be shared among several churches or non-profit organizations. A single organization may not require the use of a van more than a few times per month, and it may not be able to bear 100% of the ongoing maintenance costs. But if several organizations each need use of the van a few times per month, sharing the van

(and its associated costs) appeared more viable. In the Outreach team’s experience, the idea remains sound, but individual entities’ Boards or leadership expressed hesitancy as to how this would play out in practice, especially for those organizations which did not “house” the vehicle and keys on their property. They shared concerns such as, “How do we know we won’t end up putting up money for some other organization to have a van, and then we get to borrow it once in a while when they’re not busy?” “We’re uncomfortable spending donors’ money on something we won’t own or can’t control.” “I’d be fine with this now, but what happens when the other organizations change Executive Directors?”

These insights suggest that the need for food pantries to deliver emergency food to homebound clients will continue well beyond the end of the public health emergency. The number of delivery requests rose during the pandemic partly due to increased numbers of homebound residents and partly due to an increased public awareness that such a service may exist. Thoughtful ideas beyond, “The volunteers will do it,” will be required to meet the expected permanent increase in home delivery need.

Recommendation 8

Home delivery mechanisms should be approached strategically for the long-term and strengthened across New Jersey’s emergency food network. Volunteers likely will continue to play a large role in these mechanisms but cannot be counted on to bear the full costs of delivery. Replacement of obsolete vehicles and shared delivery models among multiple providers should be among the ideas considered more deeply. In particular, avenues to move beyond the obstacles and concerns surrounding shared models should be explored.

V. OVERALL FINDINGS, LESSONS LEARNED, & RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

D. Food Needs of Certain Subgroups Go Unmet

Structurally, the food needs of specific communities largely go unmet by the emergency food system. More than 20% of New Jersey residents were born outside the United States, ranking third among all 50 states,⁶ but immigrant and tribal families and communities do not receive culturally-specific healthy food on a consistent and reliable basis. Motel-based and homeless clients frequently do not receive from pantries an adequate supply of groceries that they can prepare and eat in their living situations. In each of these cases, extraordinary local pantry efforts can help clients overcome these challenges, but usually only with a huge amount of extra work and/or additional spending.

Although NJPRF does not have access to the menus of food made available by the United States Department of Agriculture (“USDA”) and the New Jersey Department of Agriculture (“NJDA”) to food banks through government-funded food programs, it has seen no evidence that these government agencies have incorporated service to either of these two subgroups into their offerings.



Photo Credit: Christopher Francois

Food banks in some cases have responded to individual pantries about this issue. First, food bank agency partners generally have the opportunity to “order” additional food beyond what initially is allocated to them each month – provided their partner food bank has that food on hand. Beyond this option, the Outreach team did not identify other existing structural support systems to address the differing food needs of these subgroups. Such a system could hold the potential to support the food needs of immigrant and tribal populations, although the cost to pantries and other factors would need to be considered.

Recommendation 9

A structural and proactive approach is recommended to meet the different but equally valid **food needs of New Jersey’s many immigrant families and communities**. USDA and the New Jersey Dept. of Agriculture (NJDA) should be encouraged to account for client nutritional preferences when planning menus of which food to make available to partner food banks. NJDA in particular should take into consideration New Jersey’s changing demographics and concentration of certain immigrant and ethnic groups: an increase in participation in these programs could reduce hunger in the state. Food banks also are encouraged to gauge nutritional preferences of their clients, by way of their partner organizations, and to identify ways in which they can meet more of that need.

Recommendation 10

A deeper dive is recommended into promising pantry-level practices to meet the **needs of motel-based and homeless clients**, and the ways in which these practices can be replicated or scaled.

⁶ NJ Dept. of Labor, “Geographic Mobility of NJ Residents,” p. 7. <https://nj.gov/labor/lpa/content/njsdc/Wu%20NJ%20Geographic%20Mobility.pdf>

V. OVERALL FINDINGS, LESSONS LEARNED, & RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

E. Inequitable Pantry Access to Food Bank Resources

A series of food bank protocols and practices, though well-intentioned and sometimes “fair” at first glance, nonetheless in practice systematically can disadvantage small- and medium-sized food pantries and emergency providers.

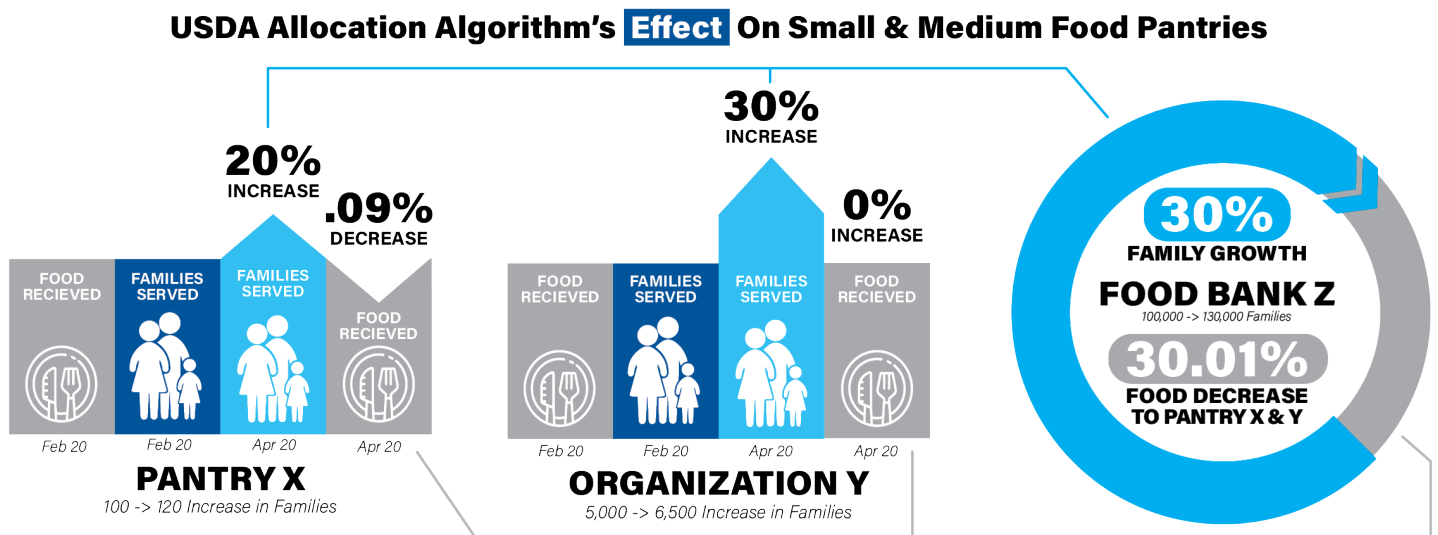
Overreliance on USDA Algorithm⁷

First, food banks’ reliance on a USDA algorithm for determining allocation of government-provided food results in a systematic disadvantage for small and medium-sized food pantries and soup kitchens. It has been common for pantries with no change in the number of clients served per month to receive less food from their food bank partner in following months, and for pantries which have experienced increases in clients served to receive the same amount or less food in future monthly deliveries – not mistakenly, but by design.

For instance, using simplified, fictional numbers:

Small Church Pantry X serves 100 families at its monthly food distribution in February 2020, pre-pandemic. In April 2020, it serves 120 families. It has seen a 20% increase.

Meanwhile, Large Organization Y serves 5,000 total families across its numerous food distributions in February 2020. Its numbers rise to 6,500 families served in April 2020. It has seen a 30% increase.



⁷ As discussed earlier in this report regarding other USDA matters, NJPRF does not have access to this algorithm. This description is based on a common understanding gleaned from conversations with multiple food banks and pantry staff and volunteers from around the state.

V. OVERALL FINDINGS, LESSONS LEARNED, & RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

February 2020

Pantry X	—	100 Families	—	
Food Bank Z	—	100,000 Families	—	.1%
Organization Y	—	5000 Families	—	
Food Bank Z	—	100,000 Families	—	5%

March 2020

Pantry X (+20%)	—	120 Families	—	.09% (22 Families Not Served)
Food Bank Z (+30%)	—	130,000 Families	—	
Organization Y (+30%)	—	6500 Families	—	5% (1,500 Families Not Served)
Food Bank Z (+30%)	—	130,000 Families	—	

Also in February 2020, Food Bank Z serves 100,000 families throughout its network.

- Small Church Pantry X is serving 0.1% of the families in Food Bank Z's network ($100 \div 100,000$), so it receives 0.1% of Z's food allocation that month.
- Large Organization Y is serving 5% of the families in Food Bank Z's network ($5,000 \div 100,000$), so it receives 5% of Z's food allocation that month.

Again, for simplicity, assume client numbers for all other partners in Food Bank Z's statewide network remain constant from February to April 2020. Therefore, Food Bank Z's network sees an aggregate 30% client increase, going from 100,000 to 130,000 families served.

- Small Church Pantry X's 120 families served represent 0.09% of the families in Food Bank Z's network, and therefore X only will receive 0.09% of Food Bank Z's food allocation.

- Large Organization Y's 6,500 families served represent 5% of the families in Food Bank Z's network – the same percentage as in February 2020. Large Organization Y will continue to receive 5% of Food Bank Z's food allocation.

If Food Bank Z's total amount of food allocated across its entire network in April is the same as the total amount allocated in February, the impact on each food bank partner is:

- Small Church Pantry X is serving 20% more families in April, but its Food Bank Z food allotment has dropped from 0.10% to 0.09%. It receives less food than it received in February, to serve more clients.
- Large Organization Y is serving 30% more families, but its Food Bank Z food allotment in April is the same as it received in February. It gets the same amount of food, to serve more clients.

V. OVERALL FINDINGS, LESSONS LEARNED, & RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

This example is not provided to suggest that Large Organization Y should not continue to receive its proportional allocation based on the number of clients it serves. Nor is it provided to suggest Food Bank Z – or any food bank – should ignore USDA allocation guidelines. Instead, the purpose is to shed light on the very real scenario – which played out over and over again in New Jersey in 2020 – in which small pantries are forced to confront shrinking monthly USDA allocations while expecting the same or an increased number of clients. Additionally, by recognizing this result, food banks and other providers may think through how to ensure emergency food providers with steady demand receive steady food supply, and those with rising client numbers receive increased amounts of food, from sources beyond USDA allocations alone. For instance, in one promising development, one food bank in early 2021 began purchasing additional protein and rice to supplement allocations of government-purchased food which it determined would continue to remain insufficient for partners’

needs. This removed much of the strain on their small pantry partners, which quickly and happily reported in interviews that their supplies of chicken and other meat, and rice, once again met their clients’ needs.

Technological Barriers

Small, volunteer-led pantries, especially those in poor and immigrant communities, also face technological barriers to equal access. By the nature of donations of perishable goods (fresh produce, milk, bread, etc.) from companies to food banks, food banks routinely send alerts to local partners about the availability of these perishables, which must be distributed to pantries and then to clients before they become inedible, and thus have short turnaround times. New Jersey food banks tend to rely on notices within their “portals” and emails, and to offer these goods on a “first come, first served” basis. Each of these puts the onus on the local agency to find the information, claim the food, and usually, to figure out how to pick up the food from the food bank on short notice.



Larger partners may have professional staff members whose duties include checking these emails and portals on a daily basis, commercial vehicles and even drivers at the ready, and reliable internet access. Smaller providers frequently rely on a team of volunteers who may work other jobs (and fill other roles within the pantry), may not have email and internet access both at home and at work, may find technology more challenging or time-consuming, and may

V. OVERALL FINDINGS, LESSONS LEARNED, & RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

require renting a U-Haul truck or van in order to make a bulk pickup. Here, while “first come, first served” food might seem like a “fair” or “equal” system, equality does not mean equity. Throughout the course of its work, the Outreach team heard stories from volunteers at small agencies across the state who lamented missed opportunities to secure fresh, nutritious food for their neighbors, and who felt as though the system was not set up for people like them or organizations like theirs.

Recommendation 11

More user-friendly systems of communication and feedback are recommended between food banks and local partners, particularly smaller agencies. For instance, the adoption of a standardized mass text messaging service is encouraged to facilitate efficient communication. This is not to suggest a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, exploration of an expanded variety of communication tools is encouraged, as different forms of communication work best for different audiences.

Geographic Disparity

The geographic distance between a small food pantry and its partner food bank often proved to be strongly correlated with the degree of difficulty securing sufficient food for their clients consistently through the pandemic, especially in rural southern New Jersey. In many cases, a pantry which is a long distance away from its food bank essentially is precluded from taking advantage of fresh produce or milk, due to the logistics involved in securing it. For instance, one pantry leader described routinely receiving notice between 8:30 and 9:00 a.m. about fresh items which were available for pickup, but which needed to be picked up by 10:00 or 10:30 a.m. that day. Even if she read the notice the minute

it was sent, she would need to claim the items electronically, then drop everything and make a 30-minute drive to the food bank – and hope she encountered no traffic on the way. Because this combination of events was so impractical, she generally gave up on trying to access these perishables from her food bank. Another pantry leader described a drive of at least 75 minutes each way, plus the need to rent a U-Haul for pickups: when combined with loading and unloading time, this added up to a staff member or volunteer devoting most of a full day to a pickup, with no advance notice.

In contrast, many pantries nearer to partner food banks view pickups as small, feasible errands. One pantry coordinator noted, “We’re only 10 minutes away and we have a volunteer who drives by the food bank on his way home from work. If any food comes free, we ask him to stop off on his way home and it’s usually no problem.” Other close-by pantries make several trips to the food bank per month, seeing this as no more burdensome than a trip to the bank.

Of course, food banks should not be expected to offer on-demand delivery of every item they receive into their warehouses, particularly when they accept soon-to-expire fresh food with short turnaround times. However, it seems fair to ask whether the level of service to food pantries or the availability of fresh, nutritious foods to pantry clients should vary so widely from one community to another, based on nothing more than the happenstance of proximity to a given food bank.

Recommendation 12

The model by which emergency providers procured food – especially fresh, perishable food – from food banks prior to the pandemic

V. OVERALL FINDINGS, LESSONS LEARNED, & RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

did not hold up well under the strain of the pandemic for many providers. Food banks and funders are encouraged to explore more resilient and sustainable models including different or increased delivery systems, a “hub-and-spoke” model for more local access, or some combination.

Innovations in Fresh Food Delivery

FBSJ recently unveiled plans to convert its pop-up pantry program to a client choice-style “farmers market” distribution of eggs, cheese, milk, often produce, and other fresh items which area pantries may have less success keeping in stock. Interestingly, this approach works around logistical hurdles involved with moving produce to pantries, and it brings fresh items directly to clients. This program bears watching as it is rolled out, but at best, it would be one piece of a broader overhaul to reduce the variance in access experienced by pantries and their clients based on the good or bad luck of geography.

Meanwhile, CFBNJ recently began shipping produce directly from its suppliers to select partners. In addition to freeing up food bank warehouse space and delivery schedules, direct shipment also adds valuable extra days for local

providers to distribute fruits and vegetables to their clients while those items remain ripe. This is because it eliminates the time required for a supplier to ship to a food bank, the food bank to receive and store the produce in its warehouse, and the food bank to package and prepare to send it out again.

Recommendation 13

Funders are recommended to explore and invest in **more equitable and sustainable delivery to food pantries and other emergency providers**, especially as related to fresh or perishable healthy food. Food banks are encouraged to assess how their policies may disproportionately affect some of their local partners more than others in their ability to provide sufficient nutritious food to their clients.

Overall Inequity

At present, the amount of time required of some pantry leaders to navigate food bank ordering and communications systems appears to be higher than necessary. An equity-based approach will take these factors into account and could free pantry leaders and volunteers to devote more time, money, and effort to other aspects of pantry management and operations.



V. OVERALL FINDINGS, LESSONS LEARNED, & RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

F. Non-Food Necessities: Inadequate Structural Systems, Rising Costs for Local Pantries

Local providers' access to non-food personal items and necessities was inequitable and haphazard before the pandemic, and this issue has grown dramatically since it began. These items include child and adult diapers, baby wipes, and baby formula; feminine hygiene products; toiletries such as soap, shampoo, deodorant, toothpaste, and toothbrushes; toilet paper and paper towels; and laundry detergent. The pandemic exacerbated clients' desperation and left far more pantries and soup kitchens seeking to offer these items than before the pandemic.

Importantly, these items cannot be purchased with SNAP benefits. Although some of them can be purchased with WIC benefits (Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, another federally-funded program), the barriers to WIC participation are more cumbersome than they are for SNAP participation, and the program is more limited in scope.

Some New Jersey food banks, aided by NJPRF grants, are building a structure for consistent distribution of diapers and feminine hygiene products to partner agencies. No similar system appears to be in place or in the works for food pantries and soup kitchens to acquire other necessities at scale – toiletries and paper products, laundry detergent, and cleaning supplies. However, when compared with other local options, many pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters recognize they are best positioned to meet this need for clients who otherwise will go without. As a result, the Outreach team heard countless stories from all corners of the state of small and medium-sized emergency providers' purchasing these products at retail prices from

dollar stores, supermarkets, and big-box chains. In addition to an unsupported expense line in pantries' budgets, this also sends staff and volunteers – many of whom are elderly – into retail outlets on a regular basis, in the midst of a public health emergency.



Food Packaging

The conversion from a client-choice “shopping” model to a grab-and-go model for pantries, or from a “dine-in” to a “takeout” model for soup kitchens, created a daunting new recurring budget line for providers in the form of food packaging: boxes, bags, and to-go containers or cutlery. Anecdotally, local providers served by various New Jersey food banks mentioned that their partner food bank provided plastic bags at one time before the pandemic, but this service ended early in the pandemic as the focus turned more urgently to securing and distributing increased amounts of food.

Storage and Other Limitations

New Jersey's food banks generally are operating at or close to full capacity in their warehouses.

V. OVERALL FINDINGS, LESSONS LEARNED, & RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS

They may lack ample space to take in entire new categories of personal items beyond those they handle already. Therefore, it would be unfair and unrealistic simply to suggest, “Food banks should handle this, too,” without accounting for capacity limits. In addition, further extension into non-food personal items could raise questions of whether scaling up this type of service fits within the mission of each respective food bank. It is possible this could be an area into which food banks may wish to expand, but it also is possible

that one or more outside entities may be best suited to take on such a project.

Recommendation 14

Further study is warranted of a **scalable and consistent discounted supply of non-food necessities** to emergency food providers. To the extent grab-and-go food distribution remains the safest or most viable option, the inclusion of food packaging supplies in such offerings also should be explored.

G. Importance of Organizational Culture within Food Banks

New Jersey food banks have faced several major challenges and changes simultaneously since the pandemic began. They received an influx of government, corporate, and individual grants, and donations as public awareness of spikes in hunger peaked. With those contributions comes an expectation of an increased level of service. They are receiving, storing, and distributing a significantly higher volume of food and at more frequent intervals. As a response to the increased need, and made possible by their stronger financial positions, food banks also have ramped up their hiring, adding, and onboarding new staff amid their increased activity.

In the midst of this frenzy lies the challenge to raise their levels of service to match the level of demand. To do so requires adjusting quickly to changed circumstances and finding creative solutions. In many cases, the food banks have done exactly that. In other instances, though, food banks' rigid adherence to “how we do things” has created deep frustration among network partners. Nearly every partner of all the food banks reported their personal fondness for their food bank contacts and the staff in general. However, based on 18 months of interviews

with these partners, one key determinant in the likelihood of food banks achieving customer (local partner) satisfaction appears to be where their staff members fall on the spectrum between two approaches to their partners. The first approach declares, “This is how it works; you know the rules. Take it or leave it.” The second approach asks, “How can I meet you where you are, in a way that works best not just for me, but also for you?”

Put another way, the questions come down to culture. Does a food bank's staff lean into pre-pandemic rules and practices, no matter the outcomes and consequences in a rapidly changing emergency food climate? How recently has staff reviewed or updated these policies to ensure they work best for their partners? Do staff members view themselves as doling out “favors” for pantry leaders, or do they approach network partners as true “customers” worthy of high levels of service? And finally, are they aware of how their rules, systems, and interactions are perceived by each and every one of their partners?

This report is based on the work of the NJPRF Critical Needs Outreach team and was commissioned by The Tepper Foundation (formerly, the David Tepper Charitable Foundation). The creation of this report could not have been possible without acting project lead Brad Preston.

All titles listed below were held during the duration of their work at the New Jersey Pandemic Relief Fund and may have changed since then.

OUTREACH TEAM MEMBERS

Brad Preston Outreach, Hunger Free New Jersey Project Lead, NJPRF Critical Needs Outreach Report	Shelley Skinner Director of Programs, The Tepper Foundation	Adele LaTourette Director, Hunger Free New Jersey	Lisa Pitz Assistant Director, Hunger Free New Jersey	Gerard Green Grants Associate, The Tepper Foundation
Helen Lasry Member, NJPRF	Anna Rimland Member, NJPRF	Sarah Rimland Administrative Assistant, NJPRF	Rachel Smith Outreach Coordinator, NJPRF	Jason Steuerwald Outreach Specialist, NJPRF

NJPRF Leads

Josh Weinreich Chief Executive Officer, NJPRF	Tammy Murphy First Lady of New Jersey Chairwoman, NJPRF
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KEY INFORMANT STAKEHOLDERS

The Outreach team’s work described in this report would not have been possible without the extraordinary openness and collaboration of each of New Jersey’s Feeding America affiliated food banks: the [Community FoodBank of New Jersey](#) (“CFBNJ”), the [Food Bank of South Jersey](#) (“FBSJ”), [Fulfill](#), [NORWESCAP](#), and [Mercer Street Friends](#).^{*} In particular, the Fund worked closely with Carlos Rodriguez and the leadership team at CFBNJ, Fred Wasiak and the leadership team at FBSJ, and Kim Guadagno and the leadership team at Fulfill throughout the duration of the pandemic. In spite of the historic and ever-changing challenges coming their way, Carlos, Fred, Kim, and their respective teams unflinchingly made themselves available for questions, updates, and the opportunity to check in about what the Outreach team was seeing and hearing “in the field.”

The Outreach team also could not have accomplished its objectives without the thousands of hours devoted to surveys, interviews, and follow-up information by emergency food providers across the state. Many were overwhelmed by the demands of serving through the pandemic, yet they took time to share their insights and experiences anyway.

Carlos Rodriguez Chief Executive Officer & President, Community Food Bank of New Jersey	Fred Wasiak Chief Executive Officer & President, Food Bank of South Jersey	Kim Guadagno Former Chief Executive Officer & President, Fulfill
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^{*} In the Feeding America network, NORWESCAP and Mercer Street Friends are considered “Partner Distribution Organizations” of CFBNJ. As such, NJPRF designated support specifically for NORWESCAP and Mercer Street Friends, and this support generally flowed through CFBNJ.

**ADDENDUM 1:
NJPRF SURVEY (MARCH 2020)**

1. Are you open?
2. If no, why?
3. Do you have enough food to meet demand?
4. If no, how many days' worth of food supply do you have?
5. If yes, how long will your food last?
6. Can you restock if and when you run out of food?
7. If no, why not?
8. How are you distributing food?
9. Where is your facility located?
10. Are you experiencing an increase in need?
11. How long do you estimate you can keep your operations going under current conditions?
12. What would it take to keep your operation going to meet current demand?
13. What would you need to stay open and provide your services for the next 30 days?
14. Please add any additional concerns you may have.

**ADDENDUM 2:
NJPRF SURVEY (JULY 2020)**

1. Are you spending money to supplement the food banks?
2. How much are you spending every month?
3. How many clients did you serve pre-COVID-19?
4. How many clients did you serve post-COVID-19?
5. Has there been a percent increase or decrease?

**ADDENDUM 3:
NJPRF FALL FOOD CAPACITY SURVEY (NOVEMBER 2020)**

1. How are you currently distributing food?
2. How often are you distributing food?
3. Since August, on average, how many families/households are you serving per month?
4. How many families/households do you expect to serve in October?
5. Do you anticipate serving more families/households in the next 3 months than you served in the last 3 months?
6. Prior to Covid: On average how much did you spend per month to purchase food?
7. On average, how much do you spend per month to purchase food now?
8. If you are spending more money on food, where are you spending the biggest percentage?
9. In the last 3 months, did you experience a shortage of any of the following categories of food?
10. For this question, a shortage means you either didn't have enough to distribute to all clients, OR you had to purchase more from a non-food bank source. (Check all that apply)
11. On average, how much do you spend per month to pick up food?
12. How many times per month do you pick up food?
13. How far is your pantry from the food bank?
14. Delivery Costs: How much do you spend per month to deliver to your clients?
15. If you expect to incur any new costs related to distributing food during cold weather, what will contribute to those new costs?
16. Will you be changing your food distribution operation for cold weather?
17. What is keeping you from serving more families/households?

**ADDENDUM 4:
NJPRF OUTREACH TEAM TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS –
QUESTIONS / CONVERSATION PROMPTS FOR PANTRY LEADERSHIP**

1. Since the pandemic started, have you needed to increase or decrease the number of days & hours the pantry is open to the public?
2. Do you have a ballpark average or a guess as to how many families the pantry served in a given month before the pandemic hit – say, in January or February 2020?
3. And then about how many families do you serve in a given month now?
4. Have the numbers been relatively steady during the crisis, or have you had big changes month to month?
5. Do you see people coming from longer distances than before the crisis?
6. [If yes] Where are people coming from now?
7. If the need for food continues, or if there's an increase in need later this summer or in the fall, do you feel prepared to meet that demand? By that I mean, do you have enough volunteers, or have you had a dropoff since the pandemic?
8. And how is your refrigerator and freezer capacity? Could you accept more food from the food bank if they had it for you?
9. Do you feel as though you're getting enough of the different types of food? By that I mean enough meat, eggs, milk, cereal, produce, and so on?
10. [If shortage of any items] Is that not available at all from the food bank now, or do you get some, but it's just not enough to last the month?
11. If you don't get enough of something from the food bank, do you spend pantry money to buy that at the grocery store, or do you just not have it for clients that month?
12. Do you get many requests for toilet paper and paper towels?
13. What about diapers or baby wipes, and baby formula?

Continued...

14. Do you get any requests for adult diapers or Depends?
15. How are you set with packaging – do you buy plastic bags and boxes, or get them donated?
16. Do you partner with any other organizations to get donated food? For example: ShopRite, or Acme, or any other grocery stores, restaurants, or local churches?
17. About how much do you spend in a given month on food (not counting food from the food bank)?
18. Are there any other pantries in your area that are giving out food?
19. Do you know of any pantries in your area that have closed down during the coronavirus?
20. Finally, do you have a sense of where things will go in the next couple of months? Do you think things are leveling off or getting a little bit better, or do you think the need will continue to increase?
21. That's all the questions I have. I also wanted to let you know our organization recently started a Facebook group for pantries around New Jersey to exchange ideas and hear what other people are doing. Would that be interesting to you? If so, I can send you an e-mail link where you could request to join the group, and then an administrator would accept the request.