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## ***SNAP* Into Collaboration: An analysis of public and private sector food security programs.**

Abstract: This paper will first address the gaps left by the federal program SNAP. It will then discuss the private sector programs and finally it will suggest ways that the private sector can improve its methods to greater complement SNAP and reduce food insecurity.

Despite America's high level of development, The War on Poverty is far from over: "When compared with other Western industrialized nations, levels of impoverishment in the United States have been found to exceed those of virtually all comparable developed countries" (Rank 738).<sup>1</sup> With recent and potential cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the nation's largest publicly funded food assistance program, the nation is at a cross roads as to how it will address hunger and food security in America. Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. saw this crossroads almost 50 years ago: "Let us march on poverty until no American parent has to skip a meal so that their children may eat" (Jackson). Dr. King was not the first, however, to see food access as a condition of justice. The relationship between food, well-being, competitive advantage, opportunity and capability has captivated philosophers and scientists for generations. A study from November 2012 establishes a link between childhood food security and a statistically significant "increase in educational attainment, earnings, income, and decreases in welfare participation" (Hoynes 29). A study from 2014 found that 15.9 million children in the United States live in households where they are not food secure (Feeding America).

In this paper, I will argue that government food assistance programs in general, and SNAP in particular, are on their own insufficient and by some measures ineffective in meeting the basic food security needs of Americans who rely on them. For this reason, I will argue that private and charitable food assistance programs play a vital role in not only supplementing, but also correcting deficiencies in SNAP

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Census Bureau currently 15.4% of individuals are below the poverty line in the United States (Census Bureau).

and other government food programs. In 2012 there were 17.6 million Americans who experienced food insecurity (Feeding America 2). In part, gaps left by the government contribute to this figure and can be filled by private sector efforts. The private sector can tailor their programs in such a way that accounts for the shortcomings of SNAP. Consequently, the private sector can reach underserved sections of the population and decrease national food insecurity. First, this paper will explore several shortcomings and challenges in SNAP. Then, it will describe the private sector food assistance landscape and show how the public and private sector can complement each other.

The fight against food insecurity became official in 1961 when President Kennedy signed executive order 10983, which initiated the food stamp pilot program (USDA). Thirteen years later the program was extended to cover all 50 states. Since then, it has ballooned into the largest food assistance program in the nation. In 2008, the food stamp program was renamed to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly referred to as SNAP (USDA). As of June of 2014, 46.5 million Americans were participating in SNAP (SNAP to Health Program).<sup>2</sup> SNAP benefits are determined using the “USDA’s Thrifty Food Plan (TFP)”, which uses factors like household size and income to determine the appropriate level of benefits for each household (USDA 11). This is a “nutritious, minimal cost food plan that reflects current nutrition standards and guidance”, while also being highly budget conscious (USDA 11). The benefits received by

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<sup>2</sup> “The federal government pays the full cost of SNAP benefits and splits the cost of administering the program with the states, which operate the program” (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities).

participating families or individuals vary based on income level as well as other factors, like household size, composition, assets, deductions and resources.

According to the USDA, the maximum benefit for a family of four in 2012 was “\$668, or less than \$1.90 per person per meal” (USDA).

There is widespread consensus among policy makers and nutrition experts that SNAP has been highly effective in reducing food insecurity in America. A 2011 study found that “receipt of SNAP benefits reduces the likelihood of being food insecure by roughly 30% and reduces the likelihood of being very food insecure by 20%” (Ratcliffe). According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, in 2014 the Federal Government spent \$76 billion on SNAP (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities). These numbers indicate the scale of the program and suggest that private sector food assistance programs could never replace government food support. This paper will not argue that the private sector can solve food insecurity at the national level; but rather, that it can and should complement SNAP and mitigate some gaps in the program. Furthermore, I will argue that there must be greater collaboration between USDA Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) officials, SNAP administrators at the state and local levels, and leaders in the private sector hunger relief agencies.

## **I. Look at SNAP**

**Eligibility:** The first area in which SNAP falls short is the complicated testing process for eligibility. The receipt of SNAP benefits is dependent on “certain tests, including resource and income tests” (USDA). Applicants can find these tests

burdensome. Within the Feeding America network, 8.1% of eligible non-participants to SNAP did not apply for benefits because of the application difficulty (Feeding America 144). Application difficulty stems from the amount of information required to determine eligibility. Different states have different processes for determining SNAP eligibility; however, based on federal guidelines, in all states these tests include: resources, assets, income, deductions and employment (USDA). The asset test is especially troublesome for the newly jobless (FRAC 4). In these situations the applicants might be below the income level they need to establish eligibility, but still not eligible due to assets from a time when they lived a different lifestyle. Figure 1 demonstrates how different states value assets in a variety of different ways. In the majority of states, there are two options for applying: online eligibility screening or completing a manual application at a participating agency.

After the application is completed an interview is required. In Virginia, the application interview can occur by phone or face-to-face (Virginia Department of Social Services). In contrast, Texas requires a face-to-face interview (Texas Health and Human Services). The face-to-face interview has been found to exclude the working poor from the program because of the time and travel requirement (USDA). This shows yet another way that the application process can be difficult.

The Food Research and Action Center found that the language in these applications can be excessively complicated. In 49 out of 50 states, certification statements required a 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. Some of the phrases identified as difficult included: “liquid assets,” “deemed income,” and “deprivation factor” (Food Research and Action Center 45). A 2003 study found that 30 million American

adults (14%) are at a below basic reading level (National Assessment of Adult Literacy). An additional problem FRAC points out is that misrepresenting information on a SNAP form is considered perjury. This is a rather significant consequence that requires applicants to have a fairly high level of comprehension of the rules regarding fraud in the U.S legal system, as well as the consequences for violating them. If they are not fully aware of this then they could face serious repercussions just for filling out the application.

Additionally, different rules state-by state for seniors further complicate the eligibility process. Deductions help determine a families' income level and the presence of seniors adds a level of specificity needed in documentation. For example, "Medical expenses for elderly or disabled members that are more than \$35 for the month if they are not paid by insurance or someone else" count as deductions for SNAP benefits (USDA). Even deductions for shelter alter based on the presence of an elderly person. "The amount of the shelter deduction cannot be more than \$490 unless one person in the household is elderly or disabled" (USDA). These provisions add complexity to the application process. A 2012 study found that "eligible households containing elderly members were roughly five percent less likely to participate in the Food Stamp Program than eligible households without elderly members" (FRAC 14). When surveyed, 86% of state food stamp directors said that eligible non-participant seniors do not apply for the program mainly because, "the effort needed to apply for food stamps outweighed the benefits" (FRAC 14). It is possible that the complicated process for the elderly excludes eligible seniors.

Despite the high levels of SNAP use there still exist individuals who assume they are ineligible when they are in fact eligible. Presumed ineligibility accounted for 52.1% of eligible non-participant's reasons for not applying in 2014 (Feeding America 144). Some food stamp clinics participate in outreach endeavors; however, this is not a federal mandate. This means that state participation levels are dependent on the social services departments overseeing SNAP applications and benefits distributions, to communicate effectively with the surrounding community.

**Timeliness:** Timeliness is another factor that plays a role in the application process. A 2013 report demonstrated that application process timeliness is a priority for the Food and Nutrition Service because it is important that recipients gain benefits as quickly as possible. Consequently there is a quality control system in place, as well as rewards for high performing states.<sup>3</sup> They evaluated state compliance with the thirty-day return standard and found that increasing applicant knowledge about necessary documents prior to the application helped Idaho, Kentucky, Oregon and New Mexico shorten the length of their application process (FNS 5). Additionally Oregon found that using state waivers to disregard the face-to-face interview requirement improved staff efficiency (FNS 8).

Despite these success stories, a 2014 USDA memo reveals that, "The average national APT rate has fallen from 91% in 2004 to 88% in 2013 (USDA). They point out that while some states operate on a high level of efficiency, most states don't process 90% of their applications in a timely manner. The USDA attributes these

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<sup>3</sup> FNS determined a list of best practices based on 9 states with high APT performance levels (FNS 1).

issues to “shrinking budgets and rising caseloads” (USDA). Essentially, the list of best practices exists but most states are not currently implementing them.

**Third Party Verification:** Third party verification is another barrier in accessing SNAP benefits. These verification requirements include: “nine states requiring landlord verifications of some sort (letter, phone or in person), 13 states requiring bank account numbers, and 20 states requiring detailed directions to the applicant’s house for home visit verification purposes” (Food Research and Action Center 48). A sample landlord verification form is pictured in Figure 2. These verifications can be unduly burdensome for many SNAP applicants. The difficulty of the verification process can lead to denial of SNAP benefits. In Indiana if applicants do not provide document verification of “resources, income, social security number and residency” within ten days the division can deny the request for SNAP (Indiana.Gov).

**Transportation:** Lack of transportation is another barrier to access in SNAP, particularly for the poorest segments of society. The USDA noted in 2004 that “12.9 percent of eligible nonparticipant households” stated that the reason they did not apply for SNAP was difficulty traveling to the food stamp office (Food Research and Action Center 29). In many states the application process requires many visits to a social services office and possibly to other locations for third party verification. Some individuals report that they drive their own car, ride with a friend or use public transportation; however, this is not always a viable option (Food Research and Action Center 29). This same evaluation was able to determine that offices in remote areas that cannot be reached by public transportation account for “approximately 40% of the national caseload” (Food Research and Action Center

30). Some offices offered a phone interview as an alternative application method, yet these relaxed rules apply to only 16% of caseloads (Food Research and Action Center 30).

**Office Hours:** The working poor face additional constraints because most social services department's hours conflict with normal daytime work hours.

Extended office hours occur in some localities, but are not federally required.

Twenty-two percent of eligible nonparticipant respondents reported that "applying for food stamps would require too much time away from work" (Food Research and Action Center 32). The business hours of most SNAP offices and the large time commitment required to complete a SNAP application harm poor working families who may need SNAP.

**Caseworker Error:** SNAP caseworkers can be incredibly overworked and in some cases highly prone to error. A 2004 Urban Institute study discovered that budget cuts and increased participation has led to "caseloads up to 600 to 1000 per worker, especially in larger, urban offices" (Food Research and Action Center 36).

These numbers are troubling because SNAP workers have a vital role in ensuring that each applicant receives due process. Overworked workers might not be able to catch errors, or they might even commit them. According to 2000 USDA quality control data, over half of SNAP errors were as a result of mistakes made by workers. (Food Research and Action Center 18). In these situations applicants can fail the eligibility tests solely based on worker error, not lack of need.

**The Appeals Process:** After this occurs the appeal process is a complicated one.

Applicants are informed by letter whether or not their benefits were approved. Once a SNAP application is denied, whether caused by worker error or not, the appeals process is one that requires a strong understanding of the law. The Virginia Department of Social Services' procedure, which is quite typical, requires applicants to "request a hearing on your SNAP case within the next 90 days as long as the issue appealed is based on the improper computation of your benefits, or the misapplication or misinterpretation of federal law or regulations" (DSS Virginia). In other words, the applicant herself needs to correctly and sufficiently understand the rules governing SNAP eligibility and know the reason she was denied. By law, all SNAP applications must be processed within 30 days, unless expedited (Food Research and Action Center 37). The Food Research and Action center reported that "22 percent of the nation's caseload is automatically denied, without notification" (Food Research and Action Center 37). Lack of denial notification means that applicants might not even know the status of their SNAP application. Subsequently, the applicant might not be able to appeal the decision within the allotted 90-day time frame. Hence, even those who have a clear understanding of the rules and the criteria face obstacles.

**Disincentives to Savings:** Saving money is an important part of escaping poverty. A 2010 report demonstrates that "asset poverty" is a pervasive issue in America. In 2010 22.5 percent of American households lived in asset poverty and "14.3 percent of them lived in extreme asset poverty with no net savings or assets whatsoever" (Levere). The report continues, "Assets provide more than a cushion against hard

times. Household savings help to build aspirations and expectations for the future” (Levere). To build credit and economic stability, people often need liquid assets. However, SNAP regulations disincentivize savings. “Households may have \$2,250 in countable resources, such as a bank account, or \$3,250 in countable resources if at least one person is age 60 or older, or is disabled” (USDA). This means that as soon as an individual rises above a certain savings level they are required to report that amount to their local food stamp office, and disqualify themselves from future benefits. This asset limit increases SNAP beneficiaries’ vulnerability to financial emergencies, to prolonged chronic poverty and to reliance on public benefits.

**Issuance Schedule:** The timeline on which SNAP benefits are issued lacks flexibility. Under federal guidelines, SNAP benefits are issued automatically once a month (USDA). This monthly issuance schedule requires that individuals receiving SNAP benefits plan out the entire monthly budget for their household, estimating what they will eat each day. A 2013 series in *The Washington Post* by Eli Saslow followed the lives of several SNAP recipients as they adjusted to the benefit reduction that resulted from the 2012 Farm Bill budget cuts. One of his subjects, Raphael, epitomizes this issue: ““Her monthly allotment of \$290 in food assistance had been reduced to \$246. She already had spent the entire balance on two carts of groceries at Save a Lot. There were 22 days left until the 8<sup>th</sup>” (Saslow 3). This example illustrates that the monthly allotment system requires intense planning throughout the month. In 2014 the program was changed even more. The 2014 Farm Bill included 8.6 billion in SNAP budget cuts over the next ten years (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities).

**Access in Rural Areas:** Living in a rural area creates an even greater barrier to access. Feeding America found that in rural areas SNAP outreach was particularly difficult due to “to higher costs for time and travel, higher rates of stigma, fewer opportunities to partner with organizations, and fewer opportunities to routinely interact with people. Thus, rural communities were most likely to be underserved or served inconsistently” (Feeding America 4). Not only is it physically harder to reach rural areas with enrollment assistance, but many rural areas also face food deserts and decreased supplies of quality food. Areas where it is impossible to purchase healthy, fresh food are defined as food deserts. The USDA uses a ten-mile marker from a supermarket to define a food desert (USDA). According to this method 2.3 million low income people live in rural areas that fit this definition. Part of food security is “food availability, access, and utilization” (Scanlan 89). SNAP alone cannot remedy all problems with food access and availability. EBT cards serve only as a method of payment; they do not impact purchasing ability.

**Limitations on Service to Homeless Individuals:** A 1999 study by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty discovered discouraging facts about the state of SNAP among the homeless in America. According to their research:

“Forty-five percent” of food pantry caseworkers reported that their homeless clients had been denied food stamps because they lacked an address. Seventy-seven percent reported that homeless clients had been denied because they lacked proper identification.” (Food Research and Action Center 42)

The homeless are a particularly vulnerable population within society, and the way SNAP is administered makes it unlikely that the program can meaningfully address the food and nutrition needs of this population.

**Reliance on Federal Funding:** The SNAP program is reliant on the federal government for funding. Given the partisan atmosphere, which often pervades Congress, the program's source of money is precarious. In 2012 Congress attempted to stem the growth of SNAP by decreasing the budget for SNAP. This was the biggest cut to SNAP in 50 years and it resulted in Americans on SNAP facing decreases to their benefits by 7% (Saslow 2). Despite this cut the House of Representatives is discussing an even further reduction. Another decrease would only exacerbate the existing limitations of the program. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found that to achieve the \$125 billion dollars of savings over 10 years, proposed by House Budget Committee Chairman Tom Price, the states would need to reduce SNAP caseloads by 11-12 million people, or reduce monthly benefits by an average of \$55 (Delany).

A 2013 public opinion survey found that only 39.4% of Americans support 39 billion dollars in cuts over the next ten years (University of Illinois). These numbers suggest that a spending cut of the magnitude suggested is unlikely; however, it is still possible that significant spending cuts could be made. SNAP's funding future might rely on the composition of Congress and the Executive Office after the 2016 election. A 2012 study found that while 74% of Democrats reported that they believe that the government has an obligation to help the "neediest" sectors, only 38% of Republicans answered affirmatively (Morin 1). The study found that this translates into a lack of support for entitlement programs, like SNAP, by elected officials. These numbers serve to demonstrate that SNAP funding is reliant

on the political culture at the federal level and as such is unpredictable despite popular opinion of the program.

**Barriers to Access Hurt the Poorest Segments:** Additionally people with the lowest income and highest level of other deprivations are the ones who experienced problems with the SNAP application process. The Urban Institute found that families with incomes below 50 percent of the poverty line reported problems with SNAP more frequently because of administrative hassles, less than those between 50 and 130 percent (ERS 40). People experiencing the deepest levels of poverty are the ones who need SNAP the most, yet numerous structural barriers prevent them from reaping the full benefits of the program.

In America the political system tends to prioritize the rich. A 2015 study found that the financially insecure opt out of the political system to a “striking” degree (Pew Research Action Center). They discovered that in 2014 94% of financially secure Americans registered to vote while only 54% of the least financially secured registered (Pew Research Action Center). Figure 3 demonstrates how the least financially secure fail to engage in the political process. Only 14% of the least financially secure had contacted an elected official in the last two years (Pew Research Center). Consequently, SNAP participants lack a voice in how the program is altered by the political system.

**Conclusion Section I:** The current administration of SNAP creates numerous barriers to access. Though the program is very large, covering over 46 million Americans, the cumulative effect of these barriers is to deny hungry and food insecure Americans the ability to purchase food. As a result of its scale SNAP is able

to help a large number of Americans, but consequently is unable to operate on a case-by-case basis. What the public sector lacks in flexibility can be ameliorated by private sector efforts.

## **II. Private Sector**

Because of the particular urgency of the need for adequate food, I argue that the private sector can increase their effectiveness by seeking a greater understanding of the gaps within the government system, and translating that into a system of nationally accepted best practices. The private sector can better serve as a complement to the government if it were to tailor its efforts around the government's gaps in service.

Food pantries have evolved into a "component of the broader public-private nutritional safety net" (Bartfeld 302). A 2011 article states, "The proliferation, even institutionalization of emergency food providers as a part of the social safety net is now a well accepted reality" (Paynter 30). This relationship is supported by statistics that evaluate food pantry use.<sup>4</sup> According to Feeding America, 25 million Americans used charity for food assistance in 2004 (Paynter 29). That number has since grown to 46.5 million in 2014 (Feeding America 44). Beyond general use, 58%

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<sup>4</sup> "The findings in Food Banks: Hunger's New Staple reveal that, for many clients of the Feeding America network, food pantries have become a critical supplementary source of food for their households on an ongoing basis. In light of Congress' continued focus on deficit reduction and reducing federal spending, as well as the expected reauthorization of certain federal nutrition programs in the 2012 Farm Bill, the policy implications of these findings are serious and immediate – not only for the 37 million people served through the Feeding America network, but also for the nearly 49 million people struggling with food insecurity across the country" (Feeding America 20).

of SNAP users are “frequent visitors to a food pantry (Feeding America 9-10).<sup>5</sup> This wealth of evidence suggests that food pantries play a vital role in addressing the gaps left by both federal and state governments; however, this relationship can be further cultivated.

Feeding America is the nation’s largest charitable food assistance network and as such accounts for 200 food banks and 60,000 food pantries in America. Within that network those programs distribute more than three billion pounds of food annually” (Feeding America 3). Feeding America agencies received most of their funding from individual contributions: “27.7% of agencies received more than half of funding from individual contributions” (Feeding America 73). The second largest donor is government and the third largest is religious organizations. Figure 4 shows the dissemination of resources within the Feeding America network. In one month alone they see an average of 2 million volunteers across the entire network (Feeding America 55). Despite its breadth, only 62% of the food distributed by food pantries comes from Feeding America (Feeding America 44). These statistics demonstrate the importance of private sector food security programs. Next I will discuss ways that food banks and pantries can better serve their clients through increased understanding about the government’s gaps in coverage.

### **III. Suggestions**

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<sup>5</sup> This information is from the 2010 Hunger in America data: “Hunger in America 2010 collected data from more than 61,000 interviews with clients during the winter and spring of 2009, over 42,000 of which were with food pantry clients, representing the largest study of domestic emergency food assistance ever conducted” (Feeding America 5).

The private sector is flexible in a way that SNAP cannot be. Because SNAP is federally funded and state administered there are regulation standards, like the application process, that are vital to the nature of the program, but lead to gaps in service. In places where these gaps occur there can be a more institutionalized system of communication between the private sector and public sector. In those cases food pantries can work to fill the gaps left by government service. Studies done by Feeding America support the idea that there is a list of best practices that both food pantries and local SNAP offices can follow so that each can side benefit from the other's information. Currently some food pantries are completing some, or all, of these measures, but a nationally recognized list of best practices would be helpful in formalizing and legitimizing this vital relationship.

There are competing ideas of what qualifies as a food pantry best practice. Foodshare is responsible for "150 partner pantries" and produced a "Food Pantry Best Practices Scoring Guide" so that they could promote consistency at all locations (Foodshare 2). The score sheet covers non-traditional hours, client emergencies, respect and food product, but it does not specifically address partnerships with the government. The closest the score sheet gets is in their "coordination with other agencies" section. In it, they recognize that there is "strength in numbers! Being aware of and collaborating with other service providers in your community will help build a stronger, more seamless social fabric to support your food pantry clients" (Foodshare 11). Nowhere in the score sheet do they suggest collaboration with the government, or ways that pantries can fill the food insecurity gap. The same omission occurs in a FoodBank of the Southern Tier's 2009 list of best

practices (Food Bank of the Southern Tier 2009). In contrast, River Bend Foodbank, a member of the Feeding America network, has a score sheet that includes “informing elected officials of hunger realities” and “ensuring that clients are aware of other help they may qualify for” (River Bend Foodbank 20). These examples demonstrate the diversity of approaches to food bank management. Due to their vital role in the food security landscape it is important that food banks fully utilize their resources and form mutually beneficial relationships with SNAP offices. Subsequently, a comprehensive score sheet that prioritizes filling the gap left by the government should be adopted by food pantries nationally, across the variety of food banks. The next section will review the ways in which the public and private sector can collaborate to decrease food insecurity in America.

**SNAP Participation:** Among 46.5 million clients in the Feeding America network, of the client households not receiving SNAP benefits almost half never applied (Feeding America 139). Of those non-applicants 72% could be eligible for SNAP (Feeding America 145). Currently if food banks provide outreach services they can “receive reimbursement for some of their administrative expenses” by the USDA fund (Feeding America). Under the State Outreach plan, implemented in 2014, food banks can operate as contractors for the state (USDA). This is a way that the government and private sector can collaborate to the greater benefit of both.

Food pantries can serve as a complement to government outreach programs due to their understanding of the communities.<sup>6</sup> Outreach workers work on a much

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<sup>6</sup> “During the case study period from April-November 2013, eight food banks (across six states) collectively reached close to 140,000 people to raise awareness about SNAP, averaging close to twenty thousand people a month. Outreach may include

smaller scale than SNAP offices and have a keen understanding of the community due to their firsthand experience with clients. Some examples of creative outreach locations utilized by the pantries in the Feeding America case study include: “nail salons where low-income immigrant women work, a car wash site, and a migrant farmworker employer site” (Feeding America 5). These sites were chosen because the outreach workers found that thinking outside of the box made it possible to reach previously unreachable communities. As a result, more individuals were able to see if they qualified for government benefits.

**Pre-Screening:** Outreach workers employed by the food banks can help to pre screen clients in a low stress manner before the individuals apply for SNAP. The Executive Summary on SNAP Outreach Cases found that the eight food banks participating in the case study were able to pre-screen 48,840 people in eight months (Feeding America 3). Of these applicants 11,564 people submitted SNAP applications with the help of food bank counselors. These are 11,564 individuals who did not previously know their eligibility or possess the support to apply for SNAP.

**Advocacy:** Once the application process begins, client advocates are able to make sure the applicant is protected throughout the process. As earlier stated, social workers face a high volume of applications and are not able to fully devote their time to each case. Subsequently, client advocates can fill that gap by checking that their clients: “receive a timely response from their SNAP agency, are treated fairly

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distribution of fliers, phone contacts (inbound and outbound), group meetings and workshops, and individual in-person contact” (Feeding America).

and receive benefits when they meet eligibility requirements” (Feeding America 2). These advocates can serve as an extra line of defense between vulnerable populations and the system. Despite the high level of success, in the Feeding America network only 34.2% of their 200 food banks offered some SNAP-related services in 2014 (Feeding America 66). Of the eight food banks that participated in the case study, they were able to help 11,564 previous non-applicants gain benefits. Consequently, counselor and outreach policies should be adopted across the national food bank landscape.

**Federally Funded Commodity Programs:** Currently the Federal Government funds programs like The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), which help fund the charitable food system (Feeding America 3). These programs are an ideal hybrid between the private sector’s lack of funding and SNAP’s lack of flexibility. Private sector innovation combined with government funding could lead to a significant reduction in persistent food insecurity. Currently, “TEFAP provides approximately one quarter of the food that flows through the Feeding America network and CSFP provides monthly food boxes for nearly 600,000 participants” (Feeding America 3). Compared to SNAP, these programs are relatively small in scale. However, they show how federal funding can be repurposed. The Riverbend Foodbank’s best practices guide suggests that food banks can increase the funding they receive from these programs by openly communicating with their local government officials. They state that government officials won’t know there is a persistent problem unless organizations, like food banks, reach out and inform them. Their score sheet

suggests that food banks and pantries should contact key government officials quarterly with figures about local need (Riverbend Food Bank 20).

**Food Deserts:** Mobile food pantries are a way that the greater food bank network can provide food to areas that don't have grocery store access. In places where SNAP benefits aren't enough, mobile food pantries are a flexible way aid can be supplied. An example of this comes from Quincy Bay, Germantown (Hanc). In Germantown, residents were finding the bus system burdensome and difficult to handle with groceries. In August 2011 the Greater Boston Food Bank started a mobile food pantry using a donated truck (Hanc). The truck would bring food directly into the city. For this particular mobile food pantry clients are able to access food with no proof of need. Shelly Ver Ploeg, "an economist at the United States Agriculture Department who studies food deserts" stated, "For communities that don't have a supermarket, this might be a way to go" (Hanc). In one day the mobile pantry was able to provide 571 individuals with food they wouldn't have otherwise had.

Mobile food pantries are a very simple and flexible method for providing food support. "Any church or other 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that would like to distribute food to the needy can sign up to use a Food Bank. They don't have to own a building or have a "normal" food pantry. (Food Bank of the Rockies 17). The Food Bank of the Rockies distributed 2,590,900 pounds of food to 18 urban and rural locations in 2014 using mobile pantries (Food Bank of the Rockies). Food banks can increase their effectiveness by using the USDA's Food Desert Atlas to

determine optimal areas for a mobile food pantry.<sup>7</sup> The Food Desert Atlas tracks food availability from 1 to 10 mile areas of access (USDA). Utilization of food desert mapping could lead to an increase in rural access to mobile food pantries.

**Flexible Intake Process:** Some food pantries attempt to verify client's financial information with methods similar to the government SNAP offices. Under least advisable practices, Riverbend food bank states that food banks should not: "require that they prove who they are, where they live, why they are in need," and "check that out (on a computer, with phone calls, etc.)" (Riverbend Food bank 18). The Food Bank of the Rockies explains why an informal verification process is important when they state: "We want clients to feel comfortable, and there is no quicker way to tell someone you don't trust them than to require they produce documentation, two forms of I.D., etc." (Food Bank of the Rockies 9). For the interview process Riverbend Foodbank suggests that they ask: "only who they are, where they live and if they are in need (and maybe why)" (Riverbend Foodbank 18). This could include name, address, phone number, a household count, days of food needed, and why they are in need (Food Bank of the Rockies 9). A less stringent application process is beneficial because that way, food pantries are able to fill the void left by the government. Subsequently individuals who experience barriers to access in the SNAP program, like lack of knowledge about financial assets, are able to find solace in the food pantry system.

**Hours:** Food pantries can help the working poor who might not be able to apply or qualify for SNAP benefits by scheduling their hours of operation around the

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<sup>7</sup> USDA Food Desert Atlas: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-access-research-atlas/go-to-the-atlas.aspx>

workweek schedule. Riverbend foodbank states, “Many of those in need of emergency food aid are employed; to serve them you will need to plan some distribution time outside of the normal workday. Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays are badly underserved in many communities” (Riverbend Food Bank 7). Despite the constraints put on the working poor some food banks do not currently follow this model. For example, the Food Bank of Iowa’s hours of operation are Monday through Thursday from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m and Friday from 7:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. (Food Bank of Iowa). It is important that food banks understand that one of the underserved populations is the working poor so that they can alter their practices to support them.

**Flexibility:** Food pantries should be able to adjust the amount of food they give each client on a case-by-case basis. The SNAP monthly issuance cycle means that once the benefits run out they are gone. While food pantries typically give food on a “(4 lbs.) x (number of people in the client’s household) x (the number of days worth of food they think they need from this visit)” basis they also have the capacity to change the amount issued based on circumstance (Riverbend Food Bank 9). Making sure that there is no strict standard, or maximum, of food allowed is an important part of food pantries because that way they are flexible in case of emergency. Such emergencies could be anything from unexpected loss of residence to unforeseen decrease in SNAP benefits.

**Local Government:** The primary way that the local government can help is by increasing communication with local food pantries about changes in eligibility. It is important for food banks participating in outreach activities that they possess

“Government agency data” which will “give insight to food banks about processes and policies that foster or hinder SNAP application processing and benefit distribution to eligible individuals and families” (Feeding America 11). It is especially vital with the potential budget cuts that food pantries understand how this will affect their clients’ level of need. Increased communication from local offices, as well as the USDA, will ensure that food counselors are better equipped to handle the changing food security landscape.

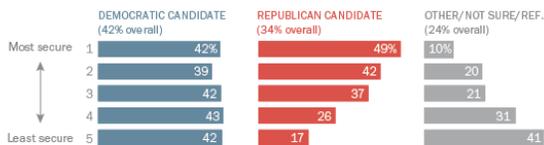
**Conclusion:** These suggestions show areas in which there is greater potential for collaboration between the private and public sector. A nationally accepted list of food bank best practices could play an instrumental role in reducing food insecurity. Eligible non-participants of SNAP and residents of food deserts are examples of groups that are under-served by current SNAP policies. Food banks are ideally positioned to address these populations and help them gain access to food in a way that local SNAP offices do not.



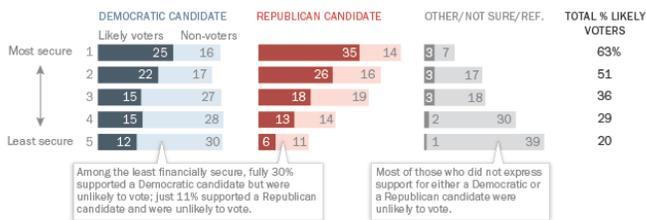
**Figure 3: Financial Security and Voter Participation**

**The Least Financially Secure Preferred Democrats in 2014, But Many Had No Preference ...**

2014 candidate preferences among the general public, by level of financial security



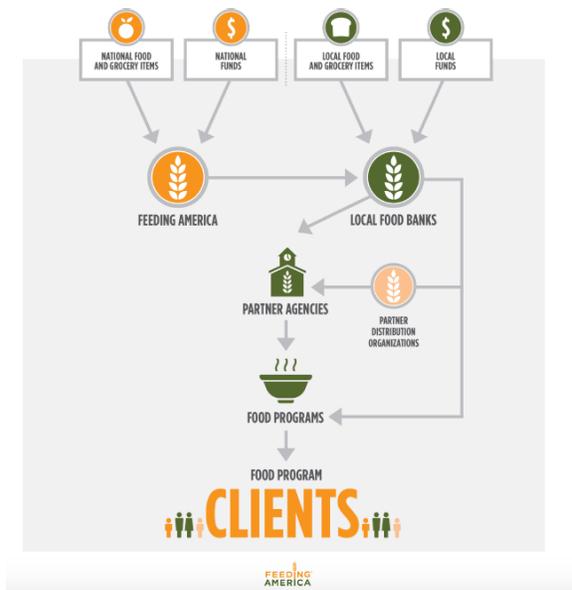
**... and Most Were Unlikely to Vote**



Note: Figures in bottom charts may not add up to totals in top charts and total % likely voters column because of rounding. Source: American Trends Panel (wave 7). Survey conducted Sept. 9-Oct. 3, 2014. Based on general public. PEW RESEARCH CENTER

[\(http://www.people-press.org/2015/01/08/the-politics-of-financial-insecurity-a-democratic-tilt-undercut-by-low-participation/\)](http://www.people-press.org/2015/01/08/the-politics-of-financial-insecurity-a-democratic-tilt-undercut-by-low-participation/)

**Figure 4: Feeding America 2014 National Report; Sources of food and distribution in the Feeding America network**



(Feeding America 7).

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