Taking Stock: A survey of food pantries in the Food Bank for Central and Northeast Missouri region

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Central Missouri farmland

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

Food insecurity and hunger continue to be a major concern in Missouri. Nearly one million Missourians face the prospect of missing meals, reducing portions, compromising the quality of the food they eat, or worrying about where their next meal will come from.

Unfortunately, the number of people who lack resources to have enough to eat, and have enough of the right kinds of food, has consistently risen over the past decade and a half. Since 2000, food insecurity in Missouri has increased by 95%.

With reductions to publically funded, government programs, the private, charitable response to hunger has grown. Increasingly, more people rely on food pantries to provide a portion of the food they need.

Given the increasing role of food pantries in meeting the food needs of Missourians, it is important to better understand the ways in which the management and operations of food pantries can be enhanced. This report highlights areas for potential improvement, identified by those who operate food pantries, to help spur conversation, target resources, and develop tools to help food pantries better meet their goals.

This document describes the results of an online survey completed by Missouri food pantry directors in the fall of 2015. The survey was developed by researchers and staff with the Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security at the University of Missouri.

Survey Participants

Food pantry directors from four of the six regional food banks associated with Feeding Missouri participated in this survey. The two regional food banks that did not participate were invited but noted that they had plans to conduct their own, similar surveys.

Food pantry directors affiliated with Harvesters in the Kansas City region, Ozarks Food Harvest in Southwest Missouri, the Southeast Missouri Food Bank, and the Food Bank for Central and Northeast Missouri took part in the survey.

These regions serve 86 of the 115 Missouri counties and St. Louis City. They provide coverage to 75% of the state and include rural and metropolitan counties.

Of the 513 food pantry directors who received the survey link and message, 204 completed the survey, representing a 40% response rate. Of the 204 directors who completed the survey, 199 provided their zip code, allowing us to denote their region.

Within the Food Bank for Central and Northeast Missouri region, 43 food pantry directors completed the survey. This represents a total of 21% of all food pantry directors who completed the survey and 47% of all directors within the region.

Central and Northeast Missouri survey participants were generally female (77%) with an average age of 61.2. Fifty-eight percent have some schooling beyond high school, and 42% have completed high school or received their GED.

The table below compares survey participants from the Food Bank for Central and Northeast Missouri region to those from the four food bank regions combined.

Demographics	Central and Northeast	All Regions
Total Respondents	43	204
GENDER		
Male	10 (23%)	45 (22%)
Female	33 (77%)	156 (78%)
AGE		
Average Age	61.2	59.8
EDUCATION		
High School/GED	18 (42%)	61 (30%)
Beyond High School	25 (58%)	140 (70%)

Service areas of the six regional food banks associated with Feeding Missouri. Photo courtesy of Feedingmissouri.org.

The Buddy Pack Program provides food-insecure children with bags of food to take home. Photo courtesy of sharefoodbringhope.org.

Food Pantry Characteristics

The average Missouri food pantry serves 295 households or 755 individuals per month. Pantry directors average approximately seven years of experience. Pantries averaged 32 volunteers and were open 8.5 days per month.

Most pantries are serving more people this year compared to last year (47%). Thirty nine percent are serving about the same number of people, and 14% are serving fewer people.

The Central and Northeast Missouri food pantries participating in the survey serve an above average number of households and individuals per month (414 and 1120, respectively). Directors from these pantries average 8.3 years of experience, above the average for All Regions by just over a year.

Compared to the average for food pantries from all food bank regions in Missouri, pantries in Central and Northeast Missouri utilize more volunteers per month (41 vs. 32) and are open

Pantry Characteristics	Central and Northeast	All Regions
Total Respondents	43	204
NUMBER SERVED		
Average monthly households served	414	295
Average monthly individuals served	1120	755
PANTRY STAFFING		
Average director experience (years)	8.3	7.1
Average number of monthly volunteers	41	32
Average days open per month	8.6	8.5
TREND *(compared to prior year)*		
Serving more people	40%	47%
Serving about the same	44%	39%
Serving fewer people	16%	14%

nearly the same number of days per month (8.6 vs. 8.5).

Forty percent of Central and Northeast Missouri food pantries are serving more people than the previous year. Forty-four percent are serving about the same number of people, and 16% are serving fewer people.

Survey Design

To better understand the potential areas for improvement within Missouri food pantries, an online survey was created for food pantry directors[*]. The survey included 50 food pantry activities (such as fundraising, recruiting new staff and volunteers, and being prepared for each food distribution). For each activity, pantry directors were asked to answer two questions:

1. How important is the activity to the success of your pantry?

2. How well does your pantry perform the activity?

Using the responses from these two questions, each activity was ranked from one to 50. A rank of one meant the activity had the greatest difference between Question 1 (importance) and Question 2 (performance).

In other words, for activities with a high rank, directors indicated that the activity was generally very important, yet they believed they did not perform the activity very well.

Higher ranked activities (with one being the highest) indicate potential areas for improvement and areas where resources can be targeted.

To better understand the broader implications of the pantries' needs, each activity is grouped into one of seven categories. The categories include finances, operations, communications, planning, programs & partnerships, facilities and governance.

* The survey was designed using the Borich Needs Assessment Model. Please contact the report authors for more details.

Results

The following section provides a look at the combined results from all four food bank regions, followed by the results for the Central and Northeast Missouri region. In order to simplify the results, only the top 10 activities are shown. Complete survey results are found in the Appendix.

All Regions

Many of the activities identified center on reaching out to others for support, whether the support needed is in the form of money, food, or time.

As a whole, the top 10 activities include items from five of the seven broad categories. The only categories not represented are facilities and governance. See All Regions table below.

The top 10 activities are areas for potential improvement where resources can be targeted.

Food Bank for Central and Northeast Missouri Region

By comparison, eight of the top 10 activities identified by food pantry directors in the Central and Northeast Missouri region are also found in the All Regions Top 10. Most of these activities involve asking for support in the form of money, time, or food.

Two items (highlighted in the table below) differ from the overall group. These include *having enough parking, and having reliable computer software.* Both are related to facilities, a broad category that was not part of the All Regions Top 10 list.

Rank	All Regions - Top 10 Activities (Category included)
1	Grant writing (Financial)
2	Recruiting people for leadership roles (Operations)
3	Soliciting cash donations (Communications)
4	Being prepared for emergencies (Planning)
5	Offering educational programs in-house (Programs & Partnerships)
6	Recruiting new staff or volunteers (Operations)
7	Fundraising (Financial)
8	Soliciting food donations (Communications)
9	Soliciting produce donations from local gardeners/ farmers (Programs & Partnerships)
10	Telling your pantry's story to the public (Communications)

Rank	Central and Northeast- Top 10 Activities (Category included)
1	Having enough parking (Facilities)
2	Recruiting people for leadership roles (Operations)
3	Grant writing (Financial)
4	Being prepared for emergencies (Planning)
5	Soliciting cash donations (Communications)
6	Fundraising (Financial)
7	Recruiting new staff or volunteers (Operations)
8	Offering educational programs in-house (Programs & Partnerships)
9	Telling your pantry's story to the public (Communications)
10	Having reliable computer software (Facilities)

* Highlighted activities are those that do not appear in the All Regions - Top 10.

Strengths

While this survey is designed to uncover needs and areas for potential improvement, it also uncovers the strengths of food pantries. Before moving further into the discussion, we want to share those activities that Central and Northeast Missouri food pantry directors feel are important and being performed well. We have selected one or more activities from each broad category.

Planning
Being prepared for each food pantry distribution

Finances
Accounting and short-term budgeting

Communications
Letting people in need know you are there to help

Operations
Distributing food, handling food safely, and sorting, shelving, and storing food

Facilities
Having enough refrigerator and freezer space

Governance
Retaining board members

Programs and Partnerships
Providing referrals to services offered by outside agencies

When making comparisons between all seven of the broad categories, survey results show that food pantries are strongest in the area of operations.

Discussion

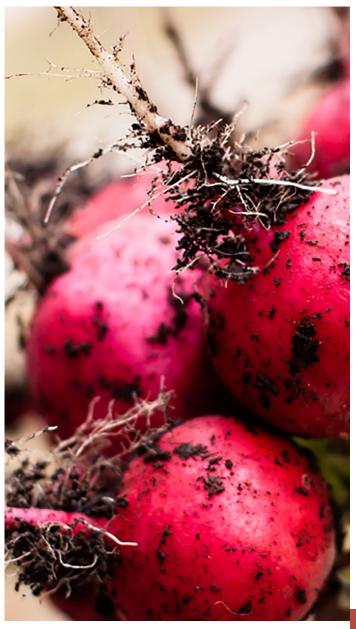General impressions from the survey results include the following:

• Central and Northeast Missouri food pantry directors have a good handle on the basics. They do well at performing those activities that are most essential to getting food to people in need.

• Central and Northeast Missouri directors indicate that having enough parking is their greatest need. This is followed by recruiting people for leadership roles and grant writing.

• Being prepared for emergencies ranks highly (4th). This is followed by two activities related to enhancing financial resources: seeking cash donations and fundraising.

• Recruiting new staff or volunteers is a concern, along with offering educational programs in-house and telling the pantry's story to the public.

When taken as a whole, it appears that focusing on three main areas would make the greatest impact for Central and Northeast Missouri food pantries. The first area includes enhancing financial resources, whether from grant writing, directly asking for money, or through fundraising activities. The second area includes enhancing human resources by recruiting new people for leadership roles or general roles at the food pantry. The third area includes improving facilities, namely office space and computer software.

While there is likely no easy or single fix to address these challenges, the following options are offered for consideration. First, enhancing communications could prove beneficial. By increasing awareness about the activities and needs of food pantries, they may be able to attract new volunteers, donors, and other forms of assistance. The ability of pantries to tell their story to the public can help garner support for a variety of food pantry activities.

Likewise, a focus on both creating new partnerships and enhancing existing partnerships could lead to new forms of support that only come from cooperation and collaboration.

In addition, by placing some emphasis on activities outside of the current core mission of food pantries, such as offering educational programs, pantries may be able to better address the multiple challenges their customers face. Educational programs can take many forms and cover a range of topics including cooking, nutrition, finances, or fitness. They may also help people develop new skills to enhance employment opportunities. Regardless of the specific details, food pantries can often partner with other agencies or professionals in the community to bring a variety of programs to their customers.

Appendix: Complete Survey Results

Appendix A: Includes the activity rankings for all 50 activities from the Central and Northeast region. The activities are ranked from one to 50. A rank of one means that the activity has the greatest difference between importance and performance. In other words, the activity is not performed as well as it could be relative to its importance. Activities with lower ranks are performed relatively well by the food pantry staff and volunteers. In total, 43 food pantry directors from the Food Bank for Central and Northeast Missouri region completed the survey.

Appendix B: Includes the activity rankings for all 50 activities from all participating food bank regions (Harvesters, Ozarks Food Harvest, Southeast Missouri, Central and Northeast Missouri). The activities are ranked from one to 50. A rank of one means that the activity has the greatest difference between importance and performance. In other words, the activity is not performed as well as it could be relative to its importance. Activities with lower ranks are performed relatively well by the food pantry staff and volunteers. In total, 204 food pantry directors completed the survey.

Appendix C and D: Includes the full survey results for all 50 activities from the Food Bank for Central and Northeast Missouri region (Appendix C, 43 respondents) and all participating food bank regions (Appendix D, 204 respondents). The table includes the following:

• **Category Rank:** The categories are ranked from one to seven based on the activity scores for a given category. A rank of one means that when taken as a whole, the activities included in a particular category have the greatest difference between their importance and performance. Higher ranked categories are not performed as well as they could be relative to their importance.

• **Within Category Activity Rank:** The activities are ranked within each category. A rank of one means that the activity has the greatest difference between importance and performance. In other words, the activity is not performed as well as it could be.

• **Overall Activity Rank:** Similar to Appendix A and B, this column includes the activity rankings for all 50 activities.

• **Average Importance:** This is based on a scale from one to five. One equals "Not important" and five equals "Very important". Values closer to five indicate activities that are very important to the success of food pantries, based on the responses from food pantry directors.

Appendix A:

Activity Ranking - Central and Northeast Region

Activity	Rank
Having enough parking	1
Recruiting people for leadership roles	2
Grant writing	3
Being prepared for emergencies	4
Soliciting cash donations	5
Fundraising	6
Recruiting new staff or volunteers	7
Offering educational programs in-house	8
Telling your pantry's story to the public	9
Having reliable computer software	10
Hosting, sponsoring, or supporting a community garden	11
Having good office space	12
Having reliable computer hardware	13
Having reliable internet access	14
Having enough staff or volunteers on hand	15
Long-term budgeting	16
Training board members	17
Offering related services in-house	18
Soliciting food donations	19
Soliciting produce donations from local gardeners/farmers	20
Recruiting board members	21
Having a sound building	22
Having an opportunity for customer feedback	23
Giving referrals to educational programs hosted by outside agencies	24
Strategic planning	25
Training staff or volunteers	26
Sponsoring, hosting, or supporting food drives	27
Having enough freezer space	28
Providing referrals to services offered by outside agencies	29
Having enough refrigeration	30
Purchasing food from other sources	31
Writing newsletters	32
Having an effective board of directors	33
Retaining staff or volunteers	34
Short-term budgeting	35
Maintaining a website	36
Having a clear mission/mission statement	37
Having a clear vision for what pantry wants to accomplish in the future	38
Letting people in need know you are there to help	39
Managing social media	40
Retaining board members	41
Ordering food from the food bank	42
Picking up/receiving food from other sources	43
Being prepared for each food distribution	44
Picking up/receiving food from the food bank	45
Customer intake/registration	46
Accounting	47
Handling food safely	48
Sorting, shelving, and storing food	49
Distributing food	50

Appendix B:

Activity Ranking - All Regions

Activity	Rank
Grant writing	1
Recruiting people for leadership roles	2
Soliciting cash donations	3
Being prepared for emergencies	4
Offering educational programs in-house	5
Recruiting new staff or volunteers	6
Fundraising	7
Soliciting food donations	8
Soliciting produce donations from local gardeners/farmers	9
Telling your pantry's story to the public	10
Having enough refrigeration	11
Hosting, sponsoring, or supporting a community garden	12
Having reliable computer software	13
Having enough staff or volunteers on hand	14
Strategic planning	15
Recruiting board members	16
Giving referrals to educational programs hosted by outside agencies	17
Having enough freezer space	18
Having enough parking	19
Long-term budgeting	20
Training board members	21
Sponsoring, hosting, or supporting food drives	22
Offering related services in-house	23
Having good office space	24
Managing social media	25
Having reliable computer hardware	26
Maintaining a website	27
Writing newsletters	28
Training staff or volunteers	29
Having a sound building	30
Having an opportunity for customer feedback	31
Letting people in need know you are there to help	32
Having an effective board of directors	33
Retaining staff or volunteers	34
Having reliable internet access	35
Having a clear vision for what pantry wants to accomplish in the future	36
Providing referrals to services offered by outside agencies	37
Retaining board members	38
Having a clear mission/mission statement	39
Being prepared for each food distribution	40
Picking up/receiving food from other sources	41
Customer intake/registration	42
Short-term budgeting	43
Purchasing food from other sources	44
Ordering food from the food bank	45
Handling food safely	46
Accounting	47
Picking up/receiving food from the food bank	48
Sorting, shelving, and storing food	49
Distributing food	50

Appendix C:

Full Survey results - Central and Northeast Region

Category	Activity	Category Rank	Within Category Activity Rank	Overall Activity Rank	Average Importance
Facilities	Having enough parking	1	1	1	4.79
	Having reliable computer software		2	10	4.71
	Having good office space		3	12	4.48
	Having reliable computer hardware		4	13	4.74
	Having reliable internet access		5	14	4.42
	Having a sound building		6	22	4.88
	Having enough freezer space		7	28	4.95
	Having enough refrigeration		8	30	4.98
Programs & Partnerships	Offering educational programs in-house	2	1	8	3.56
	Hosting, sponsoring, or supporting a community garden		2	11	3.33
	Offering related services in-house		3	18	3.83
	Soliciting produce donations from local gardeners/farmers		4	20	4.17
	Giving referrals to educational programs hosted by outside agencies		5	24	3.9
	Providing referrals to services offered by outside agencies		6	29	4.24
Financial	Grant writing	3	1	3	4.26
	Fundraising		2	6	4.37
	Long-term budgeting		3	16	4.74
	Short-term budgeting		4	35	4.7
	Accounting		5	47	4.71
Planning	Being prepared for emergencies	4	1	4	4.37
	Having enough staff or volunteers on hand		2	15	4.93
	Strategic planning		3	25	4.51
	Being prepared for each food distribution		4	44	4.91
Communications	Soliciting cash donations	5	1	5	4.44
	Telling your pantry's story to the public		2	9	4.81
	Soliciting food donations		3	19	4.56
	Writing newsletters		4	32	3.38
	Maintaining a website		5	36	3.49
	Letting people in need know you are there to help		6	39	4.86
	Managing social media		7	40	3.17
Governance	Training board members	6	1	17	4.65
	Recruiting board members		2	21	4.62
	Having an effective board of directors		3	33	4.88
	Having a clear mission/mission statement		4	37	4.93
	Having a clear vision for what the pantry wants to accomplish in the future		5	38	4.88
	Retaining board members		6	41	4.79
Operations	Recruiting people for leadership roles	7	1	2	4.84
	Recruiting new staff or volunteers		2	7	4.81
	Having an opportunity for customer feedback		3	23	4.62
	Training staff or volunteers		4	26	4.88
	Sponsoring, hosting, or supporting food drives		5	27	4.43
	Purchasing food from other sources		6	31	4.26
	Retaining staff or volunteers		7	34	4.95
	Ordering food from the food bank		8	42	4.86
	Picking up/receiving food from other sources		8	42	4.86
	Picking up/receiving food from the food bank		10	45	4.91
	Customer intake/registration		11	46	4.95
	Handling food safely		12	48	4.95
	Sorting, shelving, and storing food		12	48	4.95
	Distributing food		14	50	4.98

Appendix D:

Full Survey results - All Regions

Category	Activity	Category Rank	Within Category Activity Rank	Overall Activity Rank	Average Importance
Programs & Partnerships	Offering educational programs in-house	1	1	5	3.47
	Soliciting produce donations from local gardeners/farmers		2	9	3.89
	Hosting, sponsoring, or supporting a community garden		3	12	3.22
	Giving referrals to educational programs hosted by outside agencies		4	17	3.76
	Offering related services in-house		5	23	3.77
	Providing referrals to services offered by outside agencies		6	37	4.18
Planning	Being prepared for emergencies	2	1	4	4.16
	Having enough staff or volunteers on hand		2	14	4.85
	Strategic planning		3	15	4.41
	Being prepared for each food distribution		4	40	4.92
Communications	Soliciting cash donations	3	1	3	4.17
	Soliciting food donations		2	8	4.55
	Telling your pantry's story to the public		3	10	4.52
	Managing social media		4	25	3.1
	Maintaining a website		5	27	3.32
	Writing newsletters		6	28	3.04
	Letting people in need know you are there to help		7	32	4.78
Facilities	Having enough refrigeration	4	1	11	4.76
	Having reliable computer software		2	13	4.25
	Having enough freezer space		3	18	4.81
	Having enough parking		4	19	4.65
	Having good office space		5	24	4.24
	Having reliable computer hardware		6	26	4.3
	Having a sound building		7	30	4.81
	Having reliable internet access		8	35	4.23
Financial	Grant writing	5	1	1	3.92
	Fundraising		2	7	4.16
	Long-term budgeting		3	20	4.62
	Short-term budgeting		4	43	4.53
	Accounting		5	47	4.65
Governance	Recruiting board members	6	1	16	4.05
	Training board members		2	21	4.06
	Having an effective board of directors		3	33	4.45
	Having a clear vision for what the pantry wants to accomplish in the future		4	36	4.77
	Retaining board members		5	38	4.22
	Having a clear mission/mission statement		6	39	4.71
Operations	Recruiting people for leadership roles	7	1	2	4.36
	Recruiting new staff or volunteers		2	6	4.52
	Sponsoring, hosting, or supporting food drives		3	22	4.14
	Training staff or volunteers		4	29	4.79
	Having an opportunity for customer feedback		5	31	4.36
	Retaining staff or volunteers		6	34	4.83
	Picking up/receiving food from other sources		7	41	4.63
	Customer intake/registration		8	42	4.86
	Purchasing food from other sources		9	44	3.98
	Ordering food from the food bank		10	45	4.84
	Handling food safely		11	46	4.96
	Picking up/receiving food from the food bank		12	48	4.81
	Sorting, shelving, and storing food		13	49	4.92
	Distributing food		14	50	4.96

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