How Have Wisconsin Food Pantries Experienced the COVID-19 Pandemic?
Results from Focus Groups with Food Pantry Coordinators
June 2022

BACKGROUND

In 2020, the University of Wisconsin-Madison partnered with Feeding Wisconsin to examine the experiences of food pantry visitors in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. With funding from the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP), Judith Bartfeld, PhD, led the team in the survey project, collaborating with School of Human Ecology colleagues Carolee Dodge Francis, EdD, Allison Hellenbrand, and Amy Washbush Hilgendorf, PhD (Center for Community and Nonprofit Studies or the CommNS). Stephanie Jung Dorfman, Executive Director of Feeding Wisconsin, partnered in the survey development, interpretation, and writing of the report.

This survey lifted up several important learnings about the experiences of food pantry visitors during the 2020 pandemic year and in particular, the increased vulnerabilities many households experienced. For instance, approximately 40% of respondents were new pantry users and these respondents more often reported pandemic-related employment impacts and less access to social insurance or food assistance programs. The results also suggested how some of the early pandemic responses of food pantries, like starting pop-up or mobile distributions, extended access safely to many households. (Visit the CommNS Knowledge website for the full report, Food Pantries During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Survey of Visitors to Feeding Wisconsin Network Pantries.)

With additional funding available through the School of Human Ecology, the CommNS research and evaluation team, Co-Create, was able to build on this survey project to add information from food pantry coordinators about their experiences in serving their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, we document the focus group process and key findings.
APPRAOCH

The goal for this sub-project was to develop a deeper understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on Wisconsin food pantries and the people they serve by gaining the perspectives of food pantry coordinators. To do this, we planned four one-hour virtual focus groups, organized by four regions of the state as identified by Feeding Wisconsin (northwest, northeast, southeast, and southwest/central).

For each region, Feeding Wisconsin provided a list of food pantry coordinators from their network to invite to participate. Coordinators indicated their interest in participating through an online form and provided some basic information about their food pantries. We offered a raffle of one complimentary registration to the 2022 Health and Hunger Summit to those who participated.

The Co-Create team (Amy Washbush Hilgendorf and Emma Flanagan) facilitated the focus groups using Zoom at the end of February and early March 2022 and utilized a protocol that asked about the challenges to pantries during the pandemic, coordinators’ observations of food pantry visitors during this time, pantries’ responses to challenges, and their perspectives on the lessons learned from this time. (See Appendix A for the focus group protocol.)

A total of 28 food pantry coordinators participated, from 4 to 10 coordinators per focus group. The coordinators represented pantries with varied characteristics (see Appendix B for additional demographics):

- 50% represented small pantries (less than 300 households per month)
- 68% represented mature pantries (established more than 3 years ago)
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- 39% served urban communities
- 36% were solely volunteer-run

After the focus groups, the Co-Create team reviewed the notes and meeting transcriptions and began a qualitative analysis to identify themes and patterns. We shared initial themes and patterns with Stephanie Jung Dorfman and Cecelia Schieve of Feeding Wisconsin and Judith Bartfeld, the survey project lead, to provide feedback and raise questions to inform the final analysis.

FINDINGS

What has the pandemic been like for Wisconsin food pantries?

Food pantry coordinators described many and frequent changes they had to make during the pandemic. This included various changes in safety protocols, including shifts to outdoor distribution, social distancing practices, and symptom monitoring for volunteers and visitors. Pantry coordinators also spoke of changes in how they sourced and distributed food, shifting to pre-packed boxes early in the pandemic that were distributed through drive-through or walk-up systems. However, because visitors could no longer select their own food, many coordinators were concerned about increased food waste, and they observed donations coming back to the pantry when visitors did not utilize the food that was in their box. Coordinators were thoughtful about maintaining desirable food options despite the limitations brought by the boxes.

Coordinators noted changes in the number of visitors that came to their food pantries, but this varied considerably. Some recalled significantly increased numbers of visitors and others significantly decreased numbers. Some noted changes in the characteristics of visitors coming to them, such as increased Latinx households visiting pantries in some parts of the state. They speculated that some of these households could not access the government income supports, such as the stimulus payments and pandemic EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) that others in the community could.

“Funding was certainly an interesting thing, how quickly that turned into our community. And donations, both from individuals who were getting all their stimulus money and didn’t feel like they really needed the money, so we were seeing a significant increase there. Also, we had a lot of volunteers in that time frame, because there were so many people without work, and they were just wanting to do something that kept them busy. But as soon as the stimulus program ended and a lot of people were going back to work, we definitely saw a dip in volunteers.”

– Food pantry coordinator, start-up, small, urban, volunteer-run

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Coordinators also often spoke of changes in their volunteers, with many of their older volunteers needing to stay home for safety concerns but also increases in working-age volunteers who had more flexibility with remote work. Several pantry coordinators noted an early “community outpouring” with increased donations and volunteers.

Many expressed a sense that change was constant in the pandemic, and this brought feelings of overwhelm, fatigue, and stress. With the rise of “grassroots” efforts and heightened community engagement, especially early in the pandemic, this brought challenges as well as benefits, as some coordinators expressed concerns about a lack of coordination, confusion in the community, or attention being diverted from their own efforts. Several coordinators also noted concerns for a lost sense of community and social connection amongst their visitors and their volunteers. Because of safety concerns and limitations on social gatherings, people could not gather in the ways they used to, and coordinators experienced this as a loss for their pantries.

**What has the pandemic been like for food pantry visitors?**

Food pantry coordinators provided their observations about visitors during the pandemic, specifically the economic hardships they experienced and the barriers they faced in gaining access to food pantries. These varied as the pandemic continued and varied by areas of the state, but coordinators noted increased unemployment, changes in visitors’ work hours and thus their availability to visit pantries, and higher economic hardships among their Latinx visitors. Several coordinators believed that the pandemic stimulus checks and expanded EBT temporarily alleviated some visitors’ hardships and they associated this with the declines in food pantry visits that they observed.
Barriers to food access that coordinators observed included:

- Transportation, including some visitors who were not willing to share rides or use public transportation because of the health risks of the pandemic;
- Differing levels of comfort with visiting food pantries during the pandemic, or with their safety protocols, social distancing, and masking practices;
- Lacking food desirability, which varied by pantry and was influenced by supply chain issues, but included meat, fresh produce, gluten-free food, and culturally-relevant foods.

In contrast to the findings of the Food Pantries During the COVID-19 Pandemic survey, food pantry coordinators generally did not see food pantry limits as a barrier to food access, as many reported that they did not have limits or that they suspended them during this time.

"We were getting feedback about kind of like ‘box fatigue’ is what we call it. We started implementing a little bit more menu-based system so that people are able to, we still have the drive-thru model, but they’re able to instead of just get whatever food we happen to have and give them that day… they get a menu where they’re able to select items and an opt in or out of of certain things, which I think has been helpful and well received from our guests."

- Food pantry coordinator, mature, large, urban, paid staff

How have Wisconsin food pantries responded to the pandemic?

To meet the challenges of the pandemic and to serve their communities effectively, food pantry coordinators spoke of multiple responses and of adapting their responses over time as the pandemic evolved. The primary response that coordinators noted was moving to outdoor distribution, and many transitioned to a drive-thru model in which pre-packed boxes were delivered to vehicles. Some pantries adopted a “menu model” in which visitors could opt in or out of certain foods, and a “personal shopper” selected the food and delivered them to vehicles. Coordinators noted the increased efficiency of these drive-through models, and they said some visitors seemed to appreciate them as well. As such, some coordinators plan to implement hybrid models in the future, to allow visitors the choice to either drive through or come into the pantry, based on their personal preferences.

Additionally, many pantries instituted enhanced indoor safety protocols, such as “by-appointment” models, in which visitors called beforehand to schedule a visit to the pantry. Many pantries also instituted changes in volunteer protocols to prioritize safety, such as symptom screening.
Other adaptations that pantry coordinators reported to meet the challenges of the pandemic were:

- Hosting pop-up pantries or mobile distributions
- Beginning delivery services
- Extending hours of the pantry
- Pausing visitor limits on pantry usage
- Seeking input from visitors related to comfort with safety protocols or distribution model preferences
- Establishing new partnerships, for example, to host COVID-19 vaccination clinics

Coordinators noted plans to continue to implement some of these changes into the future, such as delivery services and new partnerships with other community organizations.

**How and why have food pantries responded differently?**

While all food pantry coordinators spoke of their efforts to meet the needs of their communities during the pandemic, the responses they made and why showed variation. Many coordinators indicated a felt tension between navigating safety and pantry efficiency with visitor choice and the dignity they associated with that. Many pantries utilized choice models under typical conditions, but the challenges of the pandemic made implementing choice models difficult or not possible for some time.

In the ways that coordinators described their decision making to balance safety, efficiency, and visitor choices, two different orientations seemed to be apparent: a visitor-centered orientation or an operations-centered orientation. The table below
provides two quotes that illustrate these two orientations. Pantry coordinators speaking from more of a visitor-centered orientation tended to prioritize the experiences of visitors over other considerations in their decisions. They tended to return to choice models or community-building activities more quickly, even though they had to change how they approach these (e.g., personal shopper models, outdoor community gatherings). Coordinators speaking from more of an operations-centered orientation emphasized efficiencies and/or the experiences of their volunteers in their decision making. For some of these pantries, concerns about their pantries’ capacity to meet the shifting needs of their communities in the pandemic, like new safety protocols or changes in their volunteer base, may have influenced this orientation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visitor-Centered</th>
<th>Operations-Centered</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“.....we have to evolve our thinking on how do we get back to that point of bringing people together again around food and, and building those communities again. And doing it in a way that's safe, especially for, you know, marginalized communities... and so, trying to make food a connector again in a way that is safe and protective of our clients, is very important.”</td>
<td>“And we give them the same choices they had inside, but we give that they fill out a sheet outside that comes in... sometimes it takes, you know 10 minutes to get them in and out. But it seems like it’s more, more efficient that way for us, and all the volunteers, at this point are happy doing it that way, and really don't want them back in the building.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Food pantry coordinator, mature, large, urban, paid staff</td>
<td>– Food pantry coordinator, mature, small, rural, volunteer-run</td>
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**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

These focus groups offered opportunity to better understand the experiences of food pantries across Wisconsin during the COVID-19 pandemic. From participating food pantry coordinators, we learned more about the pandemic-related challenges that pantries experienced, how they responded, what they noticed about food pantry visitors, and how things changed over the course of the pandemic.

Key takeaways from these focus groups include:

- The experiences of food pantries varied a lot and frequently. Food pantries in different communities around the state experienced different challenges and responded in differing ways but change over time was a constant theme.
- All food pantry coordinators reported changes in how they distributed food, including shifts to outdoor distribution and implementing new safety protocols.
- Many coordinators reported changes in numbers of visitors (up and down) and
some reported changes in the characteristics of visitors, seeing increases in some kinds of visitors (e.g., Latinx households) or decreases in others (e.g., older households or young families).

➢ Many coordinators spoke of how they navigated tensions between operational efficiencies and safety with visitors’ choice and dignity. Coordinators reflected differing orientations in their decision making, with some emphasizing visitors’ experiences and others emphasizing pantry operations.

➢ Among the changes that food pantries made to respond to the pandemic, some were described particularly favorably and worthy of continuation beyond the pandemic. Specifically, these included drive-thru models, delivery services, menu ordering or personal shopper models, and pop-up and mobile distributions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a time of great challenge for all Wisconsin communities and has presented particular challenges for insuring families’ food security. Throughout this time, Wisconsin food pantries have demonstrated commitment, resilience, and adaptability, and these experiences have offered opportunity for learning that will serve pantries in going forward.

ABOUT THE COMMNS AND CO-CREATE

The Center for Community & Nonprofit Studies (the CommNS) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison is a hub for faculty, students, and community partners to collaborate on research, practice, and evaluation that examines the well-being of communities and the civic and nonprofit sectors.

Co-Create is the CommNS space for collaborative creation with nonprofit organizations and community groups to meet unique needs for advancing social change. In Co-Create, the CommNS brings to the table the full assets of engaged research – knowledge and synthesis of current research on important community and nonprofit issues; a broad range of methods in data collection and analysis and participatory research; skills in strategic planning, program design, and group process; and connections to university experts and opportunities – to help mission-driven groups advance their work.

Co-Create is led by Amy Washbush Hilgendorf, PhD, CommNS Associate Director for Engaged Research and an experienced program evaluator and community-based researcher, supported by staff and graduate students in the Civil Society & Community Research doctoral and the Master of Science in Human Ecology programs.
APPENDIX A: Focus Group Protocol

1. Introductions [in chatbox]: Name, location, food pantry name, how long in service at the food pantry

2. OPENING ROUND [all respond]: The survey we conducted of visitors to food pantries in Fall 2020 sought to lift up and document some of the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted food pantries and the individuals they serve. When you reflect on your experiences at your food pantry since the onset of the pandemic, what is one thing that stands out to you?

3. From this survey, we learned more about the food hardships that pantry guests experienced in the first year of the pandemic. For example, we heard that some guests didn’t always have enough food for the month, while others did not always have the food they wanted. How does this compare to your experience? What have you noticed about pantry guests and the food hardships they’ve faced during the pandemic?
   a. Probe: How does this compare to before the pandemic (before March 2020)? How does this compare to more recent months?
   b. Probe: In our survey, we heard most from visitors who identified as white and we heard less about the experiences of Black, Latinx/Hispanic, Asian, Native American, or other visitors. What do you think the experiences of your visitors from other racial and cultural backgrounds have been like during this time? How do you think they were similar or different?
   c. Probe: Pantry guests noted lack of money as the most common barrier to food access, but 41% also noted food pantry limits as a barrier. What are your thoughts on this finding? How do you think food pantries like yours and others in the Feeding Wisconsin network should respond?

4. From pantry guests responding to the survey, we also heard about their experiences at food pantries during the pandemic. What kinds of things has your food pantry done well to respond to the needs of pantry guests in the pandemic?
   a. Probe: What kinds of things do you think your food pantry could have done better to respond to the needs of pantry guests in the pandemic?
   b. Probe: Did your food pantry operate or support pop-up or mobile food distributions? If so, what was that like? The survey indicated that these may have been especially effective in reaching new pantry guests. Do you agree?
   c. Probe: More than 3/4s of pantry guests said they had received pre-packed boxes of food, and that these boxes included foods they generally knew how to prepare but not always foods they preferred. Did your pantry distribute boxes like these and, if so, how do you think this went?
d. Probe: What ideas do you have that would help food pantries like yours provide a range of high quality foods, including culturally-appropriate foods and foods for different dietary needs?

e. Probe: Among the shifts that you made, which do you think are worth maintaining into the future? Why?

5. Some people believe that the role of food pantries is to provide emergency food. Others believe that the role is to connect to resources and stabilize lives more broadly (employment, housing, and healthcare). And some might believe that a food pantry should be addressing root causes of food insecurity and other social injustices. How do you see the role of a food pantry?

a. Probe: Has the pandemic influenced how you see the role of a food pantry? If so, how?

b. Probe: What do you think would help you better realize this role in the future?

6. CLOSING ROUND [all respond]: As we continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic and move forward from this time, what is one important lesson that you will take away from this experience?

7. Is there anything else anyone would like to share?
### APPENDIX B: Pantry Characteristics of Participating Food Pantry Coordinators

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<tr>
<td><strong>Size of Pantry</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Small (less than 300 households per month)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large (300 or more household per month)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MISSING</td>
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<td>14%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Maturity</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start-up (established within past 3 years)</td>
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<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mature (established more than 3 years ago)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MISSING</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Urbanicity</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serving rural areas</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serving urban areas</td>
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<td>39%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Serving both rural and urban areas</td>
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<td>32%</td>
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<td><strong>Staffing</strong></td>
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<td>Run by volunteers</td>
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<td>36%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Run by paid staff</td>
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<td>21%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Run by volunteers and paid staff</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21%</td>
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<tr>
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