



# Research Brief: The Neighbor Experience at Food Pantries in Cumberland County

This research brief discusses how residents of Cumberland County access charitable food and their experiences with food insecurity based on a series of 13 interviews with neighbors who visited different food pantries across the county.

These interviews and the conclusions drawn from them supplement the Feeding America Pantry visitor Survey conducted for the Cumberland County Community Hunger Mapping project and the [2022 Cumberland County Food Assessment](#) completed in partnership with Dickinson College.

Two Central Pennsylvania Food Bank researchers developed the flexible guide and conducted all 13 interviews. The interview guide, and the interviews themselves, asked about visiting a food pantry from the perspective of pantry users. The open-ended nature of the interview questions allowed pantry visitors to speak about the most relevant or pressing matters related to their own experiences.

## Background and Methods

Interview subjects were randomly selected from a pool of individuals who participated in pantry visitor surveys in Cumberland County in fall 2022. All individuals surveyed were given the option to provide a phone number for follow-up contact in the form of a 15–20-minute phone or Zoom interview.

Of the 390 pantry visitors surveyed, 52 individuals provided a phone number, 28 were randomly selected for outreach, and 13 completed an interview with a CPFNB researcher. Although it was not possible to interview every person who offered their contact information, the research team determined that speaking to at least one individual who visited each pantry targeted by our surveys could provide a useful snapshot of the pantry visitor experience in Cumberland County.

Interviews were conducted in November and December 2022. The interview pool included 11 women and 2 men. Ages ranged from 30–75 years; most respondents were over 50. The sample population included nine white people, two Black people, one Latino or Hispanic person, and one Asian person. One interview was completed in Spanish. All interviewees were compensated for their time and given pseudonyms to protect their identities and privacy.

Broadly, the Research Team wanted to learn:

- How and why people start using a food pantry;
- Their impression of the experience overall including what could be improved;
- Additional challenges they may face beyond food access; and
- What pantry users “think the government should know” about food insecurity and food pantries.

## Main Findings

CPFNB researchers found that social support plays a large role in how folks came to access pantry services, whether that through a friend or family member, or a social service representative. Many pantry visitors spoke highly of programs and services provided by the pantry they attend, pointing to positive social interactions with pantry staff or volunteers. However, not all interviewees said they have consistent and reliable transportation, which greatly affects how they come to access food pantries and grocery stores. Income eligibility requirements can also hinder public access to vital resources. One visitor expressed the desire for the ability to visit pantries where culturally relevant or preferred foods are known to be available.

Pantries serve as a stabilizing presence in people’s lives. This includes people who are experiencing medical or financial crises, and those who need or want supplemental help. Finally, when asked what the government should know about food insecurity, pantry visitors largely expressed that the government does not understand their lives, particularly how difficult it is to live on a fixed or limited income.

## Access to Charitable Food and the Charitable Food Experience in Cumberland County

### **Most pantry visitors started attending their food bank by recommendation from a loved one or administrative official.**

Pantry visitors generally learn about food pantry services by word of mouth from neighbors and friends, or when seeking help from social service representative.

Most elderly pantry visitors accessing food pantry services report their initial visits were facilitated by a friend or neighbor, often someone who was willing to provide transportation and bring them along to their own scheduled pantry visit. Two pantry visitors said they learned about their respective pantries through materials distributed by their children's schools.

Kathryn, a mother of three, was familiar with her food pantry before using their pantry services because her children were taking cooking and nutrition classes there already. This was helpful when her "status changed" unexpectedly. "We knew the system a bit already... so it made using it easier," she said.

Four people mentioned that case managers or social workers referred them to a pantry. Only one person interviewed reported deliberately seeking out food assistance with internet searches.

### **Pantry visitors who reported positive experiences at their food pantries cite welcoming staff and meaningful culture.**

Pantry visitors were asked to describe their experiences while attending their food pantries. Responses were overwhelmingly positive, referring to kind and welcoming staff and the impact of pantry services.

Four pantry visitors described staff and volunteers from their food pantries as nice or friendly. Three pantry visitors said that their pantries were 'judgement-free zones'.

"They're just so nice and so open arms and you don't see judgment on their faces or anything," Alli, pantry visitor in Enola said. "They literally just sit there and talk to you... they actually really care."

### **Feelings of inclusion and familiarity at a pantry site have the potential to make pantry visitors feel part of a community and can reduce stigmas or anxieties related to using a food pantry.**

A few individuals enjoy the socializing that occurs at their food pantries, saying it makes them feel "not like a pantry visitor." Similar comments refer to the use of pantry spaces that are set up to be user-friendly. Susan appreciates that her pantry in Enola gives pantry visitors shopping carts, which "makes you feel like you are going to a grocery store." Susan is one of a few pantry visitors who alluded to having a more dignifying experience with the ability to browse and select her own food. "It doesn't feel like you're poor and not allowed these things because of it," she said.

### **Neighbors who felt safe and supported by their food pantry expressed willingness to return for services when they want or need them.**

Kathryn appreciates the calm and welcoming atmosphere of her pantry in Carlisle. She suggests that they work hard to cultivate this space to encourage pantry visitors to return for services. "We don't need additional help. With the little augmentation that [my pantry] gives us, we're good," she said. "But if we ended up (with) some sort of issue... I know I could give [them] a call and say, 'Hey, our status changed'... and they might be able to redirect me to help me find whatever else that we need."

Two pantry visitors spoke about giving back to their pantries and community by volunteering in the future. "Once I get my SSI and get my physical health a little bit better, I'd like to go down and volunteer because I feel like what they're doing is on the front lines... I really appreciate everything they're doing," Jim, who attends a food pantry in Carlisle said.

### **Several neighbors benefited from additional programming and services offered by pantries.**

For a few interviewees, pantry services were an entry point to later engage in other services offered by the pantry, such as job training, GED courses, life skills, food nutrition classes, and case management services. Susan obtained her GED as an adult after enrolling in prep classes offered by her pantry in Enola. She took a workshop teaching soft skills for the workplace as well and a budgeting class that continues to help her today, "I've been using the same budget they helped me with since 2017."

Kathryn's two sons attend their cooking and nutritional education classes at a pantry in Carlisle where they have learned how to pick from healthy food choices and use foods available in the pantry.

### **Transportation challenges greatly affected food access for some neighbors.**

Sofia used to be able to walk between grocery stores to pick out her goods. She enjoyed being able to compare between stores, choosing to purchase meat from Weis, and fruit and vegetables from Giant or Aldi's, depending on the coupons and special deals available that week. However, once she moved to her own house in Mt. Holly Springs, her access to grocery stores became very limited. "I don't have a supermarket nearby," Sofia said. She is no longer walking distance from many grocery stores and does not have a car of her own.

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Now, Sofia can only get groceries when her coworkers do, or when they are able to give her rides. "I have to buy (groceries) in Carlisle to be able to bring to my place here in Mount Holly Springs... Last month, I got people to give me a ride from the church. I am waiting to see who will take me tomorrow to the food bank."

While for Sofia, "this works for now," she is eager to secure her own car soon to be able to not only access food on her own time, but hopefully also be able to take advantage of the client choice-shopping model at a pantry in Carlisle, instead of using the drive-through because she is carpooling with others.

Steph's ability to reach Big Spring Area Food Bank in time for services was largely dependent on the bus schedule's hours. "Rabbit Transit used to take people out to the food pantry, but this is hard to make work because there are sometimes hours between when the bus can drop you off and when it can come pick you back up, so it can take a whole day for just that one errand," she said.

### **Pantry visitors benefit from either a drive-through or client-choice food distribution model, depending on their circumstances and preferences.**

Drive-through pantry models can save neighbors valuable time and increase access at busy pantries.

For Sofia, who does not have access to a car, drive-through is the best food distribution model as she can stop by on her way home from work with the help of a coworker. The drive-through option is also helpful for folks who would like to utilize the client choice-shopping method but are not able to secure an appointment. "It is very hard to make appointments with them. They are very full. They fill up all at once... I would love to go on my own if I had my own car... Now I am doing drive through because it is easiest for me."

Other pantry users expressed appreciation for drive-up programs which accommodate particular dietary needs such as switching pork-based foods for another type of protein.

Client choice-shopping pantry models allow pantry users to carefully check labels ensures the food they take home is safe and healthy.

Taylor is one of two individuals who cited health conditions and food allergies for themselves or a child in their household. She stated, "I can't eat meat, so when the pantry has stuff like hummus, that makes me very happy, because that is a healthy food I can eat."

**Negative experiences at food pantries included understocked shelves and spoiled or expired food, as well as only being able to receive services at the pantry nearest to home rather than at a pantry that might be preferable for reasons other than location.**

Few interviewees reported having negative experiences or had complaints about the services they received at food pantries.

Steven had trouble relying on his food pantry being stocked according to their advertising. “The inventory is very low,” he said. “They told me I have 14 choices, but sometimes there is nothing on the shelf.” He would like to go to a pantry in Harrisburg, where he says more food options are available, but was told he could not use this pantry because he lives in Cumberland County.

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“We prefer Asian food that is not always available because it also depends on if they can get the donation. This is not a food bank problem,” he said. He reported travelling to a variety of different Asian stores in the area to reach these foods. “There are Asian stores in Harrisburg, but their prices are very high. In Mechanicsburg (too). I go to different stores depending on which has the best deal.”

Pantry visitors also expressed that their pantries should continue to closely check the foods they offer to ensure that they are not spoiled or expired.

## The Experience of Food Insecurity in Cumberland County

### **Food insecurity occurs along with other life de-stabilizing events.**

Pantry users who experienced a job loss, homelessness, medical emergency, or other major life event viewed food pantries as a consistent, stable resource during an otherwise challenging time in their lives.

Further, people shared that they knew others who were “deserving or in need of help” from a pantry but were concerned that pantries did not serve these neighbors or family members due to income eligibility guidelines. These income eligibility guidelines were viewed by interviewees as out of sync with the financial reality of their lives.

Kathryn started attending her pantry in Carlisle a few years ago when “ugly things transpired” while switching careers due to injury. “I was a big proponent of (saving) your extra money. When you're transitioning, you're supposed to save two months' worth of salary and all that kind of stuff to help with the process.” However, numerous unplanned events arose during this time, including a family emergency and a flooded basement one winter, which led to heating issues as well. “Our savings completely were demolished. So, we were getting by, but a little help would have been nice.”

Because she was already familiar with her pantry through her children's cooking and nutrition classes there, Kathryn was relieved to be able to turn to receive services relatively quickly and make less “wicked, tough choices.”

### **Pantry visitors also generally turn to food pantries when in need of extra support.**

Alli, a single mother, is employed in a profession that pays by commission, meaning that she does not receive pay on a consistent, bi-weekly basis. “So, me being able to go to somebody and say, ‘Hey, I need help,’ and them to be able to come up with a plan for me was excellent,” she said. “It just gives you a sigh of relief that, you know, you can get those little extra things that you might have not had the money for.”

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“It [visiting a food pantry] just gives you a sigh of relief that, you know, you can get those little extra things that you might have not had the money for.”

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Two pantry visitors began attending their food pantries when they experienced homelessness. Sofia registered to her food pantry when she arrived in the area from the northeast. She stayed with her son temporarily as she awaited approval for her own housing. Another pantry user was referred to their current site by an outreach worker for food assistance “In 2014...I was living in my car.” She and her family are now housed and continue to visit the pantry. A respondent who lacks stable housing reported visiting their pantry in Carlisle when living in different areas of the county: “I think there's some other ones, but that's the one that I've always known.”

A few interviewees were longtime pantry users. Wendy explained that even while her husband was still alive, they struggled to make ends meet every month on a fixed income. A friend who visited a local pantry offered to take her along one day, and she has attended ever since. Her husband passed away in 2021. Now with even less income, she envisioned that she will continue to use the pantry monthly into the future. Another user, Steph, has utilized food pantries across the county for the past 16 years.

### **Income eligibility requirements for food pantries and benefits programs limit pantry visitors from accessing resources to their full potential.**

Income eligibility requirements aim to identify those most in need of immediate assistance but may also exclude vulnerable populations, creating additional barriers for those seeking help. This leaves individuals in a difficult position when their income is “too high” to qualify for SNAP, but still not enough to cover food expenses without assistance.

“We are afraid to make more money.”

“We are afraid to make more money,” Taylor said. She fears that earning more income could lead her to lose access to Section 8 housing, SNAP benefits, and food pantry benefits. Her family is on a budget plan for their utility payments, but the amount they must pay has increased.

Susan asserts that food insecurity affects “more than just one type of people,” including double-income families that make “just a few bucks over” the limit.

Taylor spoke about a friend who went to a pantry for assistance but was told they were “\$100 over the limit.” She felt the details of their personal situation justified getting more support. “There should be flexibility with the rules, a case-by-case basis because sometimes you need it more than other times,” she said.

### **Food Insecurity and What the Government Should Know: “They should have to live like this”**

Pantry visitors were asked what they would tell their local leaders or government about food insecurity and using food pantry services. Many pantry users felt that the use of food pantries was not understood by the government, and that income guidelines were not an accurate reflection of the need experienced by their families and friends. People “still need help even if they are ‘over’ the income limits because food is so expensive,” and local leaders are unaware of how widespread the issue is.

Further, programs like SNAP were often frustrating to navigate. According to survey data, just 45% of people who visit food pantries in Cumberland County also participated in SNAP. One user described his experience as “there's always something that like I, either my ID is out of date, or my social security card is lost or hidden. It's always, there's always like one or two more steps I gotta go through before I can get paperwork turned in, but yeah, bureaucracy?”

Pantry users expressed the feeling that there is a disconnect between their own lives and the lives of the government officials who represent them. Many felt that elected officials would not understand their experiences without living through it. Wendy would tell the government “to come and live the way I do for 3 months. See what it is like to have to experience this, worry about how to pay a house repair or other unexpected bill.”

A family who was previously homeless challenged elected officials to experience the same: “government [officials] should have to be homeless for a month. See what it is like to live in your car, go to food pantries, beg for money from churches and be turned away for help.”

Another neighbor cited a similar lack of resources as a difficulty, stating “They couldn't handle even a week like this.”

“They couldn't even handle a week like this.”

Pantry users also wanted their elected officials to understand the impact of having access to a pantry where they feel comfortable and welcome, especially in difficult circumstances. “I would say when someone is reaching out for help, it's the most devastating moment of their life, to think that they can't do it themselves, even with the help that they're already getting. And to know that they have a place to go. Even if it's to get a book for your child is just a great thing to have in your community,” Alli said.

## Additional Data: Neighbor Comments from Corresponding Surveys

From the survey data itself, participants had the opportunity to add comments in response to the question, “Before finishing the survey, do you have any notes or comments to add?”

Similar to the findings from interviews, a majority of comments came from pantry visitors who expressed gratitude for the pantries and complimented friendly staff and volunteers. A few made specific food requests such as halal food or non-dairy food items. Of the 100 comments, 10% described receiving food that was expired or spoiled. Other comments detailing negative experiences at their food pantries pointed to unpleasant experiences with one or two volunteers or staff members at their sites “acting like the food they are giving out is theirs.”

Two pantry visitors commented that they make “enough money on paper” but struggle to make ends meet. Both pantry visitors shared great gratitude for Project Share’s Farmstand program which serves pantry visitors once a month, regardless of income eligibility.

## Conclusions

Interviews with pantry visitors highlighted some successful aspects of food pantry services that promote inclusion and sociability. Food pantries appear to have ample visibility in Cumberland through public advertising and both formal and informal referrals by key acquaintances. Continued open dialogue and advocacy can increasingly engage individuals who need and want to access food services and destigmatize experiences related to using food pantries.

Responses also pointed to several small but tangible changes that can significantly improve access for families in need and overall services. For example, coordinating pantry opening schedules with relevant bus routes and times can open services to pantry users who rely on public transit. Pantry visitors who did not have their own vehicles had difficulty planning a food pantry visit ahead of time and found it more difficult to use client choice-shopping pantries, which can take longer to visit than drive-through pantries. Flexibility is needed for people who rely on others for rides and should be considered when working to ensure equitable pantry access.

Flexibility should also be considered regarding service areas. Reimagining larger or less strict service territory boundaries would enable pantry visitors to choose pantries based on hours of operation that meet their needs and ride arrangements, as well as to reach pantries that offer foods that offer foods more consistent with their dietary or cultural preferences.

Possibly the most urgent finding is that people who relied on government programs for access to housing, health insurance, and food were very sensitive to the impact of any possible changes in their eligibility for those programs. Pantries should ensure that people whose income is higher than the government eligibility threshold of 185% of the federal poverty line still have access to donated food. In addition, pantries, with support from the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank, should consistently implement policies regarding how visitors who request help but are outside of the TEFAP or SFPP income guidelines will be served using privately funded food. Clear policies can alleviate uncertainty for pantry staff and visitors and can be revisited to reflect the changing needs of the community.

It is important to note that while the interviews that were conducted and the conclusions drawn from them are highly informative, they should not be considered to represent all people who experience food insecurity in Cumberland County. Interview responses used throughout this brief account only for people who currently visit food pantries and have agreed to participate in both the survey and interview. Future qualitative studies should include individuals who need or want to use pantry services but are not doing so in order to uncover additional shortfalls and barriers to access within the charitable food system.

Similarly, the recommendations made above should not be considered an exhaustive list of the changes that can increase opportunity for neighbors countywide. Moving forward, the first and best way to assess neighbor needs and develop suggested policy changes is for food pantries to engage with the people they serve. Occasional brief surveys or listening sessions can help gather honest feedback and point to specific problems that pantry leadership may not be aware of, including but not limited to transportation availability, hours of operation, and food preferences. There is much more that can and ought to be done to fully understand the experiences of food insecure residents of Cumberland County and take steps to support them as the charitable food network works to end hunger.