“God always provides”: Challenges and barriers in food assistance delivery in Mississippi

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“God always provides”: Challenges and barriers in food assistance delivery in Mississippi

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ABSTRACT
This exploratory research project identifies critical needs for food pantry delivery in rural Mississippi. Our study describes the experiences of food pantry operators and volunteers while documenting the challenges these pantry providers encounter when attempting to meet the needs of pantry patrons. We interviewed 25 food pantry providers/volunteers at 14 food pantries located in nine counties in Mississippi, representing four geographic areas of the state (North Central, Central, Delta (West), and Southwest). Findings suggest that growing demand for services, coupled with stricter reporting requirements and infrastructure barriers are key challenges that food pantry service providers face. These issues are important to community development studies that focus on how coalition building facilitates community partnerships that support food assistance programs.

The proliferation of food banks and food pantries in communities across the nation since the first food bank was established in the 1960s (Poppendieck, 1998) has been striking. Food pantries, initially established as emergency food sources for families, have become primary, routine, food sources for many. Increased demand, increased usage, and seemingly no-end-in-sight, are the challenges facing food pantries in the US (Berner, Ozer, & Paynter, 2008; Greenberg, Greenberg, & Mazza, 2010). Local food pantries are experiencing the strain of trying to provide food for an increasing number of struggling families. Community food insecurity, low access to healthy food, and economic downturn have exasperated already difficult times for food pantries.

Emergency food programs and food pantries run the gamut with regard to availability, staffing, and services. Although the structure and operation of these organizations tend to be fragile in nature, their clients maintain a steady reliance on food assistance programs (Paynter, Berner, & Anderson, 2011). The logistical demands of these programs create challenges and barriers to service. These factors echo Poppendieck’s (1998) research that...
illustrates how one cannot predict when or what food resources may be obtainable, thus creating instability and fragility in emergency food distribution. The “unpredictability of the food supply and unreliability of financial support” contributes to the issue of instability that exists for a number non-profit food assistance operations (Poppendieck, 1998, p. 219).

This study aims to examine the experiences of food pantry providers and volunteers engaged in emergency food assistance in Mississippi. Through interviews with food pantry operators and volunteers, we offer a descriptive overview of key findings that outline the challenges and barriers with food assistance delivery in communities within a rural, high poverty state. All of the food pantries in our study are affiliated with the largest food bank in the state, the Mississippi Food Network (MFN). This affiliation allows emergency food assistance programs to benefit from the community partnerships that support the vision and mission of the MFN. At present, there are limited studies that examine the experiences of food pantry providers in rural areas (Morton, Bitto, Oakland, & Sand, 2005; Nooney et al., 2013; Smith & Morton, 2009), especially in the Deep South region of the US. This study will contribute to the growing body of research concerning food pantries, pantry volunteers’ experiences, and the community development activities that support food assistance programs located in the rural southern region of the US.

The rise of the emergency food assistance program

Within the US, a variety of strategies have been implemented to provide a food safety net for low-income citizens. There are two main types of food assistance: public and private. Public assistance is funded by the government. Historically, the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) is the primary food assistance program sponsored by the federal government that provides benefits used for only purchasing food. The goals of the program are to allow low-income households to obtain a more nutritious diet and to stabilize food prices (Daponte, Haviland, & Kadane, 2004). The federal government also supports other food assistance programs such as school feeding programs and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), which target certain demographic groups (Daponte et al., 2004).

The passing of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act redesigned the cash welfare system. States had more flexibility in terms of designing their welfare programs; specifically, they were able to impose work requirements on cash welfare recipients and time limits on the receipt of federal cash assistance. Changes in welfare reform may have led to declines in SNAP caseloads (Molnar, Duffy, Claxton, & Bailey, 2001; Mosley & Tiehen, 2004; Whitley, 2013). Poppendieck (1998) contends that emergency food assistance reinforces a get-tough approach to welfare reform. Due to the growth of food banks and other forms of emergency assistance, politicians were able to justify dramatic cuts in welfare spending. After all, private food assistance providers play a major role in fighting hunger (Cashwell et al., 2004). An unintended consequence of some SNAP recipients no longer participating in the program is that these households have not achieved self-sufficiency. In many cases, these households depend on private food providers for assistance in meeting their food needs (Berner et al., 2008; Greenberg et al., 2010; Hossfeld, Kelly, & Waity, 2016; Molnar et al., 2001; Whitley, 2013).

Private, charitable emergency food assistance providers have played an influential role in the larger effort to eliminate the problem of hunger in America. Historically, soup kitchens,
breadlines, and church food pantries have existed for many years, yet there is little data concerning the prevalence of these programs. Since the 1980s, there has been an increase in the number of local hunger relief agencies. This type of food assistance is typically provided by food pantries where patrons receive assistance in the form of a few bags of groceries. These agencies were originally promoted as a response to a short-term crisis, based upon the idea that when people experienced hard times they could lift themselves out of poverty (Cashwell et al., 2004; Daponte & Bade, 2006; Mosley & Tiehen, 2004; O’Brien, Staley, Uchima, Thompson, & Aldeen, 2004; Paynter et al., 2011). However, many people receive assistance from food pantries on a regular basis. Thirty-six percent of households that depend on food pantries receive SNAP benefits, and one-third of households have never applied for SNAP (Daponte & Bade, 2006). Due to the increasing demand of food assistance from the private sector, many families now rely upon multiple types of assistance (private and public) when necessary (Mosley & Tiehen, 2004; Paynter et al., 2011).

The emergency food assistance system has three levels of involvement. There are national nonprofit organizations such as Feeding America that procure and distribute food. At the regional or state level, food banks are nonprofit “wholesalers” of national, regional, and locally obtained food that is distributed to local agencies. Food banks also provide training and technical assistance to food pantries. Finally, at the local level, “retailer” agencies such as food pantries, soup kitchens, and emergency shelters provide food assistance and other services directly to the needy.

The contributions of faith-based and secular organizations to the food assistance safety net

In many communities, local food agencies come in a variety of forms. Some agencies are secular nongovernmental organizations, and other food assistance programs are either directly or indirectly connected to a religious organization (faith-based organizations, or FBOs). Secular nonprofit agencies have the opportunity to procure government funds to underwrite the social services they provide to clients. FBOs typically partnered with government or secular nonprofits are required to secularize their service delivery protocols before receiving public funds (Cashwell et al., 2004).

For many FBOs, food assistance programs are implemented by religious congregations or church-affiliated relief agencies (Bartkowski & Regis, 2003). FBOs based in congregational settings tend to be more attentive to providing emergency needs such as food, clothing, and shelter (Chaves & Tsitos, 2001). In a recent study of congregations and social services, two-thirds of congregations list feeding the hungry among their four most important social service programs (Chaves & Eagle, 2016). Typically, congregations in poor neighborhoods do more social services than congregations in non-poor neighborhoods, and congregations with more college-educated people do more social services (Chaves & Eagle, 2016; Chaves & Tsitos, 2001).

Research concerning FBOs and food pantries in rural areas has found that the rural church plays an important social welfare function. Rural ministers and their churches identify hunger as a congregational issue. They focus on working with local food organizations as an outreach effort (Molnar et al., 2001). In some instances, food distribution has provided a central role for African-American congregations to offer assistance to their memberships and communities (Molnar et al., 2001).
MFN’s challenge: Providing services in persistent poverty counties

The MFN has an extensive service area, and as a result there are complex geographical, bureaucratic, and economic issues that make food distribution a challenge across the state. Although Mississippi has a population of about 3 million people, it is a high poverty, rural state with a poverty rate of 23% compared to 14.5% for the US. Of the 82 counties in the state, Mississippi has 51 counties designated as persistent poverty counties. Persistent poverty is a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) measure that captures the dimension of time. These counties are defined as persistently poor if 20% or more of their populations were living in poverty over the last 30 years measured by the decennial census (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service [USDA-ERS], 2016). In other words, 62% of Mississippi counties have deep, embedded poverty of 20% or more for a period of 30 years or more.

Persistent poverty counties are more common in rural areas because resources are spread out and isolated. Therefore, rural food distribution strategies must incorporate ways to address the barriers associated with supplying and accessing donated food. Consequently, the distribution of resources may affect the food availability and acquisition that might contribute to the higher prevalence of food insecurity within these areas. Table 1 shows the distribution of the MFN’s food pantries and the persistent poverty counties in Mississippi.

Table 1. Number of MFN affiliated food pantries located in Mississippi, persistent poverty counties, and the food insecurity rate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Number of food pantries</th>
<th>Food insecurity ratea (%)</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Number of food pantries</th>
<th>Food insecurity ratea (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>6</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>Yalobusha</td>
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</table>

aMap the Meal Gap’s food insecurity rates are determined using data from the 2001–2014 Current Population Survey on individuals in food insecure households; data from the 2014 American Community Survey on median household incomes, poverty rates, homeownership, and race and ethnic demographics; and 2014 data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics on unemployment rates.

The MFN has a total of 131 food pantries located within the state’s 51 persistent poverty counties.

**MFN’s mission**

According to its mission statement, the MFN is committed
to relieve poverty-related hunger in our service area by distributing donated and purchased food and grocery products through a network of member churches and non-profit organizations. We provide nutrition education to our needy clients. We also emphasize advocacy and related needs. (Mississippi Food Network, 2017)

However, MFN faces the challenge of ensuring that patrons who utilize their services receive adequate and nutritious food at all times.

The MFN is a non-profit 501(c)(3) that began food bank distribution in 1984 and now distributes more than 18.5 million pounds of food throughout the state annually. Member agencies throughout the state receive food from MFN and distribute it in their own communities. MFN works closely with partner agencies in helping provide food for their pantries. This non-profit receives food from the USDA and other sources and distributes to the partner agencies based on their requests, demand, and availability. The MFN has low-cost items on the monthly inventory list that pantries may also purchase at a reduced cost. In addition to agency resources, individual partner pantries receive donations from Walmart, Kroger, and other private sources. However, the MFN has rigorous administrative reporting requirements that pantries must adhere to in order to be compliant with its organizational procedures.

**Methods**

This IRB-approved research project is part of the Mississippi Food Insecurity Project (MFIP) established in 2015 to document and examine food insecurity in Mississippi. In August 2015, the research team met and interviewed leaders of the MFN to gain insight concerning the challenges and barriers the organization faces when trying to provide nourishing food to hungry Mississippians.

During the initial interview with our research team, the MFN’s leadership described the growing need for more food pantry distribution centers throughout the state, and what they perceived as increased demand by food insecure Mississippians for more food to address growing hunger in Mississippi. From this preliminary interview, we sought to develop an exploratory research project that described the experiences of food pantry providers in the state, and help document the barriers food pantry providers face. This study aims to document the difficulties food pantry providers may encounter when trying to meet the needs of their patrons. MFN leaders supported our research project and provided a list of partner food pantry member agencies. The MFN announced our research project to explore and identify barriers to food pantry delivery in the state at their annual conference of food pantry agency providers. From there, we recruited participants using convenience sampling from the agency’s list of affiliates and from agency officials who contacted us and expressed an interest in participating our study.

This study was designed as an exploratory study with a focus on understanding the structure, processes, and procedures of food pantries across the state of Mississippi. A semi-structured, open-ended, interview guide was developed. Interviews were scheduled
and conducted on-site at the individual participating food pantries (See Appendix 1 for the interview guide). Participants signed informed consent forms and were assured confidentiality and anonymity. From September to December 2015, we interviewed 25 food pantry providers/volunteers at 14 food pantries located in 9 counties in Mississippi, representing 4 geographic areas of the state (North Central, Central, Delta (West), and Southwest). Of the 14 food pantries we interviewed, all but five identified as faith-based organizations.

The pantries ranged considerably in level of complexity and capacity, from physically small operations with one or two service providers to complex, administratively robust operations with a director, support staff, volunteers and complex administrative intake systems, and large physical space. All pantries expressed the sustained (and at times increased) demand by their constituents for more food and more days of operation.

The research team was comprised of seven members who conducted interviews that ranged in length from 45 min to two hours; all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. After completing interviews, transcripts were coded by three team members. Afterwards, all team members collectively discussed relevant codes that captured the aim of the study. In this process, the discussion yielded multiple codes; these codes were defined and operationalized. Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman, and Marteau (1997) support this approach to help solidify inter-rater reliability, stating that a strong analysis is better conducted as a group activity because results are improved when one view is tempered by another. For this phase of the study, the research team selected relevant codes – aging, individualism vs. collectivism, and isolation of pantries – for input into qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA.

Selected findings

Five key themes emerged from the data: (1) increased demand for service providers; (2) religiosity and faith mission of pantries; (3) challenges with infrastructure; (4) challenges with technology; and (5) sustainability of pantries through volunteers, staffing, and partnering with other pantries.

Increased demand for service providers

This theme captures the increased need for services for food pantry patrons, and the efforts of food pantry volunteers in meeting these needs. Ninety-two percent of the food pantry providers described an increase in patrons and expressed their concern over the need for more. As a faith-based food pantry manager explained:

> There is a need there, and we see it month after month. We’re only giving three to five days’ worth of food … not overwhelming them with food, and that’s not providing everything they need. You do what you can, but you know it’s not enough. If you weren’t here to see, you really [would not] know that many people are in need of certain things.

Similarly, another faith-based food pantry manager shared how the number of clients they serve drastically increased and the populations they serve shifted. The manager stated:

> Numbers change every month. We have grown a hundred boxes in the last year, because the [other pantry] shut down because they aged out. We see more older people here now than we saw when we first started, and there’s always someone whose house burned down or someone
who has cancer and they’re not able to work … a week doesn’t go by where we don’t get at least one or two new people.

When considering these factors, food pantry managers bear the burden of ensuring that the pantry services continue, despite changes occurring around them. The same food pantry manager went on to say:

We’re definitely needing another resource of food to open up soon because our clientele is increasing so much. We’re hoping we can reach out to the markets and if they will step up and help us out, otherwise in another month or two we might start having some difficulties.

Similar sentiments were expressed by many of the food pantry managers and volunteers. Further, the increased demand for services highlights the physical burdens placed on volunteers, as a large number of food pantry managers and volunteers participating in this study were retirees or nearing retirement. In one non-faith-based food pantry, the lead volunteer explained the clientele served and growth in population in the area. When discussing the closure of a local chain of a national grocery store, the pantry manager shared that there were growing concerns about the remaining grocery store options in the area, explaining that the costs of groceries might be too high for many of the working-class citizens in the town. She explained:

We like to see those people. We like to serve those people who are not the food stamp client. They are the “in-betweens.” Their income is just above the food stamp level and they can’t get help. They are just getting by. [Then] you think about all of the people that come through here and think about the ones who are too proud.

In one faith-based food pantry, the manager described dire circumstances faced by families within the community. Patrons served by this pantry were often left to make tough choices where they had to choose between paying for living expenses like rent and electricity vs. purchasing food to feed the family. She stated that they often “fell short of funds, and they are suffering.” Ultimately, the needs of the patrons served by the food pantries continue to increase as food pantry managers continue to seek opportunities to meet these needs.

Religiosity and faith mission of pantries

A great number of food pantries interviewed were affiliated with a church or faith-based organization. Religion, faith, and spirituality were interwoven in food pantry providers’ responses to questions regarding operating procedures, interactions with food recipients, and meeting the needs of families served. Findings emerged around two related themes: mission from God and concern for others. Mission from God emerged out of the providers’ understanding of God’s expectation of them to feed and otherwise assist people in need and providers’ roles in fulfilling this mission. This mission was also related to providers’ overall concern for others that spanned a host of social issues, not limited to food insecurity.

A few of the pantries, despite the restrictions on proselytizing set by the non-profit and agency, were highly influenced by their religious beliefs. Some of the food pantries developed due to the religious mission of providing food to those who are in need and as a way to fulfill God’s mission. Reflecting their religious beliefs, food pantries addressed the need of the community. As one provider explained: “A lot of folks are sufferin’. And you got to have food and clothes and a shelter. So peoples needs supply food, and we can do that. And we believe in God for shelter of his home.”
Another food pantry volunteer stated that she “had a desire to try to extend this ministry to a place where [she] could feed people.” Even though they may face some hardships when running a food pantry, some expressed that God will always provide a way to assist the food pantries. According to one food pantry director:

It goes back to the two fish and the five loaves of bread. I’m believing that God is gonna open up a door where we will be able to supply enough food to bring the sign from red to green.

When discussing volunteers, a faith-based food pantry manager said, “God knows that we’re doing this as a ministry and when someone doesn’t show up, someone else does. He always provides people here to do the ministry.”

Other food pantries expressed that providing food to the hungry was the right thing to do and that providing food brings satisfaction. The act of feeding and assisting others can be seen as a religious influence. One food pantry volunteer stated, “Joy, it gives me joy. Peace, knowing I have done something for somebody … I’ve given back,” when describing how providing food to the hungry makes her feel. Another stated, “All we know is we know to do what is right.” Even if someone may not qualify to receive food from the non-profit supply, some pantries still help those who need food. A faith-based, food pantry volunteer stated: “The church purchase[s] food also … those that may not qualify to get it [the non-profit’s food], then they’ll get it from the church …”

Providers at food pantries expressed an interest in becoming more acquainted with the people and families they served. One pantry volunteer noted a desire to “try to find out what’s going on with their lives, how they got here … their whole situation.” Another volunteer offered: “We do develop relationships with them. We ask them about their children, their health … one of our patrons had some open-heart stuff. She tells us about that, and we say we’ll be thinking about you.” Such interest in getting to know recipients appeared connected with food pantry providers’ awareness of relationships between food insecurity other social issues such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of education as described in another volunteer’s comments: “They can’t stand on their [own]. Some of it is educational problems … the family cycle of staying in the poverty. If they don’t know anything better, how are they going to break the cycle?”

Awareness of recipients’ additional needs was further expressed through pantry providers’ wishes to build relationships with other community organizations. Desired partnerships would offer recipients access to medical, pharmacological, and dental services in some instances. Other collaborations with community organizations would involve social issues such as education, employment, and poverty.

**Challenges with infrastructure: Barriers to providing services**

A key finding identified in this research is the evidence of challenges with infrastructure that create barriers that prohibit optimal services for clients. A barrier is defined as any issue that impedes services for clients and/or hinders execution of the mission of the organization. A challenge with infrastructure is defined as any issue related to the physical or structural elements of the food pantry that hinders service. At times, these variables occurred simultaneously or one served as a catalyst for the other to take shape. These issues notwithstanding, food pantry volunteers often quickly identify solutions to these problems that threaten the continuity of service. Food pantry managers and volunteers continually found solutions to the challenges and barriers that arose.
For some food pantry providers, the special problems were resolved by adapting the physical space to accommodate products and/or processes associated with food distribution. These adaptations were often evident in various ways. Speaking on the evolution of a major food pantry in one community, one volunteer described the dynamics that resulted in the food pantry moving several times due to the increase in donations and the changing needs of the community. Formerly a social worker in the community, this volunteer explained:

We started collecting food in the closet there in the [Department of Human Services] office, and then the Episcopal Church allowed us to use it when they built their new kitchen. They had the old kitchen back there and they had a section of cabinet they let us put our food in there. And they gave us a key so we can go in there and get food as we need, but it was very limited space … then we moved into [another] place. When that place didn’t no longer have the space, the sheriff gave us … two tiny little rooms, they had been storage closets.

As word of the food pantry spread through the community, the volunteer leaders of this organization discovered that the need for services were greater than they had anticipated. Over time, the organization was gifted a space where they converted an old gymnasium into the food pantry. While this location has abundant storage space and equipment to maintain and track incoming food items, the building is not wired for broadband access and there is no telephone service in the facility. Still, the food pantry thrives, as volunteers improvise to address these shortcomings.

Adapting the space to fit the storage needs of the food pantry has not been an easy feat for some. One pantry volunteer described the on-going issues of transforming an old bank building property into a space to operate the food pantry.

The challenges are having a proper area to store the items to keep them in the best shape possible, and one of my challenges now, I’m blessed to have a nicer refrigerator, finally, several good freezers … I need a walk-in cooler … if I had a walk-in I could put it [frozen food] on the shelf and give it out with the bags … so it would help us to be even more efficient in our operation and give a greater variety to individuals.

The inability to properly store a variety of food items hinders the selection they give to patrons. Similar challenges were encountered as they worked to shore up the building to address water issues.

The drive-thru wasn’t graded to have the water flow away, it’s graded for water to flow through. When they originally framed those walls they put a grade on the concrete and 12 years later they were rotted. We had to take them all the way out … then I saw deck material … we’re real happy with the improvements, but it needs to be bigger …

While the improvements in this area have addressed the water drainage issues at this time, this food pantry manager expressed the desire to continually improve their operation to serve their patrons.

Of all the food pantries interviewed for this study, none of them were housed in a space that was specifically designed to operate as a pantry, hence the spaces were retro-fitted for food distribution. Many spaces served dual purposes, and food pantry volunteers transformed spaces to maximize their services. One food pantry owner stated: “Three years ago … we started in the hallway and then we advanced. I had my beauty shop room, and I changed the room from my beauty shop so that I could make the pantry.” Seeing the level of poverty and the need for food assistance, this food pantry owner allocated business space to operate a food pantry. A similar impetus for service was evident in a community over 100
miles away. One manager described how a church-sponsored food pantry came to fruition, stating:

The [food pantry] originally operated out of the back part of the church in a little hallway that runs behind the stage. We were feeding a hundred families a month just out of the back hallway of our church and that went on for a number of years until a donation was made for us to be acquire a building.

The work of transforming physical spaces to food pantry distribution hubs is even more profound when it occurs almost weekly, as dual-purpose spaces are shifted from conventional meeting rooms to distribution centers. Offering an explanation of how one space is transformed on distribution day, one administrator describes their operation:

… you see how the stage is right there, all the chairs are lined up like this in a row … like 20 of’em and they all sit there; and right where you see the foosball and the tennis [table], that’s where … our partition is and then we have the table here so they come out in rows so they don’t jump in front of each other. We learned that, and they come out in rows and just come in and go out to the outside.

Other managers and volunteers, who worked to ensure that church sanctuaries, kitchens, and fellowship halls were converted on food distribution day, shared similar stories. Many spaces were then transformed back to their original setup once food distribution was finished.

**Challenges with technology and logistics**

The food pantry providers and volunteers identified both technological issues and logistical issues as barriers to service delivery. Technological issues pertain to the challenges associated with acquiring equipment to facilitate record keeping, internet access, and protocols for reporting monthly inventory. Logistical issues are defined as situations that affect the operation of the food pantry. Although providers have experienced these concerns over the course of their work with the food pantries, they try to prevent these issues from disrupting service delivery.

While many food pantries maintain operational records using pen and paper, there has been a move by the non-profit and agency to encourage its pantry affiliates to use an online system to order food, track inventory, and manage client data in a more efficient manner. Due to the increasing service demands and the need to submit monthly reports to the USDA, the non-profit and agency has been developing its technological infrastructure to facilitate the submission of this information by its affiliate pantries. While most pantry directors are willing to submit their reports online, many of the pantry providers described challenges in terms of the following areas: (1) volunteers’ lack of technological literacy, (2) the lack of a computing system, (3) the lack of Internet access, and (4) the costs of paying for Internet access.

When pantry providers were asked how they use technology in the day-to-day operations of the pantry, the responses ranged from pantries having high to low levels of technological sophistication. Some pantry managers reported having volunteers enter data about clients and food distribution into spreadsheets. One pantry manager stated:

We keep a client list of some 500 clients on the list and we just go in there check off the week that they came that’s on a spreadsheet that does all the counting for me. [It’s an] Excel spreadsheet
that counts for me and from that it tells me how many boxes I made, gave away that month, how many peoples was served in those boxes, and how many by various age range.

On the other hand, many pantry providers indicated that they still record information by hand. A food pantry provider said: “We haven’t got that far yet so everything is done by hand. We do however need a computer where we could get involved in there, but as of now everything is by hand.”

Another pantry director described the level of technology being implemented in the daily operations describing it as a “low technology system.” In this same vein, many pantry providers indicated that they or their volunteers do not have Internet access or do not own a computer. One pantry director stated: “… we order the food online … the one lady that works with my wife on that, she doesn’t have access to the Internet so we help her through the church office with some of that.”

When a pantry volunteer was asked how the pantry submits their monthly report to the non-profit and agency, the volunteer said, “[We] fax ‘em.”

Furthermore, additional issues pertaining to the topic of technology emerged concerning the ability of pantries to submit their food orders to the non-profit and agency. One provider stated:

Getting our order in is difficult. When the letter comes out in the mail [it] seems like by the time we get it and call and place our order, they are already out of a lot of things. Somehow other organizations are getting it sooner. We are certainly very thankful to get whatever we can but we’re trying … I think I can fax the orders and get them in. I am trying to get that worked out from my house.

In many cases, pantry providers welcome the incorporation of online procedures to make the ordering and reporting process more efficient. However, for those pantries located in rural communities, converting to an online reporting system may be extremely difficult and could actually hinder their efforts of food distribution, especially if broadband capacity is lacking.

With regard to logistics, providers were able to increase the number of clients served when they established an affiliation with the agency. However, having access to reliable transportation to pick up food from the non-profit and agency warehouse or designated distribution sites around the state became an issue for several pantry providers. One food pantry manager described her first experience with the food distribution process:

When we got the first food from the non-profit and agency we didn’t know what to expect, so my husband had a truck and another friend in town had a truck. We go to [Town A] to pick up food. When they put all these cans on my husband’s truck, the tires would get flat … it was a very rainy day. I could have gotten discouraged. They left me watching the food on the roadside “cause they dropped it [the truck] off at a service station. They had to go back 32 miles to [Town A] then come back. We would have had the 5th load but a young man came through [Town A] that the Reverend knew so he brought the last food.”

Although this particular pantry provider was not discouraged by the initial trip to the non-profit and agency food distribution site, she found a volunteer who owned a flatbed truck and he became responsible for picking up food for the pantry. In some cases, food pantry providers discovered that as the needs of the community increased, they had to expand their transportation capacity to receive more inventory. One pantry director stated, “I thank God for the non-profit and agency too because the bigger our vehicle got the more food that they was able to give us …”
The food pantry volunteers primarily discussed logistical issues pertaining to picking up monthly food supplies from the non-profit and agency or other organizations. However, some pantry managers mentioned the transportation needs of their clients. Many clients were able to arrange for transportation to food pantries if they lived in communities with reliable public transportation. A pantry manager stated, “We have a very good transport system here. Buses are pretty good about running and it’s pretty cheap to get a ride …”

In the event clients had difficulty finding transportation to the food pantry, several managers and volunteers indicated that they would provide clients with transportation. One provider said: “… We have quite a few of our people that if they absolutely need a ride and can’t find another way they call [us].” Despite experiencing challenges when retrieving food for distribution, pantry managers effectively adapted to the demands of their environment. In cases where pantry staff provided transportation for clients, they took on that responsibility and helped clients when necessary.

**Sustainability of food pantries**

Pantry organizers highly regard the dedication of their pantry volunteers. The number of volunteers varied across the food pantries in the study, and in some instances, pantries may have had an excess of volunteers on preparation and/or distribution days. They attribute this asset to having a committed volunteer group and a willingness to partner with other organizations when the opportunity presented itself. Food pantry providers were able to recruit volunteers from a number of religious, social, and school organizations. One pantry organizer described the variety of volunteers and their work ethic:

> We get volunteers from the congregation. The majority come from [there], but we also get them from campus and we get people in town. We got two or three that don't go to this church and they are some of the strongest volunteers I have. They show up every time, and they do whatever you ask them to do. For us this year, volunteers have not been a problem.

However, some pantry managers discussed how the lack of committed volunteers affected their ability to provide services to their clients. In communities with several pantries, food pantry managers with a few volunteers talked about the distribution of volunteers across multiple sites. When asked about the number of volunteers and tasks required to operate the pantry, a pantry director stated: “Yeah, that's a grim picture. We don't have that many volunteers here. Not like another pantry here is [Church B]. They have the manpower plus they have the youth.”

For those pantry providers who lack volunteers, they either assign more tasks or duties to existing volunteers or they recruit volunteers on food distribution day. A pantry manager described a particular day when she needed additional help: “… Sometimes even some of the clients themselves, if we say we kinda’ short-handed, they'll get out the line and they’ll come help and volunteer ….” The challenge of having enough volunteers to keep food pantries fully operational is a major concern for directors and managers. The ability to attract, recruit, and retain volunteers is particularly important for service delivery.

To provide services to their clients, some pantry managers cooperated with others by engaging in barter/trade with other pantries. Several food pantry managers described situations in which they would give or trade food with other pantries in the community. Typically, these exchanges of food, supplies, or volunteers occurred periodically based on immediate need. However, some pantry managers have described long-term patterns of
cooperation with other pantries in their local community. One pantry director discussed how the volunteers take turns picking up crates of bread weekly from a larger pantry in the community. The director stated: “Our average is anywhere from 75 to 125 crates of bread … we were able to get every bit of it. We have people every Saturday lined up out there to get bread.”

These examples of cooperation among food pantries demonstrate how food pantry organizations work together to serve more clients and ultimately build infrastructure and foster sustainability of their food pantry operations.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Careful analysis of the responses reveal an overarching view that many food pantry providers have learned the art of improvising to meet the demands of the food pantries and more so the patrons. Poppendieck (1998) succinctly characterizes a detrimental element of emergency food operations and identifies insufficiency as a threat to consistent services. Poppendieck explained the uncertainties related to planning and preparation for distribution highlights levels of insufficiency that exists for food pantry providers. Though these individuals have very little control over or knowledge of who might arrive on distribution day, there remains the need to ensure that all who arrive for food distribution are served.

While the services provided by the pantries are very public displays of social services, much of the work is fueled by a desire to embrace a higher calling to serve others. Hula, Jackson-Elmoore, and Reese (2007) highlighted the fact that congregations are most likely to be involved in housing/shelter, clothing, and food programs, because of the expressed survival needs of congregants and community members. These same organizations often focus on activities that may be handled by a small volunteer force capable of performing well-defined tasks (Hula et al., 2007). Furthermore, the lack of funding for supplies, equipment, and staff make it almost impossible maintain a food pantry operation without the sacrifices of a strong volunteer force (Poppendieck, 1998). Such is the case for the vast majority of the food pantries interviewed for this study. Despite mounting barriers to providing quality services to citizens who may be chronically or acutely suffering from poverty, food pantry managers and volunteers choose to focus on the business of service by creating partnerships and networks designed to help them meet the growing demands of food pantry clients.

A growing body of literature suggests the need to identify alternative strategies to addressing food insecurity. Tarasuk (2001) and Boddie (2002) promote the importance of implementing community development strategies designed to empower food pantry patrons rather than foster dependence of emergency food assistance programs. For secular and faith-based organizations that operate food pantries, the idea of helping clients beyond their food needs is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, many of the food pantry managers and volunteers in this study were accustomed to providing services beyond the scope of their organization’s goals (i.e. the provision of clothing and toiletries was not uncommon). Thus, the foundation for providing services outside of food pantries has been laid; however, the infrastructure and funding to do so is not readily available in many of the food pantries. Campbell (2004) highlights the important role that urban and regional planners, working with community food security advocates, play in using more comprehensive approaches for combatting household food insecurity.
The MFN is positioned to serve as a liaison between stakeholders and food pantry providers by building partnerships and coalitions to help food pantries devise plans to provide comprehensive services. These services include increasing the amount and quality of fresh fruits and vegetables for distribution. Currently, the MFN collaborates with university stakeholders to offer food demonstrations and educational literature to help patrons learn various preparation methods for the food that is provided on distribution day. The MFN has a number of partnerships with large corporations across the state. These partnerships include automotive manufacturing plants where employees have the option of donating food or making a donation via payroll deduction, as well as grocery stores with savings programs where shoppers can enroll their savings card and a percentage of their grocery bill will be donated to the MFN.

In addition to corporate partnerships, the MFN has built coalitions with non-profit agencies that provide a myriad of social services. The affiliated pantries demonstrated their willingness to develop a consistent and reliable network of service-oriented providers to offer assistance with basic needs. Many of the staff and volunteers at the pantries were connected to and/or had detailed knowledge of various services throughout their community. They willingly used their influence to help clients gain access to other services.

Based upon the findings of this study, the next phase of this research project entails interviewing food pantry patrons to understand their overall experience with food insecurity. Specifically, we plan to examine their basic needs beyond food, health issues, and their interactions with food pantry staff and volunteers. We hope to gain a more in-depth understanding of the types of services provided by food assistance programs and how they impact people across the state of Mississippi.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References


Appendix 1. MS Food Insecurity Project (MFIP): Abbreviated list of interview questions

**History of the pantry**
How did your pantry get started?
How long has your pantry served the community?
How often does your pantry provide services to the community?
How many staff members do you have?
How many volunteers do you have?

**Documenting need in the county**
Tell us about the need in your county.
Who has access to your pantry?
Tell us what a good day looks like at your pantry
Tell us what a bad day looks like at your pantry

**Recordkeeping**
Tell us how you keep track of your service delivery.
Do you use technology in the day-to-day operation of the pantry?

**Long-term planning/Future of the pantry**
Over the long term, tell us how you see your pantry operating in 5 years?
Will you be involved with the pantry in any capacity?
How do you foresee this work continuing if you are no longer involved with the pantry?