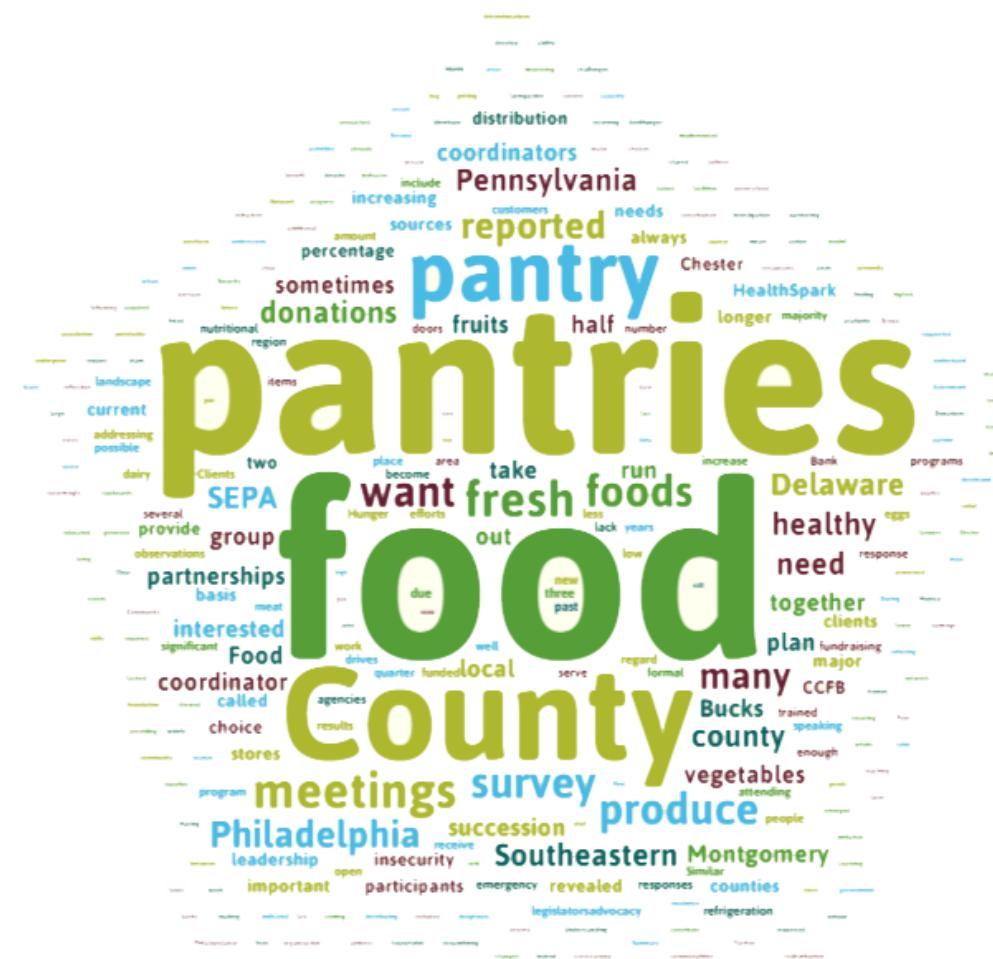


# **Healthy Food Pantries Fuel Healthy Communities**

# ***Key Highlights from the 2017 Southeastern Pennsylvania Food Pantry Coordinator Survey***



# February 2018



# PHILABUNDANCE

*Driving hunger from our communities*



## **Executive Summary**

In this report, we highlight the current practices and needs of food pantries across Southeastern Pennsylvania as revealed by findings from the 2017 Southeastern Pennsylvania Food Pantry Coordinator Survey, as well as interviews with area anti-hunger organizations.

Responding to the needs of their program, survey participants revealed that food pantries in Southeastern Pennsylvania, in general:

- want healthy foods;
- need infrastructure support to keep their doors open and their communities healthy; and
- want to strengthen their programs through partnerships.

There are many unique opportunities for funders, elected officials and the general public to lend their support to food pantries.

## **Background**

Every month across Southeastern Pennsylvania (SEPA) there are nearly 700 food pantries that open their doors to provide nourishment to their neighbors in need of food. In the early 1980's, our region was dotted with a few food pantries. Since then, the number has multiplied in response to deep cuts to federal social spending, lack of wage growth for low-income workers, an increase in jobs that provide less than full-time hours (underemployment) and, more recently, a sharp recession. [1] In the past, food pantries provided food on an emergency basis, but now due to a variety of economic factors have become a necessary monthly supplemental food resource for many.

The foods distributed by food pantries are dependent on many factors. Most pantries receive their food through food banks, food distribution programs, government funded commodities, local grocery stores, and food drives/donations. Some food pantries raise funds to purchase foods for their participants that they are not able to get through other sources.

Traditionally, food pantries gave out a pre-packed bag of food. Over the past decade, more pantries have implemented a "choice pantry" model, which allows participants to choose the food they want rather than providing a pre-packed bag of food. Our survey revealed that presently 29% of SEPA food pantries are operating as choice pantries.

**Food insecurity is the lack of access to enough food for a healthy, active life.**

Hunger is not only an urban issue as many believe as can be seen in the table below. Each county faces unique challenges, but there are surprisingly many commonalities.

**SEPA Food Insecurity by County [2]**

County	Percent Food Insecure	Estimated Number of Food Insecure Individuals
Bucks	8.8%	55,120
Chester	8.4%	42,990
Delaware	13.2%	73,940
Montgomery	9.7%	78,540
Philadelphia	21.0%	325,940

## Survey Overview

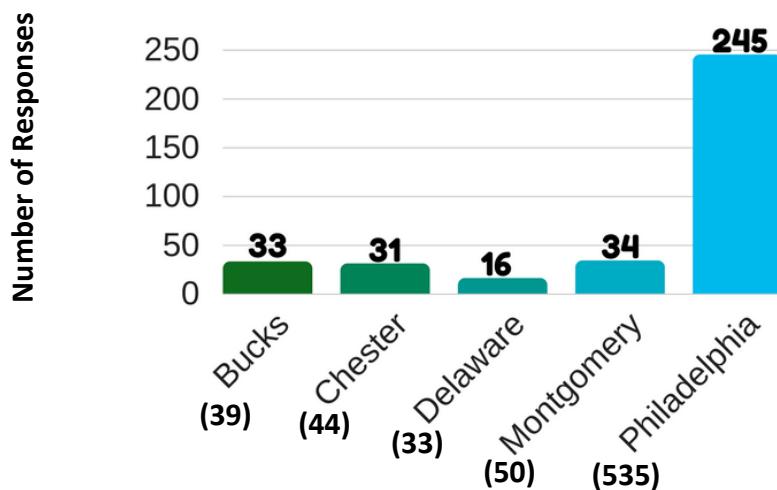
In June 2016, three Southeastern Pennsylvania anti-hunger organizations, the Coalition Against Hunger, Share Food Program and Philabundance partnered on the 2017 Southeastern Pennsylvania Food Pantry Coordinator Survey. The survey was designed to explore the needs of food pantries across the region. It was also an opportunity to collaborate with our county partners: Community Action Development Commission of Montgomery County (CADCOM), Chester County Food Bank, United Way of Bucks County, Bucks County Opportunity Council, and Family and Community Service of Delaware County. Over the years each of our partners have conducted various surveys, but we hoped this joint effort would not only strengthen our collective work, but would also decrease the burden that we put on the volunteers and staff of area food pantries to answer multiple surveys.

What do food pantries in Southeastern Pennsylvania need to help them keep their doors open and keep their participants healthy? What are their current assets as well as challenges? When are they open? The responses to these questions focused on pantry needs, sustainability, and partnerships allowed our organizations to understand how to best serve and support pantries that work to provide food to their neighbors.

Starting in January 2017, 654 known food pantries in the region were sent the survey via email using the online survey tool, SurveyMonkey. Chester County Food Bank collected several surveys on paper during a meeting in January. [3] From January to March 2017, trained staff and volunteers conducted the survey over the phone with those who did not complete the online survey. Three attempts were made to reach non-communicative pantries by phone. In the end, 359 pantries (55%) participated in the 2017 Food Pantry Coordinator Survey for Southeastern Pennsylvania.

For the purpose of this survey we define healthy eating as following the latest Dietary Guidelines for Americans (2015-2020). These guidelines include a healthy eating pattern that consists of a variety of vegetables; fruits (especially in their whole form); grains (at least half of which are whole grains); a variety of protein foods like seafood, lean meats, poultry, eggs, legumes, nuts, seed and soy products; low-fat or fat-free dairy; and oils. This healthy eating pattern also limits saturated fats, trans fats, added sugars, and sodium. [6]

## Number of Pantry Responses by County



\* The number in parenthesis is the number of pantries known to be operating in each county

### 3 Key Findings from the Survey

#### 1. Food Pantries in Southeastern Pennsylvania want healthy foods.

## Food Pantries in SEPA Want Healthy Foods

### The issue:

**42%**

of SEPA adults living below 150% of the Federal Poverty Level have high blood pressure, which puts one at risk for stroke and heart disease.

**31%**

of adults living at or above 150% of the Federal poverty level have high blood pressure.

Of the food pantries surveyed in SEPA:

**72%**

want fresh vegetables.



**3 in 4**

food pantries in SEPA want dairy.

**80%**

of food pantries in SEPA want poultry.



### What You Can Do:

- **Hold a healthy food drive!**
- **Keep your elected officials informed about the needs of local pantries and their participants.**

With the prevalence of diabetes (12.7%) and high blood pressure (33.3%) in our region [5], we can no longer afford to ignore the fact that what we eat, *and don't eat*, affects our health. A poor diet can contribute to an increased risk of many diseases including diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, obesity, heart disease, osteoporosis as well as certain cancers. [6] Sadly, food insecure households are at greatest risk for poor health. [7]

When children do not get enough of the healthy foods that their bodies need this can lead to developmental delays, poor health status, mental health problems and poor education outcomes. In addition, there are many studies linking early childhood malnutrition to adult disease, including diabetes, high cholesterol and cardiovascular disease. [8]

The food pantries' desire for healthy foods for their participants reflects this growing concern about the health of their communities.

## **2. Food Pantries in Southeastern PA need infrastructure support to keep their doors open and their communities healthy.**

Most food pantries run on small budgets with limited resources. In fact, three-quarters of SEPA food pantry coordinators who responded to the survey reported that they are doing their job on a voluntary basis.

The majority of the pantries cannot take on the costly burden of increasing the amount of healthy foods on their shelves alone. In addition to securing the actual food, they need dependable transportation as well as more refrigeration to store these perishable foods.

One-third of SEPA food pantries reported that they are in need of volunteers. Pantries need volunteers for a wide range of tasks, from bagging food to fundraising, picking up food from distribution sites to assisting participants. One pantry noted, "We are sometimes forced to close because we have no one to pick up [the food]." Volunteers who are able to lift heavy boxes are also needed to unload food from trucks to the pantry. Many pantry volunteers are seniors or have physical disabilities.

The stability of food pantries requires more than sufficient food, volunteers and infrastructure. To ensure that food pantries can reliably continue to serve their participants, they need strong leadership. Yet, only 54.8% of food pantries said that they have trained someone to take over the duties of the present pantry coordinator should he or she be no longer willing or able to fill the role. Often this is because those duties require a significant increase in responsibility, time, and managerial talent that is not available.

### **SEPA FOOD PANTRY INFRASTRUCTURE**



**47 %**

of pantries in SEPA said they need freezers or refrigerators to store fresh foods like produce that their participants want.

**1 IN 3**

pantries in SEPA need more volunteers to help bag and pick up food, stock shelves, unload trucks and fundraise.



**40 %**

of SEPA pantries have no formal succession plan or a trained person to take over leadership.



### **WHAT YOU CAN DO**

- Make a commitment to volunteer on a regular basis for a pantry in need of your particular skills.
- Encourage others to volunteer.
- Fundraise to help pantries purchase appliances to store healthy perishable foods.

### **3. Food Pantries in Southeastern PA want to strengthen their programs through partnerships.**

Just as the regional anti-hunger organizations saw the importance of working together to complete this survey, the food pantries report that they see the value in partnerships with other pantries to better meet their participants' needs. They know that they can do more and do it better by pooling their limited resources and working together.

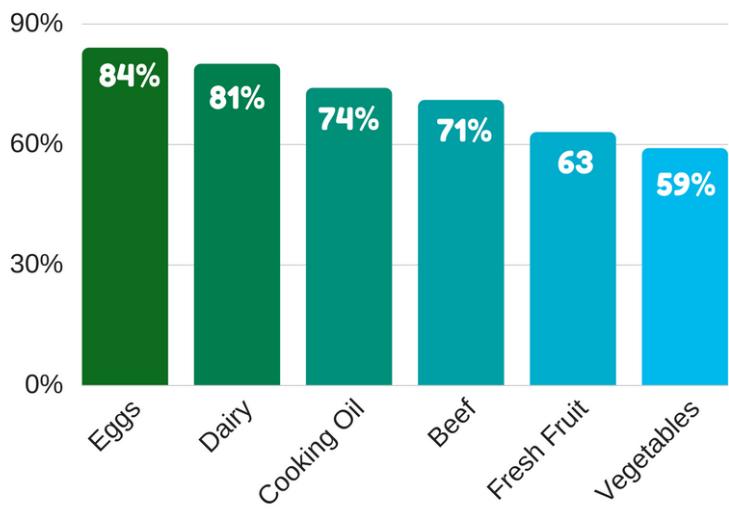
Although only 15.1% of SEPA food pantries reported that they are currently taking part in advocacy efforts or speaking to their elected officials, it is encouraging that half of the pantries are interested in partnering with their fellow pantries to advocate for the needs of their low-income participants.

The anti-hunger organizations that conducted this survey are in the position to help facilitate these partnerships by bringing together regional coalitions that can discuss fundraising, sharing resources, and taking part in advocacy efforts.

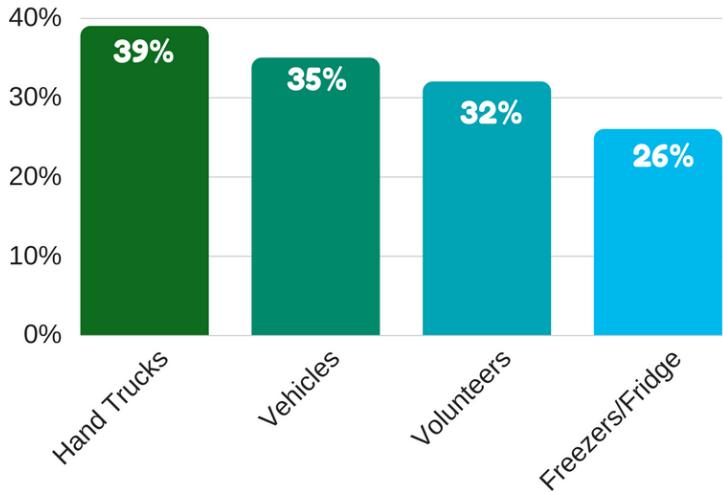


## Bucks County Results and Background

### **Percentage of Pantries in Bucks County That Requested the Following Foods:**



### **Some of the Top Needs Reported in Bucks County Pantries Include:**



With regard to the pantry coordinator survey, two areas were significant for Bucks



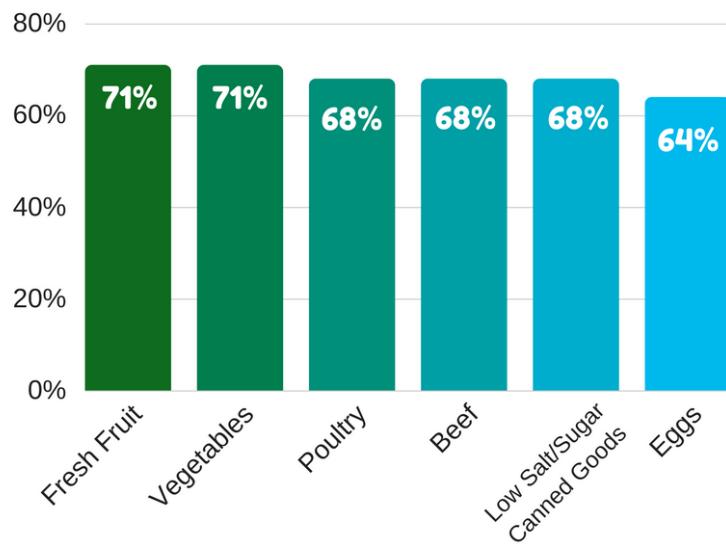
County. First, despite all efforts to date, 26% of pantries say that they "sometimes" or "often" run out of food. This underscores that challenges remain in getting needed foods distributed through the pantry network. This may reflect a lack of operational capacity at both the pantry level and the community and agency levels.

Second, the percentage of pantries in Bucks County that say they want fresh fruits and vegetables is lower than the region as a whole. This may be a reflection of the fact that distribution of fresh produce has been a priority for the county for the past several years and that progress is being made in securing and distributing generous donations of fresh produce from our area farmers.

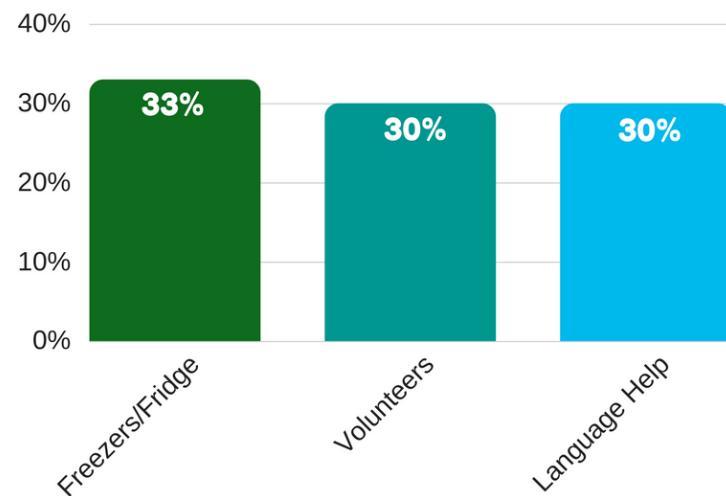
The landscape of food relief efforts in Bucks County has undergone three major changes in the last two years, all of which are increasing the ability of local agencies and pantries to better meet the needs of food-insecure county residents. Bucks has acquired cold storage space which has greatly increased storage capacity for fresh and perishable foods; Bucks County Opportunity Council, the community action agency for Bucks County, has become a "re-distribution organization" with Philabundance, increasing its capacity and streamlining distribution; and, a new produce distribution program, "Fresh Connect," has been developed that is reaching 250 households per week.

## Chester County Results and Background

### Percentage of Pantries in Chester County That Requested the Following Foods:



### Some of the Top Needs Reported in Chester County Pantries Include:



Clear themes have emerged from the survey results that are consistent with Chester County Food Bank (CCFB) data and observations. The survey indicates that pantry coordinators are most interested in receiving more fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy, eggs, and meat. These results are consistent with the results from the CCFB Community Food Security Assessment survey that included over 1,000 participants. Participants listed fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy, eggs, and meat as the most important food items when coming to the pantry for participants. [8] Participants also indicated that they would like to receive additional produce if possible. CCFB is developing plans to maximize the amount of fresh foods made available to partner agencies every season.

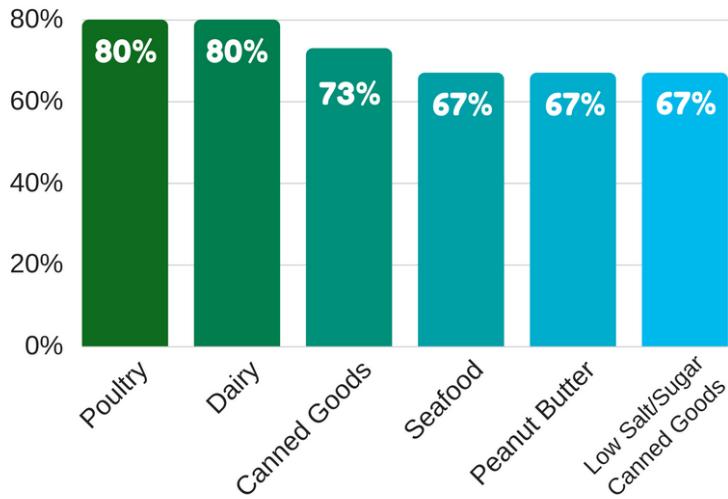
The pantry coordinator survey also showed that the top three healthy food donation sources come from private donations, Chester County Food Bank, and farms/gardens. Donations from restaurants and stores did not appear to make any major contribution of healthy food. Based on observations in their pantries and cupboards, it is clear that many of the foods from local stores include baked goods such as doughnuts, processed meats, and other foods of low nutritional quality.

The survey revealed that Chester County food pantry coordinators were most interested in attending trainings together. This is also consistent with informal polls CCFB has taken. Providing opportunities for pantry capacity building and trainings related to emergency preparedness and succession planning is an appropriate direction for supporting partner agencies based on this information.

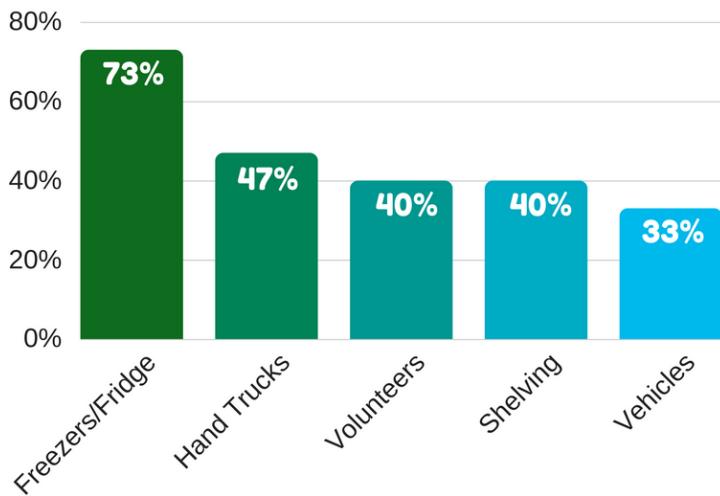


## Delaware County Results and Background

### **Percentage of Pantries in Delaware County That Requested the Following Foods:**



### **Some of the Top Needs Reported in Delaware County Pantries Include:**



Of all of the SEPA counties, Delaware County food pantries requested fresh fruits and vegetables (46.7%) less than the other counties. Are their pantries getting enough produce or do they not have the facilities to store these perishable items? Delaware County pantries reported a very high need for more refrigeration (73.3%) so perhaps the low request for fresh produce is due to the lack of enough refrigeration. Further investigation is required to understand the need for produce in this county.

The partnerships that Delaware County food pantries are most interested in are group pantry meetings (40%), joint fundraising and food drives (53.3%), referring to other pantries (46.7%) and speaking to legislators/advocacy (46.7%).

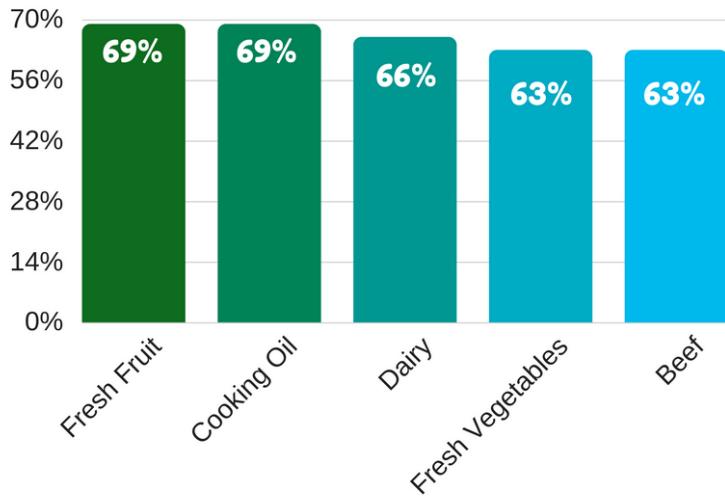
These partnerships are vital to a county where over a quarter of the food pantries (26.7%) reported that they sometimes run out of food.

Another major finding from Delaware County food pantry coordinators is that over half (53.3%) said they did not have a succession plan in place for who would take over leadership if the coordinator could no longer serve. Group pantry meetings can address how to develop a succession plan.

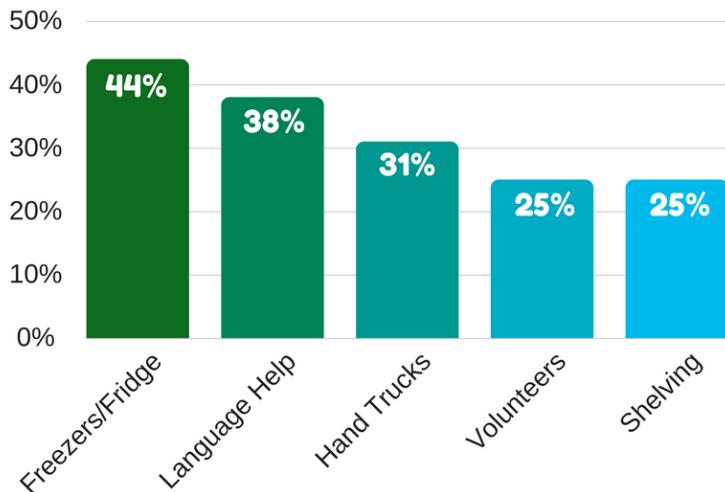


## Montgomery County Results and Background

### Percentage of Pantries in Montgomery County That Requested the Following Foods:



### Some of the Top Needs Reported in Montgomery County Pantries Include:



A large percentage (71.9%) of Montgomery County pantries surveyed are already attending group pantry meetings. These five regional pantry coalitions are supported by a local foundation, HealthSpark, through an initiative called the Montco Anti-Hunger Network (MAHN). HealthSpark has also funded cross-training events called *Peer Learning Circles* that take place several times a year. These two initiatives bring pantries together to network, learn new skills, and become educated about programs that could benefit their customers.

The pantries are most interested in partnering with other pantries for the following activities: fundraising (50%), attending trainings (50%), and speaking to legislators/advocacy (46.9%).

Nearly half (46.9%) of Montgomery County pantries surveyed said that did not have a formal succession plan or someone trained to take over leadership if the current coordinator could no longer serve.

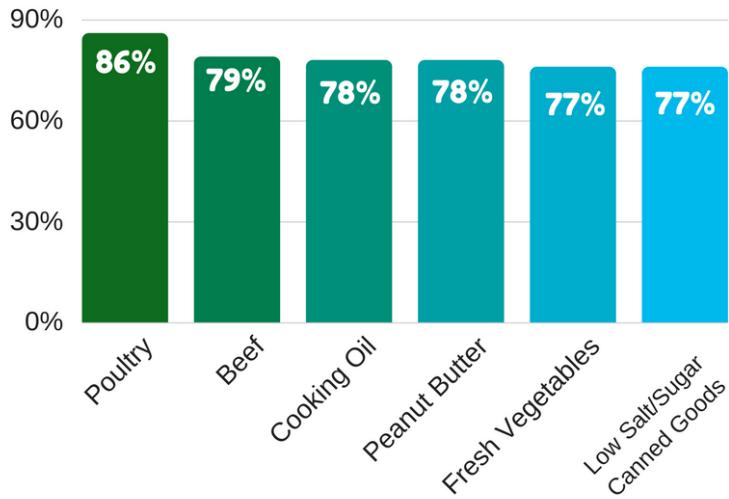
Montgomery County, also through HealthSpark funding, has dramatically increased the percentage of choice food pantries (61.5%). There is a strong interest to continue to increase these numbers due to the positive response from pantry customers.

A 2017 countywide pantry participant survey revealed that food pantry participants want fresh foods and lean meats, very similar to findings from this survey.

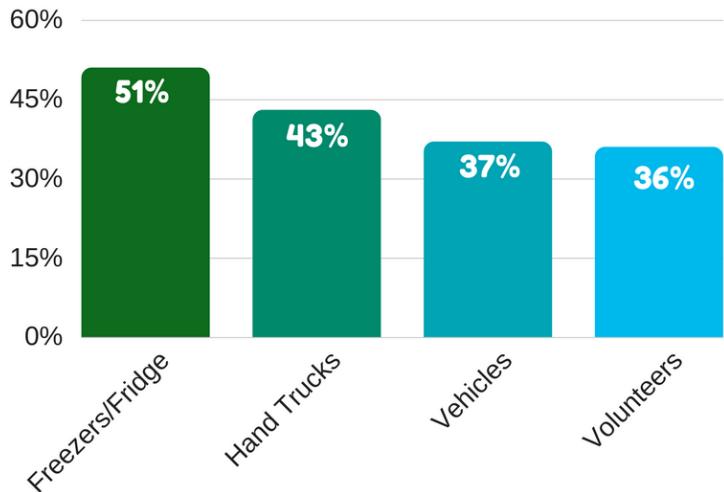
Recently, Share Food Program has become the lead agency for Montgomery County government programs and the MAHN. This kind of consolidation brings additional talent, new resources, and sets an example for increased cooperation.

## Philadelphia County Results and Background

### **Percentage of Pantries in Philadelphia County That Requested the Following Foods:**



### **Some of the Top Needs Reported in Philadelphia County Pantries Include:**



The Coalition Against Hunger currently holds monthly meetings called Victory in Partnership (VIP) meetings for Philadelphia food pantry coordinators. Over the course of a year, as many as 60 pantry coordinators and volunteers attend these meetings. More attention should be focused on addressing the above issues at future meetings.

Just under half (42.8%) of SEPA food pantries reported that they sometimes, often or always run out of food.

Interestingly, each of the “always” responses came from Philadelphia County, as well as the majority of the “often” responses. Over half of Philadelphia County food pantries (52.5%) reported that they sometimes, often or always run out of food. It is possible that this number is actually higher than reported, since many food pantries will stretch their food by decreasing the amount each participant receives so more people may be served.

Well over one-third of Philadelphia County food pantries (38.0%) reported that they did not have either a formal succession plan or have a person trained to take over leadership should the current coordinator no longer be able to work at the pantry.

Similar to the other SEPA counties, partnerships are important to Philadelphia County food pantries: 42.4% are interested in group pantry meetings, 57.2% want to fundraise with other pantries, 55.1% want to do food drives together, and 53.5% want to speak to elected officials and do advocacy together.



## **Focused on a Future Free from Hunger and Full of Good Healthy Food...**

Philabundance and the Share Food Program have already begun to reach out to the participating pantries to see how they can provide refrigeration or more food when possible. The Coalition Against Hunger has used the data collected to update a food pantry map, <http://www.hungercoalition.org/food-pantries>, with the most current contact information, requirements, locations, days, and hours of operation. The Coalition Against Hunger's SNAP and Food Resources Hotline (215-430-0556), will also provide this pantry information to callers.

Securing healthier foods for pantries to distribute will be important moving forward. While pantries across SEPA are working hard to address hunger in our communities, we are just scratching the surface in terms of forging stronger partnerships that will strengthen our networks and leverage opportunities to secure more nourishing foods. In order to make lasting changes to the health outcomes of our low-income neighbors throughout Southeastern Pennsylvania, we must support nutritious foods in food pantries. Although there is limited ability to exercise choice in some of the federal food programs, through targeted procurement and advocacy efforts large food organizations like Philabundance and Share can work towards increasing the availability of healthy foods they have to offer food pantries.

While continuing to provide food that promotes healthy options to our communities, we must support programs that provide food to food pantries such as the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP)\*, The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)\* and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)\*. We must protect the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or “food stamps”) so that people in need can go to their local stores and purchase food.

In addition, knowing what to do with those foods through nutrition and food education, access to health care, physical activity, affordable housing, and social connections is essential. Food pantries should foster partnerships with nutrition educators, health centers, hospitals, and social services agencies to increase their impact on the health of their communities.

Finally, we should remember a challenge from Janet Poppendieck in her book, “Sweet Charity” (1998) to think beyond the food drive where people participate in a food drive and think that is enough. [1] Twenty years after “Sweet Charity” was first published, we must renew our efforts to focus on eliminating poverty and income inequality and their devastating consequences, including hunger and food insecurity.

Food pantries are an important part of the picture for decreasing food insecurity in the short term, but we should not lose sight of the things that we must do for long-term solutions to this very solvable injustice. Collectively, we must support programs and policies that eliminate income inequality such as expanding the Earned Income Tax, increasing the minimum wage, investing in education and through advocacy. [9]

There are many extraordinary women and men who have dedicated themselves to their food pantries, but we cannot leave this burden to them alone. Rather, we must step up to support them in their efforts to increase health and well-being in their communities.

## **Key Recommendations**

The Coalition Against Hunger, Philabundance, Share, and their county partners will work together to focus on implementing the following three key recommendations for SEPA food pantries. Additional funding, time and commitment from donors, volunteers and elected officials are required to ensure successful results:

### **Support and strengthen food pantry coordinators' advocacy efforts.**

Food pantry coordinators are in the unique position to share their participants' victories and struggles with elected officials, empower their participants to use their own voices to speak up for their needs and their communities, and distribute voter registration forms at their sites. Our organizations will support them with advocacy trainings, coordinating group visits to elected officials and joining them on visits to elected officials they set-up. We will also work with them to collect and share stories from their pantry participants to increase the impact of their advocacy efforts.

### **Increase the amount of healthy foods available to food pantry participants.**

In order to get food pantries the healthy foods they are asking for, we will encourage and coordinate healthy food donations, provide equipment for fresh food storage, and educate donors about the benefits of giving cash for food donations to allow pantries to get the best deals on healthy foods. In fact, food drives often bring in unhealthy, and undesirable foods, and donors efforts could be better spent on fundraisers which allow the food pantries to purchase needed food at a lower cost, bringing more impact. In addition, we will develop more food pantries with nutrition education programming for their participants.

### **Strengthen food pantries' infrastructures**

Our organizations will increase efforts to help food pantries find the resources they need to keep their neighbors fed with healthy foods. Based on the survey findings, we will work to provide them equipment needed for fresh food storage, volunteers, fundraising assistance, and succession planning training. We will also hold regional meetings that bring pantries together to increase cooperation amongst pantries for things like sharing food, resources, and coordinating hours to best meet participants' needs. While food pantry coordinators identified grocery bags as one of their top needs, our organizations feel that we can meet this need easily ourselves with current resources and do not categorize this as a long-term recommendation.

## **\*Glossary**

**State Food Purchase Program (SFPP):** This state-funded program provides grants to Pennsylvania counties for the purchase and distribution of food to low-income individuals.

**The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP):** A Federal commodity program that provides food and administrative funds to states that in turn provides low-income individuals with food and nutrition assistance at no cost.

**Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP):** A Federal program that works to improve the health of low-income elderly persons at least 60 years of age by supplementing their diets with nutritious USDA Foods.

**Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP):** SNAP, formerly known as "food stamps", is our nation's most effective short-term relief program in the fight against hunger, with the average recipient household on the program for less than one year. The program helps millions of families buy the food they need to make ends meet. SNAP is a need-based program and eligibility is based on household income. SNAP participants receive a monthly stipend that is placed on an ACCESS Card (in Pennsylvania), which works like a debit card, so they can stretch their budget each month. In 2015, SNAP lifted 4.6 million people out of poverty.

## **Notes**

- [1] Poppendieck, J. Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement. London, UK; Penguin Books; 1999.
- [2] Feeding America, Hunger in America 2017
- [3] One detail to acknowledge in Chester County's Food Bank's results is the limitation in data collection and input. Many of Chester County Food Bank's surveys were completed on paper rather than by phone. Answers that were skipped were input as "not interested" or the corresponding negative response instead of a non-response. Because of these factors in data collection and input, it is challenging to interpret several survey question results. Despite this limitation, the data has been helpful in informing Food Bank systems and programs.
- [4] <http://www.chdbdata.org/images/PDFs/September-17-High-Blood-Pressure.pdf>
- [5] PHMC's Community Health Data Base, 1991-2015 Southeastern Pennsylvania Household Health Surveys
- [6] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. *2015 – 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. 8<sup>th</sup> Edition. December 2015.
- [7] Gundersen, C., & Zillak, J. P. (2015). Food Insecurity and Health Outcomes. *Health Affairs*, 34(11), 1830-1839.
- [8] CCFB Community Food Security Assessment Survey [9] <http://haasinstiute.berkeley.edu/six-policies-reduce-economic-inequality>

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to all of the food pantries that participated in this survey. We are using these survey findings to focus on the challenges you face on the front lines.

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