



HEALTHY FOOD BANKING TOOLS & EVALUATION LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT

October 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The charitable food system plays a critical role in food access for millions of Americans every year. Emphasis on supporting not only food security, but also nutrition security has grown among food banks and food pantries. Standards for healthy food, namely the Healthy Eating Research (HER) Guidelines for the Charitable Food System, have created common language and metrics for measuring the nutrition of food collected and distributed by the charitable food system. However, there is currently no standard for measuring or evaluating healthy food banking initiatives more broadly. To address this need, More Than Food Consulting convened a working group of charitable food researchers, food bankers and key decision makers to identify key strategies of healthy food banking, assess existing evaluation tools, and to compare with pantry-level assessment tools.



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*Each organization listed was invited to participate at the beginning of the project. Due to staff changes, some members attended early meetings while other members participated in later meetings.

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Background

Food insecurity is linked to poor health outcomes such as malnutrition, poor physical, cognitive and socioemotional development as well as long term health conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and obesity. Recognizing the strong connection between hunger and health, many food banks and food pantries are focusing on health and nutrition initiatives. Conversations have shifted from food security to "nutrition security", signaling a change in focus from providing *enough* food, to prioritizing access to *nutritious* food to support long-term health.

Most health and nutrition programs within the charitable food system have focused on strategies at *food pantries* that directly serve individuals. Often, nutrition professionals and university programs support food pantries with nutrition education, increasing capacity to offer fresh produce, and promoting healthy food choices through "nudges". Research on the health and nutritional impact of charitable food typically centers on the food pantry level.

Recently, there is a growing movement of *food banks* embarking on health and nutrition initiatives. Efforts at the food bank level can improve the nutritional quality of food being distributed to an entire network of food pantries and other partner agencies, broadening the potential impact for households experiencing food insecurity. Adoption of standards to define and measure the nutritional quality of food in the charitable food system, namely the [Healthy Eating Research \(HER\) Nutrition Guidelines](#), has been growing across the country. As of June 2023, Feeding America and More Than Food Consulting estimate that over 115 food banks in the Feeding America network use the HER Nutrition Guidelines through avenues such as ranking inventory, developing nutrition policies, and making sourcing decisions. Using consistent guidelines for measuring nutritional quality of food opens the door for using standard measures of health and nutrition efforts more broadly across food banks.

However, at present, there is no standardization of strategies for healthy food banking initiatives. Given the many areas to embed health and nutrition work, from food sourcing to working with partner agencies, **using standardized evaluation tools would benefit food banks** and allow them to:

- Understand the scope of potential healthy food banking strategies
- Identify areas for growth
- Set goals for organizational improvement
- Create common language among food banks
- Measure progress over time
- Compare scores between different food banks

Within various strategies, food banks could use standardized evaluation tools to measure the impact of their work over time to build systems change and reduce health disparities for people experiencing food insecurity.

Landscape Assessment

Over the course of six months, More Than Food Consulting convened a working group of researchers and food bankers to conduct a landscape assessment of healthy food banking initiatives and assessment tools. The group met four times via Zoom to discuss examples of healthy food banking initiatives, methods for evaluating this work and existing assessment tools. The working group identified the [Food Bank Health & Nutrition Assessment \(FB-HANA\)](#), and the [Healthy Hunger Relief Index \(HHRI\)](#) as the only existing tools that assess healthy food

banking at the organizational level. The group also identified six key strategies from the two tools to embed health and nutrition work at food banks. In this report, we describe each tool and compare the components, strengths and limitations of both.

Strategies for Healthy Food Banking identified by this working group include 1) developing an organizational commitment to health and nutrition including nutrition policies, 2) ranking the nutritional quality of food, 3) sourcing healthy foods, 4) supporting partner agencies to follow healthy pantry practices, 5) improving equitable food access, and 6) developing community partnerships. (See Appendix A)

Food Bank Health and Nutrition Assessment (FB-HANA)

The FB-HANA was created by the University of Illinois in 2019.

The survey takes about 60-90 minutes to complete. It is recommended to conduct a pre-assessment to identify areas for improvement, and then a post-assessment approximately 6-12 months later to measure progress. The assessment contains five sections that address the six strategies for healthy food banking as well as food bank operations questions that could be beneficial in contextualizing answers and supporting food bank-level action planning. Section 2 covers these main strategies of Healthy Food Banking and divides the strategies into eight objectives.



Only Section 2 for Policies and Practices is scored. Each strategy is measured in a Yes/No format, either "Yes" this is in place, or "No" this is not in place. The total possible score is 65 points.

Strengths:

- Tested by researchers for validity and by food banks in Illinois for reliability
- Builds off a similar tool (the NEFPAT) for food pantry assessments
- Very comprehensive in assessing food bank assets and strategies for health and nutrition work and can be used to identify strategies to target
- Food banks can choose how they want to use the assessment based on their priorities and time available. Each objective can be used on its own, as each has standalone validity and reliability evidence, or as a longer full version of the assessment.
- Tool was created in collaboration with Feeding America nutrition-focused staff with the intention that the [Nutrition in Food Banking toolkit](#) would be used as the implementation resource

Limitations:

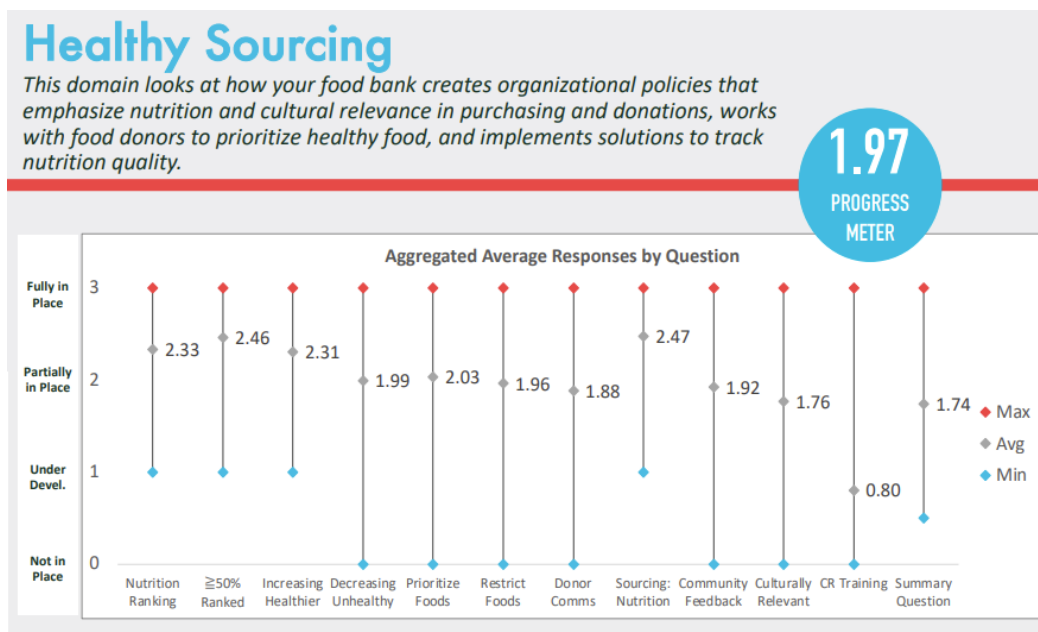
- The existing online platform is not formatted in a user-friendly way. There is some repetition among objectives that reduces clarity on key objectives.
- The dichotomous responses (yes or no) do not leave room to show planning or preparation for changes or expansion of services

Healthy Hunger Relief Index (HHRI)

The HHRI was developed by Partnership for a Healthier America (PHA) in 2021. The survey takes approximately 15 minutes to complete. It contains five domains with multiple questions and a summary question for each. These sections cover the six key strategies for healthy food banking with an additional focus on leadership and staff knowledge and attitudes.



PHA scores responses from each food bank and creates a summary report. Average scores are calculated for each question, and then aggregated for each of the five domains. Food banks can see the range of responses when multiple staff complete the survey to determine how aligned they are, or where there may be disagreement about current activities. For example:



Strengths:

- Focuses on food equity
- Short assessment that can be completed by multiple staff at a food bank
- The four-point scale can show strategies that are under development or partially in place
- PHA creates a progress report with accelerator ideas and suggestions for improvement

Limitations:

- Does not calculate an overall score. Many food banks have expressed wanting to see their score in comparison to other similar food banks.
- Scores are subjective, depending on the assessor. This is useful in understanding organization-wide commitment but creates challenges in measuring change over time and impedes objective scorability.

For more in-depth comparison of these tools, see Appendix B.

Food Pantry Assessment Tools

As part of the landscape assessment, several food pantry-level assessment tools were assessed. The two food pantry-level assessment tools which measure the nutritional environments at food pantries and suggest areas for improvement that are widely used include: the [Nutrition Environment Food Pantry Assessment Tool \(NEFPAT\)](#)¹ (developed by the University of Illinois in 2017) and the [Healthy Food Pantry Assessment Toolkit \(HFPAT\)](#) (created by Washington State University and Colorado State University in 2018). In this report, we describe both tools with comparisons. (See Appendix C)

¹ At the time of this report, the NEFPAT is undergoing revision. The new NEFPAT + is expected fall 2023.

These tools can be utilized by food banks when supporting pantries in their network or by partners, such as SNAP-Ed and can help food banks understand how their work will impact neighbors. Alignment between food pantry level and food bank level activities can further the adoption of these six strategies to promote health and nutrition in the charitable food system. For example, food banks ranking foods nutritionally can make those rankings available to food pantries and provide them with the tools, resources and trainings to implement food rankings on their pantry shelves. Pantries can make food rankings visible to guests to help them make choices that align with their needs. Unlike the FB HANA and HHRI, these two pantry assessments are notable in their focus on scorability and lack of focus on a nutrition ranking system. Both tools have companion guides to provide support in adopting better practices.

Recommendations from the Working Group

The goal of this landscape assessment is to raise awareness for Healthy Food Banking initiatives, provide examples for measuring progress, and suggest recommendations for future assessment tools. The HER Nutrition Guidelines create a common language and criteria by which to evaluate the nutritional quality of foods in the charitable food system. It would be beneficial to have a common set of criteria by which to assess the broader work of food banks to support the health and well-being of neighbors beyond pounds of food distributed. These criteria would not only measure where food banks are now, but also provide ideas and inspiration for how the food bank can grow. We recommend the creation of a modular Healthy Food Banking Assessment aligned with the six strategies for Healthy Food Banking.

Existing Tools	The FB-HANA and HHRI serve different purposes. We recommend food banks interested in a comprehensive assessment of organizational practices and resources to use the FB-HANA and food banks interested in understanding organization adoption and buy-in to use the HHRI tool across the organization among various staff.
New Tools	New tools should align with the six key strategies for healthy food banking identified by this working group. A modular approach could allow for a condensed version of the survey to be completed quickly and a more in-depth assessment to measure change over time and areas for growth.
Key Features Recommended for New Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Length should preferably be less than 30 minutes • Food bank should be able to score the tool on their own and have a score that is meaningful to show comparison (over time, across food banks) • Includes self-assessment options • Focus on food equity, including measuring on how food banks and pantries are meeting the preferences of culturally diverse populations • Use the HER Nutrition Guidelines as the standard for evaluating the nutritional quality of foods • Alignment between food bank and food pantry initiatives to advance systems change • Consideration for how these actions are translating into impact, and accountability strategies for the improvements in removing neighbor barriers to access and improving neighbor health

Appendix A: Strategies for Healthy Food Banking

Strategy	Examples	Resources
Organizational commitment to health and nutrition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design a nutrition policy that includes nutrition guidelines and foods to increase or decrease • Develop an organization-wide strategy to implement nutrition policy • Incorporate health equity values in strategic plan • Communicate organizational values via mission statement or on website • Have staff member(s) with nutrition expertise • Solicit feedback from community on preferred foods (cultural, health-related, religious) 	Nutrition in Food Banking Toolkit (FANO Food Banks only): Learning Hub <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create & Implement Nutrition Policies Toolkit • Source & Distribute Cultural & Neighbor-preferred Foods Toolkit
Rank inventory nutritionally with the HER Guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In inventory system, regular reporting and monitoring of nutrition ranks, setting goals based on rankings • Communicate with agencies about ranks and/or ranks are visible on ordering system • Communicate with food donors about nutritional ranks 	Healthy Eating Research Nutrition Guidelines for the Charitable Food System (FANO Food Banks Only): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rank & Source Food Using HER Nutrition Guidelines Toolkit
Source healthy foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set goals for more Green and Yellow food, less Red • Prioritize funding to purchase healthy and culturally preferred food • Source foods based on preferences from neighbors 	(FANO Food Banks only): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deploy a Food Sourcing Strategic Plan
Support partner agencies to follow healthy pantry practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support healthy food pantry programming (with trainings, grants for fridges) • Direct nutrition education (to neighbors) or nutrition education training (for pantry staff/volunteers) 	Leah's Pantry Trainings Key Considerations for Nutrition Education Programs: An Evidence Review
Improve equitable food access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remove barriers to accessing charitable food: encourage agencies to offer choice, evening/weekend hours, collect feedback on preferred foods, provide welcoming culture • Offer trainings, conferences, grants on equitable access practices • Model better practices if offering direct service (e.g. shopping for agencies, choice at food bank led mobile distributions) • Incorporate neighbor voice, support agencies in being more responsive to their communities 	Client Choice Handbook (2019) (FANO Food Banks only): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Client Choice Toolkit
Develop community partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage health care partners • Establish food policy councils • Collaborate with advocacy organizations • Create nutrition advisory boards 	Food Bank-Health Care Partnerships Toolkit

Appendix B: Existing Tools to Assess “Healthy Food Banking” Initiatives

	FB-HANA Food Bank Health & Nutrition Assessment <i>University of Illinois</i> 2019	HHRI Healthy Hunger Relief Index <i>Partnership for a Healthier America</i> 2021
Overview	<p>Measures adoption of food banking practices that promote nutrition and health through policy, system, and environmental (PSE) approaches.</p> <p>Helps food banks gain new insights about health and nutrition practices, identify areas of opportunity for action planning, and determine a baseline against which progress can be measured.</p>	<p>Measures alignment across the organization and extent to which practices in health equity have been adopted by the food bank.</p> <p>Helps food banks understand and identify progress toward achieving food equity through organizational policies and practices to make lasting health-focused organizational change.</p>
Access	<p>Publicly available: http://go.illinois.edu/FB-HANA</p>	<p>Publicly available: https://www.ahealthieramerica.org/articles/just-released-pha-s-healthy-hunger-relief-index-1046</p>
Assessed by	Ideally by an external, technical assistance provider. May also be conducted as a self-assessment by food bank leadership team.	Self-assessment, ideally from multiple food bank employees across different departments of the food bank.
Time to complete	60 – 90 minutes overall tool 10 – 15 minutes for individual objectives	15 minutes
Content	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. General Information (17 questions): Food bank information. 2. Policies and Practices (62-75 questions): Covers eight key areas of identifying and responding to needs of community, integrating needs of diverse populations, nutrition policy, nutrition education and training, external policies, internal operations and support for member agencies, nutrition ranking and modeling nutrition promotion practices. 3. Special Programs and Reach (5 questions): Additional programs offered by food bank, such as USDA Commodities and cooking education. 4. Sources of Food and Funding (20 questions) 5. External Conditions (3 questions): Background information on external, 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Staff and Board Leadership (7 questions): Commitment to nutrition and food equity among staff. 2. Healthy Sourcing (11 questions): System to track nutritional quality and cultural relevance of food, policies to promote nutrition. 3. Organizational Culture (5 questions): Internal commitment to health. 4. Agency Support (6 questions): Engagement and incentives for agency partners to prioritize health.

	<p>FB-HANA Cont.</p> <p>uncontrollable factors that may influence policies and practices.</p>	<p>HHRI Cont.</p> <p>5. Collaborative Partnerships (5 questions): Engaging with other organizations at the local, state and national levels to advance change.</p>
<p>Measure / Score</p>	<p>Total score of 65 points for practices and policies currently in place, across 8 objectives.</p> <p>All questions are dichotomous Yes/No.</p>	<p>Does not create an overall score. Across 5 HHRI domains, the food bank learns which stage it is in from Not in Place to Fully in Place and receives suggestions for making progress.</p> <p>All questions are on a 4-point Likert scale.</p>
<p>Strengths</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tested by researchers for validity and by food banks in Illinois for reliability • Builds off a similar tool (the NEFPAT) for food pantry assessments • Very comprehensive in assessing food bank assets and strategies for health and nutrition work and can be used to identify strategies to target • Food banks can choose how they want to use the assessment based on their priorities and time available. Each objective can be used on its own, as each has standalone validity and reliability evidence, or as a longer full version of the assessment. • Tool was created in collaboration with Feeding America nutrition-focused staff with the intention the Nutrition in Food Banking toolkit would be used as the implementation resource 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on food equity • Short assessment that can be completed by multiple staff at a food bank • The four-point scale can show strategies that are under development or partially in place • PHA creates a progress report with accelerator ideas and suggestions for improvement
<p>Limitations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The dichotomous responses (yes or no) do not leave room to show planning or preparation for changes or expansion of services • The existing online platform is not formatted in a user-friendly way. There is some repetition among objectives that reduces clarity on key objectives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not calculate an overall score. Many food banks want to see their score in comparison to other similar food banks. • Scores are subjective, depending on the assessor. • Tool has not been validated.

Appendix C: Existing Tools to Assess “Healthy Food Pantry” Initiatives

Additional ways that food banks can improve their Healthy Food Banking is in how they support their partner agencies. The following are two existing tools to measure healthy food pantry initiatives.

	NEFPAT Nutrition Environment Food Pantry Assessment Tool <i>University of Illinois</i> 2017	HFPAT Healthy Food Pantry Assessment Toolkit <i>Washington State University</i> <i>RNECE West – Colorado State University</i> 2018
Overview	The NEFPAT helps food pantries assess their nutrition environment and make improvements to promote healthier food choices among their clients. The assessment evaluates various aspects of the food pantry environment, such as the types of foods offered, the layout of the pantry, and nutrition education provided to clients to help food pantries identify areas where they can make improvements in the nutritional quality of the food offered.	The HFPAT provides an observational survey that can be used to measure the healthfulness of the local food pantry environment, also called an environmental scan or “e-scan.” The HFPAT can be used to measure the food pantry environment as it compares to best practices in food assistance agencies that is supported by “nutrition food banking” efforts.
Access	Publicly available: https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/library/materials/nutrition-environment-food-pantry-assessment-tool	Publicly available: https://extension.wsu.edu/pierce/nutrition/healthy-food-pantry-assessment-toolkit/
Assessed by	Typically, SNAP-Ed staff use the NEFPAT to support pantries through 5 phases: 1) partner engagement, 2) 30-60 min NEFPAT assessment, 3) collaboration with pantry to develop an action plan 4) intervention, and 5) re-assessment.	Designed for use by food pantry managers, staff, volunteers, and USDA nutrition program partners (SNAP-Ed and EFNEP).
Time to Complete	30-60 min	60 min
Content	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Increase Client Choice for Nutritious Options (8 questions): Strategies to promote selection of nutritious foods including questions around nutrition policy, offering choice and food safety Market & “Nudge” Healthful Products (8 questions): Focus on Foods 2 Encourage (F2E) and MyPlate as nutrition guidelines 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Pantry Location & Entrance (13 questions): measures accessibility and equity. Food Available to Clients (23 questions): with a focus on food groups, food variety and food quality. Policies of the Food Pantry (6 questions): Includes nutrition guidelines, respect and dignity and food safety

	<p>NEFPAT Cont.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Provide Various <i>Forms</i> of Fruits and/or Vegetables (8 questions) 4. Provide Various <i>Types</i> of Fruits and/or Vegetables (5 questions): Based on food color 5. Promote Additional Resources (8 questions): Includes nutrition education and connection to other resources 6. Plan for Alternate Eating Patterns (5 questions): Addresses education for volunteers and client food needs and preferences 	<p>HFPAT Cont.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Frozen, Chilled, Dry Storage and Food Safety (13 questions) 4. Services for Clients (3 questions): Includes nutrition education and connection to other services 5. <i>Not scored</i> Other Supplementary Programs (9 questions)
Measure / Score	Provides a numeric score 0-47 (Bronze = 0-15; Silver = 16-31; Gold = 32-47). An "Action Plan" is developed in collaboration with the SNAP-Ed partner.	Provides a numeric score on a scale of 0-100. The closer to 100, the more aligned the pantry environment is to current "healthy best practices of food pantries". A "Resource Guide" identifies strategies that SNAP-Ed and EFNEP partners can implement based on the scoring of the 69 HFPAT assessment items to support healthy food pantry changes.
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tested by researchers for validity and by food pantries in Illinois for reliability • Short and easy to complete • Implementation Materials provided to support SNAP-Ed trainers provide training for pantry staff • Scorable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tested by researchers for reliability across multiple states • A "Resource Guide" identifies strategies that SNAP-Ed and EFNEP partners can implement • Addresses equitable access, food availability, pantry resources and policies/practices • Scorable
Limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses variable and inconsistent nutrition standards, including F2E and MyPlate with some "eat the rainbow" verbiage • The dichotomous responses (yes or no) do not leave room to show planning or preparation for changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not address food sourcing • Long and highly dependent on point in time of assessment • Does not include a food ranking system – standards are based around food variety