Food Security

8-2015

2015 Food and Function: An Assessment of the Capacity of Food Pantry Programs in San Diego County

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Food and Function:
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Food pantry programs play a critical role in meeting a basic need for thousands of individuals and families each year. They are the front-line support mechanism for providing short-term or emergency assistance to those struggling with food insecurity. San Diego County has a wide variety of food pantry programs that are helping to meet the need of thousands of hungry residents across the region.

In 2012, several of the major emergency food provider agencies in San Diego County gathered to discuss how collaboration could support cost-saving efficiencies in the food distribution network, and subcommittees were formed to collaborate on achieving specific objectives. This report presents the findings of one of the four subcommittees, whose objectives were to: 1) identify specific operational and procedural components and best practices of food pantry programs, and 2) survey local food pantries to better understand their capacity and needs in order to enhance current and potential partnerships among food banks and food pantries.

The findings reveal that when assessing San Diego County food pantries in aggregate, they generally do a good job with getting food to those individuals who need it. This includes:

- Acquiring food from different sources
- Providing a welcoming environment
- Having an efficient distribution process
- Utilizing committed staff and volunteers
- Interacting and engaging with clients

Overall, there is a need and desire for local food pantries to improve:

- Refrigerator and freezer storage for perishable food such as produce and proteins, which are more nutritious, preferred, and in demand
- Well-balanced, nutritious foods and nutrition information, along with more client choice and alternative food options to meet dietary restrictions
- Volunteer recruitment, training, management, recognition, and retention, given that food pantries rely heavily on volunteers to keep their programs operating
- Environmental initiatives such as recycling, composting and zero-waste

- Sustainability in terms of financial reserves, planning, and fundraising
- Collaboration, outreach and advocacy efforts within and outside the food security network

There continues to be demand for the basic need of food, and there is the potential for growth and expansion in meeting these needs. Yet resources are tapped, often causing food pantries to limit their services or even close their doors to the hungry. Therefore, strategies and efforts should include focusing outward to funding and partnerships with government, philanthropies, and for-profit corporations to reduce the expenses incurred by food pantry programs and give them the infrastructure, staffing, and operational resources they need to address hunger throughout San Diego County.

The survey findings provide new insights into the needs and gaps in the local food distribution network, and emergency food providers, community agencies, and legislators can use the findings to develop greater efficiencies and make a bigger impact in San Diego County. Moreover, "The San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey" that was developed is a robust assessment tool and can serve as a solid foundation for future efforts. It is hoped that the food banks -- and the food security network as a whole -- will continue to collaborate, reflect and act on the survey results, and survey and track over time in order to build the capacity of food pantries across the region.

Finally, the processes and outcomes of this project highlight the benefits of collaboration and collective impact, where "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" and more can be accomplished by working together.

> *"It seems like there is a great effort to end hunger and a lot of agencies are doing their best. It would benefit us all if we all came together to look at the problem as a whole so we can maximize and strategize on how to end hunger together."*
>
> - San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey Respondent

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OVERVIEW OF FOOD INSECURITY IN SAN DIEGO[1]

Food insecurity: When consistent access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources at times during the year.

In San Diego County…

- 3,115,810 total population

- 409,129 individuals living below poverty line

- 167,535 individuals experience food insecurity

Table 1. Description of Population and Food Insecurity by Region[2 & 3]

	Total population	Population living below poverty	Percent of population below poverty	Population of food insecure	Percent of food insecure vulnerable population
North Coastal	509,827	56,081	11%	24,115	43%
North Inland	574,565	57,457	10%	21,833	38%
North Central	609,745	67,072	11%	23,475	35%
Central	485,568	106,825	22%	51,276	48%
East	466,650	60,665	13%	26,086	43%
South	469,455	61,029	13%	20,750	34%

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[1] *Source: USDA ERS – Food Security in the U.S.: Definitions of Food Security. (n.d.). Retrieved July 27, 2015.*

[2] *County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency Community Health Statistics Unit. (2013). San Diego County demographics profile: 2011 population estimates. San Diego, CA.*

[3] *Vulnerable population calculation based on a survey of individuals with income of 200 percent of poverty or less who answered affirmatively to at least one of six questions that reflect an inability to purchase enough food to meet individual or family needs. Source: California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) 2009. Supervisorial district and regional information from CHIS, ages 18-64 for 2009.*

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

In 2012, several of the major emergency food provider agencies in San Diego County gathered to develop strategies to achieve greater efficiencies in the food security network. As the group identified service gaps within the network and areas that might benefit from strategic collaboration, several subcommittees were formed to work together on specific initiatives in 2013-2015. The subcommittees that were created focused on: 1) best practices for food pantries, 2) joint procurement, and 3) efficient distribution. They were facilitated and supported by the Caster Family Center for Nonprofit and Philanthropic Research (Caster Center) and the Supply Chain Management Institute at the University of San Diego, through funding by The Kasperick Foundation.

This report presents the work of the "Best Practices for Food Pantries Subcommittee" [4] that focused on identifying specific operational and procedural components of food pantry programs, as well as surveying local food pantries to better understand their capacity and enhance current and potential partnerships among food banks and food pantries throughout San Diego County.[5]

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of the "San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey" was to assess the current capacity of food pantries across the region through a comprehensive survey of food pantry leaders -- the first of its kind for San Diego County. The survey was designed to identify the capacity, needs and gaps of San Diego food pantries (as perceived by survey respondents) in terms of physical space, staffing, transportation, equipment, technology, distribution process, client choice, nutrition, client referrals, leadership, planning, outreach, advocacy, and financial security. The survey was intended to provide an initial benchmark, and was expected to be used in future food security research and practice.

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[4] *Subcommittee work was conducted from April 2014 to July 2015.*
[5] *This research study focused only on food pantry programs, which distribute food "as is" – including packaged, canned and dry goods, and sometimes perishable items such as fresh fruits, vegetables, proteins, and dairy. It did not include soup kitchens or residential programs that serve prepared meals.*

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A secondary objective was that the survey and accompanying results would create a unified rating system for the two major food banks in San Diego (Feeding America San Diego and The Jacobs & Cushman San Diego Food Bank) to assess and determine capacity levels of their food pantry partners. The rating system was intended to be particularly helpful for food pantries that partner with both food banks in order to eliminate confusion and create uniformity and greater efficiencies between the food banks. However, because of differences in internal operations of the food banks, further work is still needed to unify the rating system.

METHODOLOGY

The Caster Center coordinated all efforts of the Best Practices for Food Pantries Subcommittee and designed, distributed, analyzed, and managed the San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey. This was accomplished through a productive collaboration with representatives from Feeding America San Diego (FASD), The Jacobs & Cushman San Diego Food Bank (JCSDFB), North County Food Policy Council, Fallbrook Food Pantry, Jewish Family Service, The Salvation Army, and South Bay Community Services.

Survey Content

The survey consisted of 303 self-report items,[6] including questions about the organizational, operational, and administrative functions related to food pantry distribution programs. Questions were created using the "Food Pantry Best Practice Elements Matrix" that was developed by the subcommittee.[7]

Survey Limitations

Note that while the survey results are valuable and the first of their kind in the San Diego region, they are based only on the food pantries that participated and do not capture the entire population of food pantries located throughout San Diego County. Furthermore, the results are based on self-reported feedback, and some questions (e.g., rating on "poor to excellent" scale) were quite subjective in nature and open to interpretation.

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[6] *The number of questions increased if the food pantry distributed food at more than one site.*
[7] *The matrix can be provided by the Caster Center upon request.*

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Survey Distribution

The Caster Center distributed the survey online in April 2015 to 268 food pantry programs that were identified by FASD, JCSDFB, The Salvation Army, 2-1-1 San Diego, Interfaith Community Services, North County Community Services, and North County Food Policy Council. The survey was emailed to the leader of each food pantry program and recipients were offered a $50 Vons gift card as incentive for completing the survey. A total of 152 completed surveys were returned, yielding a response rate of 57 percent.[8]

Survey Dimensions

Through an iterative and consensus-building process, the subcommittee determined which questions were most relevant in evaluating a food pantry's overall capacity.[9] These questions were then transformed into ten "dimensions" that encompass what is needed to operate a food pantry program. Table 2 summarizes the ten dimensions and the topics included.

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[8] *Throughout this report, the total number of respondents who answered each question is provided in parentheses (n=). Also note that percentages may not always total 100 percent because some respondents did not answer the question or respondents could select multiple choices.*

[9] *Additional questions were asked for the benefit of the food banks, but were not necessary or relevant to include in assessing food pantry capacity.*

Table 2. Summary of San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey Dimensions

Dimension	Topics Included Within Dimension
Workforce: Paid Staff and Volunteers	Staff and volunteer activities, number of hours worked, management, training and skills
Food Distribution Site	Distribution space, physical location, equipment, site maintenance
Food Storage Space	Storage of perishable and non-perishable foods including freezer, refrigeration, and dry goods
Transportation	Food transportation on and off the distribution site, amount and condition of equipment
Office Equipment and Technology	Office and administrative equipment, technology, software tools
Distribution Process, Model, and Client Experience	Distribution model, hours of operation, wait times, populations served, communication with clients,[10] client experience
Partnerships, Outreach, and Client Referrals	Collaboration and referral activities with other agencies, additional services provided such as nutrition information and CalFresh
Communication, Marketing, Awareness, and Advocacy	Communication activities and tools used for clients, general public and government officials, media efforts, education activities
Compliance and Reporting	Food safety and handling, client tracking, reporting to food bank partner(s)
Finances and Fundraising	Financial and fundraising activities, financial management tools

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[10] *Throughout the report "client" refers to the recipient of distributed food and direct services from food pantry programs.*

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This section summarizes the overall organizational profile of participating food pantries, as well as the key findings for each of the ten dimensions.

Profile of Participating Food Pantries

Type of Organization (n=143)

- 53% program or ministry of a faith-based organization
- 38% independent nonprofit organization
- 8% program that is part of a non-faith-based organization

Years of Operation (n=133)

- Range from 6 months to 60 years
- Median = 10 years
- Mean = 14 years

Pounds of Food Received from Food Bank in 2014* (n=133)

- Range from 115 to 1,842,922 pounds
- Median = 48,963 pounds
- Mean = 149,484 pounds

Dollar Amount Spent at Food Bank(s) in 2014* (n=110)

- Range from $15 to $59,267
- Median = $1,640
- Mean = $3,871

Households Served per Month in 2014* (n=116)

- Range from 2 to 5,164 households
- Median = 320 households
- Mean = 660 households

* Data provided by FASD and JCSDFB

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How Do the Food Pantries Acquire Food?

Figure 1 shows how food pantries acquire their food. They do rely on their food bank partners, as roughly three-quarters purchase food and more than one-half receive food donations from a food bank.

Figure 1. Average Percentage of Donated or Purchased Food from Different Sources

Purchased from

1% Local farms

6% Wholesalers

21% Retail grocery stores

73% Food bank partner(s)

Donated by

1% Local farms

2% Wholesalers

19% Food drives

20% Retail grocery stores

58% Food bank partner(s)

Food bank partner	Percent of food pantries that purchase food from food bank partner(s) (n=152)	Percent of food pantries that receive donated food from food bank partner(s) (n=152)
FASD	11%	9%
JCSDFB	32%	37%
Both (FASD & JCSDFB)	24%	25%
North County Food Bank	7%	4%

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Where Are the Food Pantries Located in San Diego County?

Table 3 compares the representation of the survey sample to the population of food pantries in each of the six regions. The survey sample adequately reflects population percentages across San Diego County, although there was a notable under-representation of participating food pantries in the East region.

Table 3. Dispersion of Food Pantries in San Diego County

	Food pantries in San Diego County (n=268)[11]	Survey participants (n=152)[12]
North Coastal	7%	6%
North Inland	11%	9%
North Central	10%	15%
Central	34%	37%
East	23%	9%
South	15%	17%

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[11] Estimated number of current (March, 2015) food pantries, based on data provided by partner agencies
[12] Zip codes were not provided for 26 pantries.

Where Do the Food Pantry Distribution Sites Operate?

42% at a church or place of worship
(n=64)

39% at the agency's headquarters
(n=59)

11% at a community/recreation center
(n=17)

7% at a school
(n=11)

6% via a mobile food truck
(n=9)

Who Do the Food Pantries Serve?

As can be seen in Table 4, two-thirds of the food pantries distribute food to anyone in need. The remaining food pantries serve one or more specific target population.

Table 4. Target Populations Served in San Diego County

Target Population	Percentage of Food Pantries that Serve Target Population (n=152)
All; food pantry serves food to all people	67%
Homeless	11%
Seniors	11%
Single parents	11%
Children/Teens	11%
People in recovery/substance dependency	10%
People with emotional disabilities	10%
People with physical disabilities	9%
Veterans	9%
Residents of a specific geographic area	9%
Active duty military	7%
Survivors of domestic violence	6%
Congregants of a church/place of worship	4%

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How Often Are the Food Pantries Open?

Figure 2 illustrates that about one-half of the food pantries distribute food at least two days per week, while four out of ten food pantries are open less than one day per week.

Figure 2. Number of Days Per Week of Food Distribution
(n=138)

Legend:
- Less than 1 day/week
- 1 day/week
- 2 or more days/week

41%
10%
49%
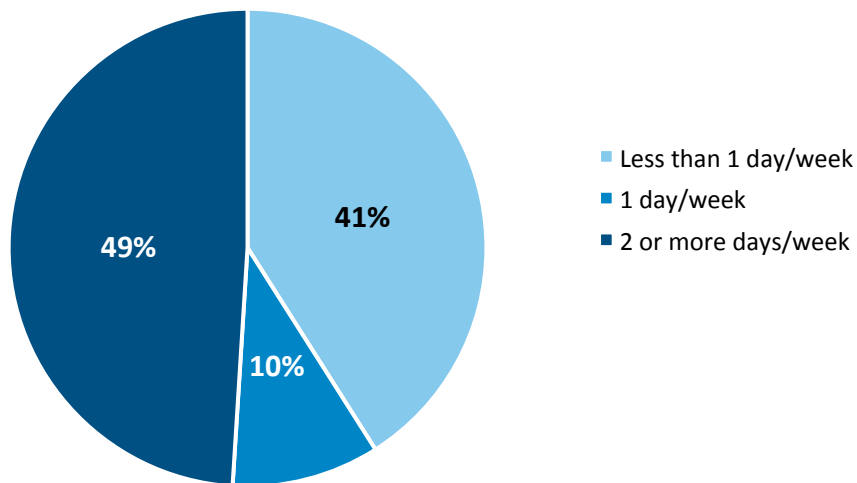
Capacity of Participating Food Pantries

Workforce: Paid Staff and Volunteers

Figure 3A describes the workforce that operates the food pantry programs. While the majority of food pantries utilize many volunteers, one-half reported they have paid staff.

Figure 3A. Description of Workforce

Paid Staff	Non-paid Volunteers
49% of food pantry programs have at least one paid staff member (n=152)	85% of food pantry programs have at least one non-paid volunteer (n=152)
Of those with paid staff…	Of those with volunteers…
50% of food pantry programs have one paid staff member on an annual basis 50% of food pantry programs have 2-9 paid staff members on an annual basis (n=74)	47% of food pantry programs have less than 20 non-paid volunteers on an annual basis 53% of food pantry programs have at least 20 non-paid volunteers on an annual basis (n=130)
Paid staff members work a median of 20 hours per week (80 hours per month) (n=44)	Non-paid volunteers work a median of 10 hours per week (40 hours per month) (n=73)

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Figure 3B shows that many food pantries do not have important administrative tools in place.

Figure 3B. Availability of Administrative Tools
(n=152)

Tool	Percentage
Operations Plan/ SOPs	55%
Volunteer Management Tools	51%
Job Descriptions	43%
Emergency Plan	28%
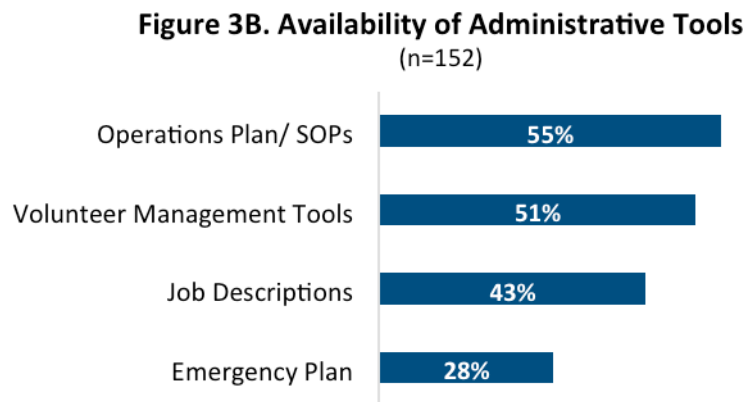
*"Maintaining a workforce (paid staff or volunteer)
to carry forth the mission is vital to accomplishing the mission.
You can have all the funding in place
but without helping hands willing to get it done,
the agency is not successful."*

*"Additional support would allow paid staff to address
sustainability and capacity development issues."*

*"We could not carry out our mission without our fantastic volunteers.
They are the heart of the pantry."*

- San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey Respondents

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In terms of workforce competencies, at least two-thirds of food pantries reported that they do a "good/excellent"[13] job with orientation, scheduling, recognition, training, retention and supervision of paid staff, while fewer do well with recruiting paid staff. These percentages are fairly consistent for volunteers, although performance is lower for the overall management of volunteers than for paid staff, particularly in terms of recruitment (see Figure 3C).

Figure 3C. Evaluation of Paid Staff and Volunteers

Category	Percentage
Recruiting (n=129)	56%
Recruiting (n=75)	35%
Orientation (n=130)	67%
Orientation (n=75)	64%
Scheduling (n=128)	68%
Scheduling (n=75)	69%
Recognition (n=129)	76%
Recognition (n=74)	72%
Training (n=130)	72%
Training (n=75)	73%
Retention (n=192)	80%
Retention (n=74)	75%
Supervision (n=130)	81%
Supervision (n=74)	76%

■ Paid Staff   ■ Volunteers
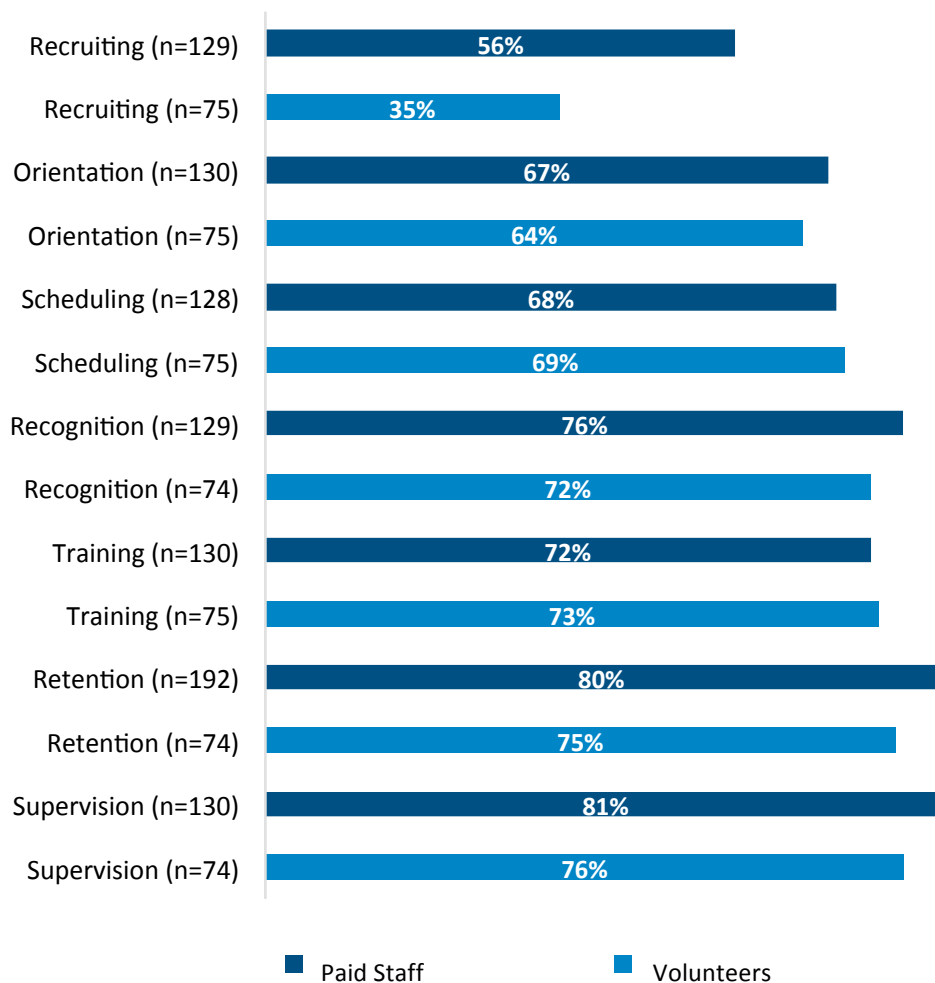
[13] For all figures that report "Good – Excellent" results, respondents were asked to provide a rating based on a five-point scale where "Poor" = 1, "Fair" = 2, "Average" = 3, "Good" = 4, "Excellent" = 5.

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Figure 3D shows that the majority of food pantries reported that their paid staff do a "good/excellent" job using equipment and technology, meeting the language and cultural needs of clients, and meeting fluctuating supply and demand throughout the year.

Ratings on these duties are lower for volunteers, as compared to paid staff, particularly for volunteers' abilities to use office equipment, technology and software.

Figure 3D. Capacity of Paid Staff and Volunteers
(Percent of "Good/Excellent" Ratings)

Office and tech ability (n=75) — 81% (Paid Staff)
Office and tech ability (n=130) — 44% (Volunteers)
Language and culture (n=75) — 72% (Paid Staff)
Language and culture (n=130) — 67% (Volunteers)
Supply and demand (n=75) — 88% (Paid Staff)
Supply and demand (n=130) — 75% (Volunteers)

■ Paid Staff   ■ Volunteers
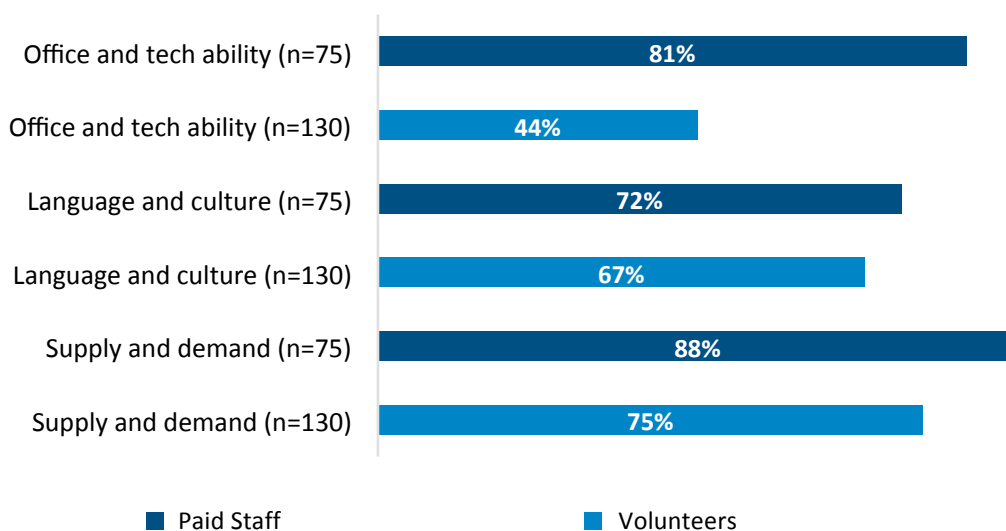
Food Distribution Site

Figure 4A shows that the majority of food pantries own or rent their distribution site space.

Figure 4A. Ownership of Distribution Site Space
(n=142)

- Own/Rent
- Borrow
- Don't know
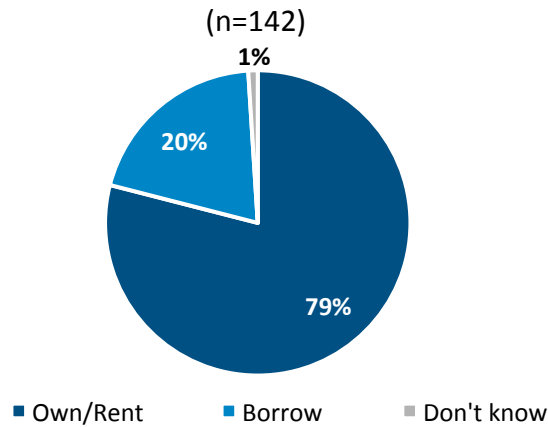
There is room for improvement in securing more distribution site space and equipment, given that one-third reported not having enough (see Figures 4B and 4C).

Figure 4B. Amount of Distribution Site Space
(n=138)

- Right amount
- Extra
- Not enough
- Don't know
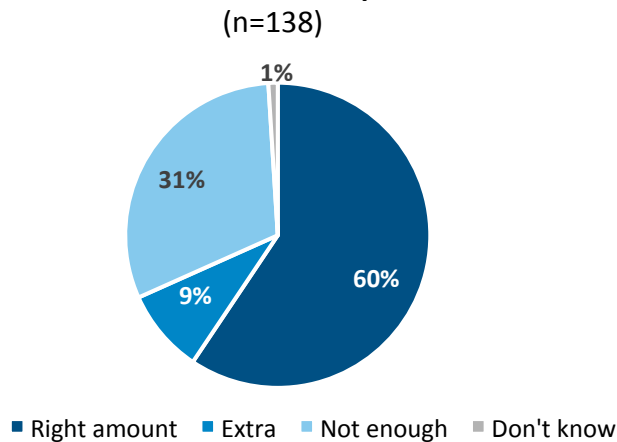
Figure 4C. Amount of Distribution Site Equipment
(n=142)

- Right amount
- Extra
- Not enough
- Don't know
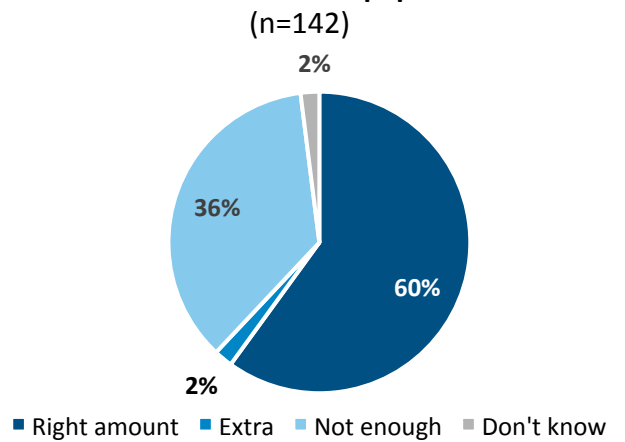
A notable percentage of food pantry distribution sites do not have important tools and equipment, and even fewer follow environmentally conscious practices such as zero-waste, and composting (see Figure 4D).

Figure 4D. Availability of Equipment and Site Procedures
(n=152)

Category	Percentage
Tables	84%
Gloves	67%
Ongoing pest control	66%
Boxes	66%
Recycling	54%
Pallets	45%
Zero-waste program	31%
Freezer blankets	19%
Composting	9%
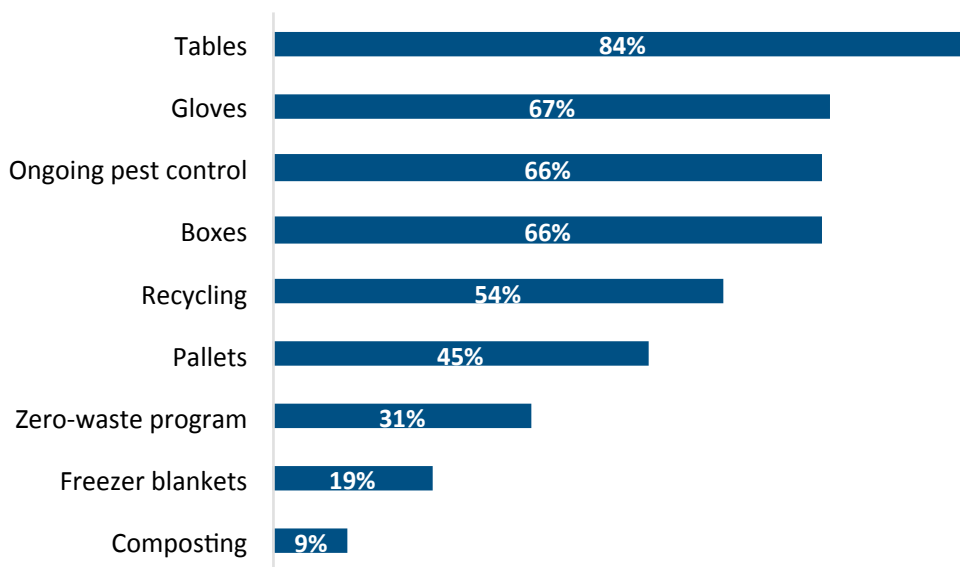
*"The site can get crowded if it's raining or very cold,
but usually it's just right.
Volunteers bring their own box cutters, gloves, dollies, etc."*

*"We can use more tables and space for chairs for the elderly.
We could transport our fruits and veggies better if we used dollies
instead of using our human strength."*

- San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey Respondents

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Food Storage Space

Food storage space is lacking, particularly for perishable goods. Nine out of ten food pantries reported having non-perishable storage or shelving; however, one-third said that it is not enough. In terms of refrigeration, roughly one-quarter of food pantries do not have a freezer and refrigerator, and just over one-third of those that do have them say it is not enough (see Figures 5A and 5B).

Figure 5A. Availability of Types of Food Storage

Freezer (n=152)	76%
Refrigerator (n=150)	78%
Non-perishable shelving (n=143)	92%
Non-perishable storage (n=149)	96%
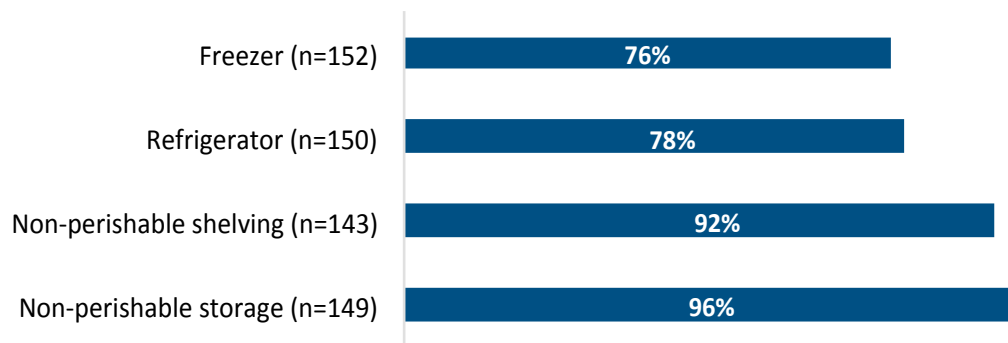
Figure 5B. Amount of Types of Food Storage

	Right amount	Extra	Not enough	Don't know
Amount of freezer space (n=116)	51%	3%	44%	2%
Amount of refrigerator space (n=116)	46%	3%	48%	3%
Amount of non-perishable shelving (n=132)	61%	6%	33%	
Amount of non-perishable storage (n=141)	59%	4%	34%	3%

■ Right amount ■ Extra ■ Not enough ■ Don't know
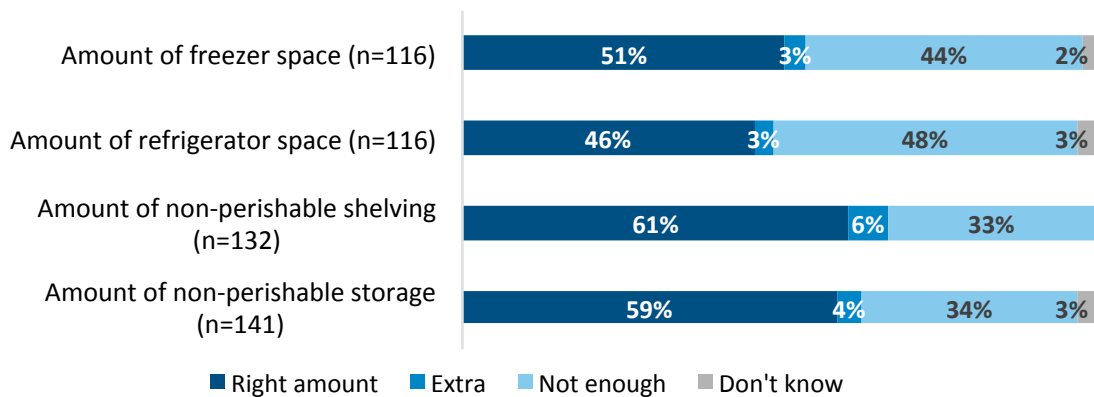
The need for more storage -- and its connection to obtaining more food and serving more people -- is conveyed in the following verbatim comments from survey respondents.

"There is a big need for refrigerator storage.
We are only able to keep a limited amount of fresh fruits and vegetables because we have no refrigerator storage."

"Some additional shelving may be helpful. If we had extra storage space, we could potentially pursue extra donations of food."

"We could definitely use more frozen space
and having a climate controlled room for our dry goods would be great –
but like most places, financial limitations keep us from doing these upgrades because it would mean that we would serve less people…
So, we choose to serve more people with less adequate facilities."

- San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey Respondents

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Transportation

There is room for improvement with regard to transportation, given that one-half of food pantries do not have transportation (see Figure 6A). Furthermore, of those with transportation, more than one-third reported not having enough or not having sufficient back up transportation (see Figures 6B and 6C).

Figure 6A. Availability of Transportation Equipment
(n=145)

- Has transportation
- Does not have transportation

48%

52%

Van (n=63)	75%
Pick-up truck (n=57)	56%
Car (n=53)	40%
Non-refrigerated box truck (n=47)	28%
Refrigerated truck (n=45)	11%
Bus (n=45)	11%
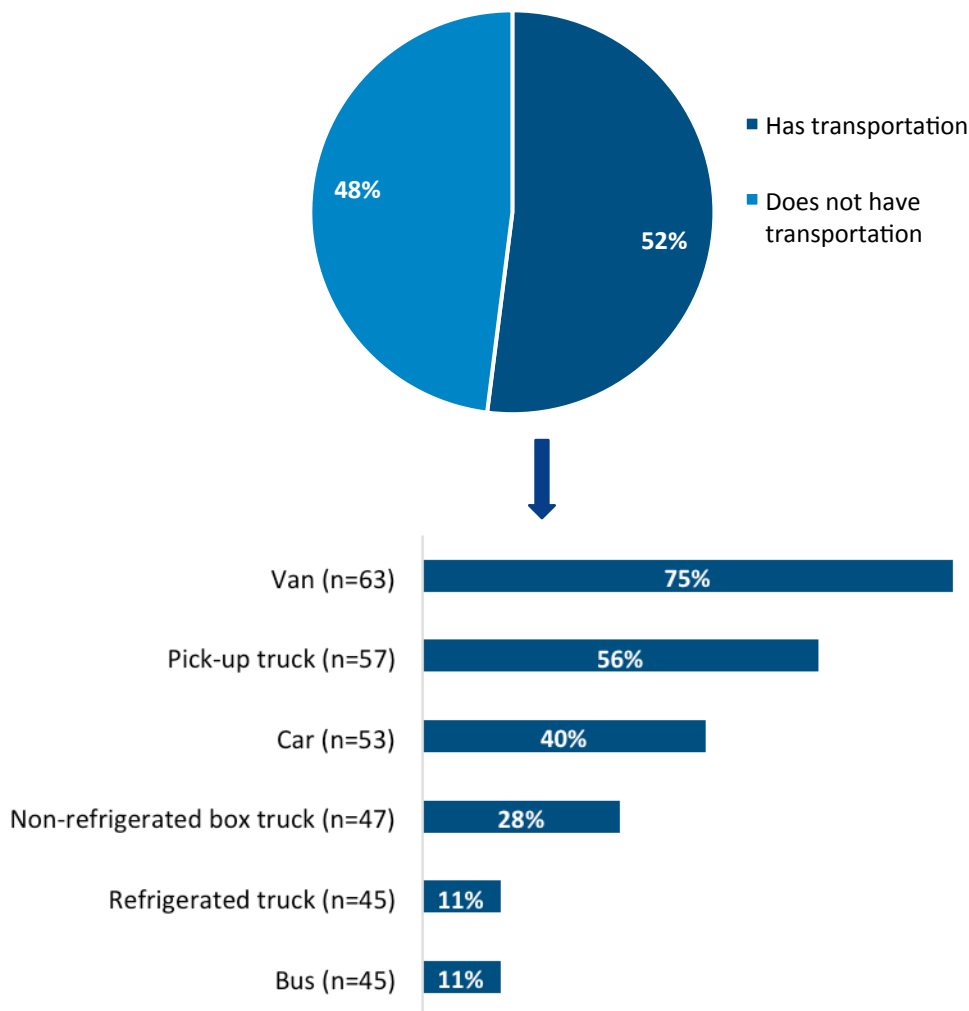
Figure 6B. Amount of Transportation Equipment
(n=74)

1%

37%

51%

11%

- Right amount
- Extra
- Not enough
- Don't know
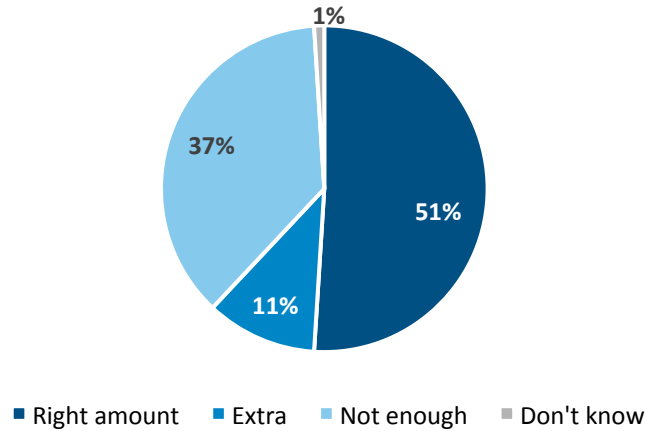
Figure 6C. Evaluation of Transportation
(Percent of "Good/Excellent" Ratings)

Availability (n=73) 82%

Condition/Reliability (n=74) 80%

Back-up (n=73) 56%
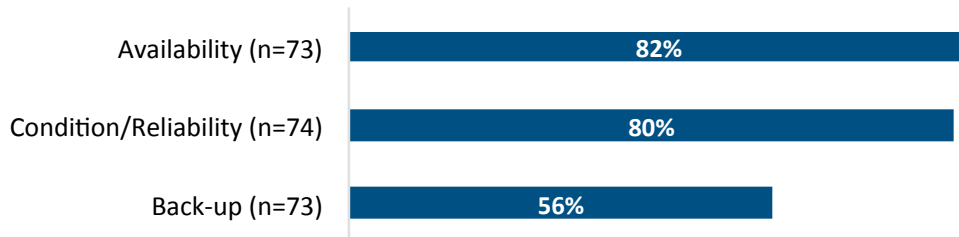
*"We rely on our volunteers to make this program work.
They provide transportation."*

- San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey Respondent

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Office Equipment and Technology

In general, most food pantry staff and volunteers reported having access to necessary office equipment, although more than one-third do not have a laptop or website (see Figure 7A). However, one-quarter said they do not have enough office equipment and technology, and four out of ten do not have enough office space to complete administrative tasks (see Figure 7B).

Figure 7A. Availability of Office Equipment and Technology

Category	Percentage
Copier (n=141)	91%
Phone (n=142)	90%
Internet (n=144)	89%
WiFi (n=136)	82%
Desktop computer (n=137)	81%
Fax (n=132)	80%
Laptop computer (n=127)	62%
Website (n=152)	57%
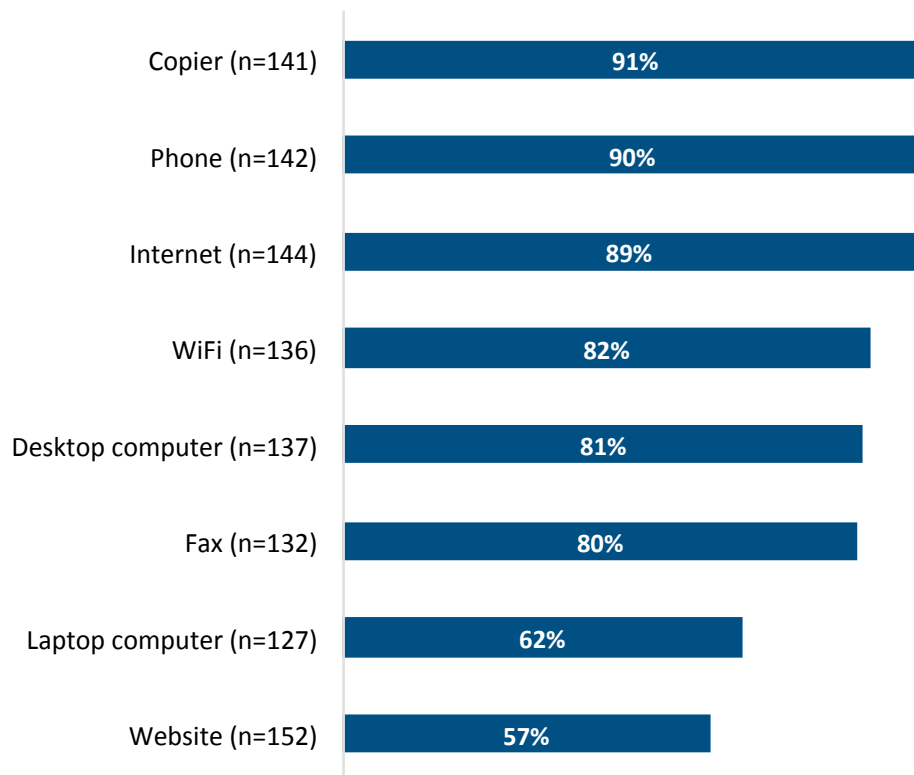
Figure 7B. Amount of Office Equipment and Technology

	Right amount	Extra	Not enough	Don't know
Amout of physical office space (n=140)	51%	6%	39%	5%
Amount of office equipment and technology (n=147)	63%	3%	26%	8%

■ Right amount ■ Extra ■ Not enough ■ Don't know
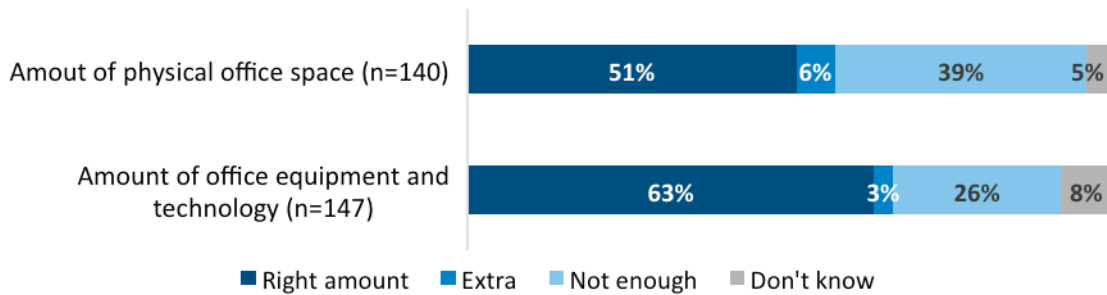
"Having a larger office and equipment space is a goal for the organization so that the staff, interns and volunteers have adequate space to get work completed."

"We have no office space or equipment. I do all my reports and copying at home at my expense."

"Recent private donations of IT equipment has improved our operations significantly."

"Our distributions occur in an outdoor location without the use of technology. All administrative tasks occur prior to and following a distribution. I would love to utilize software and my database during the distribution."

- San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey Respondents

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Summary of Office and Distribution Site and Equipment Capacity

Figure 8 summarizes the overall capacity of the dimensions related to office and distribution site space and equipment. In general, food pantries reported greatest capacity in the areas of distribution site space, shelving for non-perishable goods, and office equipment and technology. The areas of lowest capacity are storage for perishable goods, physical office space, and transportation.
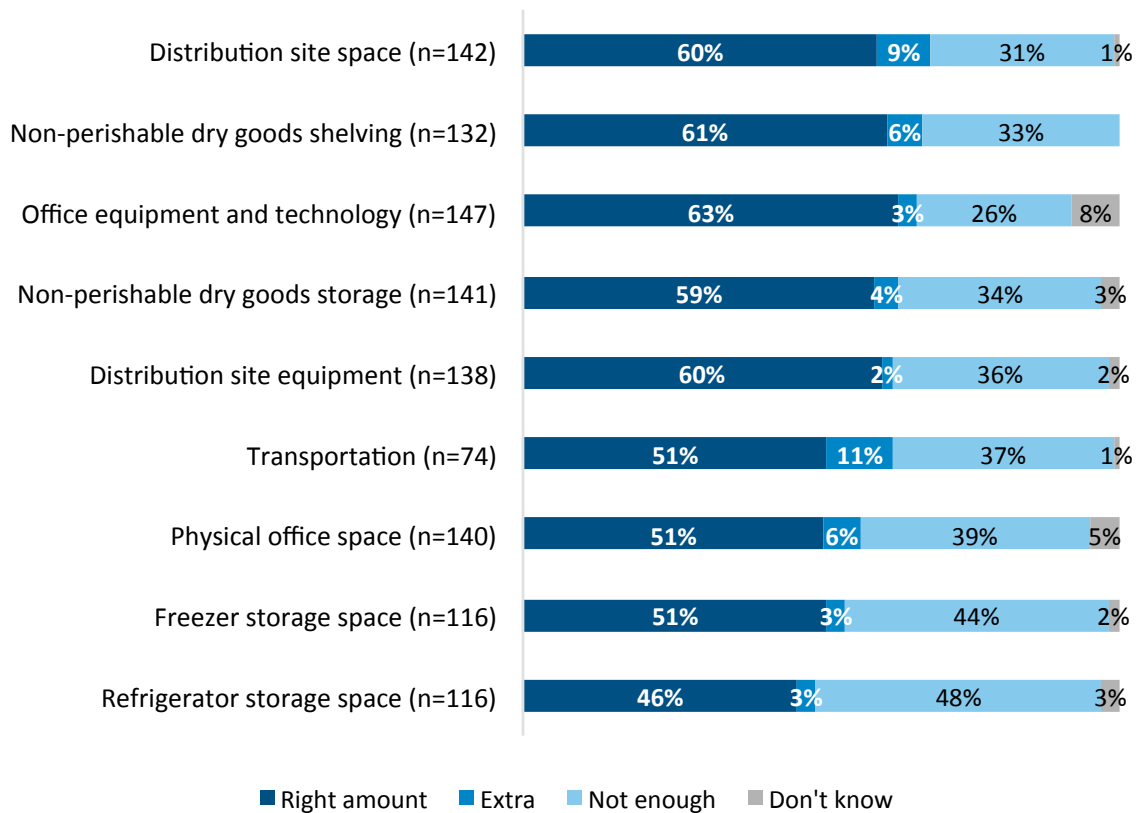
Figure 8. Summary of Office and Food Distribution Site and Equipment Capacities

Dimension	Right amount	Extra	Not enough	Don't know
Distribution site space (n=142)	60%	9%	31%	1%
Non-perishable dry goods shelving (n=132)	61%	6%	33%	
Office equipment and technology (n=147)	63%	3%	26%	8%
Non-perishable dry goods storage (n=141)	59%	4%	34%	3%
Distribution site equipment (n=138)	60%	2%	36%	2%
Transportation (n=74)	51%	11%	37%	1%
Physical office space (n=140)	51%	6%	39%	5%
Freezer storage space (n=116)	51%	3%	44%	2%
Refrigerator storage space (n=116)	46%	3%	48%	3%

■ Right amount   ■ Extra   ■ Not enough   ■ Don't know

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Distribution Process, Model, Client Experience, and Nutrition

Figure 9A illustrates that food pantries vary in their primary distribution model. Assuming client choice is a priority in the food distribution network, this deserves attention because one-third of respondents reported not providing a client choice model.

Figure 9A. Primary Distribution Model
(n=152)

- No client choice
- Some client choice
- Complete client choice
- Don't know
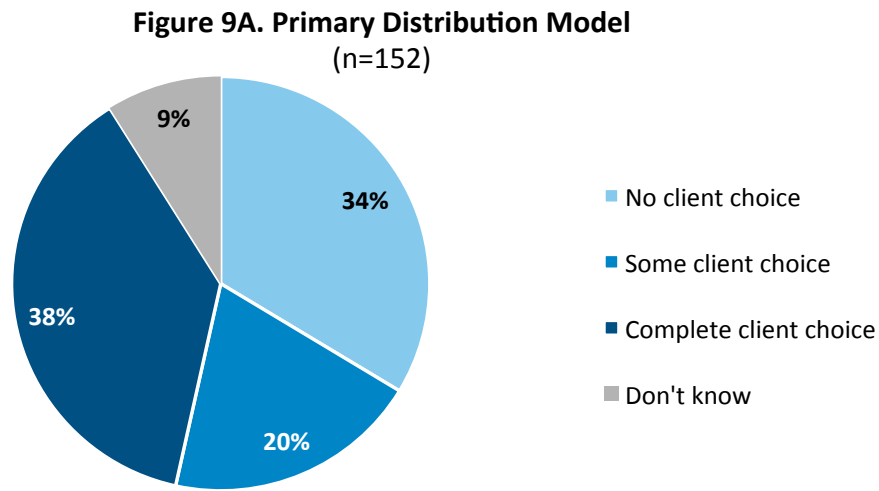
Client Choice Definitions:

No client choice: All clients receive the same pre-packaged bag of food. They do not have the option to choose the items to take home.
Some client choice: Clients receive a standard packed bag, but have the option to take a specified amount of additional items or take items others leave behind.
Complete client choice: Pantry is set up like a grocery store. Clients may browse goods and select items they want (with or without limits to number of items clients can take).

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While there is room for improvement, the food distribution process is efficient in providing food to individuals and families in a reasonable amount of time. Most clients wait less than 20 minutes prior to food distribution (see Figure 9B) and less than ten minutes to actually receive their food (See Figure 9C).

Figure 9B. Average Wait Time for Clients Prior to Food Distribution
(n = 135)

Category	Percentage
0-9 minutes	46%
10-19 minutes	24%
20-29 minutes	11%
30-39 minutes	10%
40-49 minutes	4%
50-59 minutes	4%
60 or more minutes	2%
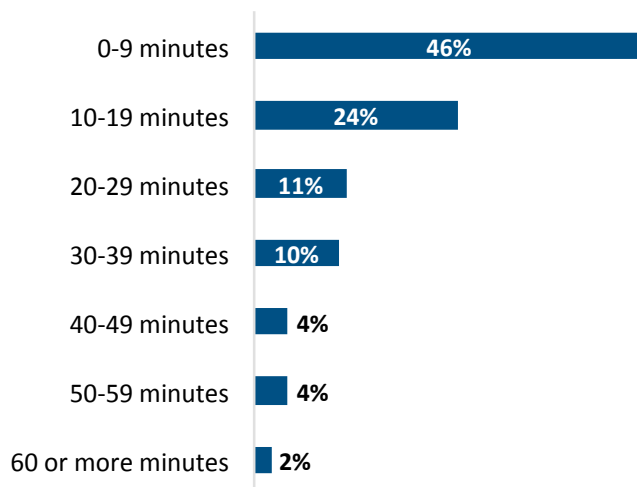
Figure 9C. Average Time to Distribute Food to Each Client
(n = 139)

Category	Percentage
0-4 minutes	47%
5-9 minutes	32%
10-14 minutes	9%
15-19 minutes	4%
20-24 minutes	1%
25-29 minutes	1%
30 or more minutes	6%

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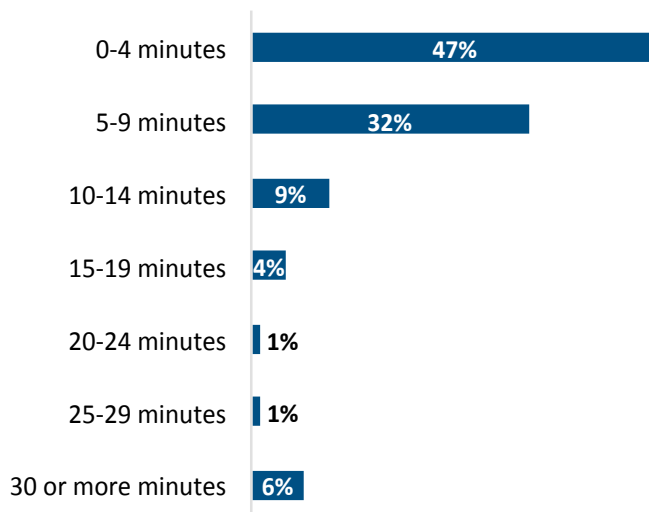
In general, food pantries are doing a good job in serving their clients. When asked how they would evaluate their overall distribution process, at least three-quarters rated the overall distribution process and providing a welcoming environment as "good/excellent." Food pantries could improve on providing clients with an evaluation/feedback process, as well as written materials in multiple languages (see Figure 9D).

Figure 9D. Evaluation of Distribution Process and Client Experience
(Percent of "Good/Excellent" Ratings)

| Category	Percent
Provide welcoming environment for clients (n=142)	84%
Overall distribution process (n=141)	78%
Provide distribution instructions for clients (n=139)	64%
Provide oral communications in different languages to meet clients' needs (n=141)	56%
Provide written materials in different languages to meet clients' needs (n=137)	36%
Have evaluation process for clients to report their experience and give feedback (n=134)	26%

*"Our clients often come much earlier than they need to because they like the experience of fellowship.
More than one-half of our volunteers
at the distribution events are actually clients as well.
They want to help at the distribution."*

*"We need literature in Arabic about health and diet,
and translators when people come out to the site for CalFresh."*

- San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey Respondents

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There is also room for improvement in terms of client nutrition, as only one-third of food pantries provide nutrition information, dietary alternatives, or complete food packages based on myplate.gov (see Figure 9E).

Figure 9E. Evaluation of Nutrition-Related Information and Services
(Percent of "Good/Excellent" Ratings)

Provide complete food packages based on myplate.gov (n=138)	34%
Provide alternative for dietary needs (n=139)	32%
Provide nutrition information (n=140)	29%
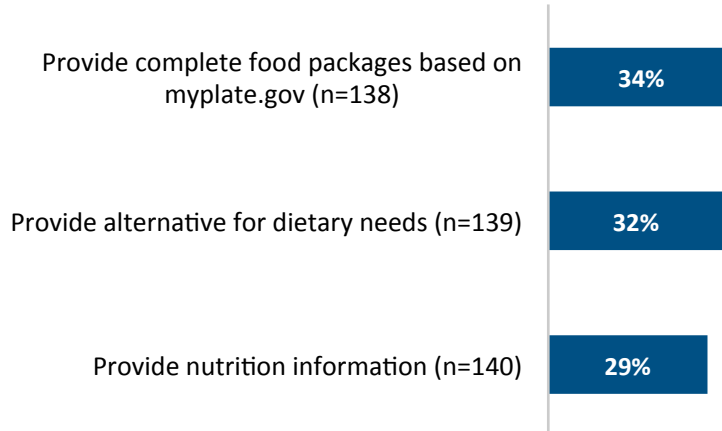
"Client satisfaction depends upon the food available to them. They love fresh foods and produce."

"We sporadically offer nutrition education."

*"We would like to offer more nutritional information."*

- San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey Respondents

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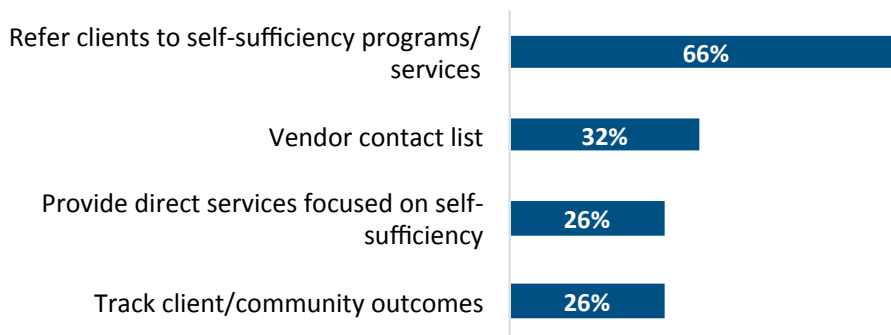
Partnership, Outreach, and Client Referrals

When food pantries were asked to rate their overall level of partnerships, outreach, and client referrals, roughly two-thirds of respondents reported doing a "good/excellent" job (see Figure 10A).

Figure 10A. Evaluation of Overall Partnerships, Outreach, and Client Referrals
(n=145)

- Poor-Fair
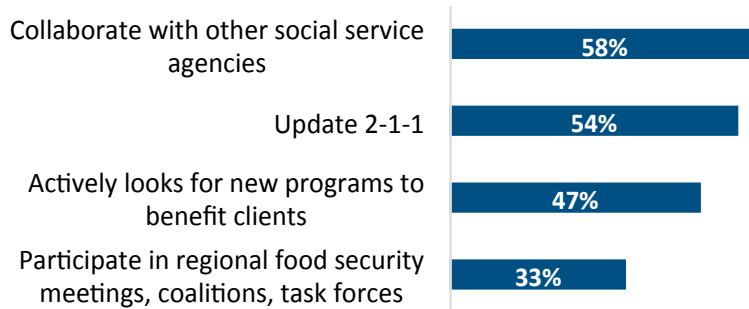- Average
- Good-Excellent
- Don't know

2%
16%
16%
62%
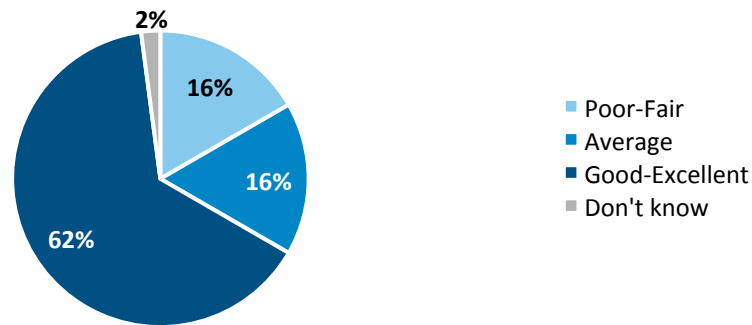
Two-thirds of food pantries refer clients to self-sufficiency programs yet, less than one-third of food pantries provide direct services to clients, track client and community outcomes, and have a vendor contact list (see Figure 10B).

Figure 10B. Outreach Efforts
(n=152)

Refer clients to self-sufficiency programs/ services	66%
Vendor contact list	32%
Provide direct services focused on self-sufficiency	26%
Track client/community outcomes	26%

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More than one-half of food pantries said they actively collaborate with social service and community agencies. However, only one-third report participating in regional meetings, coalitions, and task forces that are specific to food insecurity (see Figure 10C).

Figure 10C. Collaboration Efforts
(n=152)

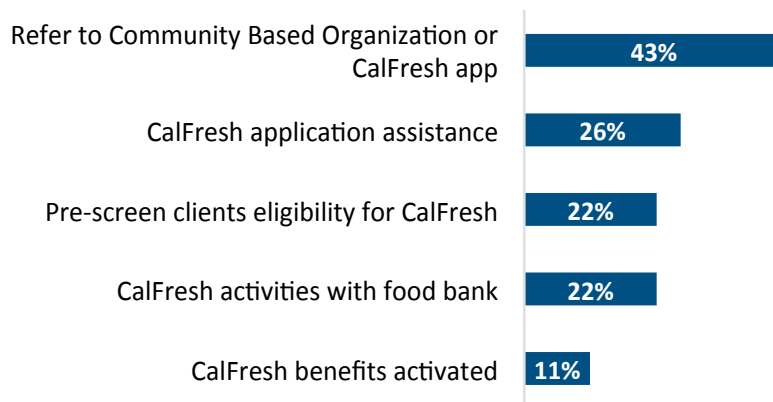|	
Collaborate with other social service agencies	58%
Update 2-1-1	54%
Actively looks for new programs to benefit clients	47%
Participate in regional food security meetings, coalitions, task forces	33%

> *"It would benefit our food program to have a qualified volunteer with the skills and the time to be more effective with outreach and partnership with other resources."*
>
> - San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey Respondent

As can be seen in Figure 10D, food pantries could enhance their CalFresh[14] efforts, given that less than one-half of food pantry programs assist clients with the CalFresh program and even fewer provide additional CalFresh-related assistance.

Figure 10D. CalFresh Efforts
(n=152)

Refer to Community Based Organization or CalFresh app	43%
CalFresh application assistance	26%
Pre-screen clients eligibility for CalFresh	22%
CalFresh activities with food bank	22%
CalFresh benefits activated	11%

> *"We need to work on becoming more proactive in regards to CalFresh opportunities for our clients."*
>
> - San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey Respondent

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[14] *CalFresh is the California-specific program of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).*

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Communication, Marketing, Awareness, and Advocacy

Figure 11A shows that at least one-half of food pantries communicate their purpose, needs, partnerships and events to the general public, and they do this primarily by using print and social media (see Figures 11A and 11B).

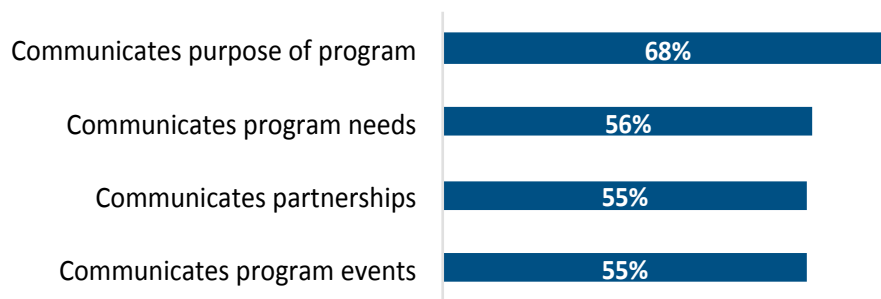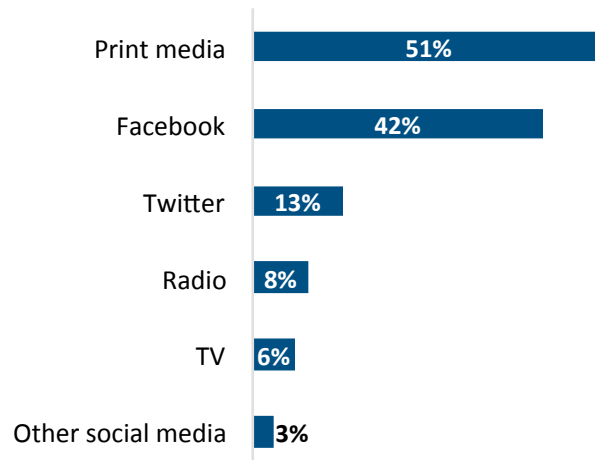**Figure 11A. Communications to General Public - What**
(n=152)

Communicates purpose of program	68%
Communicates program needs	56%
Communicates partnerships	55%
Communicates program events	55%

Figure 11B. Communications to General Public - How
(n=152)

Print media	51%
Facebook	42%
Twitter	13%
Radio	8%
TV	6%
Other social media	3%

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In terms of providing information to clients, most food pantries have signage about their program hours, yet fewer communicate about other program details or services (see Figure 11C).

Figure 11C. Communication to Clients
(n=152)

On-site signage about program hours — 72%

On-site signage about program details — 54%

On-site signage about other services available at the food pantry — 41%

Instant communication delivery method — 26%
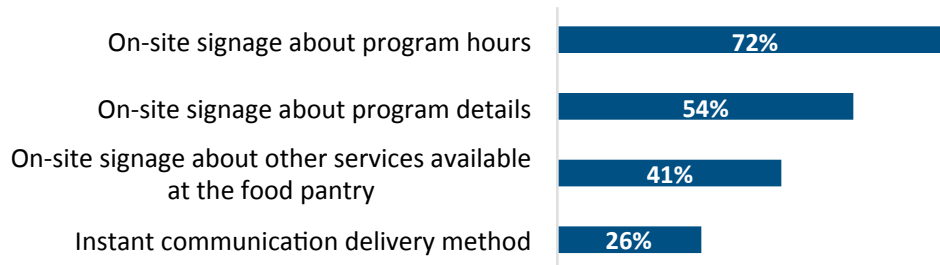
"Even if we put a lot of things online or through social media, many of our clients wouldn't be able to access it."

"Always working to stay up to date with new ways to stay in touch with clients."

"Word of mouth communication has been quite effective."

- San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey Respondents

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In terms of advocacy efforts, less than one-third of food pantries communicate with local and state legislators or engage in hunger initiatives, indicating that more attention and resources need to be given toward advocacy and legislative initiatives.

28% send invitations to legislators

(n=114)

28% provide updates to legislators

(n=128)

19% initiate calls to action

(n=128)

16% participate in Hunger Action Day

(n=133)

"Over the years we have invited our elected officials to visit our pantry but they never seem to feel it is much of a priority to them.
We have had officials come at Thanksgiving to donate turkeys and other holidays to have a media photo opportunity."

- San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey Respondent

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When asked to evaluate their overall communication, advocacy and education efforts, roughly one-half of food pantries indicated they are doing a "good/excellent" job, while a notable percentage said these efforts are "poor/fair" (see Figure 11D).

Figure 11D. Evaluation of Overall Communication, Advocacy, and Education

Legend:
- Poor-Fair
- Average
- Good-Excellent
- Don't know

Pie chart values: 2%, 17%, 27%, 54%
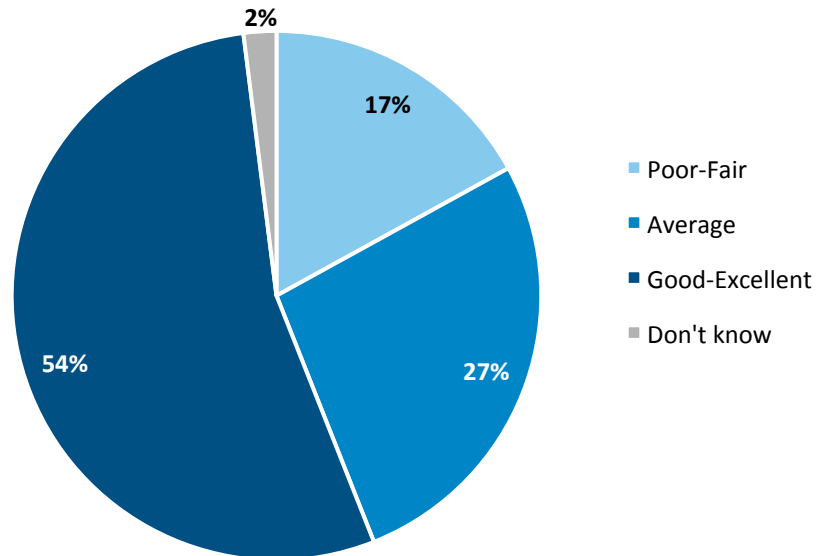
Compliance and Reporting

As Figure 12A illustrates, food pantry programs do well with overall operations, compliance and reporting. However, Figure 12B shows that there is room for improvement in terms of having various compliance and reporting systems particularly for inventory management, food safety, and client tracking.

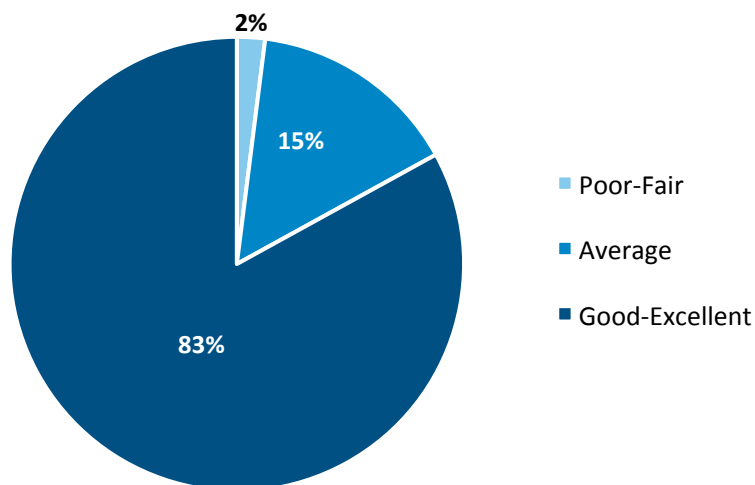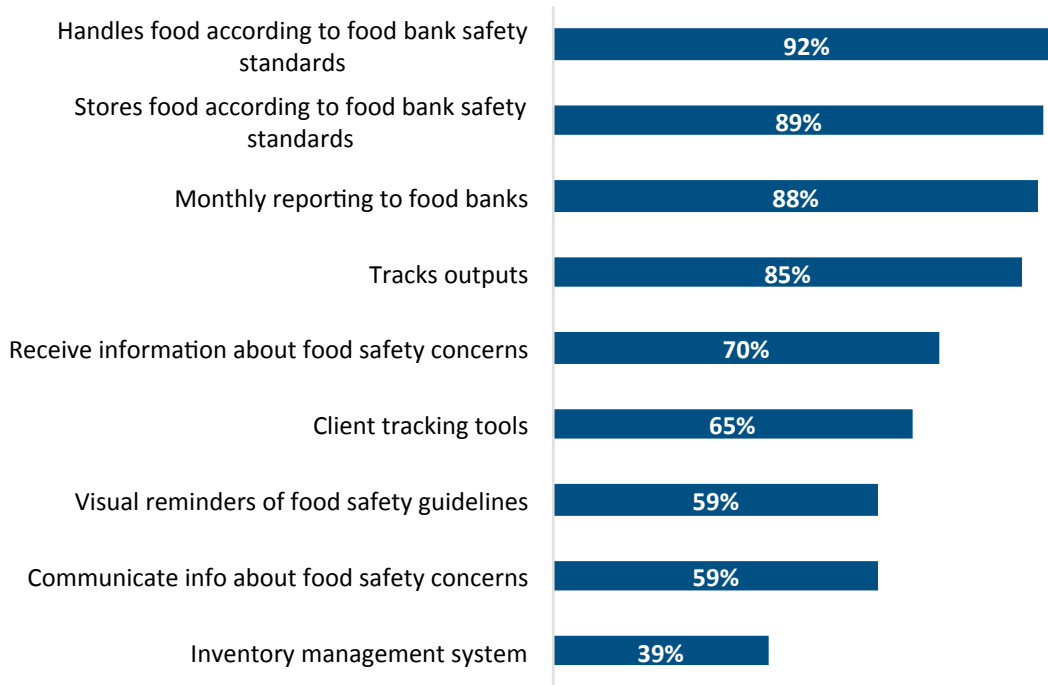**Figure 12A. Evaluation of Overall Operations, Compliance, and Reporting**
(n=145)

- Poor-Fair
- Average
- Good-Excellent

Figure 12B. Compliance and Reporting
(n=152)

Category	Percentage
Handles food according to food bank safety standards	92%
Stores food according to food bank safety standards	89%
Monthly reporting to food banks	88%
Tracks outputs	85%
Receive information about food safety concerns	70%
Client tracking tools	65%
Visual reminders of food safety guidelines	59%
Communicate info about food safety concerns	59%
Inventory management system	39%

"I think we still need to improve in some areas like how to communicate to a client the recall of a product."
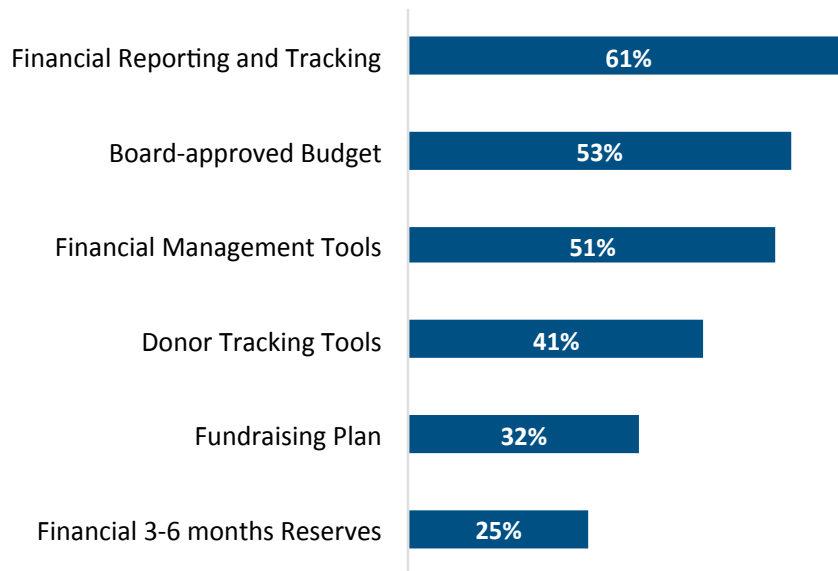
"Tracking client and community outcomes would be a new area of growth for our pantry."

- San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey Respondents

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Finances and Fundraising

As shown in Figure 13A, many food pantries reported not having fundraising plans, donor tracking and financial management tools, board-approved budgets, or financial reserves.

Figure 13A. Finances and Fundraising
(n=152)

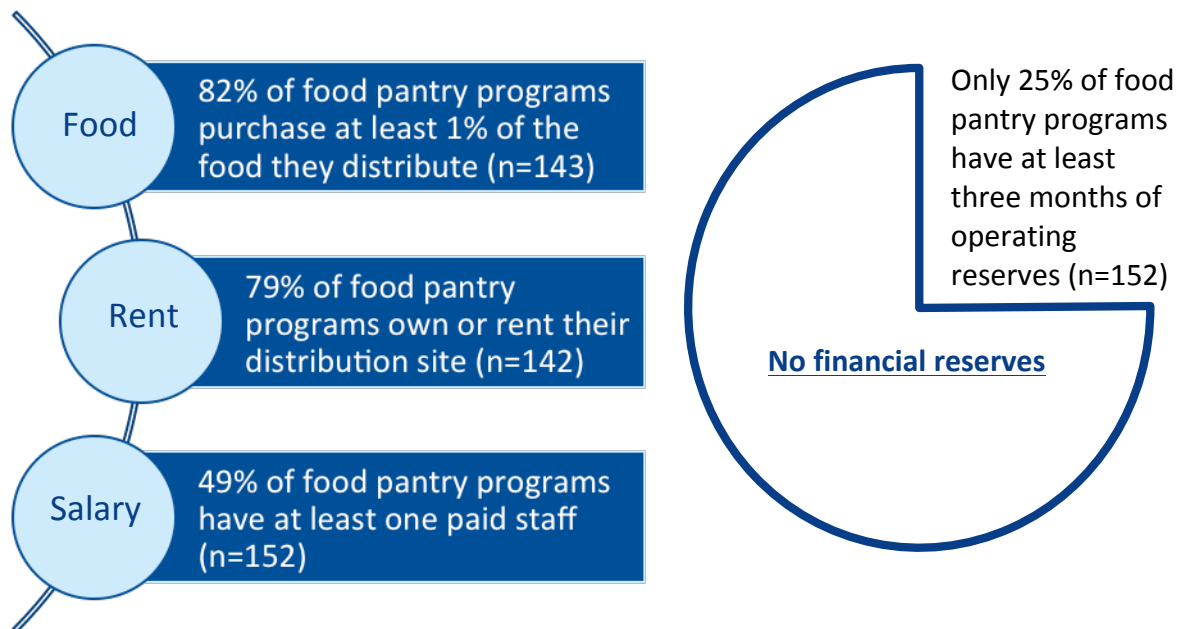| Category	Percentage
Financial Reporting and Tracking	61%
Board-approved Budget	53%
Financial Management Tools	51%
Donor Tracking Tools	41%
Fundraising Plan	32%
Financial 3-6 months Reserves	25%

"A food pantry's focus in maintaining sustainability is financial. Without funding (dollars or food sources) there is nothing to distribute. All you have is the idea of aiding in the fight against hunger."

- San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey Respondent

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When viewing the bigger picture, more than three-quarters of food pantries own or rent their distribution site space and/or purchase food, and one-half have staff salary costs. Yet, only 25% reported having at least three months of financial operating reserves. This is concerning because without financial reserves and sound financial planning, food pantry programs are at risk for not meeting demand, expanding services, or being sustainable over time.

Figure 13B. Food Pantry Expenditures and Financial Stability

Food — 82% of food pantry programs purchase at least 1% of the food they distribute (n=143)

Rent — 79% of food pantry programs own or rent their distribution site (n=142)

Salary — 49% of food pantry programs have at least one paid staff (n=152)

Only 25% of food pantry programs have at least three months of operating reserves (n=152)
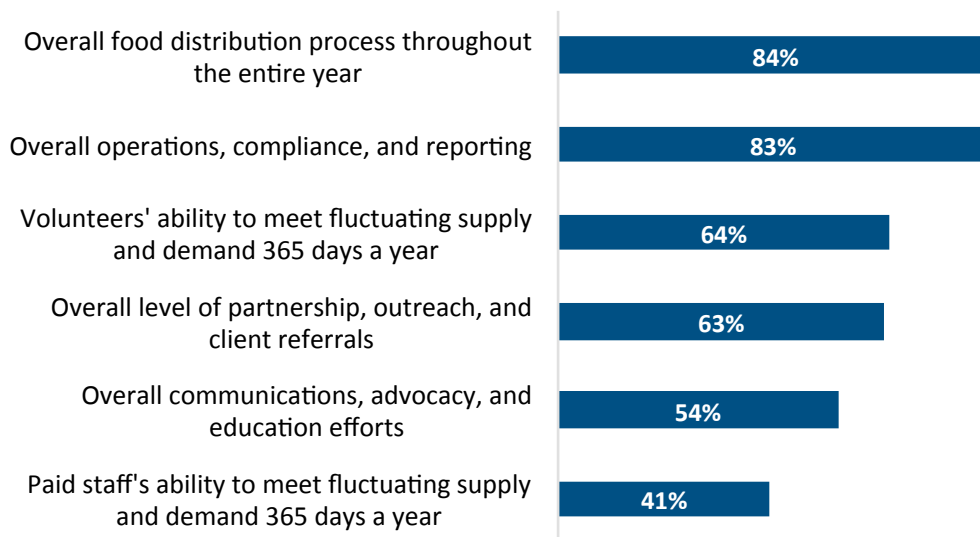
No financial reserves

"The demands on food banks/pantries in this area have been scaled up greatly during a time when we have seen greater need from clients and less money from donations due to the economy. Impending cuts to the federal food assistance programs will make it even harder for the food insecurity network to meet the existing demand for professional organizations that run on non-profit budgets."

- San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey Respondent

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Summary of Favorable Ratings on Key Dimensions

Figure 14 summarizes the percentage of "good/excellent" ratings on the aforementioned dimensions, and highlights that the ability to meet supply and demand throughout the year is in jeopardy.

Figure 14. Percentage of "Good/Excellent" Ratings on Key Dimensions
(n=152)

Dimension	Percentage
Overall food distribution process throughout the entire year	84%
Overall operations, compliance, and reporting	83%
Volunteers' ability to meet fluctuating supply and demand 365 days a year	64%
Overall level of partnership, outreach, and client referrals	63%
Overall communications, advocacy, and education efforts	54%
Paid staff's ability to meet fluctuating supply and demand 365 days a year	41%

DISCUSSION

As the survey results indicate, San Diego County food pantry programs are varied. Some are large, located in industrial warehouses, which distribute food on a weekly basis to hundreds of households. Others are smaller, located at places of worship or community centers, which provide occasional food support. Similarly, some food pantries provide food to anyone needing assistance, while others focus on specific vulnerable populations such as single parents, seniors, homeless, or veterans. Therefore, while it is useful to use the survey data to develop, implement, and evaluate best practices for food pantries, it is imperative to realize that "no one size fits all" and caution should be taken if making direct comparisons across food pantries.

In most cases, the food pantries are doing a good job in serving those in need. This includes providing a welcoming environment and an efficient distribution process managed by committed staff and volunteers.

Overall, there is a need and desire for local food pantries to improve:

- Refrigerator and freezer storage for perishable food such as produce and proteins, which are more nutritious, preferred, and in demand
- Volunteer recruitment, training, management, recognition, and retention, given that food pantries rely heavily on volunteers to keep their programs operating
- Well-balanced, nutritious foods and nutrition information, along with more client choice and alternative food options to meet dietary restrictions
- Environmental initiatives such as recycling, composting and zero-waste, which could be achieved through partnerships with environmental nonprofit organizations
- Sustainability in terms of financial reserves, planning, and fundraising
- Collaboration, outreach and advocacy efforts within and outside the food security network

When assessing food pantries in terms of where they are needed the most, the data highlights some interesting considerations. According to the poverty statistics for San Diego County (as referenced in Table 1), 11% of the population in the North Coastal area lives below poverty. Yet, only 7% of the food pantries (18 sites) were identified as serving this

area. This low number suggests the need for more food pantries in the North Coastal area. In contrast, 22% of the population in the Central area are below the poverty level, and are being serviced by 34% of the food pantries (91 sites) that were identified. This suggests that needs are being met in the Central area.

There continues to be demand for the basic need of food, and there is the potential for growth and expansion in meeting these needs. Yet resources are tapped, often causing food pantries to limit their services or even close their doors to the hungry.[15] Therefore, strategies and efforts should be focused outward to funding and partnerships with government, philanthropies, and for-profit corporations to lighten the high food costs incurred by food pantry programs and give them the infrastructure, staffing, and operational resources they need to reduce hunger throughout San Diego County.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

In addition to providing a better understanding of the capacity of food pantries in San Diego County, this project facilitated greater collaboration within the local food security network. An example is found in the strengthening of the relationship between FASD and JCSDFB through ongoing interaction of staff members working together in several subcommittees. This relationship building has resulted in both food banks successfully receiving joint funding for a food program that both food banks operate in the City Heights area.

It is anticipated that the food banks will continue to collaborate through the use of the survey data. Individual survey responses[16] were provided to FASD and SDFB to supplement their partner agency data. This will provide the food banks with more detailed and specific information about their food pantry partners in order to assess their strengths and weaknesses, help with capacity building, and better serve their clients and stakeholders. If desired, both food banks can proceed with creating a uniform assessment of food pantry partners.

An additional outcome of the project was the streamlining of FASD's Request for Partnership application and process. As of July 1, 2015, FASD is requiring new partner agencies to

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[15] *In fact, over the course of the four week survey, at least three food pantries had closed their doors*
[16] *Identified only by agency name and not by name of respondent, which remained anonymous.*

complete sections of the Food Pantry Capacity Survey as part of their partnership application. Eventually, it is hoped that FASD (and JCSDFB) will have complete information for all food pantry partners.

On a broader level, the San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey has garnered the attention of several food banks around the country. Some have expressed interest in using the survey to evaluate food pantry capacity within their own communities. The Caster Center welcomes the opportunity to share the survey and discuss providing evaluation and assessment expertise to organizations, collaborations, governments, and regions on a case-by-case basis.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEXT STEPS

There is certainly more tactical and strategic work that can be done to build on the collaborative work accomplished to date. Below are some recommendations for next steps:
- Communicate and share findings with survey respondents, as well as other food pantries and relevant agencies and individuals
- Utilize survey results to enhance awareness, engagement, and funding among the nonprofit, philanthropic, private, and public sectors, as well as the general public
- Conduct broader and deeper analysis of data (e.g., by individual food pantry, region, size of organization, etc.)
- Continue to collect, compile, synthesize, and act on information from food pantries throughout San Diego County[17]
- Consider surveying the remaining 43 percent of food pantries who did not complete the survey
- Develop unified criteria for food banks to use when partnering with food pantries
- Coordinate and consolidate surveys, forms and documentation to avoid duplication and reduce burden on food pantry partners
- Create a consistent deployment schedule (e.g., every other year) to increase awareness of the San Diego Food Pantry Capacity Survey (or similar assessment tool),

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[17] *Food banks can consider similar strategies and implementation for other partner agencies (e.g., soup kitchens, residential programs, etc.), although the content and criteria will obviously be different than food pantry partners.*

achieve higher response rate, and minimize duplication of efforts for food banks and food pantry partners

- Utilize a designated auditor (potentially from each food bank or an objective third party) to collect survey information from food pantry sites
  - Reduce subjectivity of responses
  - Strengthen relationships between food bank and food pantry partners
- Recruit (and financially support) a catalytic leader and champion from an organization with influence and respect of the network
- Continue to research, share, and build upon best practices

*"I knew (this survey) would be a learning tool for our agency
and for me personally…
and I (am) excited for the survey outcomes."*

*"Let me commend you for all of the effort
you have put into the survey and its effectual outcomes.
The end results will be worth it!"*

- San Diego County Food Pantry Capacity Survey Respondents

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