Impact Perspectives

Report on interviews with food bank leaders

WSDA Food Assistance

FUTURE EMERGENT

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Executive Summary

Since 2020, Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) Food Assistance (FA) programs have launched new services, expanded client access, updated guidelines, and created processes as supply chain disruptions collided with an unprecedented community demand for food. They partnered with the Food Assistance Advisory Committee and food bank leaders to write and test new rules to support food-insecure communities and emergency food distributors. FA piloted and then implemented these changes throughout the Food Assistance network. Two policy areas inspired lengthy discussions within this network. These included:

- The requirement that all agencies supported by WSDA Food Assistance must serve everyone in Washington state without requiring ID; and
- The requirement to count all food bank clients as new beginning January 1 on their first visit to any food bank in Washington state.

WSDA asked josh martinez to gather information about the impacts all their policy changes have had on food banks in Washington state. I interviewed 16 leaders in the emergency food system representing 13 Washington food banks. These leaders shared the following information.

Policy Impacts: Serve All

- Some food banks don't feel properly resourced to serve all food insecure Washingtonians. Many struggle to source enough food for their increased client numbers.
- Food banks report an increase in the number of visitors from outside their service area.
- Some food banks distribute only a limited portion of their inventory to people outside their traditional service area.
- Others saw the "serve all" policy as an opportunity to streamline residence requirements across their food distributions.
- Many food banks already served Washingtonians from outside their service area on a case-by-case basis. This has led to inconsistent or discriminatory service to visitors.
- Not all food banks are clear on the exact wording of the policy. WSDA FA reiterated that acceptance of any FA funding or food obligates a food bank to serve all Washington residents equally.

Policy Impacts: New/Returning Visitor Counts Starting January 1

- This policy change was costly for food banks who needed to reconfigure their systems.
- Some food banks run two year-to-date reports each month to satisfy different funders.
- The question "is this your first visit to a food bank?" is not consistent across agencies. Their clients may feel judged or suspicious that their answer will change what they receive.

Policy Impacts to WA Communities

- FA policies have meaningfully reduced client access barriers across the state. Some food banks struggle to meet the demand of the increased number of people who need food.
- Communities that extend across service areas or county boundaries are now less likely to receive unequal amounts of food.
- Some food banks give out-of-area clients less food than in-area clients.
- Some made statements that implied the othering or less-worthiness of out-of-area clients.
- Some clients have commented on the higher number of visitors or expressed fears about lower volumes of food at their local food bank.

Introduction

The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) Food Assistance (FA) programs make regular improvements to their agency's policies and practices around food security. They do this in concert with the Food Assistance Advisory Committee (FAAC), Washington Food Coalition (WFC), and through feedback from their partners and stakeholders. FA programs have undergone several changes since the Covid-19 pandemic began in March 2020. Since that time, FA launched new services, expanded client access, updated guidelines, and created processes as supply chain disruptions collided with an unprecedented community demand for food.

These efforts ensured greater access and participation in the food system for community members and food distributors alike. Some program changes have generated deep discussion among food bank leaders, FA staff, and others who participate in this system. These conversations grew as the reality of the changes went into effect.

In May 2024, WSDA FA asked me to gather perspectives on the impact that their policy changes have had on community organizations across Washington state. Because much of the funding and support from FA goes to food banks and pantries, this report focuses on the perspectives of leaders at those front-line service providers, also known as sub-agencies.

This is a small project with a relatively narrow scope. Unlike my 2023 report on EFAP, this report will include few recommendations from participants or myself on how to improve the food security system. This report instead presents a snapshot of perspectives from sub-agencies working to follow these guidelines at the local level. I encourage WSDA to continue their plans for broader conversations with folks across the network. I also encourage meaningful engagement with the thousands of food insecure people in Washington state who rely on food banks, meal programs, mutual aid groups, and similar entities to meet their food security needs.

I spoke to a small cross-section of the diverse network of food security leaders that work with WSDA Food Assistance. I hope that their perspectives may reflect those of people who have fewer avenues to share how the food system's policies and practices shape their work. The perspectives in this report come from conversations I had with each participant. This report includes anonymized quotes from participants that I edited for clarity. This report may not reflect the official positions of the Washington State Department of Agriculture or the organizations where these leaders work.

Please note: I use "food bank" throughout this report to describe a variety of programs that distribute food to people. What would be a "food bank" in another state (an organization that distributes most of its food to food pantries) I call a "food bank distributor." Some of these organizations call themselves food programs, food pantries, food banks—and some don't even use any form of the term "food bank" to describe what they do! Most of the emergency food network in Washington describes themselves as a food bank. I'll use that broad term to protect people's anonymity.

About the participants

I reached out to food bank leaders at 15 food banks across the state. For this report, I spoke with 16 people at 13 food banks. I conducted these meetings in person, virtually, and over the phone. The following people gave their time and perspectives to this report:

- Amanda Lopez-Castanon and Mike Hatada, Hopelink, King County
- Amanda Sparks, Orcas Food Bank, San Juan County
- Bob Mark and Rachel Bishop, Upper Valley MEND, Chelan County
- Cecilia Chavez, Toppenish Community Chest, Yakima County
- Fran Yeatts, West Seattle Food Bank, King County
- Gloria Hatcher-Mays, Rainier Valley Food Bank, King County
- Kathleen Murphy and Jen Muzia, Ballard Food Bank, King County
- Kellie McNelly, ROOF Community Services, Thurston County
- Kris van Gasken, Des Moines Area Food Bank, King County
- Marcia Wright-Soika, FamilyWorks, King County
- Marlando Sparks, Restoration Community Impact, Benton County
- Stacey Crnich, GoodRoots Northwest, Pierce County
- Steve Fox, Skagit Valley Neighbors in Need, Skagit County
- WSDA Food Assistance team

I shared with each participant a list of topics I hoped to cover. These topics, reviewed by WSDA before I began, included:

- What's happening at your food bank these days?
- We're discussing the changes WSDA FA made to these programs:
    - EFAP, EFAP Tribal, TEFAP, CSFP, Resiliency Grants, training opportunities, targeted workgroups, open office hours, and more.
- How have these changes impacted community members and your food program?
- How do you stay connected with WSDA (sharing feedback, receiving program updates)?
- How do you stay connected with other funders of your work?

I asked questions around each of these topics, but participants were free to include other topics they felt were relevant to the discussion. Once I completed all interviews, I organized the participants' statements into these themes:

- About the Participants
    - How long they have participated in WSDA services
    - How they track client/customer intake
- Perspectives on:
    - Current state
    - Impact of WSDA FA Policies
    - Community Impacts
    - Funders and Funding
    - Decisions and Feedback

I collected a lot of information from the people I spoke with. Appendix A summarizes the current state of food banking at these sub-agencies. Information about WSDA's decisions and ways to give feedback also fell outside the scope of this report. Instead, I share these perspectives in Appendix

B. Finally, I received some information that didn't fit in any of the above categories. I recorded these perspectives in Appendix C.

Perspectives on the Impact of WSDA FA Policies

These sections cover feedback from a variety of agencies. At the start of each interview, I described some of the policy changes that I named in the previous section. I asked folks which of the changes had a significant impact on how they do their work. I tried to understand how people accessed their food banks before and after these policies went into effect. Not everyone has experienced the same issues. People within the classic groupings of rural, urban, and suburban food banks don't feel these impacts equally. They also haven't responded to the policy changes in identical ways.

The changes we discussed in the interviews all originated from community leaders across the emergency food system. WSDA received many concerns across the state regarding client access barriers. They also received feedback about changes to the program that would better meet clients' needs. WSDA FA partnered with the WFC, FAAC, and stakeholder groups to review and report back on their proposed changes. FA rolled out these changes over the first three years of the pandemic. They used this period as a trial run before formalizing the changes into policies that applied to all FA-funded food banks in the state. The people I spoke to told me about the impact WSDA's policy changes have had on their food banks.

Impact of "Serve All"

Many food bank leaders reported positive and negative impacts from the WSDA decision known as "serve all." This policy change allows any Washington resident to access any food bank that receives funding from WSDA Food Assistance programs. The service areas that defined the years before the Covid-19 pandemic do still exist for some food banks. Some food banks do maintain strict service areas in conflict with the requirements of the programs they're in.

One leader shared they segregate their inventory based on who they allowed to receive it. This leader said, "We ask them to prove their address. If they're from out of the area or if they can't prove that they live here, then we would give them food that we get because we're a member of [food bank distributor]. They would have unlimited access but only to the food we get from [food bank distributor]. But they wouldn't get the milk that we purchased."

At this food bank, only people within their service area have access to that food bank's entire inventory of purchased and donated items. Some donors require the food bank to distribute the food they donate to all clients who need it. That means that a person living outside the service area would only receive that distributor's food. Someone living inside the service area will receive a different amount of food than someone who lives outside that area.

At another food bank, they offer out-of-area clients TEFAP commodities but not their full inventory. This leader shared that their overhead costs increased because they had to track people across the different eligibility requirements of each WSDA FA program they administer.

But limiting people's access to food based on where they live is not a path that every food bank chose. A leader at one food bank said, "We've tried different strategies around service areas before, but the updated ["Serve All"] policy helped us create a clean slate. It's been a good thing for us, but also a challenging thing, for staff to get their heads around the idea that people can come from anywhere to use the food pantry." Another leader at the same food bank added, "I cannot imagine saying, 'only this food is for these people.'"

Nearly every food bank leader I spoke to said that they've always had an informal policy of allowing in people outside their service area. At most food banks, people living outside the area did previously receive the same amount of food. One leader shared that they would probably have served a family up to three times before restricting them only to the free-access food. Or they might give them a small bag of donated food instead of letting them shop for themselves. This food bank was also willing to let in clients from other food banks if they had a demonstrated need to come there. For instance, if a client couldn't visit the food bank close to their home when it was open, this food bank was willing to let them shop here instead. Other food banks expressed similar informal policies. These decisions appear to have been made on a case-by-case basis.

Though many food banks saw the policy change as a natural extension of how they've always tried to operate, some bristled at the policy itself. One leader shared that, "from our values standpoint, as an organization, we would prefer not to turn anyone away. That fits with our values. But to require it of us is a different thing." The biggest challenge for them was that they don't feel resourced to serve people from other parts of the state. Another said, "we have never been very good about refusing service from anybody out of our area. We pretty much always served folks. We've gone through different periods of trying to encourage folks to use their own food bank but in recent years we really haven't done that."

Food bank leaders acknowledged that families come from outside their service area because of what their food bank offered. Families come to them when their local food bank doesn't offer the same quality of food or restricts how much food they allow them to have. Others expressed concern about hearing people in their lines telling each other where to go for high-value items. "People are standing in line telling each other, 'Here's where you can get oil on Tuesday. Here's where you can get meat on Wednesday...' People are having to go to three or four different food banks during the week just to try to get what they need for their families." Many food bank leaders echoed what I've heard for years: Washington residents who shop at multiple food banks do so because they don't get enough food for their families in a single visit.

The "serve all" policy also impacts food banks that are near county boundaries. Food and funds for many FA programs are distributed by county. EFAP regions map to counties in most of the state. TEFAP foods come in through distributors that typically operate at the county level. Whether someone living in a different county gets food, that person's EFAP dollars are still awarded to their home county. Food banks report feeling strain when they can't compete for funds from nearby counties or regions where their visitors are from.

I also heard confusion from leaders about what "serve all" means for their programs. If a food bank ran a home delivery program, could they limit the range or number of households they could deliver to? Could they still tell out-of-area clients that there were food banks closer to where they lived?

Did the “serve all” policy mean they had to refuse EFAP applicants who served specific populations? They and their staff didn’t feel clear on what the rules meant for their programs.

Leaders I spoke with expressed confusion about what programs fall under the “serve all” rule. Many believed that the rule only applied to programs funded under EFAP. Some programs had even “redirected” their EFAP general funds to smaller programs. It was their belief that doing so meant they didn’t have to comply with “serve all” for their standard food distributions.

I reached back out to WSDA Food Assistance to clarify this requirement. They reiterated that for participating agencies who receive this foundational food and funding, they must meet the requirement to serve all clients equally. This means that anyone in Washington who needed food should get it, except for food provided through CSFP. Food Assistance put it this way: “Even when food pantries were permitted to set their own service area, our view has always been that if you receive any funding, regardless of program, you must serve all eligible Washington residents.”

One program specific exception to this rule was the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). CSFP is exempted because it has strict age and location requirements that are confirmed with a photo ID. Because this program operates at the federal level, WSDA cannot change the requirements for that program. Other allowable exceptions to the “serve all” rule include: food distributions that operate at schools; domestic violence shelters; a home delivery program or food delivery programs focused on homeless populations; and kids’ backpack programs. Because these distributions are not open to the public, the “serve all” policy does not apply.

Impact of counting new/returning clients by calendar year

Every food bank records the number of people who access their services throughout the year. Food banks must report these service numbers on a regular basis. If this is a client’s first visit to a food bank, they are counted as a “new” or “unduplicated” client. If the client returns, we count them as a “returning” or “duplicated” client. All clients are considered “new” once per year. For some food banks, they reset this count at the end of their fiscal year. For most of these food banks, that meant all clients were new starting July 1. For other food banks, this number resets at the calendar year, or January 1.

Beginning with the 2024 round of EFAP funding, WSDA FA asked all food banks to count their unduplicated households beginning on a January 1 start date. The goal of this change was to make reporting consistent across all food banks. WSDA FA also recommended asking every client, “is this your first time visiting a food bank this year?” This would help quantify the true number of new/returning clients across the state, rather than having inconsistent questions and counts between individual food banks.

For some food banks, the date change meant costly reconfiguring of their intake software. One food bank reported they must run two year-to-date reports each month: one report for the calendar year and one for the fiscal year. Another leader said they’ve tried to fix their intake system but couldn’t. “It screws everything up. I’ve never really gotten a good explanation as to why they're doing this, either.” This food bank says their calendar year reporting is a manual process because they haven’t found a way to automate it.

I observed confusion among leaders about the exact wording of the “first visit” question for visitors. Another food bank struggled to track people who visited other food banks before theirs. Their intake software counts clients’ first visit to *their* food bank. Reporting a client’s first visit to *any other* food bank must be done by hand. Another person shared their confusion about the exact question they were supposed to be asking. One food bank leader said they understood the question to be, “Have you been to any EFAP-funded food bank in Washington this year?”

Another leader talked about the awkwardness of asking a question like, “is this your first visit to a food bank?” Their impression is that people feel suspicious of or even feel judged by the question. This awkwardness is even more pronounced when the question is asked in non-English languages. The question by itself doesn’t assure clients they will be treated fairly if they also visit other food banks. Still another leader reports feeling discomfort asking clients if they visit other food banks. “They think that you're starting to judge them. You’re going to say, ‘Oh, you went to another one. You can't come here,’ or something.” Indeed, food banks may unwittingly contribute to the stigma their clients feel when staff complain about people who visit more than one food bank.

How other food banks have adapted

I asked participants to share their perceptions of how other food banks may be adapting to WSDA’s policy changes. Across the state, implementation seems to be moving at different rates depending on the agency’s capacity and values among its leaders. Many food banks still distribute pre-packed boxes. Even some food banks that ran a grocery store model before the pandemic continue to hand out boxes. This may represent a sort of ambiguity about the future of food banking for agencies still dealing with the aftermath of the pandemic.

Food banks are meeting in coalitions to discuss their challenges and share information or resources. One person shared that rural food banks with less oversight may not be following the new policies as closely. Other food banks report struggling with the new rules. They say the rules opened them up to more visitors but funding has not increased at the same rate.

Some food banks are in areas with a lot of others food banks; they see some clients visiting multiple agencies nearby. One food bank adapted by changing how visitors pick up food for multiple households. “We still let people pick up for multiple families, but they have to go back in line. It's helped reduce how fast we go through food. We’re all just trying to figure out, how do we make this more manageable and still be respectful?”

Some agencies have decided to stop taking EFAP funding if it means serving everyone in the state. Others have reconfigured their programs or directed funds to one program so they can exempt the rest of their food bank services from serving everyone. The new policies create conflicts with food banks’ efforts to remove limits on some items. One food bank stopped offering high-value items (like cooking oil and milk) to all customers. Instead, they moved those items to programs, like home delivery, where they can control how quickly they run out. “People are trying to do the right thing, really coming at this with an equity lens. They’re thinking about who has power and who has control, but then also trying to balance the capacity and the sustainability.”

Food banks across the state are having similar conversations about sustainability. They’re considering the stress each policy change puts on staff and volunteers as they try to adapt. It’s not

just the policy changes that require adaptations. They're also focusing on how people come in, how they run their checkout process, how they avoid overcrowding during distributions. One leader told me, "We created a space that's very inclusive and wonderful, but we're trying to balance our capacity, too. How do we spread out people so that people have better use of their time? How do we make it easier for people? People are feeling burned out. That's true for volunteers and staff in how we do some of this work."

Others are asking how they can limit the number of people coming to their food bank. One leader said, "I have to start thinking about this. What program can I design for my own city so I can exclude other people? That's what some of the other food banks around are asking. They're designing programs to exclude people from out of their service areas. So they can try to serve the people in their service area. It should not happen. But that's the reality. They can't serve everybody. We can't serve the world. We're not funded well enough to do that."

One food bank shared that the policy changes are going over poorly in their area. The underlying issues range from systemic racism to inefficient business practices. Some agencies are using their local business partnerships and trying to go without state support. Or they partner with sub-distributors who don't have the same level of scrutiny on their practices. These places may require religious services to receive food. They may practice unsafe food handling or distribute food in ways that can't be tracked for safety. Other food banks may be making it difficult for non-locals to access food, quoting lengthy waiting periods to get a shopping appointment slot.

Perspectives on the Impacts to Washington Communities

WSDA policies have had an impact on Washington communities as well. Food bank leaders shared that their visitors appreciated the increased focus on culturally relevant food. Other clients have noticed the growing number of people visiting their food bank. Some conversations with food bank leaders themselves revealed opportunities to bridge the gap between "us" and "them."

Community Impacts

Many of the food bank leaders I spoke with shared that their communities were growing larger. The people who visit a food bank may change over time, depending on their circumstances and how the economy at large affects people with low incomes.

One leader shared the impact WSDA's policies overall have had on their community. The increase in culturally relevant foods made a huge difference in the lives of people who came to their food bank. They recognize the trauma that people seeking food may have experienced; they don't want to add to it. "Recognizing cultural differences is important to us, to humanize and really make this about people. It's not just numbers."

Another food bank leader shared more about the impacts of open-access policies on their community. Policies like "serve all" and no longer requiring ID meant more people could come get food. Their policies didn't have to change after "serve all" went into effect. Lots of people come to them when they can't get their needs met at other food banks in the area. People without ID visit their food bank all the time, including farmworkers here on temporary visas. "Some farmers don't do a good job of taking care of their workers. When we were in the height of [the pandemic] we

were serving thousands of people. Come four o'clock in the afternoon, the line was filled with people coming off the fields. We looked at the food that we were given, and it was coming from the same city. Those farmers picked this, bagged this, it got sold. It got sent to our warehouse, and now we're giving it right back to them." This doesn't just speak to the impact of the policy changes. It also gives us another glimpse into why we can't solve systemic problems through food banking alone.

Some food banks say their regular food bank customers have noticed the increase in people accessing the food bank. These customers have reported to staff that it seemed like more folks were coming from outside the community. One leader said, "We've just definitely done our best to let people know, hey, everybody around the city needs food." Some of these regulars no longer visit their food bank. This leader wasn't sure if they stopped coming because of the longer lines or for some other reason.

One food bank said the policy changes have inspired them to focus more closely on customer experience. Predictability is key, they said. People love "having this wonderful, solid, assortment of food in the market where there are protein alternatives, things you can add spices to and make meals, things that go together."

Messaging about "the other"

In some ways, "serve all" and other changes sought to make policy out of expectations we've long held in food banking. We know that many people visit more than one food bank. How do we count them accurately? How do we ensure that they are getting the food they need?

Another expectation common in our food system is that when times are tough, we should limit our food bank's services to people who "truly deserve" them. Some leaders used this framing when describing food procured with local dollars for the benefit of local families. But decisions about who is and isn't deserving of "our" food aren't consistent across food banks. Community members around the state have shared examples of racial discrimination affecting who can receive food and who can't. This framing also risks alienating people who are in fact local but may be unfamiliar to food bank workers.

It's worth asking ourselves about the ways we as food bank leaders are adding to the stigma and discrimination that clients face. One food bank leader reported hearing from a homeless client that when they visited another food bank nearby, a person working there told them, "You stink." That person had to wait outside until it was time to shop. Another said they had clients who "claim to be homeless" so they can secure food designated only for people within their service area. They said, "It's tough when you see them all piling into a van, and they're taking off, and they're leaving garbage all over the parking lot, and you're just like, 'Oh, you guys, you're just taking from the families that really need this.'" What right do we have to say that to anyone who comes to us for help?

These larger patterns across the network are not new, but the updated policies may have made them more apparent. One leader said they've heard of volunteers at a nearby food bank following clients of one ethnicity home just to see what they could be doing "with all that food." This leader

added, “I think people are scared about what might happen if you create accountability in the system. But nothing could be worse than what’s happening now with this discretionary behavior.”

It's hard to hear coded language about people who visit food banks. To some listeners, these phrases or beliefs may feel neutral. But using phrases like these creates distance between “us” (food security leaders) and “them” (Washington state residents seeking food). One person described the impact of “serve all” at their food bank in this way. People outside their service area come to their food bank because food banks closer to their homes aren’t meeting their needs. This person described their situation with this analogy: “Your neighbor’s got all these cats and doesn’t feed them. You feed them, and then all of a sudden, you're in charge of feeding all these cats.” Another saying I’ve heard more than once goes something like this: “Say I’m a parent who is making dinner for their family when all my kids’ friends come over and want dinner too. Suddenly I’m cooking for the whole neighborhood.”

I’ve heard quotes like this throughout my several years in the food security world. I include both analogies because I want to bring attention to system-wide issues in our network. It does matter how we describe the constituents who visit Washington food banks. Language like the above reduces our neighbors to problems, not people. When food bank staff describe adults as cats or children, it positions *them* as separate or different from *us*. We need to remember, every chance we get, that we are *part* of the community. We divide our communities when we think of ourselves as the serving and others as the served.

The reality is that we all play a role in solving hunger and food insecurity. When the demand for food is greater than the food we have to distribute, that’s not the fault of anyone who comes to any food bank. People come to a food bank to get the food they need to live. Everyone has a right to get food where and when they need it. Clients, elected officials, donors, volunteers—we’re all part of the same state. Reframing the language above, the speaker does call attention to a pressing issue. Food banks that can’t distribute enough food to people living near them create higher demand for other food banks in the area. That’s the problem we should be solving. We can help all communities meet the basic needs of the people who live there. We must work on that together.

And not every food bank in Washington agrees with this “us” against “them” way of thinking. One food bank leader noticed that when they opened their doors, people would line up holding bills, their IDs, and other documents. “You can put all that away,” this leader said. “When we first started this, we would find people in the back digging out of our garbage can. Once we built trust, we could tell them, ‘If you find something our garbage can, that means it's really bad. But come in and get this free stuff.’ And they’d say, ‘But we don't have an ID,’ or ‘We don't have an address.’ We’d tell them, ‘We don’t ask for that! Do you want to eat?’ They’d say, ‘We'll take whatever you can give us.’ My wife comes back and says, ‘No, come shop for yourself.’ And then their tears start flying.”

One food bank leader described their experience with refugees from Afghanistan who moved to their area. This community lives across a large part of the county. Afghan residents who live near the food bank have started to visit more often. The food bank had in turn made efforts to support their county’s Afghan population, with translated signage and more interpreters. However, Afghan residents from a neighboring area were also visiting their food bank. “Wouldn’t it be nice if they could find what they needed at that food bank, and they didn’t need to come here?” The speaker

summarizes what I think every food bank wants: people should be able to travel to their local food bank to get all their needs met. But if they can't, where else should they go? Don't we all deserve access to quality food we want to eat?

The system may not offer enough incentives for every food bank to respond to their communities in the same way. But most Washington residents don't understand service areas and aren't familiar with the nuance and complex funding models of food banking. They simply seek food from places that advertise themselves as food banks.

Conclusion

In the last few years, retailers, landlords, and others demanded record profits for themselves over affordability for everyone else. This decision, more than anything else, sent thousands more people to food banks around the country. It would be near impossible to relieve this strain through food bank funding alone. Restricting access to food at some food banks only pushes more desperate people to whatever food bank they can find.

Four years after the pandemic began, food banks across Washington are still working to withstand modern pressures on the emergency food system. The food bank leaders I spoke to shared their perspectives and experience dealing with multiple crises.

One leader told me that what motivates them is hope. "Hope is so addictive to people. People really want to be in the winners' circle. Everyone is ready for change. Everyone needs to be clear about what the expectations are and what the checks and balances are. People want to be a part of a food system that is flourishing."

Problems that affect the entire emergency food system can only be solved by taking the entire system into account. The food bank leaders I spoke to seemed optimistic that change is possible. We can meet people's needs. We can help create a world in which most people never need a food bank.

Appendix A: About the Participants

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- WSDA Food Assistance team

What follows is information I learned about these agencies: their experience partnering with WSDA Food Assistance and the software they use to track clients. I also include their thoughts on the current state of food banking: how things have gone the past 2 years, the demand at their agencies, and the supplies of food they source.

Most participants have worked with WSDA FA services for a long time

Almost every organization I spoke with has worked with WSDA for longer than they can remember. One agency has been a WSDA partner since 1993; another says it's been at least 15 or 16 years. Another said that it had been a decade or more of partnership "at least." One agency joined the WSDA Food Assistance network in 2020. They first participated in the WSDA's Farm 2 Food Pantry program and then expanded their relationship from there. Others have seen their relationships change, growing or reducing over the years, as they join new programs or discontinue existing ones.

Participants use many methods to track client/customer intake

Every food bank has its own approach to recording information about the people who access their services. Many run software designed for this purpose: Link2Feed, Client Card, PantrySOFT, SmartChoice Pantry, and Oasis Insight. Some organizations use a database they have customized, adapted from another food bank, or built themselves. Others use mainstream applications like SalesForce that they've modified to work for their food bank. Finally, some food banks track clients with paper USDA intake forms and Microsoft Excel spreadsheets.

The information each food bank collects also varies. Most agencies strive to collect as little information as possible. They often ask questions required by the FA program or funder that

supports their work. One agency's data collection includes information that grants may ask them to provide. "We put some systems in place to capture as much data as possible. We realize that the narrative is what's going to help us get support. The customer intake system that we've put into place is great at capturing information and we're able to pull detailed reports." The agency uses this information to monitor trends over the past two years. They are, however, choosing to reduce the amount of data they collect due to privacy and safety concerns.

Perspectives on: Current State

Food banking in the last 2 years

For this project, I focused on the impacts that food banks have felt in the past two years. I started by asking participants how things have gone at their food bank since 2022. Many food banks shared stories like ones I've heard across the network since the pandemic began: community demand is higher than ever and it's a struggle to keep up. When food prices go up for clients, they go up for many food banks, too. Food drives, like Stamp Out Hunger, once provided a significant source of canned food and other non-perishables. In recent years, these drives now bring in much smaller quantities of food.

Communities struggle with the same issues that food banks sometimes do. The cost of food has gone up for many households and food banks alike. One leader reported that some of their visitors are working two or even three jobs. Their county has one of the lowest home vacancy rates in the state, meaning there's almost no vacant housing for sale or rent. Lots of migrant or seasonal workers live in the area. Gas prices in Washington state are among the highest in the country. These factors all contribute to increased demand at area food banks.

Some food banks are setting limits on popular items or lowering item limits that already existed. But not every food bank has chosen to meet rising demand with cuts to their services.

One agency shared that their food programs—food banking, mobile pantries, and home deliveries—all expanded during the pandemic. During the pandemic they distributed food to more than 500 households per month. Now, their services reach 400 households. This is still a huge increase compared to their home delivery program before 2020. They've added mobile pantry distributions that take place at apartment buildings and senior centers.

Another food bank is continuing to refine their services to be what their community wants them to be. They adopted a focus on nutrition, culturally relevant foods, and necessary non-food household items. They've adopted the SWAP system for clients, implemented a grocery model, and reorganized their pantry to improve accessibility. They also expanded their volunteer pool to help them stay open 6 hours a day, 6 days a week.

Turnover and burnout continue to be a huge issue at many food banks I spoke to. One agency leader shared that the food bank's growth due to demand has created staffing gaps that are difficult to manage. "If you don't have foundational building blocks in place to support what it means to scale, you're gonna burn people out. Nonprofits are already burning leadership out. It's something nobody's talking about but I'm seeing it all over the place." Small food banks deal with administrative needs like human resources. They also must deal with operational needs, like buying

food and managing a warehouse. With limited staff, these can be hard for small food banks to navigate. At the same time, this food bank has been able to remove limits on some high-demand items, add flexibility, convert to a grocery store-style distribution, and give visitors more choice in what they eat. Another food bank is seeing more households than is typical and are spending more on food this year. They noted that WSDA is increasing their food distributions to their area to help meet demand.

One rural food bank saw exponential growth since 2020. As the number of visitors grew, they worked to meet the increased demand. Most of their visitors live within 200 square miles of their site. They've also begun working with health departments, skills centers, schools, and government and community services to generate funding and support. Their goal for the future is to get most of their clients connected to an online ordering system that monitors inventory in real-time.

Many food banks are expanding the non-food services they support. "Food is the first point of contact for us. People learn about us because of it, and then they hear about the rest of what we offer." Services and partnerships like these are making positive waves for people across Washington. Others are considering how to help their clients with unpaid rent or mortgage payments.

Another leader talked about the people who visit their food bank and what it means to them. "I didn't expect to see all the different types of individuals that come in. The paycheck-to-paycheck folks, but also nurses and teachers, people who have to make a decision: either they pay their bills, like utility bills and rent, or they get quality food. We've heard that since we've opened, we've helped people with that decision. They can do the things they need to do so they have the security of a warm house. It's not a struggle for us, but it's hard work for us to maintain and do a quality job."

Demand

At every food bank I spoke to, they are seeing more people than they are used to. One agency has a waitlist of over 800 people trying to access their home delivery services. Another food bank saw more than 39K unique households in 2019. Those numbers grew to 77K households in 2021 and 86K households in 2023. They might reach 100K households served by the end of this year.

One agency's main client group is seasonal workers, including farmworkers. Their summer months are usually lighter as people are away and working. They use this time to save up for winter months when demand is usually higher. This year, however, reductions in force at local farms and factories meant that more people are coming to them in the summer, too. Many food banks report not really having a slow season anymore. One agency shared that they now serve 1,000 households in a year in a town with a population of 2,000 people.

Supply Levels

For many food banks, their supply of food has not kept up with the pace of new visitors. The food banks I spoke to reported spending thousands or even millions of dollars on food each year. Everyone I talked to said that food was eating up more of their budget than before. Produce continues to be a big expense, as are proteins like meat, eggs, and tofu. Some food banks reported

shortages coming from the larger food bank distributors in the state. Limited resources from these distributors leads to less food for their clients, one leader reported. “When we're only allowed to get nine boxes of bread, it's like, well, we only have nine boxes of bread. I guess the first 40 people are gonna get bread, and then nobody else gets it.”

It's unclear whether the supply of food or the cost of food is the bigger culprit for smaller inventories. It’s likely that it’s both. One leader shared, “We've felt the pinch that [these distributors] report feeling. We see it in the quality, variety, and the volume of foods that we receive. That prompts us to purchase even more than we thought we needed. We get to the end of an ordering week and then hear that half of the things that we requested are not going to be delivered.”

One food bank leader said their clients notice when food bank supplies run low. They said that visitors can tell when the holiday fundraising boom is over and inventory starts to shrink. Some clients have expressed concern that the food bank will run out of food with all these visitors. Others reported longer wait times during their distributions. Some visitors line up for hours before they open; some wait in line for hours after the food bank closes its doors.

Some food banks feel like they must compete with food banks, the open market, and newer pantries to purchase items from local farmers or distributors. Many also reported that food donation levels were trending lower than in the past. Food quality from retail donations is also down for some food banks. One food bank reported that they may compost up to half of an entire donation due to quality issues.

Many appreciated the higher volumes of food from WSDA, especially the increase in culturally-relevant items offered through TEFAP. One person shared that they’re not refusing WSDA foods as often as they used to. Another food bank leader was grateful that a for-profit produce distributor they rely on is offering discounted prices on vegetables. They can then rely on WSDA and other donors to focus on the fruits and other items they like to offer.

Appendix B: WSDA Decisions and Feedback Process

I asked participants about their awareness of policy decisions that came from WSDA Food Assistance (FA). When did they learn about changes that were pending or already in effect? How do they give feedback to FA during that process? How do they typically engage with the other funders they rely on?

Funding requirements of WSDA and others

Some of the food bank leaders I spoke to told me that they didn't have any issues navigating WSDA's expectations compared to those of other funders. One leader appreciated that a WSDA representative helped them apply for a local grant opportunity. Many food banks rely on funding from the city or county where they're located. Some of those food banks do experience challenges satisfying both funders. One food bank doesn't get any funding from their city or county governments. They run their entire program through donations and EFAP funding. They're planning to seek funds from the county and through the state legislature.

One leader shared that to accept local funding, they had to sign a document that says, "these monies will be provided only to people" in their county. They told me they hoped they don't get audited or asked to prove that everyone they serve lives in their county. Another food bank leader noted that there is sometimes real tension between FA's requirements and those of other funders. When they give more food to people living in their service area, that "has to happen in front of other clients who don't get that benefit."

Another food bank leader said they are worried their city government funder is starting to ask questions about in-city versus out-of-city client numbers. They haven't explicitly asked for those numbers, but their city contact recently asked if they had asked nearby cities for funding, too.

Sometimes the staff overhead a grant requires costs more than the grant bring in. Each grant has its own reporting requirements and ways of evaluating impact. These food banks must use their general operating funds or a larger amount of EFAP dollars to pay for those staff members' time. One leader cited the expense of updating their intake system to count duplicated/unduplicated clients the way WSDA requests. Applying for a $5K equipment grant wouldn't have covered the cost of hiring a programmer to modify the software.

Distributing EFAP funding is another area of tension. Each agency runs their programs differently. That means that priorities at one agency haven't matched up with another's. Imagine an agency that prioritizes produce sharing funds with another agency that focuses on non-perishable boxed items. Even with similar client numbers, the pounds each distributes will look different.

Awareness of WSDA changes

I asked food bank leaders how they learned about upcoming changes to policy. Many cited the Washington Food Coalition (WFC) newsletters that go out each week. Another way participants said they learned about WSDA's plans is from their session at the WFC conference. Some food banks, but not all, receive updates from their lead agency.

One area of praise was the open office hours that FA launched last year. The leader appreciated how responsive their FA representatives were. Another leader echoed that sentiment: “We're able to talk personally with our representative, let them know how we feel about things, and get a better explanation on some stuff.”

Other leaders named the Food Assistance Advisory Committee calls and monthly lead or sub-agency calls as the primary way they stay informed. When they miss an update, it’s often because they couldn’t attend a meeting, didn’t read, or didn’t see the email where it came up.

Staff capacity is another factor that dictates who is present at these meetings. For food banks with fewer personnel, attending these meetings can be a challenge. One leader put it this way, “I love all these workgroups. I want to participate in them. But are they essential? If I have to be the only management in our tiny little food bank, I'm not going to have the bandwidth or time to participate in those continuously. So which ones are essential?” When pressed for time, many food bank leaders reach out to a trusted colleague or friend who can tell them what they missed. Others appreciate they can access a recording soon after the meeting happens.

Giving feedback to funders

I asked how the food banks give feedback to funders, including the WSDA. One food bank leader holds a contract with their city’s government. When something doesn’t work for them, they feel they can be frank with their contact there. If not, they find ways to escalate the issue to see if it can be resolved. At the state level, this same person found that to be tricky. For issues that affect many agencies, they’ve sent letters as part of their coalition.

Other food bank leaders attend monthly meetings and appreciate having a voice at the table. One leader said they appreciated that WSDA is receptive and open to participation. They specifically named the Food Purchasing workgroup as “the most valuable workgroup that I’m a part of.” Since adopting SWAP, they’ve been getting much fewer “choose rarely” foods from WSDA.

One leader expressed confusion about the many meetings that happen each month. “I never knew which those were just open to anybody. I always thought some were for the leads, or for people who have certain contracts.” Other food banks shared similar statements. “As a newer person joining those meetings, they really want everyone to share their opinion. But they leave it open-ended. ‘Who has anything to share?’ No one says anything. I think everyone's like, ‘What do you mean? Share about what?’” This person added that the calls don’t always feel like a forum for conversation.

For other food bank leaders, they see clear room for improvement in FA’s decision-making process. “I would encourage the folks in decision-making authority to do more of what you're doing. Engage and talk to us. It benefits all of us to be heard and to communicate with one another. Tell us about what your challenges are. We can understand what's happening with you and you can understand what's happening with us. We can work together and get more done with fewer resources because we've had those conversations. We can think and be strategic about how we go forward. I feel this with academia and government. They feel like they don't have to ask anybody because they've already figured everything out. Sometimes that's not true.” Another leader said that while they do receive responses from FA, “from time to time it has a tendency to be political speak.”

Appendix C: Other Notes

The food bank leaders I talked to covered a lot of topics in our conversations. Here are a few notes that didn't fit anywhere else.

- One food bank leader asked about opportunities for mentorship within the FA network. They have a colleague at a larger food bank that they can call and talk through issues. With the high amount of turnover in the food bank system, it could strengthen the informal networks of information that exist now.
- One said they were looking for more funding opportunities outside of the food security world. Their FA rep recently directed them to a grant with the Department of Ecology.
- Another shared their current experience launching a capital campaign. People will give funds for large projects like renovations or capital investments. But they struggle to get funding for their general operating costs.