

Offering Choice at Food Pantries: Impact for Families

April 2024

In 2022, 30 food banks participated in a project to increase the amount of choice offered by their food distribution sites for children and their families. Each food bank identified two to ten school pantry or partner sites to support in offering more choice during their distributions. Participating sites and families visiting the sites (referred to as neighbors) were surveyed in fall 2022 and spring 2023 to better understand barriers and facilitators to offering choice and to evaluate the impact of different levels of choice on the neighbor experience.

Project Goals

1. Build capacity of sites to increase levels of choice, see levels below
2. Discover best practices in increasing choice in programs that serve children and families
3. Examine the impact of offering more choice by gathering direct feedback from families to improve their experience

Data collected over two time points:

- 98 pantry directors and volunteers participated
- 4,785 neighbors participated
- 65 pantries had data from neighbors and directors for both time points

Defining Choice

While pantries, mobiles and school pantries may follow different distribution practices, the amount of choice offered can be categorized by how restrictive the model is - from no choice to full choice.



Providing Choice in Electronic and Paper Surveys

For the neighbor surveys, the evaluation team used QR codes with online surveys and digital gift cards in fall 2022. Several food banks and their sites said that this method was not accessible for some rural and elderly neighbors. The evaluation team adjusted and offered the option of either online or paper surveys for spring 2023, which increased participation.



In collaboration with:

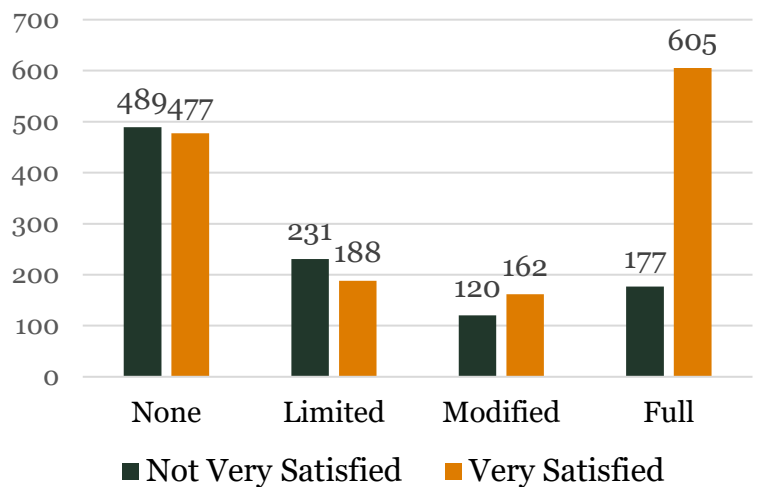


Listening to Neighbors

Neighbors were asked about their perceptions of choice, healthy food availability, and food waste. A total of 1,897 neighbors completed electronic surveys in fall 2022, and 2,888 neighbors completed surveys (electronic or paper) in spring 2023.

Among neighbors surveyed in the fall 2022, the majority of respondents were female (79%) and racially and ethnically diverse: 44% White, 36% Latino/ Hispanic, 19% Black, and 5% Other. Average age was 51. Over half of respondents (55%) had a child under age 18. Over half (52%) had at least one dietary restriction in the household.

Neighbor Satisfaction with Level of Choice, Spring 2023 (p<.01)



“Conversing with students one-on-one about the pantry and allowing them to take what they want reduces the stigma students had felt previously.” – Food bank staff

Neighbors had better experiences at full choice pantries

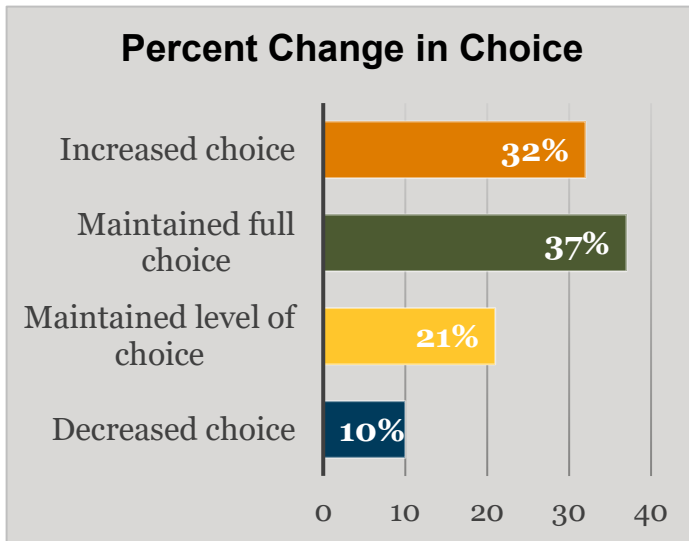
Neighbors at full choice sites reported greater satisfaction & less food waste compared to those without full choice. Compared to neighbors at pantries without full choice, neighbors at pantries that identified as full choice were:



“These neighbors [from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala and Columbia] tend to decline canned food ... in favor of fresh produce and dried beans. In response, we have reduced the amount of canned items for this location and have shifted to increasing fresh foods.” – Food bank staff

Monthly Capacity Institute Calls

Feeding America hosted monthly Choice Capacity Institute calls to provide food banks with tools and strategies to support sites in offering more choice. Topics included training staff and volunteers on choice, building buy-in for choice, collecting neighbor feedback, addressing barriers to offering choice, peer support, and highlighting choice in action. Sites that started at full choice were also encouraged to make changes to improve their operations and the neighbor experience.



Change in Choice Fall '22 - Spring '23

Based on the pantry directors' surveys, one third of sites (32%) increased their level of choice. Most sites remained at the same level of choice from the fall to the spring, including 16% that stayed at no choice. Sites of all types were able to increase choice, but those that failed to do so were significantly more likely to have small spaces and to identify both space and time as a top barrier. Among pantries that maintained full choice, one-third found ways to improve their programming by making changes to the types of food offered, the layout of the pantry, the days/hours open, and collecting additional neighbor feedback.

Barriers to Increasing Choice

In surveys and through qualitative feedback, food bank and food pantry staff shared the following factors that prevented or reduced their ability to increase choice:



High food costs



Continued impact of COVID-19



Natural disasters



Limited time



Limited space

Feeding America and the evaluation team are developing new tools to address these barriers and prompt action to increase choice in the network.

“Each choice pantry has added extra days and times, including nights and weekends, to offer additional opportunities to visit and shop in the choice pantry.”
– Food bank staff

Conclusion

Until recently, quantitative data about the impact or process of offering choice has been limited. These findings help to validate the benefits of offering choice, and in particular offering full choice, as a better practice for food pantries. Food banks can use these results to support additional food pantries to increase choice for the neighbors they serve.

With Gratitude

We are grateful for the generous financial support from Morgan Stanley and the active participation from partner food banks, school pantries and partner agencies for their enthusiasm to offer choice and improve the neighbor experience.