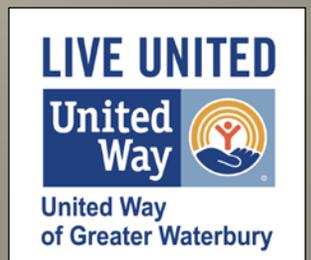
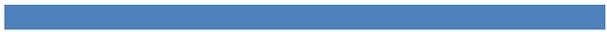




Food Pantry Data Project

Outcomes Summary 2012-2014



Food Pantry Data Project Outcomes Summary August 2012-February 2014

In order to learn more about the needs and service utilization of the city's food-insecure residents, United Way of Greater Waterbury engaged four Waterbury food pantries in an 18-month pilot data collection project.

The Food Pantry Data Project aimed to:

- Implement an electronic system for tracking client data and sharing this data among programs;
- Assess levels and patterns of clients' pantry utilization;
- Foster collaboration among Waterbury programs that provide emergency food services;
- Increase programs' capacity to improve services, seek grants and report to funders; and
- Identify gaps and inefficiencies in Waterbury's emergency food services.

The project's guiding questions included:

- Are pantries able to build the capacity necessary to implement an electronic client tracking system?
- How many clients use these Waterbury food pantries, and how often?
- Do clients use only the "originating" pantry at which they register (received a swipe card), or do they also use other pantries (and if so, to what extent do they use other pantries)?
- For clients who use pantries in addition to their originating pantries, what are the reasons for this cross-pantry use? What else can we learn about the needs of food-pantry clients?

A consultant provided data-collection training and support to food pantries, system troubleshooting and fixes, and data reporting/analysis. United Way staff convened all stakeholders, offering a venue for reviewing collected data, refining implementation and addressing challenges.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

1. Pantries overcame implementation challenges and built capacity in terms of technology. Pantries also found it helpful being at the same table and having the opportunity to function as a cohesive system.
2. The vast majority of food pantry users readily agreed to register and receive a card, which involved giving consent for one's personal data to be shared. Clients enjoyed having the cards, which functioned as photo IDs and conveyed a sense of membership.
3. The 2,120 active food pantry users who made 12,843 visits during the 18-month study period demonstrate the great need for food assistance in Waterbury. The actual number of food-insecure clients is higher, since not all Waterbury pantries participated in the project and not all clients at participating pantries participated in the swipe card system.
4. On average, tracked clients visited pantries three to four times during the project period, with the exception of one pantry's clients, who made about 11 pantry visits (nearly one visit per month) during that time. This particular pantry offered more frequent hours of operation as well as a connection to a soup kitchen, and its clients also likely represented a higher-need population.
5. System-wide, 60% of clients used only their originating pantry, while 40% of clients made cross-pantry visits. Those 40% were responsible for more than half of total system-wide visits, suggesting that this smaller but still-sizeable subset of clients made a higher-than-average number of visits.

6. The most common reason for cross-pantry use was simply needing more food during the month than is given out in a single pantry visit. While clients preferred being able to choose the items received during a visit, and while they had great interest in particular food items such as meat and fresh produce, opportunities are limited for choosing items and accessing highly desired foods. These latter reasons were therefore less likely to influence clients' decisions to visit multiple pantries.
7. Each pantry served a subset of clients with a higher-than-average frequency of pantry utilization. Called "chronic users," these heads of household made 24 or more pantry visits system-wide (more than one pantry visit per month) during the project period. One particular pantry had the largest percentage of chronic users, and these clients also made visits at a higher frequency than did chronic users registered at the other pantries. Compared to other chronic users, those from this pantry were less likely to make cross-pantry visits. In addition, compared to all heads of household tracked by the project, this pantry's chronic-user heads of household were more likely to be single, older males.

Food Insecurity in the Greater Waterbury Community

1. Food-pantry clients participating in the follow-up survey were largely (84%) enrolled in SNAP, indicating that low-income residents in the Waterbury area are accessing this benefit when appropriate. Unfortunately, SNAP did not help clients reach the point of food security. A few clients who were not enrolled even mentioned not being interested, because the small amount of financial assistance that would be provided would not be worth the effort of applying. Numerous clients mentioned that their SNAP benefits ran out well before the end of the month. It therefore appears that low-income, food-insecure clients will continue to rely upon food pantries to meet their needs.
2. The fact that 16% of survey respondents were employed, in addition to the fact that more than half of respondents not enrolled in SNAP were interested but not eligible, reflects the increasing amount of food-pantry use by what are called ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) households. These households' income is above the poverty line, yet still inadequate for meeting their basic needs.
3. Since pantries tend to distribute mostly nonperishable items—with meat and fresh produce not necessarily available on a consistent schedule—the amount of cross-pantry usage reflects the fact that savvy clients used multiple available opportunities to obtain less commonly distributed (but highly desired) foods. In addition, with largely nonperishables obtained at each pantry visit, clients were likely motivated to store items, in an effort to reduce future food insecurity.

QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION

The data project made it possible for pantries to identify chronic users, and these clients differed demographically (i.e., were more likely to be older, single males) compared to the larger population. It now makes sense to discuss how the community can best serve this high-need subgroup.

In a broader sense, this project also reinforced our knowledge that food pantries can't fully meet the needs of Waterbury's food-insecure residents. Thus, we also need to consider what additional services clients need, and how as a community, we can provide them. Points of discussion might include:

- How can we address the limitations of SNAP assistance?
- Many small pantry operations offer the same services, each with limited hours of operation. Could the system be modified to function more efficiently?
- How do we help pantries offer clients more choice in terms of food items, and larger quantities of highly needed foods such as meat and fresh produce?