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# The Food Pantry Dilemma: Understanding the Need for Nutritional Value in Emergency Food Provided in a Down Economy

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research began in May of 2011 as part of the Adrian Tinsley Program Summer Grant under the direction of Dr. Patricia Fanning. Amy has presented this research at the 2011 ATP Summer Symposium and at the 2012 National Conference on Undergraduate Research in Ogden, Utah. She is committed to excellence in educating young people through both teaching and advocacy.

**T***he purpose of this project was to determine if there are viable nutritional options available to the patrons of suburban food pantries located in Norton, Easton and Bridgewater, Massachusetts. The goal was to establish the existing practices of the pantries, how the food received is utilized, the needs of the patrons, and how corporate establishments work in conjunction with the food pantries. Providing nutritional options in a down economy is a difficult task if there is not a strong system currently in place or if the facility is unable to store and distribute fresh fruits, vegetables and dairy to the patrons. Mixed-methods data was collected through surveys, observations, interviews, and evaluations of each pantry's operating system. Upon examining these areas, it has become clear that there are viable nutritional options available, but only if the pantries are willing and able to work with the corporate and local establishments. According to the Greater Boston Food Bank (GBFB), 47% of people in eastern Massachusetts have food insecurity, and there has been a 23% increase in the requests for assistance. Public awareness, volunteers, and new procedures within the existing food pantries are essential if pantries are to restructure toward healthier options for a service that is at risk.*

## INTRODUCTION

Life experiences can sometimes provide the best backdrop for bringing relevant issues to the surface and help advocate for change. This is where I began my journey towards the ATP grant program at Bridgewater State University. It started while I was attending my English 102 class with Professor Stacy Moskos Nistendirik. The course focused on the development of writing skills as we explored the subject of food as a primary theme. We read *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, watched *Food Inc.*, and delved further into how food in this country is grown and the processes leading up to how it is served at our tables. During this semester (and even through today), I personally had to supplement the groceries for my family by going to the food pantry in my town. I am a single mother of two school-aged children and found that when I would return home from the food pantry, on more than one occasion, I would have my arms filled with sheet cakes, cookies and muffins. I was left wondering where the fresh fruits, vegetables or dairy items were. This personal experience allowed me to question whether or not I was the only one looking to have better nutritional selections available.

## THE PROBLEM

The United States is facing the worst recession since the Great Depression and food has been a source of contention. Currently many Americans face an epidemic called hunger. Hunger is when there is not enough food and one goes without any food at all. When there is some food but not enough to feed an individual or a family, it is called food insecurity. More individuals are facing the dilemma of deciding whether to pay their bills or using the little money they have to put food on the table. Unfortunately this is a common problem facing different socioeconomic statuses and is escalating into a societal issue that must be addressed. Since the Great Depression of the 1930's, there have been national food programs implemented such as Food Stamps and Women, Infants and Children (WIC). These agencies have provided aid but cannot take on the vast scale of a growing clientele; therefore, individuals look to local food pantries to help fill a gap that is steadily growing. Since the government is unable to fill this need, individuals have been forced to look for other means to meet their basic food necessities. Programs that were designed to help with food assistance were not meant for long-term dependency but for short-term solutions during crisis situations (Daponte and Blade). It has reached a point that individuals are both obtaining governmental assistance and reaching out to the local food pantries; yet it still is not enough to meet their basic needs (Paynter, Berner, and Anderson,, 2011). The increase in food-insecure homes emphasizes the need for timely data to help answer questions regarding not only the frequency of the patrons obtaining assistance, but also how various federal and state programs can interact and support the pantries on each of their levels. Reviewing recent history and current operating practices of programs such as WIC, food pantries and food banks, will help to establish benchmarks where there is little standardization existing.

In 2010, The Greater Boston Food Bank (GBFB) released a study entitled *Hunger in Eastern Massachusetts 2010*. The purpose of this study was to provide data that would reflect accurate statistics within eastern Massachusetts regarding the clientele utilizing the emergency food system and the agencies that provide services to these clients. This study showed how hunger in eastern Massachusetts affects individuals with a variety of different educational levels, social economic status, marital status, family status, employment status, medical care, household demographics and resources and outside agency assistance such as food stamps. This study reviewed information for pantries, soup kitchens and shelters to acquire their data. While these agencies are not turning away clients, the GBFB has had to increase the supply of food given to these agencies; many would not be able to operate without this

assistance. The GBFB 2010 study of eastern Massachusetts contains demographic information that shows that females, 1-2 member households, those with an age range between 30-49, white, on state assistance and an average monthly income of \$990/month were the top categories of people needing assistance. It also states, "At any given time, at least one third of clients have had to make choices between food and other critical survival factors such as heat, housing, medical care or transportation" (Tienken 13). As the numbers of patrons escalate, a dilemma has surfaced in the pantries. The food items that are being distributed among the suburban neighborhoods are contributing to poor nutritional choices, which can lead to obesity and poor health. When soliciting donations, food pantries typically request dry goods and canned goods. These generally have high sodium and fat quantities. This is due in part because of the shelf-life of these types of food products. There are few food options available to assist the low-income households with food they need for nutritional sustainability. Additionally, fresh fruits, vegetables, and proteins are often the more expensive items. The current research project is intended to determine if the donations given to the food pantries are providing essential nutrients in their food products and, if not, whether there are alternative sources that can be explored which could be beneficial to all involved.

Food pantries and food banks are two different entities that have been receiving attention over the last year due to the information surfacing from census data, statistical surveys and increasing volumes of patrons serviced by these establishments. While we know the general purpose of these establishments, our understanding of how they operate, for whom they operate, and the importance of what they are supplying is vague. According to 7 USCS § 7501 (Title 7, Agriculture; Chapter 102, Emergency Food Assistance), the term "food pantry" means "a public or private nonprofit organization that distributes food to low-income and unemployed households, including food from sources other than the Department of Agriculture, to relieve situations of emergency and distress" (Food Pantry Law). Food banks collect food and supply it to agencies that serve low-income populations. Food pantries provide food directly to people in need. The GBFB is "the largest hunger-relief organization in New England and one of the largest food banks in the country distributing more than 34 million pounds of food and grocery products annually to a network of approximately 550 member hunger-relief agencies." (Greater Boston Food Bank) The GBFB feeds 545,000 people annually in nine counties in eastern Massachusetts. These statistics and definitions help show the great need for food. There is also a disparity in scope between food banks and food pantries. Pantries provide assistance to a much smaller volume of patrons. The focus of this project will be specifically on food

pantries in Norton, Easton and Bridgewater, Massachusetts. These towns are communities that are not predominantly low-income. The need for assistance in suburban towns does not encompass the massive volumes of the inner-city areas. However, a person in need living in a suburban area is just as important as those living in an urban area, and often these suburban towns are overlooked for aid.

Additionally, there is a rise in obesity in America in part because someone is struggling to provide food for their family; price and accessibility outweigh nutritional value (United States Department). While food pantries are providing food items, there seems to be a need for alternative selections to assist them in ensuring proper nutritional value of the products they are distributing. These pantries should extend the same options as their urban counterparts. In reviewing how these establishments operate, the goal is to assess their existing nutritional selection, and also to help them find viable alternatives to their current practices to increase the distribution of fresh fruits, vegetable and dairy items.

The current study will examine if there is a need for nutritional value in emergency food provided in a down economy, specifically in the food pantries in Norton, Easton and Bridgewater, Massachusetts. The hypothesis is that there will be an affirmative response to this question not only from the directors of the pantries, but also from the clients. Another hypothesis is that the type of food donated to the pantries will affect the lack of nutritional food supplied to the patrons. A third hypothesis is that the physical and organizational structures contribute to the successful or unsuccessful pantry operation practices. There has been limited research done specifically analyzing the need for nutritional value of food provided to food pantries within suburban settings. The results of this study may be useful for the food pantries, donors, clientele and the Executive Office of Health and Human Services to aid in implementing policies and programs for healthier food options and further research.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was exploratory in assessing the Norton, Easton and Bridgewater food pantries by obtaining information about their physical space, how the sites acquire their goods, storing and distribution procedures as well as alternative options for obtaining perishables and dairy items. Qualitative face-to-face interviews of the directors of the food pantries were conducted. In addition, anonymous surveys of pantry patrons were used to assess the need for alternative systems that could provide more nutritional food. Interviews were also conducted with local grocery stores such as Stop & Shop, Roche Bros.,

Shaw's, Hannaford's, Market Basket and BJ's Wholesale Club to review their policies for food pantry donations and inquire if they are willing to look at alternative solutions. Interviews were conducted with representatives of the GBFB to review pertinent studies and compare how the GBFB handles large volumes and their distribution program relative to suburban communities. An interview was conducted with a director of the WIC program to review the structure of its system to aid in a voucher proposal. Introduction of a voucher system or other alternative plans may assist in loss prevention for stores, reduce waste of perishable items, and give economically strapped individuals and family's opportunities for food security in their homes with nutritional items. The main goal is promoting healthier food choices at food pantries through alternative options.

## FOOD PANTRY FINDINGS

### Physical Structure

The Norton and Easton facilities are located within the town hall buildings but each has its own side entrance. The Bridgewater facility is free-standing and located inside the town's senior center. The Norton site has shelving, a chest freezer and a small refrigerator. There are three aisles for the employees and patrons to walk around to gather their food items. The Easton pantry has several rooms stocked from floor to ceiling with food items. There is a large industrial size refrigerator/freezer to accommodate some bulk donations. The Bridgewater site has a refrigerator that is shared with the senior center and some cabinet space that is set aside for some of the pantry items. There is very limited space and makeshift areas are constructed when a client comes in to gather their items.

### Organizational Structure

Food pantry requirements vary by town, director, volunteer base and the ability to function as a non-profit entity. In order to operate, each pantry needs to comply with health codes for proper handling and storage of food items. While each of the three pantries has a director, the amount of time dedicated varied as well as the volunteer base. The Norton site has been operating for eleven years. Easton's director has been running its establishment for over twenty years. Bridgewater's pantry used to be located within the Town Hall, but was recently moved to the Senior Center. The Director of the Senior Center was given control of the food pantry program. This provided additional responsibilities on top of learning procedures in implementing the pantry into the Senior Center. Each director's varying years of experience with a pantry provides an indication of the rate of success or failure in their ability to utilize experience or understanding of methods available to maintain the operation.

## **Donations**

The food pantries receive their donations from the general public through direct drop offs, collection boxes placed throughout the towns, monetary gifts, food drives and corporate sponsors. Most of these items are non-perishables and canned goods. On occasion paper goods, toiletries and baby supplies are given as well. While the pantries may have suggestions for organizations, the donations are generally at the discretion of the provider. It was during the meeting with the Easton food pantry that it became evident that they operate on a very different scale compared to the other pantries examined. This establishment is self-sufficient, receives a large volume of donations, has a local farm down the street providing them fresh vegetables and has made networking connections that have proven to be the solid foundation for this entity. It was clear that the Easton pantry was taking an active role in expanding nutritional options and yet there is still more that could be done.

## **Storing and Distribution**

Since there is little room to house food supplies, there are specific time frames in which the goods are received before they are dispersed. In Norton, town residents sign in for their items on the first and third Monday of the month. The individuals need to provide proof of residency through mortgage/rent/utility bills and birth certificates of those in the household as well as other information. Once the information is verified, then eligibility for food assistance has been approved. They have had to re-check the paperwork due to the influx of individuals looking for assistance during these hard times. Individuals are coming from other towns to try and acquire help which has increased the need for credential checks to make sure that the residents of the town are receiving the aid that they need. The Norton site does not provide any dairy or produce items due to the limitations of the physical structure. Easton allows its residents to visit the pantry once a week and it has approximately five hundred people on the roster. They provide pre-made bags of items for the clients to pick up. Bridgewater allows its residence the opportunity to visit its facility only once per month. They have certain times for pick up and have certain information, similar to Norton, which assists them with size of household to prepare the bags of food for pick up.

## **EDUCATION**

### **Alternative Options for Nutritional Food Items**

After reviewing the organizational structures of these pantries, it was evident that there is a need for education at all levels, including the pantry directors, volunteers, donors and clients. These organizations are run by volunteers and do not exhibit the focus or commitment that paid employment positions demand. The pantry workers are often exhausted and burnt out

from their efforts and have little time to explore other avenues. For example, an introduction of a hypothetical voucher system was presented which would involve local farms, farmer's markets and grocery stores to help promote healthy food items for purchase. There was even discussion regarding adding appliances to their establishment for safe food handling as it was evident that these options had not yet been considered. The Easton food pantry worked with a local farm down the street to provide fresh vegetables. This relationship was not only beneficial for the pantry, and for the pantry clients, but also for the farm; the items that they are not able to sell would no longer be wasted. Roche Bros.' corporate offices indicated that there are many towns that operate outside of the box instead of relying on the traditional food pantry model. Some towns have positions in the pantry that are paid, provide clothing at minimal cost to the clients, contain industrial appliances and have a strong corporate and community investment for healthy practices. Roche Bros. has made an effort to directly interact with the local communities of its stores. To this end they have reduced their giving to GBFB in favor of giving larger donations to the local pantries. Some of these corporate donors have found that they would rather give directly to the establishments than splitting up amongst several organizations. Not all food pantries are seeking to adapt to the changing times and the heart or mission of each town rests within the individual structures.

The ability of a town to adopt new approaches to their food pantries appears to depend on the director of the pantry. Some places may agree with new efforts, but it does not mean that they are willing to implement changes for themselves. The leadership at the Norton pantry was willing to examine options that they did not know were available in order to offer more alternatives in their pantry. This may even include a donation of a refrigerator and freezer. The Easton pantry has been operating successfully for over twenty years and appears positioned to continue its success. The most difficult task facing all of these establishments is recruiting and maintaining a solid volunteer base and consistent donations. The Bridgewater pantry had the constraints of taxing the skeletal staff that is in place. The mention of a refrigerator and freezer donation was politely declined. Even in the midst of a situation where a possible solution could be implemented, it did not yield a positive, progressive response.

## **CORPORATE FINDINGS**

In speaking with the local grocery stores, Roche Bros., Stop & Shop, Hannaford's, Market Basket as well as BJ's Wholesale club, information was shared regarding how each organization aided local pantries with donations. All of these companies

supply large volumes of items to the GBFB and then smaller quantities to the local food pantries. This is largely due to the GBFB's ability to collect, store and distribute more significant amounts of food supplies. These organizations donate some perishables, dairy, or frozen meats to other organizations that can acquire and distribute these goods in a timely fashion. These corporate entities explained that they were happy to provide non-perishable items and baked goods to the pantries as these types of food are the main source of donations from the stores. However, they pointed out that unused perishable items, specifically dairy, fruits and vegetables were either composted or disposed of due to liability issues associated with donating such items. There was also a discussion regarding the possibility of a voucher system that could be used to expand the nutritional value of the food available. This would consist of providing a set of \$5.00 vouchers to each family to specifically purchase dairy, vegetables and fruits. The corporation would then use these donations as a tax write-off. In general the grocery stores thought this was a creative idea in theory, but stated that there were enough established programs to help people already and it would be ineffective to get involved beyond their current practices. Furthermore, the stores already receive a tax reduction for the items they dispose of and there is no economic incentive to donate the food instead. One store manager suggested that the proposed voucher program would only become another aid program filled with fraud just as he believes that the WIC and Food Stamps programs are. The stores also discussed how much they donate to the towns' athletic programs and other groups in the form of gift cards or food donations upwards of \$10,000 annually and believed that such support was important to the local community.

## RESULTS

The start of my research began with data collection, interviews and surveys. As I began my project I received a lot of positive feedback from the food pantry patrons, the directors of the pantries, and WIC. During this time, my initial hypothesis that the practices needed to be modified appeared to be validated and reinforced. The GBFB has wonderful programs that are able to assist many individuals, but they are mainly structured within urban settings. They feel that it is not as cost effective for them to work with the suburban pantries. This provided more questions that needed to be answered in the three towns that I was investigating that are not currently receiving aid from the GBFB. In interviewing the local grocery store managers, it also became evident that although the grocery stores donate items to the food pantries, non-perishables are their preferred donation. They avoid fresher, healthier options because perishables are easier to throw away and the stores faced less liability. Furthermore, stores would rather help the community

by donating 1,500 hamburgers and buns for little league teams rather than institute perishable vouchers for the pantry patrons. While the local stores tried to assist local pantries through the implementation of non-perishable food donation boxes, this process left me questioning whether or not the organizations would take into consideration the validity of my research and step up to implement better practices. The need for nutritional value of items in a pantry does not solely rely on the pantry itself but also with the general public, corporations, and the willingness of each to partner with pantries to establish more effective strategies.

## DISCUSSION

The intent of this study was to learn whether or not there were viable options available for nutritional value of emergency food in a down economy. It became evident that there were options available; however there are many hurdles to overcome including space limitations, limited staff, accessibility to products/ services, and resources such as money and donations. I decided to go back and visit the locations that I had worked with to see if there were any changes that had been implemented. The Norton pantry now has the individuals choosing what items they would like to place in their bags instead of having them pre-made. I was also able to expedite their application process to be accepted into the GBFB. Unfortunately, the pantry director has health-related limitations and there is no one willing to go to the GBFB to acquire the food and bring it to the pantry, so this has been delayed for now. I had the Norton Pop Warner Football league take part in a local food drive to help stock the shelves and I am currently working with a corporate sponsor to help get a large refrigerator donated for this site. The pantry is also working with a local farm for seasonal fresh vegetables. The Easton pantry is still working with their local farm, but has encountered difficulty with maintaining a regular supply of fruits and vegetables. The director is also concerned that the volunteer staff is older and they need younger generations to step in to promote longevity for the pantry and its practices moving forward. The Bridgewater facility has been utilizing local farms as well and received farmer's market vouchers for its patrons. Bridgewater State University's Kappa Delta Pi Education Honor Society also held a food drive and is looking to continue this practice to give back to the community. It has been exciting to see some results from my work so quickly and I can only hope that more steps will be taken to help achieve better nutritional items in these pantries.

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