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# MIDDLESEX COUNTY EMERGENCY FOOD ORGANIZATIONS AND NON-FOOD SERVICES DURING THE COVID PANDEMIC



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# INTRODUCTION

Food pantries, often small volunteer-operated non-profit organizations, provide food and non-food goods to clients who need them. Some pantries also provide service referrals and a few provide direct services. During the pandemic, many food pantries saw an increase in the number and share of clients with non-food needs especially related to housing, utilities, transportation, paying bills, healthcare, and help filing for unemployment assistance. This increase in non-food needs emerged in a context in which many households lost work.<sup>1</sup> Middlesex County's unemployment rate peaked at 14.8% in May 2020.<sup>2</sup> To survive, some people drained their savings and retirement accounts while others borrowed from family and friends and or sought assistance from food pantries.<sup>3</sup> Some needed help accessing systems for the first time while others found it challenging to access programs that expanded or were modified in the context of the pandemic.

Over the last forty years, food pantries and the emergency food system have grown exponentially as demand for food and other services has grown. With the increase in non-food needs, the increasing role of food pantries as primary access points to the social service system (including housing), and changes to governmental programs during the pandemic, food pantry directors asked for guidance to navigate these systems. The Ralph W. Voorhees Public Service Fellows' 2020 report [\*Understanding the Impacts of COVID-19 on People, Pantries and Practices in the Emergency Food System\*](#) found that many Middlesex County food pantries experienced an increase in demand for non-food services during the pandemic. To learn more, the Rutgers University Collaborative Center for Community-Based Research and Service and the Ralph W. Voorhees Center for Civic Engagement, in partnership with REPLENISH, the Middlesex County Food Bank, conducted 10 interviews with Middlesex County food pantries in

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Parker, Rachel Minkin, and Jesse Bennett, "Economic Fallout FROM Covid-19 Continues to Hit Lower-Income Americans the Hardest," Pew Research Center's Social and Demographic Trends Project (Pew Research Center, May 28, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/09/24/economic-fallout-from-covid-19-continues-to-hit-lower-income-americans-the-hardest/>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Unemployment Rate in Middlesex County, NJ [NJMIDD2URN], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/NJMIDD2URN>, August 11, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Kim Parker, Rachel Minkin, and Jesse Bennett, "Economic Fallout FROM Covid-19 Continues to Hit Lower-Income Americans the Hardest," Pew Research Center's Social and Demographic Trends Project (Pew Research Center, May 28, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/09/24/economic-fallout-from-covid-19-continues-to-hit-lower-income-americans-the-hardest/>.



June 2021 over Zoom (see Table 1). REPLENISH Director Jennifer Apostol provided a list of pantries to contact. The research team asked pantry staff questions about the types of non-food requests they receive, how they respond to these requests, and what type of information would be most useful to their efforts. Once the interview was complete, the research team asked the interviewees to review the notes to make sure the team captured their thoughts accurately. The team then analyzed the data and drafted this report. Though this is a small sample of food pantries, it offers some insight about the non-food challenges that pantries confronted during the pandemic, and it provides some idea about the type of information that might be useful to pantries moving forward. The remainder of the report examines the forms of non-food assistance clients sought and how pantry staff navigated the demand for these services during the pandemic through July of 2021, and it identifies the forms of information and resources that staff and volunteers prefer moving forward.

Table 1: Organizations Interviewed

Organization	Municipality	Interviewee
St. Paul's Lutheran Church	Edison	James Krombholz
First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen	Metuchen	Sarah Teti
Edison Housing Authority Food Pantry	Edison	Raquel Landero
Middlesex County College Food Pantry	Edison	Amanda Lyons
Aldersgate Outreach Community Center Food Pantry	East Brunswick	Diane Hutchens
New Life Pantry	Helmetta	Kristen Tabert
Highland Park Community Food Pantry	Highland Park	Nicole Huff
St. James Food Pantry	Woodbridge	Peggy Foley
South River Food Pantry	South River	Elizabeth Lukacs
New Destiny Family Worship Center North Brunswick	North Brunswick	Julienne Whitten



## THE DEMAND FOR NON-FOOD ASSISTANCE

Food pantry staff and volunteers witnessed an increase in non-food needs and requests for assistance during the pandemic from a variety of groups including families, senior citizens, individuals and students. Some pantries received requests for non-food services once a week, some several times a week, and others daily. The frequency changed over the course of the pandemic depending in part on the timing of lock downs and the availability of unemployment insurance and other support. Some interviewees reported a sharp increase in demand for housing assistance during the initial six months of the pandemic and again from May through July 2021. Even before the pandemic, requests for non-food assistance vary throughout the year. Requests for utilities such as heat increase in the winter. Similarly, in the summer months, there is an increase in need for food and healthcare assistance because younger children don't have access to the resources they usually receive at school.

During the pandemic, interviewees identified housing, utilities, transportation, healthcare, and employment as the most common areas where clients need help. Other types of non-food services include paying bills, obtaining baby supplies and other household necessities, and accessing technology. Nearly all of the pantries (8 of the 10) receive requests for housing assistance. Clients ask for help paying rent, water, gas, or electric bills as well as accessing emergency shelter, finding permanent housing, and covering security deposits. They also asked for assistance paying funeral costs, accessing affordable healthcare or medicine, and paying for gas or public transit to access medicine or food. Given the dramatic increase in unemployment during the pandemic, it is perhaps not surprising that pantry staff and volunteers also saw an increase in clients seeking help to navigate New Jersey unemployment insurance system (see Figure 1).



A bar chart titled 'Number of Requests' on the y-axis and 'Types of Requests' on the x-axis. The y-axis ranges from 0 to 8 with increments of 2. The x-axis lists six categories: Housing, Utilities, Transportation, Health, Employment, and Other. The bars are teal. The values for each category are: Housing (8), Utilities (7), Transportation (4), Health (4), Employment (3), and Other (6).

Types of Requests	Number of Requests
Housing	8
Utilities	7
Transportation	4
Health	4
Employment	3
Other	6

In addition to food, some pantries distribute information about programs and/or provide referrals; some help their clients navigate social service systems, and a few provide direct assistance. Distributing flyers with program information is the most common activity pantries engage in. Most of the pantries we interviewed distributed the flyers that REPLENISH emails to them, especially when flyers are written in multiple languages. Many pantries also refer people to the 211 system which assists with housing, food, transportation, and healthcare. Nationally, the system receives more than 20 million requests for help each year, and it made more than 27.8 million connections to help connect people to resources and services in 2020.<sup>4</sup> A few interviewees mentioned challenges that clients face understanding how the 211





system works and knowing what to expect when they call. Pantry staff explained that navigating the system can be difficult and it is easy to get lost. They also observed increased challenges when clients lack the documents and information that the 211 system requests, such as an address, phone number, and email account. Accessing documents may be especially challenging for clients who lack secure housing, and without a phone, it may be challenging for 211 to remain in contact to follow-up with clients who need services. A few pantries work more closely with clients to identify people, programs, or agencies who might help, and may help them navigate complex social service systems. Knowing where to go for help, filling out forms, and following up can be difficult, especially in an emergency, where clients may lack a phone, access to the Internet, and or a permanent home. Even with access to the Internet, clients may lack digital literacy skills to find information.

Though some pantries have developed relationships and know where to turn for some social service needs (which was especially challenging during the pandemic when some offices were closed), many struggle when it comes to finding the pathways to support emergency and especially long term housing solutions. Some staff and volunteers provide referrals to these resources while others personally help their clients navigate the systems. Some interviewees have built networks that include especially strong relationships with particular agencies or organizations. These relationships seem to be the most effective at ensuring that clients reach the services they need and can be mutually beneficial for pantries and social service organizations. In some cases, these relationships ensure that visitors who approach the food pantries are woven into housing systems and those who enter the social service systems access food. As relationships develop, they refer clients to each other. Though some pantries have built relationships and networks, most find it especially challenging to know where to turn when clients who visit the pantry ask for assistance, especially related to housing.

Pantry staff and volunteers face a variety of challenges in locating and providing assistance. Many pantries are operated by volunteers and their purpose has not historically been as a central access point to the social service system. But as visitors have shared needs with pantry staff and volunteers, pantries have built some capacity to link people to the services they need. But this is a challenging activity as social service and housing resource systems may not be clear and change over time. Though people try to create and maintain directories, they are often quickly out of date. And even for systems that are set up, pantry staff and volunteers may be uncertain what first steps to take and what should happen after that to ensure that clients get the resources they need. For example, they may see clients start down a



social service road only to have them come back to the pantry each week or month to share how they weren't able to find permanent housing or they grew frustrated and did not know where to turn next. The interviewees face additional challenges as well. For example, many food pantry staff and volunteers are mono-lingual and may be unable to effectively communicate with all of the families who use their pantries. Though some pantry directors use Google Translate to communicate, that does not solve all challenges related to navigating complex social service systems.

## **RESOURCES TO HELP PANTRIES RESPOND TO NON-FOOD NEEDS**

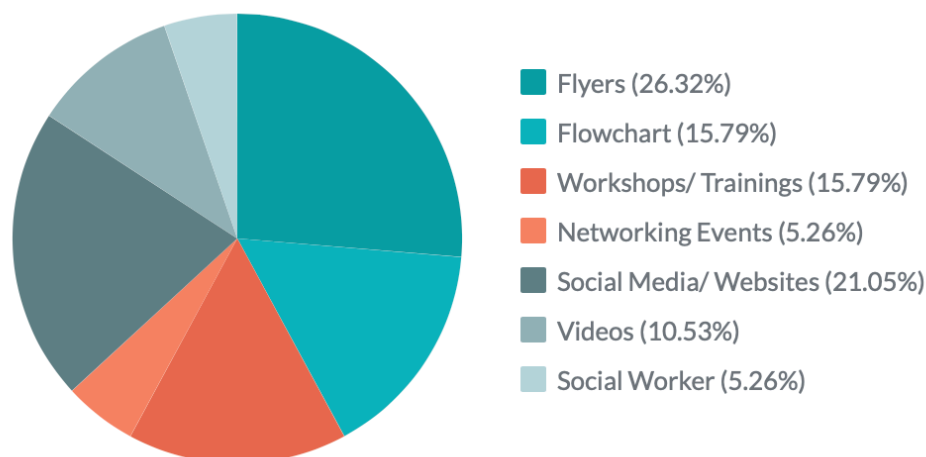
Most pantries do not provide direct social services and some pantries solely focus on foods and some non-food goods. These pantries may not need or want additional guidance about how to direct clients to non-food services and housing. Others would like simple easy-to-use resources that could help them to support the clients who visit their pantries. The interviewees we talked with especially asked for assistance with, and a clear articulation of, the steps needed to navigate through the social services system and especially the housing system. Pantry staff and volunteers want to know:

- How does the social service system work? Where do we start?
- If we get to point A, how do we get to point B?
- What is the structure beyond 211?
- What services do other organizations offer?

All of the pantries interviewed are interested in learning about resources and want to better understand the social services system. Many find that networking is essential to doing both. Some interviewees suggested hosting workshops to train volunteers about available resources and/or to provide informational sessions for clients. Prior to the pandemic, some pantries had social service organizations, health organizations and utility providers speak with clients or distribute information about how to access resources at pantries. To a lesser extent they were also interested in videos, training, and workshops (see Figure 2).

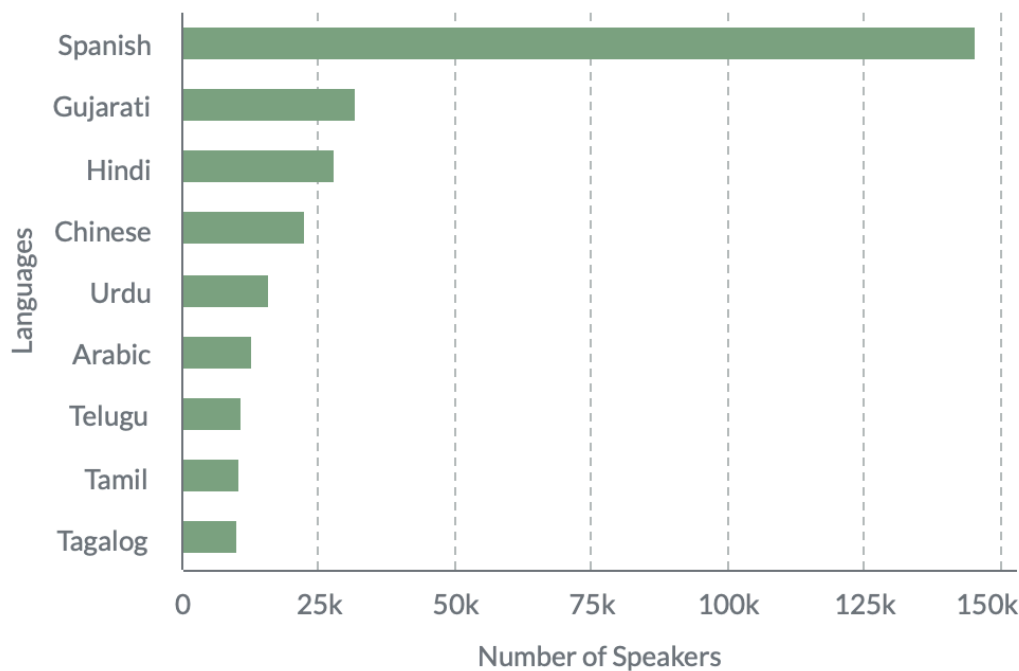


Figure 2: Suggestions to Assisting Food Pantries with Non-Food Needs



In addition to making these systems and the pathways through them more transparent or legible, pantry staff asked for flyers and access to websites and social media that would provide resources in multiple languages. Some interviewees stress that written information needs to be available in multiple languages such as Arabic, Spanish, and Mandarin. In Middlesex County Spanish, Gujarati, and Hindi are the top three non-English languages spoken (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Top 9 Non-English Languages Spoken in Middlesex County, New Jersey



It is likely that there is no one resource that will be useful to all pantries. Instead, a mix of efforts may be needed. Pantry staff and volunteers clearly use and appreciate flyers, especially in multiple languages. Creating a central repository of all available food and non-food resources, including a wide variety of flyers, could enable them to access resources as they need them rather than by email which can be overwhelming. Some interviewees suggest using social media which they thought could help distribute resources throughout the community. Pantry staff also stressed the importance of opportunities to build networks and relationships. Finally, they asked for explicit directions about how to navigate social services and housing systems. If clients come to them with specific problems, pantries want to know where they can find the resources to help them, and they want to know how to help clients navigate through those systems from the start to a finish point that ensures that the person has received the needed forms of assistance. Though most pantries will focus on distributing information through fliers, some would like a housing and social services “map” to make complex systems legible.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research creates a greater understanding of the kinds of non-food forms of assistance visitors request in pantries, how pantry staff and volunteers help them now and the challenges they face, and the forms of assistance that pantries would like to support their work. Especially during the pandemic, pantry staff are doing what they can to bridge the gap between their clients and non-food resources by providing flyers, referrals, helping clients navigate complex social service and housing systems, and assisting directly through monetary contributions. To aid their work, they ask for a set of supports that we capture in the suggestions below:

### County

- Create a one stop online multilingual shop with fliers, resources, and information about how to navigate social service and housing programs. Provide printed flyers at REPLENISH for pantries that lack the ability to download or duplicate flyers.
- Create guidebooks that explain how to apply for some of the most common forms of social assistance such as SNAP.
- Share a list of contacts in a centralized database or platform for pantry staff and volunteers to refer to when confronted with a client needing non-food services.



- Make a fact sheet about 211 that answers the following questions:
  - What is it?
  - How does it work?
  - What information do clients need to have available and what happens if they do not have this information?
  - What does the timeline look like for clients?
  - What is the most useful role of food pantries in facilitating access to it?
- Provide linkages to unemployment resources answering that address the following questions:
  - How to apply for unemployment benefits?
  - How to receive unemployment benefits?
  - Where can a client find assistance in working through the process?
- Provide guidance about how to access housing assistance including emergency and permanent housing along with rental and utility assistance.

### Organization

- Host networking events to help food pantries meet and build relationships with service providers.
- Build relationships with SNAP-Ed to support client applications for SNAP benefits especially given the recent federal benefit increase.
- Share a list of contacts in a centralized database or platform for pantry staff and volunteers to refer to when confronted with a client needing non-food services.

Food pantries have become a vital access point for people who need more than food. Many pantries are volunteer run and need coordinated, thoughtful, regularly updated resources that enable them to link the visitors who come through their doors with the services that can change their lives.

