

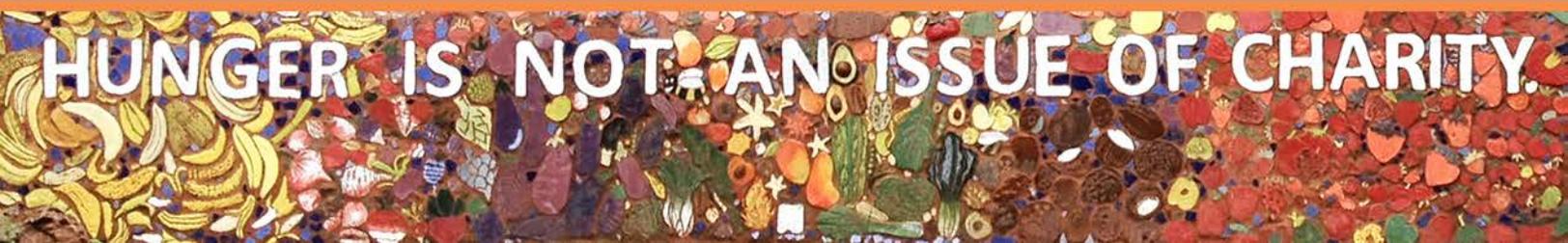


Health Impact Assessment

Improving the
Quality and Quantity of Food
in Southwest New Mexico
Food Pantries

Executive
Summary

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HUNGER IS NOT AN ISSUE OF CHARITY.



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Food is Life tile mural on the grounds of the Commons at The Volunteer Center, Silver City, NM. Created in partnership with the Mimbres Region Arts Council Youth Mural Program, Aldo Leopold Charter School YCC program, The Wellness Coalition YCC program, Diana Ingalls Leyba and Alison Phillips. 2015.

Hunger is not an issue of charity, it's an issue of justice. – Jacques Divut

El hambre no es un tema de caridad. Es un tema de justicia. – Jacques Divut



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We also want to thank the members of the HIA Steering Committee, many who also serve on the Southwest New Mexico Food Policy Council. Their time, wisdom, guidance and thoughtful feedback were invaluable in carrying out the broad scope of this project.

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To all the TEFAP food recipients who've shared their personal and powerful stories, and participated in surveys, meetings and interviews, we are very grateful and appreciative. We hope that the recommendations outlined in this report result in future actions that contribute to your future well-being in a meaningful way.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

THE FOCUS OF THIS HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENT, or HIA, is the complex food distribution system for low-income persons in southwestern New Mexico, defined here as Catron, Grant, Hidalgo and Luna counties. New Mexico ranks among the worst states in the nation in both hunger and poverty, both contributing factors to food insecurity; commonly understood as the inability to access sufficient quantities of healthy, safe and nutritious foods. According to Feeding America's 2015 *Map the Meal Gap study*, New Mexico has the fourth highest rate of food insecurity in the country at 17 percent, and is among the worst 10 states for food insecurity among seniors. Moreover, Luna County has the second-highest rate of child food insecurity (21%) among 89 Latino-majority counties in the United States. (Feeding America, 2015).

This HIA came about due to concerns among members of the Southwest New Mexico Food Policy Council that the quantity of food distributed through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's "emergency" food program – TEFAP – has decreased, and that the nutritional value is questionable, in part because it is often difficult to create balanced meals with the food distributed. Moreover, Council members, several of whom are also food pantry coordinators, describe a system in "crisis," straining under increased demand, a frayed social safety net, an aging population with chronic health problems and a high percentage of people with disabilities. It is clear that The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) is no longer a source of emergency food, but a *primary* source of food among low-income individuals and families in the region.

This study addresses three key issues related to the current state of this regional food distribution system:

- Quantity of food and how that quantity is determined.
- The nutritional value or quality of food received and distributed.
- The unique infrastructure issues faced by rural and frontier communities as they struggle to address growing food insecurity.

Key findings are highlighted below, and outlined in greater detail in the full report. To better understand the relevance of these findings, it is important to understand the characteristics of food insecurity and its implications for the southwestern region of New Mexico.





Key Findings



Households Rely on TEFAP and Other Pantry Food as a Primary Food Source

More than 77 percent of TEFAP recipients surveyed as part of this study reported that they rely on pantry food as a major food source. Limited resources and infrastructure to collect, store and distribute food limits food access in rural and frontier areas. As such, local food pantries are highly dependent upon food banks as the major—or only—source of food.

Growing dependence on food assistance programs among hungry people in southwestern New Mexico reflects national trends. Feeding America's *Hunger in America 2014* report states that nationally, more and more households rely on charitable food assistance because they are operating with a highly restricted budget and may not have enough money for food (Weinfield, et al., 2014).

Based on survey results of 538 food pantry recipients in the four-county region, food pantry recipients are likely to:

- Be age 65 or older. The four-county average for persons aged 65 and older is 24 percent; significantly higher than the state average of 15 percent. More than one-third of TEFAP survey respondents reported being in this age group.
- Be disabled or have a family member who is disabled (45 percent), compared to an average statewide rate of 19 percent (NM-IBIS, 2014).
- Have children in the home (32 percent).
- Mirror the ethnic breakdown of the region with slightly more Native Americans and slightly less whites; survey respondents self-identified as 51 percent Hispanic, 29 percent white, and 7 percent Native American.
- Experience barriers to accessing nutritious food, such as insufficient money or transportation. Nearly 16 percent said that the cost of transportation often or always is a difficulty, and more than 50 percent said that they sometimes, often, or always ate less to make food supplies last.
- Lack access to a grocery store. Less than half of the respondents were within five miles of the nearest grocery store. More than 15 percent travel 25 miles or more (50 miles round trip) to reach a grocery store.



Unemployment and Poverty Rates do not Adequately Reflect Food Insecurity

The primary focus of the HIA regarding quantity of food distributed was the formula used by both the federal and state governments to determine the quantity of food received by each county for distribution by local food pantries. TEFAP is administered by the USDA, and uses a simple formula to determine the quantity of food and program administrative funds that will be given to each state: 60 percent is based on the number of households living in poverty, and 40 percent is based on unemployment. In New Mexico, the Human Services Department Food and Nutrition Services Bureau (NMHSD/FANS) is responsible for the management of the TEFAP program, and uses the same 60 percent poverty/40 percent unemployment formula for determining the quantity of food to be distributed to each county.

The central hypothesis to be tested in the HIA study with regard to the TEFAP formula was: Could the formula be changed to better reflect the true need in rural and frontier counties, and take into account the added burdens that such communities face to distribute food that their urban and suburban counterparts do not? (*See Key Findings: Insufficient Infrastructure is a Barrier to Accessing Healthy Food, below.*)

One important finding of this study is that the federal government's poverty and unemployment rates are problematic. These measures do not accurately capture the number or characteristics of New Mexicans who are food insecure. The official poverty measure (OPM), the federal government's official estimate of how many people live in poverty, was established over fifty years ago and does not take into account the family structures, common expenses or public assistance of modern households. Researchers have studied the OPM over the past decade and propose options that are a more accurate reflection of present-day household expenses such as childcare, housing, health care, transportation and insurance costs. (*See Key Findings: What if the criteria used in the TEFAP distribution formula were changed?, in the full report*)

HIA Steering Committee members also voiced many concerns with regard to government unemployment figures. They are not "real time" numbers and therefore do not accurately reflect current need; they do not include people who have simply given up looking for work or the underemployed. Further, the unemployment rates exclude the high percentage of seniors and disabled persons who are no longer in the work force, and who will rely on TEFAP and other food sources for the remainder of their lives.



A higher proportion of older New Mexicans reside in rural and frontier regions of the state than in urban areas, many of who are food insecure and do not or cannot work. A growing senior population should be of particular concern to policy makers in New Mexico, given that the proportion of the population over 60 is increasing. Moreover, nearly 50 percent of TEFAP food recipients surveyed as part of this study report that they or someone in their household is disabled.

Finally, unemployment does not address the wage gap in America nor what constitutes a living wage; the many working poor families who may not qualify for supplemental food programs, but who don't earn enough to adequately feed their families; or the population of older adults—aged 50 to 59—who are too young for Medicare or Social Security, are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed, and are often ineligible for government assistance designed for families with children. This is the largest age group in New Mexico.

In an effort to identify better measures of people in need of food, the HIA team used two substitutions for unemployment in the TEFAP formula – food insecurity and health outcomes. It was found that substituting unemployment with either of these criteria would actually reduce the total amount of TEFAP food distributed to the four-county region. (See “*HIA Predictions*” in the full report.)

Source and Quantity of Pantry Food Varies Widely by County

A survey of the majority of food pantry coordinators in the region found that the food pantries rely almost entirely on Roadrunner Food Bank (RRFB), one of five regional food banks in the state and a member of the Feeding America network, for their food supply. Over half of the region's food pantries reported that 100 percent of the food distributed at the pantry came from RRFB; nationwide about 70 percent of the pantry food distributed comes from Feeding America member food banks (Weinfield, et al., 2014)

Fewer than half of the pantries surveyed receive food from local food drives, local food donations, or food that is rescued from being thrown away or left to rot in fields and orchards. Of the total amount of RRFB food distributed by the local food pantries in fiscal year 2015, the percentage of TEFAP food varied significantly, ranging from 41 percent in Hidalgo County to just one (1) percent in Catron County. Statewide, TEFAP food accounted for 18 percent of the total food distributed by food banks in fiscal year



BONNIE CLARK, 57, IS A NATIVE NEW MEXICAN who relies on food from the pantry at The Volunteer Center of Grant County. Bonnie has a number of chronic health problems, including hypertension and high cholesterol, sleep apnea and diabetes, but was denied disability some years ago.

She has been unemployed since the death of her husband 13 years ago, whom she cared for through his cancer treatment. She chose to stay home and care for her children, which seemed like the best choice following the death of their young father. Today, she's working hard to find employment, but the gap in her resume, combined with health issues and a sluggish economy, have made that search difficult.

Her story isn't tragic, she says, "It's a human story. You just do what you have to do, and keep going. That's life."

2015 (Source: RRFB, personal communication, August 27, 2015). The study also revealed that the amount of TEFAP food varies significantly from year to year, increasing or decreasing from one year as much as 65 percent. In years where there are significant decreases in TEFAP food, food banks and food pantries are left to make up the difference through food purchases, donations and rescue.

Distributing food to hungry people is no easy task, and it should be noted that RRFB staff have increased the total amount of food available for distribution—nearly double the annual goal of Feeding America, a national network of food banks and a major source of non-TEFAP foods. Meeting increasing demand is challenging, particularly given that the amount of TEFAP food available from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) fluctuates so much. In 2014, RRFB distributed more than 28 million pounds of food, a 72 percent increase from 2004. (See full report for a detailed review of the food distribution system.)

Many Food Items Received and Distributed Lack Nutritional Value; Cranberries and Pasta for Dinner?

With regard to nutrition and the quality of food received by food pantries for distribution, the overall finding is rather alarming, and should be of great concern to policy makers at all levels of government: A significant portion of the food supply is lacking in nutritional value and will likely exacerbate existing chronic health conditions, which are both debilitating and costly.

Nutrition is clearly correlated with a host of chronic health conditions. This HIA examined the relationship between food insecurity and obesity, heart disease, diabetes, depression and asthma. (See “*Current Conditions*” in the full report.)

The Milken Institute found that in 2003, the cost of treating chronic health conditions in New Mexico was \$1.2 billion, and the lost productivity costs totaled another \$5.8 billion. With no changes to the current system, by 2023 those numbers balloon to \$3.9 billion in treatment costs, and nearly \$20 billion in lost productivity (Milken Institute, 2007).

A key assumption made by the HIA team members at the beginning of this study was that TEFAP foods, because they are subject to USDA nutrition standards, would be of higher quality than other non-TEFAP foods that are distributed at the local food pantry level. However, the study found that though *individual* TEFAP food items received may be nutritious,



it's impossible to build nutritionally balanced meals around them. For instance, food pantry coordinators reported receiving cranberries in various forms for a period of 18 months or more, but insufficient protein sources. Reviewing the contents of one food distribution box, one pantry coordinator quipped, "Anyone for cranberries and pasta for dinner?"

Within the larger context of our highly complex, industrialized food system in the U.S., there are a number of key systemic problems impacting food distribution to people in need: (1) Food distribution is based on pounds of food rather than meals, and there is a pervasive idea that impacts the quality of food distributed: "a calorie is a calorie" and any food is better than none; (2) Retailers receive tax deductions for donating food that doesn't meet common nutrition standards; (3) TEFAP foods available for distribution are determined at least in part by special interest groups and agriculture policies of the federal government; and (4) regulations prohibit repackaging of large volume items, such as five-pound packages of ketchup or 45-pound bags of frozen chicken.

All of these problems impact the overall quality and nutritional value of food received and distributed. In each of the four counties studied, food pantry staff reported receiving the following "food" items:

- 627 pounds of *Propel*; flavored water with no nutritional value;
- moldy, stale bread;
- dozens of broken eggs;
- heavily frosted, smashed cakes and plastic buckets of maple-flavored frosting;
- cases of ginger-flavored marshmallow "peeps," the ubiquitous Easter basket stuffer;
- five-pound plastic "bladders" of ketchup;
- three-gallon bags of milk, which cannot legally be divided;
- heavy cases of Ensure, a sugary meal supplement beverage;
- 700 pounds of expired (use by date), sugar-laden yogurt; and
- spoiled produce.

Nutritional Standards Are Lacking Throughout the Food Distribution System

The study found that USDA and food banks have their own systems for assessing the nutritional value of food distributed, and there are several different tools available to food banks and food pantries that choose to monitor food quality. Currently, there is no agreement or consistency throughout the system regarding the definition of nutrition, what nutritional goals should be or how or what should be measured to ensure good nutrition.



TEFAP foods, which accounted for approximately 18 percent of all food distributed to food pantries in New Mexico in 2015, must meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which call for reduced levels of fat, sodium and sugar and recommended amounts of fruits, vegetables, grains, protein and oils.

RRFB currently uses Feeding America's Foods to Encourage (F2E) food nutrition standard to determine the nutritional value of food distributed. According to Feeding America, the product categories within *F2E* are more consistently inclusive of food items that meet the USDA 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and reflect the USDA MyPlate. The data is collected and used as a benchmark to compare the quality of RRFB food to other food banks within New Mexico, and throughout the nation. However, this data has not yet been shared publicly.

To help determine the nutritional value of the foods distributed, the team launched the first food quality pilot study to be conducted in New Mexico. The nutritional content of food distributed was evaluated over a three-month period; June through August 2015. The team evaluated a number of tools, and chose *Fooducate*, primarily for ease of use by food pantry coordinators and volunteers on busy distribution days. *Fooducate* is an application that "grades" the nutritional content of foods, either by entering a food type or by scanning the barcode of prepackaged foods.

Nutritional information is then calculated using *Fooducate's* algorithm, and the food receives a grade of A (10 points) through D- (1 point). The highest grades are awarded to whole fruits and vegetables, grains and other nutrient-dense foods. Highly processed foods, those containing high amounts of added sugars, or other controversial ingredients, receive the lowest grades.

The largest food pantry in each of the four counties participated in the three-month pilot study. Each month, the nutritional content of each food item distributed to TEFAP recipients was recorded. Results show significant variation among the four pilot pantry sites in the type of food each pantry received: protein; grains; highly processed; preserved produce; and fresh produce.

Insufficient Infrastructure is a Barrier to Accessing Healthy Food

In addition to a lack of physical infrastructure, rural and frontier communities face unique barriers and challenges to feeding the hungry that urban and suburban communities don't, such as geographic distance, limited economic opportunity, fewer jobs, higher rates of uninsured or underinsured



persons (resulting in higher out-of-pocket medical costs) and lower incomes. These economic conditions leave rural and frontier persons even more reliant on public food assistance.

If local communities and food pantries are left to fill the gap between available food and increasing demand, they must find funding to address a multitude of needs, including operating funds to compensate food pantry managers, who order, receive and package food, raise funds and manage a large number of volunteers. Money is also needed for capital improvements, including refrigerated and dry storage facilities, and transportation to recover and transport local foods. One pantry manager secured \$30,000 for cold storage, but without ongoing support to pay the \$1,200 monthly electrical bill, she is reluctant to move forward with this much-needed capacity improvement.

To better understand the concerns of food pantry staff and the conditions unique to food distribution in rural and frontier southwestern New Mexico, 13 food pantry coordinators were surveyed.

The survey identified a number of issues:

- They are unable accept food donations or rescue food left to rot in local fields and orchards because they lack storage and transportation. And this is occurring in a region where two of the four counties studied do not have a single licensed grocery store.
- This lack of storage and transportation limits the opportunity to build an inventory of sorts, so they are completely dependent on food deliveries from RRFB.
- The one-week ordering “window” to purchase food from RRFB inventory limits the opportunity to choose the most nutrient-rich foods from the total inventory available.
- Because the pantries are further from RRFB warehouses in Albuquerque, the cost per pound to distribute food to this region is higher compared to pantries that are closer to the warehouse. Although twice-per-month deliveries are possible, more frequent but smaller deliveries would drive up costs even further.
- Pantries do not have Internet access for recording delivery data electronically. Thus, recording information about who is receiving food and the quantity and quality of food received and distributed is burdensome. As a result, local food pantries and counties have to either depend on RRFB to compile, analyze and distribute data, or each pantry must manually collect the data to monitor trends over time.

According to the recent survey of food pantry customers in the four-county region 45% stated that they or a member of their household is disabled, and more than one-third are seniors aged 65 years or older.

These issues are exacerbated by several other barriers that impact access to food overall. TEFAP recipients in the four-county region were also surveyed to better understand their experience of food pantries, and to identify key barriers to accessing sufficient nutritious food. Following is a summary of survey findings and the common barriers experienced not only in Southwestern New Mexico, but also in other rural and frontier communities throughout the state:

1. Transportation. Transportation is a key barrier to accessing affordable and nutritious food for low-income, elderly and people with disabilities. According to the recent survey of food pantry customers in the four-county region 45 percent stated that they or a member of their household is disabled, and more than one-third are seniors aged 65 years or older. Seniors may no longer be able to drive for health and safety reasons, further reducing their access to any food supplies, emergency or otherwise.

More than a third of New Mexicans live in rural or frontier communities, yet more than 10 percent of New Mexicans of driving age do not own a vehicle. In Southwest New Mexico, this represents 618 households or families with little or no access to grocery stores or other food retailers, and who do not own a vehicle. Survey data indicate that though less than half of food pantry customers have had difficulty traveling to food donations, nearly 16 percent experience difficulty traveling to a food donation site due to transportation costs.

For low-income persons who do own a vehicle, they may not have enough money to purchase gas, pay for insurance and registration, or keep the vehicle properly maintained. Of the food pantry/TEFAP recipients surveyed, more than 56% stated that half or more than half of their income went to pay for food.

2. Limited Food Access. New Mexico suffers from a disparity of full service grocery stores across the state. There are approximately 250 full service grocery stores. This equates to approximately one grocery store per every 486 sq. miles. (NM Food and Agriculture Policy Council, 2005)

Across the region, an average of 23% of residents—nearly one in four—lack access to a grocery store

A 2010 USDA study found that in Catron County, 45 percent of low-income persons have little access to a grocery store. This includes 16 percent of low-income households with children, and 28 percent low-income households of seniors. Across the four-county region, an average of 23 percent of residents—nearly one in four—lack access to a grocery store. There are no grocery stores in Catron County where families and redeem their WIC or SNAP benefits. With so many people experiencing limited



access to normal food sources--particularly more vulnerable populations of children and seniors--this creates a greater reliance on emergency and other food supplies than may be experienced in more densely populated areas with greater access to food.

Additionally, smaller independent grocery stores, such as those typically found in rural and underserved urban areas, often lack refrigeration for fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as access to affordable wholesale distributors. Diets that are high in fat and processed foods and low in fresh fruits and vegetables contribute to high rates of obesity, diabetes, and other nutrition-related diseases.

3. Time and Distance. Though the majority of survey respondents were within five miles of a food pantry, nearly seven percent had to travel 50 miles or more round trip. Considering all sources of food, less than half of all survey respondents were within five miles of the nearest grocery store, and more than 15 percent must travel 25 miles or more one-way to reach the closest grocery store.

4. Insufficient Quantity of Food. When considering pantry food alone, 44 percent of survey respondents said they sometimes, often or always missed or skipped a meal, either because they had no food or no money to buy food. More than 50 percent of respondents said that they sometimes, often, or always ate less to make food supplies last.

Additional survey data shows that insufficient food is affecting work and school performance. Approximately 23 percent claim that work performance was affected due to hunger or lack of food and almost 20 percent said that school performance was affected because of hunger, lack of food, and skipped meals.

5. A Greater Reliance on Charitable Food Supplies. Of all survey respondents, 77 percent say they rely on food pantry food, and 47 percent report that their TEFAP food supply lasts approximately 1-2 weeks. Additionally:

- 71% visit food pantries monthly;
- Nearly half of survey respondents said they sometimes, often or always skipped paying bills or purchasing other necessities in order to purchase food, while 42 percent reported that they had not had to do so; and
- More than 50 percent of those who responded to the question claimed that they sometimes, often, or always ate less to make food supplies last.

77% say they rely on food pantry food, and 47% report that their TEFAP food supply lasts approximately one to two weeks.

6. Inconsistent Nutrition.

- Sixty-three percent of food pantry survey respondents said they cannot afford to eat “balanced meals” either some of the time, all or most of the time.
- Over one-half of respondents claimed they did not throw away any pantry food because it was spoiled. Slightly over one-third of respondents said that this happened on occasion, and a very small percentage, less than one percent, claimed to do this all of the time.

Top HIA Recommendations

The HIA team developed the final recommendations with input from HIA Steering Committee members, TEFAP recipients, food pantry coordinators and representatives from New Mexico food banks. While the study did not produce conclusive findings regarding the TEFAP distribution formula, it did reveal dissatisfaction among key stakeholders with the current criteria (unemployment and poverty) and an interest among those stakeholders to continue to explore options to those criteria. The findings support the need for additional discussion and action to improve and monitor the nutritional value of pantry food, and to improve the capacity of local food pantries to collect and distribute healthier foods that contribute to improved health outcomes. The study’s top recommendations are as follows:

1. USDA should increase both the TEFAP food supply and TEFAP administrative funds. Methods should be implemented to allow greater consistency and predictability in the amount of TEFAP food and administrative funding that is available annually to the states.
2. NMHSD/FANS should keep the current TEFAP distribution formula, but establish a statewide advisory committee to review, study and ultimately change the formula to more accurately reflect the true need for healthy food supplies at the local level. Additionally, this statewide advisory committee should ensure that all key stakeholders, particularly local food pantry managers and food recipients, are included in decisions that impact the food distribution system.
3. NMHSD/FANS should partner with other state and federal agencies to leverage funding to invest in rural and frontier food pantry infrastructure to improve food quantity, quality and access, by specifically:
 - Designating a portion of TEFAP administrative funds (perhaps in combination with other funding sources) to improve capacity for



Regional food banks should continue to invest in rural and frontier capacity

- food access and distribution by pantries in rural and frontier communities (including paid staff and funding operating expenses);
- Providing funding for capital needs, such as cold (and dry) storage; and transportation to collect, clean, package and distribute local food;
- Working with local pantries to determine specific infrastructure and capacity improvement goals;
- Improving data collection and sharing across the system; and
- Assisting with liability insurance options to cover volunteers who work off-site.

4. Ensure that the quality of food received and distributed at all levels of the system meets acceptable nutrition standards, by:

- First, determining acceptable nutrition standards;
- Using these standards to consistently monitor food quality at both the food bank and pantry levels, and share this information publically;
- Creating appropriate incentives (i.e. increased tax breaks for higher quality food donations) to improve the quality of food donations;
- Changing the measure of quantity of food distributed to nutritionally balanced meals, not pounds of food;
- Allowing food banks and local food pantry staff to repackage large quantities of quality food; and
- Ensuring that mobile food pantries receive the same quality of food as fixed pantries.

Additional Recommendations

Regional food banks should continue to invest in rural and frontier capacity to improve local food acquisition, storage, processing and distribution by:

- Working with local food pantries in the region to increase food deliveries to at least twice per month;
- Providing technical assistance to rural and frontier pantries to address needs they identify as priorities. Pantry priorities will be unique to each community and may include recruitment and retention of volunteers, collecting food from local sources, fundraising, increasing storage and/or transportation capacity, or data collection and analysis;
- Partnering with local food pantries to increase the amount of food available locally;
- Collaborating with local food pantries on fundraising and grant writing efforts; and

- Training food pantry coordinators how to make the healthiest purchases for their pantry customers.

Local food pantries can:

- Raise community and pantry customer awareness about hunger and its many negative health impacts;
- Explore the feasibility of creating a buying club for pantries within the four-county region to purchase food from food banks or other sources;
- Partner with regional food banks and/or community organizations to educate TEFAP recipients on proper storage, cooking and nutrition of pantry food;
- Partner with local health providers (often there is just one major health provider in the county) to screen for food insecurity and develop innovative ways to improve access to healthy food;
- Advocate for local investment to improve local food sustainability, access and distribution, perhaps by using capital investment funds; and
- Increase access to healthy local food by conducting food drives, fundraising (cash donations) and grant writing.

Conclusion

Investing in local food pantry capacity to access and distribute more nutritious food is essential to the health and well-being of New Mexico's most vulnerable populations.

The “emergency” food assistance system in New Mexico is constantly challenged to ensure there is enough nutritious food available, and that it is equitably distributed throughout the state. The food distribution network, comprised of five regional food banks and hundreds of local food pantries, struggles from year to year to meet the growing demand for food. Exacerbating this challenge is the inconsistent USDA TEFAP annual food and administrative support contributions, and how other USDA food programs such as the School Foods Authority’s Breakfast Program or the National School Lunch Program will impact the demand on food pantries. Moreover, low-income New Mexicans often turn to food pantries when other public food and nutrition programs—like SNAP or WIC—undergo funding cuts, when families cannot access grocery stores to redeem WIC and SNAP benefits, or when more stringent requirements result in more families losing their eligibility.



The fact is there is not enough nutritious food available to food pantries to meet current and future demand. Moving forward, local food pantries are expected to take a larger role in filling the increasing gap between food supply and demand. To do so, investment in the food system infrastructure is essential, particularly for rural and frontier food pantries that currently lack the capacity to access, store, package and distribute food, especially for local sources.

Finally, all participants of the food network—including regional food banks, local food pantries, state and federal agencies, food donors and policy makers—must step up efforts to ensure that more nutritious food, rather than poor quality and potentially harmful food, is accessible to our most vulnerable populations, to reduce and prevent costly nutrition-related health conditions.