

## **Food Banks**

### **Overview**

Food banks are non-profit, community-based organizations that provide a variety of foods at low or no cost to charitable feeding organizations – such as food pantries, meal sites and shelters - which in turn provide food or meals free to low-income households. Food banks typically do not serve households directly although there are some exceptions. Many emergency feeding organizations rely on food banks to provide a dependable source of food each month to supplement their own inventories of donated and purchased foods. “Food Rescue” organizations are a specialized type of food bank that collect and distribute prepared meals and perishable foods to community feeding organizations. However in recent years this line has become increasingly blurred as more food banks routinely distribute prepared and perishable products.

Wisconsin food banks belong either to the Second Harvest network or are considered independent or unaffiliated food banks. There are 7 Second Harvest food banks serving all 72 counties, including four located in Wisconsin and three in Minnesota.

- America’s Second Harvest of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (Milwaukee)
- America’s Second Harvest of Wisconsin–Fox Valley (Omro)
- Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin (Madison)
- Feed My People Food Bank (Eau Claire)
- Second Harvest Heartland (St. Paul)
- Second Harvest Northern Lakes Food Bank (Duluth)
- Channel One Food Bank (Rochester)

There are at least four independent food banks in Wisconsin primarily serving 6 counties.

- The Hunger Task Force (Milwaukee)
- The Community Action Coalition for South Central Wisconsin (Madison)
- The Racine County Food Bank (Racine)
- The Hunger Task Force of La Crosse (La Crosse)

In addition, a network of 16 agencies coordinate the distribution of USDA commodities – known as “TEFAP” – free to hundreds of emergency food providers statewide<sup>1</sup>. Although several TEFAP coordinating agencies are independent food banks, most oversee the distribution of mainly commodities in their areas. This network is described in detail in the “TEFAP” Topic Paper.

### **Eligibility for Services**

Non-profit, community-based emergency feeding organizations in the food bank’s service area are eligible for membership if they meet the food bank’s standards. Members include food pantries, meal sites, homeless shelters & domestic violence shelters. Second Harvest food banks also typically allow other non-profit charitable programs to become members, including day care centers, senior centers, housing programs, youth service organizations (Scouting programs, Boys

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<sup>1</sup> TEFAP refers to The Emergency Food Assistance Program, the federal nutrition program that is the source of USDA commodities. Thirteen Community Action Agencies (CAAs) and three non-CAAs coordinate the statewide distribution of commodities free of charge to nearly 300 emergency food providers located in every county.

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& Girls clubs, YMCAs and YWCAs), some schools, and others. Most food banks do not charge annual membership fees, but those that do typically issue a credit in the same amount that members can apply toward the cost of shared maintenance fees for food they receive.

### **Access/Participation**

An estimated 1,600 Wisconsin agencies of all kinds are served by Second Harvest food banks, while Independent food banks serve an estimated 200 agencies – primarily emergency food providers. There is some overlap, however, since some emergency food providers in the Second Harvest network are also served by Independent food banks. The vast majority of Wisconsin's estimated 900+ food pantries utilize food bank services at varying intervals. While the majority of the 250,000 low-income people served monthly by Wisconsin food pantries receive some food bank foods, the total people served monthly by all agencies utilizing food banks is not available.

### **Services Provided**

Food banks typically provide a variety of shelf stable foods, as well as perishable, refrigerated, and frozen foods. Many also provide fresh produce, especially during the summer and fall. They obtain food from a wide variety of sources including food drives and donations, local purchases, donations from manufacturers, retail stores, wholesalers, farmers, USDA commodities, produce from gardens, and increasingly prepared foods from restaurants, cafeterias, and other establishments that serve prepared meals. Most stock some non-food items like cleaning supplies and personal care products.

Second Harvest food banks distribute an estimated 20 million pounds of food annually to Wisconsin agencies. Independent food banks distribute an estimated 13 million pounds of food annually. Many food banks offer delivery services, but there is wide variation in availability and cost. This ranges from full delivery at no cost, to delivery for a fee, to limited delivery in a fixed range, to no delivery services at all.

Food banks are also a valuable source of information for their members on federal nutrition programs, public policy issues, hunger-related news and research, and grant opportunities. They also provide technical assistance to their members on food safety, food storage, program administration and other issues. Many host regular conferences as a service to their members. Some also provide limited direct services to low-income families by means of mobile food pantries, Kids Cafés and other food programs.

### **Program Impact**

Many emergency feeding organizations rely on food banks to provide a dependable source of food to supplement their inventories of donated and purchased foods. Food banks help emergency food providers to stretch their food budgets, and enable them to offer their clients a larger volume of food, greater variety, more nutritional balance and a more dependable supply than they would be able to provide on their own. They have also contributed significantly to improving food safety and service quality through technical assistance and monitoring visits.

### **Positive Developments & Trends**

- Greater availability of fresh produce from local gardens or farm production.

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- Greater recovery of prepared & perishable food from restaurants, cafeterias and other sources.
- Increasing use of the internet. “Virtual food drives” enable donors to “purchase” cases of food online and pay with a credit/debit card. Food banks use the funds to buy bulk foods.
- Better collection of monthly service statistics from Second Harvest and TEFAP providers.
- Some use of mobile food pantries to reach underserved communities.

### **Concerns, Problems & Negative Trends**

- Food pantries in many areas must travel considerable distances to a food bank. In those rural areas where delivery is limited or unavailable this can severely restrict access to food. Rising gas prices are exacerbating the difficulty. Rural pantries have significant need for food bank services since community sources of food donations are limited.
- Wisconsin – unlike OH, MN & PA - does not provide state funds to pantries to buy food from food banks or local markets. Greater financial stress and limited use of federal food programs has increased food pantries’ need for food. Limited pantry funds can seriously restrict their ability to pay “shared maintenance fees” effectively limiting access to food.
- Because food banks depend on industry donations a significant amount of food can be high in sugar, fat & carbohydrates, exacerbating the obesity risk of poor households. There is a limited availability of food that meets special dietary and ethnic requirements.
- Commercial improvements in production & inventory controls mean fewer product overruns and marketing errors, and less food near expiration. Growing foreign markets are also reducing surplus supplies. This combination of factors is impacting industry food donations.
- Wisconsin - unlike OH & MN - has no program to buy and process agricultural surplus from Wisconsin farmers into useable food products for food bank distribution.
- Competition between local agencies and food banks for limited food/monetary donations has created tension in some areas. As demand for food increases, conflicts may increase. There is no statewide forum to explore strategies to reduce conflicts and increase coordination.
- There is no statewide network among Wisconsin food banks to improve coordination.

### **Food Banks would be more effective if...**

- Wisconsin provided state funding – as many other states do - to support food pantry operations, including food purchases from food banks and transportation costs.
- All food banks provided free or low cost delivery throughout their entire service areas.
- Wisconsin offered a surplus agriculture purchase program to buy surplus farm product that would otherwise be destroyed, and packaged it for emergency food providers.
- Food banks increased efforts to engage pantries in connecting households to federal nutrition programs and other key programs that reduce poverty and demand for emergency food.
- There was a statewide association, network or coalition of Second Harvest, independent and TEFAP agencies to improve communication and coordination among food banks.
- There was an annual campaign by faith-based and secular organizations to increase hunger awareness and raise local donations of food and funding for food pantries and food banks.