Assessing The Organizational Capacity of Pittsburgh's Nonprofit Food Aid Network

by

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In 2022, over 1 in 8 American households experienced food insecurity, defined as the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food (Rabbitt et al. 2023). Food insecurity is a significant social determinant of health that is caused by poverty and exacerbated by structural disparities in food availability and access.

Efforts to combat food insecurity include federal and state benefit programs such as SNAP and ground-level charitable food aid organizations such as food banks and food pantries. The charitable food aid sector is currently facing heightened demand due to recent SNAP benefit reductions and continuous inflation, making it important to determine whether food assistance organizations have the capacity to adequately meet the needs of the people they serve. Considering substantial regional variations in food insecurity and access, as well as the context-specific nature of street-level nonprofit work, analyzing the capacity of food assistance organizations on a local scale is particularly valuable.

My research aims to assess strengths and weaknesses in the organizational capacity of Pittsburgh's charitable food assistance network, with the goal of determining areas of improvement that can be addressed on the organizational level, as well as relevant opportunities for improvement in federal food assistance policy. I conducted in-depth interviews with seven food assistance nonprofits using a modified version of an existing nonprofit capacity assessment tool (McKinsey and Company's OCAT), as well as a survey of 56 food pantries in the Pittsburgh region. My findings demonstrate significant variation in organizational capacity among food assistance nonprofits, with consistent areas of weakness in succession planning, funding stability, and extra-organizational communication. I observed similar areas of concern among food pantries, as well as an overall lack of sustainable funding and resources, and a need for additional staff and volunteer support. Based on these findings, I argue that federal food assistance policy must be strengthened to ease the burden placed on the charitable food aid sector and ensure that households struggling with food insecurity receive sufficient support.

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Preface

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to everybody that has helped and supported me throughout this research process. Dr. Glass, thank you for encouraging me to pursue this project, and for all of your time, insight, guidance, and patience over the past several years. There were multiple points at which I encountered obstacles that made me feel like giving up, but I walked out of every one of our advising meetings with a renewed drive to keep going. Your support not only helped me grow academically but kept me grounded in the passion that initially inspired me to begin this work. Dr. Audrey Murrell, Dr. Paul Nelson, and Dr. Mim Seidel, thank you for being part of my defense committee and giving me incredibly thorough and thoughtful comments on my thesis, many of which I know will help guide me in my future work.

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Acronym Glossary

Abbreviation	Meaning
CPS	Census Bureau Current Population Survey
CPS-FSS	CPS Food Security Supplement
CSI	Coping Strategies Index
EA	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Emergency Allotment
FAI	Food Abundance Index
GPCFB	Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank
HPS	Household Pulse Survey
HFIAS	Household Food Insecurity Access Scale
LSA	Low Supermarket Access
McKinsey OCAT	McKinsey Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool
RDT	Resource Dependence Theory
SFPP	State Food Purchase Program
SNAP	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
TEFAP	The Emergency Food Assistance Program
TFP	Thrifty Food Plan
U.S. HFSSM	U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module

1.0 Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Food Insecurity

In 2022, more than 1 in 8 American households experienced food insecurity, defined as the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food (Rabbitt et al, 2023). People struggling with food insecurity are often forced to make difficult trade-offs due to a lack of financial resources, often having to sacrifice the quality or quantity of the food they consume or choose between a sufficient diet and other basic living expenses. Households that already struggle to meet their basic needs are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, with any unexpected expense potentially causing them to lose stable food access.

Poverty is the primary driver of food insecurity and intersects with other structural disparities; food access and security in the U.S. varies significantly across income, gender, and racial demographics, with Black and Hispanic households experiencing food insecurity at over double the rate of white households (Odoms-Young 2020, 1). These inequities are further heightened by uneven resource distribution and limited access to quality food sources (Myers and Paynter 2017).

Food insecurity is a meaningful determinant of health and is associated with numerous physical and psychological health consequences, including birth defects, anemia, cognitive and behavioral difficulties, anxiety, and depression. Children facing food insecurity have higher odds of being in poor health than their food-secure peers and are more likely to experience learning disorders and lowered academic success (Gundersen and Ziliak 2015, 1832), beyond differences attributed to poverty alone (Olson 1999, 523). Notably, increased nutrition knowledge does not mitigate these health consequences for food-insecure households (Lombe et al. 2016, 453), highlighting the need to address food insecurity directly to improve health outcomes.

Efforts to combat food insecurity are primarily conducted through federal and state benefit programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), as well as food banks and other charitable food assistance organizations. Although food banks were initially established as sources of emergency food assistance, a study conducted by Feeding America in 2010 found that food pantry clients used the service for an average of 28 consecutive months (Echevarria and Santos 2011, 3), and over half of food bank clients that receive SNAP benefits were recurrent clients (Echevarria and Santos 2011, 4). This demonstrates that many food-insecure households consistently rely on charitable food assistance, and federal benefits are insufficient to help households meet their food needs. In Allegheny County, about 12.5% of residents participated in the SNAP program in 2020. This percentage has likely increased, as SNAP participation in Pennsylvania overall has increased by about 12% from pre-pandemic levels, reaching a record high in June 2023 (Giamarisse 2023, 1).

The use of charitable food assistance in the U.S. spiked significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, rising from 40 million individuals served by the charitable food system in 2019 to 60 million in 2020. The increased reliance on food assistance organizations during the pandemic highlights their importance in aiding food insecurity during times of emergency and mass economic hardship. While food banks receive government support through funds and commodities, they are nonprofit organizations that significantly rely on voluntarism and private contributions and would face significant instability without voluntary labor and donations (Mook et al. 2020, 836). Demand for charitable assistance has remained high, even post-pandemic. 95%

Feeding America food banks reported continued or increased demand between February and March of 2023, and 65% reported an increase in the number of people seeking charitable food assistance (Feeding America 2023b). Given this rise in need, it is critical to examine whether nonprofit food aid organizations are equipped to handle their growing role in the social safety net.

1.2 Pittsburgh Context

Several decades after facing severe deindustrialization upon the collapse of the U.S. steel industry, the City of Pittsburgh underwent substantial revitalization, reemerging as a center of education, innovation, and health care (Lam 2017) and consistently ranking as one of the most livable cities in the nation. Despite the city's economic redevelopment, legacies of redlining and disinvestment in Pittsburgh continue to manifest through uneven concentrations of poverty and subsequently uneven levels of food access across the city, with 9.2% of Allegheny County residents facing food insecurity in 2021, including 11.8% of households with children and 24% of Black households (Feeding America, 2023c).

Neighborhood appraisal strategies utilized by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation in the 1930s discouraged investment in neighborhoods deemed unworthy, which typically consisted of older, racially and economically integrated communities (Rutan and Glass 2018, 339). Between 1970 and 2000, communities with the largest proportions of black residents remained concentrated in historically disinvested areas (Rutan and Glass 2018, 347), and in 2010, Pittsburgh ranked the 19th most segregated city among 50 US metropolitan areas with the largest African-American populations (Logan and Stults 2011, 6). Nearly 20% of all Pittsburgh residents live below the poverty line, with black residents far more likely to live in neighborhoods with high poverty concentrations. Based on 2017 ACS data, 88% of Pittsburgh neighborhoods with poverty rates above 40% were primarily inhabited by black residents, and nearly 60% of poor black residents in Pittsburgh lived in neighborhoods with 30% poverty or more, compared with only 14% of poor white residents (Cotter 2019, 1). High poverty rates and high concentrations of minority populations are both significant predictors of low food access (Dutko et al. 2012, 27). A 2012 United States Department of Treasury report found that Pittsburgh had the highest percentage of residents living in areas with low supermarket access (LSA) among cities with populations of 250,000-500,000. Nearly half of Pittsburgh's residents lived in LSA neighborhoods, and over 70% of LSA residents were low-income (Danko 2020, 6). Populations experiencing elevated poverty rates and limited resource access are highly likely to depend on food assistance, and bolstering federal and charitable food aid would tremendously impact their food security and financial stability.

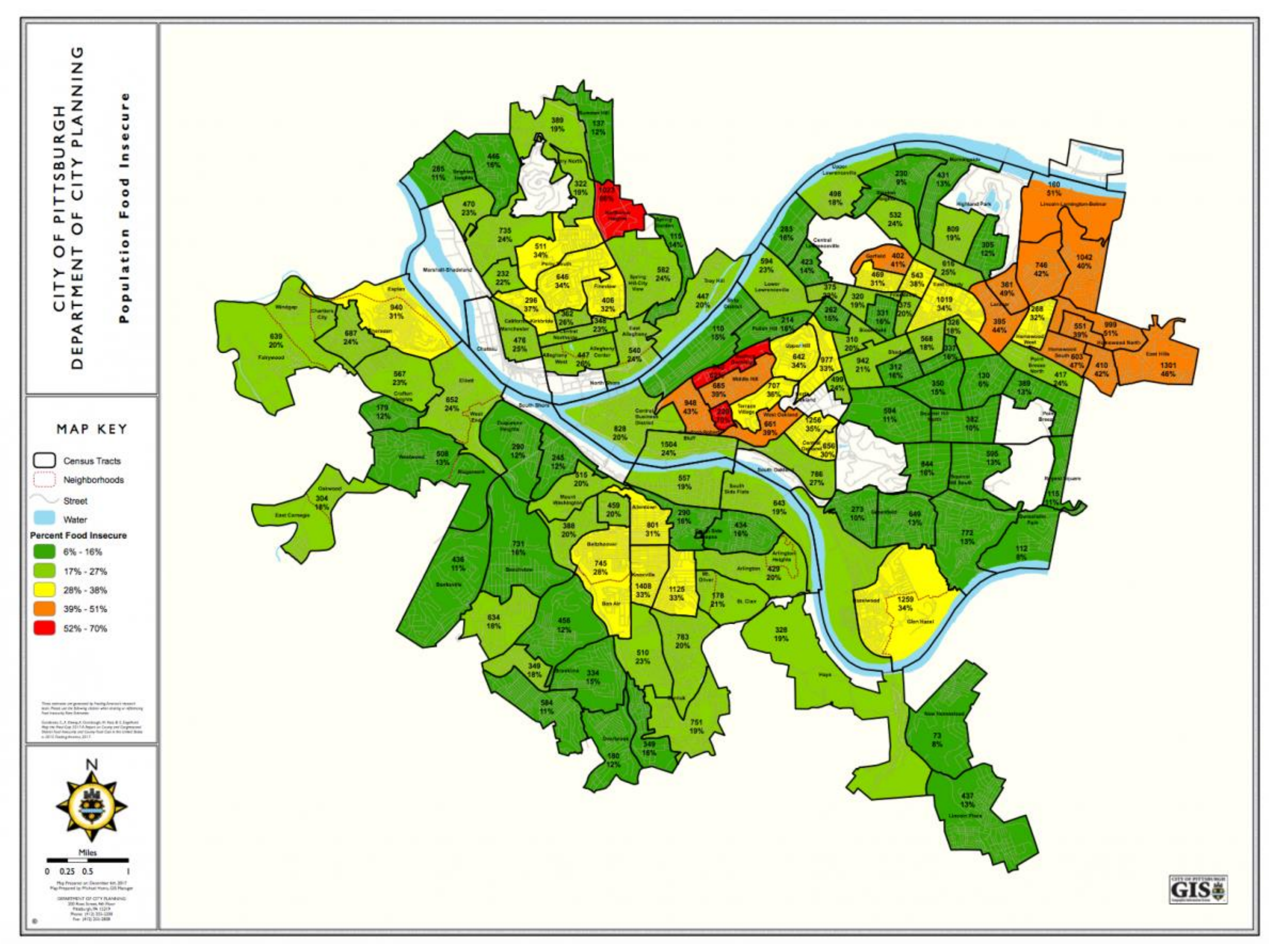

Figure 1: Food Insecurity in Pittsburgh.

City of Pittsburgh Department of City Planning, 2017

1.3 Policy Context

The role of food assistance organizations in mitigating food insecurity is especially vital amidst recent changes in federal food aid benefits and looming threats to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). SNAP is the nation’s largest federal nutrition assistance program, which provides eligible households with monthly benefits via an Electronic Benefits Transfer card, which can be used to purchase groceries at authorized retail stores. In 2022, 12.5%

of the U.S. population received SNAP benefits (Desilver 2023, 1). Beginning in 2020, the SNAP program distributed additional Emergency Allotments (EAs) during the second half of each month, as authorized under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Emergency Allotments brought SNAP recipients' benefits up to the maximum value for their respective household size and provided an additional $95 per month for households already receiving maximum benefit levels. This year, the EA benefit program ended, and beginning in March 2023, SNAP households again began to receive their regular benefit levels (DHS 2023). A 2022 study conducted through the Urban Institute estimated that, in the fourth quarter of 2021, EAs provided an average of $92 in additional monthly benefits to each SNAP recipient. This additional support kept 4.2 million people out of poverty, lowering the number of people below the poverty line by nearly 10 percent (Wheaton and Kwon 2022, 15). EA payments also had a measurable impact on food security, reducing food insufficiency by approximately 9% (Schanzenbach 2023, 10). Throughout 2021 and 2022, 17 states opted out of the EA program, and households in these states consistently reported higher levels of food insufficiency than in states that continued to distribute EA allotments.(cite) After the expiration of the EA program, there was no longer a statistically significant difference in food insufficiency between the two sets of states, with approximately one-quarter of SNAP recipients reporting "sometimes" or "often" not having enough food to eat across both groups (Brown et al. 2023,1).

The end of EA payments is already evidenced to significantly increase food hardship for SNAP recipients, who will now receive an average of only $6.10 in SNAP benefits per day, compared with $9.00 before the termination of the program (Rosenbaum et al. 2023, 10). In Pennsylvania, the end of EA payments has resulted in a loss of $194 million in federal funding each month, which translates to a monthly loss in assistance of roughly $94 per person

(Giammarise 2023). Social Security recipients, including older adults and people with disabilities, are also at higher risk of losing SNAP benefits due to a significant increase in the 2023 Social Security cost of living adjustment. While this adjustment raised Social Security benefits, eligibility thresholds for SNAP did not rise accordingly, meaning that some Social Security recipients may now be in an income bracket that lowers their SNAP benefits or makes them ineligible for the program (Giammarise 2023). As of 2021, nearly 20% of Allegheny County's population is age 65 or over, which is the second highest concentration of older residents among large counties nationally (Beach et al. 2022, 2), and 9.5% of residents under the age of 65 have a disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Households that include an adult with disabilities already face significantly higher food insecurity rates (Hales 2022), and these changes in benefit levels further heighten their vulnerability. Decreased federal assistance also puts an extraordinary strain on emergency food providers already facing increased demand prior to the benefit decrease.

The burden placed on SNAP recipients by the cessation of EA payments is further exacerbated by the expansion of SNAP work-reporting requirements under the debt ceiling agreement, which was signed into law in June 2023. Before the agreement, SNAP work requirements limited able-bodied adults without dependents aged 18-50 to three months of benefits per three years if they could not demonstrate that they were employed or in a work training program for at least 80 hours a month (USDA 2023). These requirements were suspended during the pandemic and reinstated in May of 2023. Under the new debt ceiling agreement, SNAP work requirements have been expanded to age 54, putting nearly 750,000 adults between the ages of 50 and 54 at risk of losing their SNAP benefits and placing tremendous strain on older adults who face barriers to employment (Bergh and Rosenbaum 2023, 1). Additionally, states receive individual hardship exemptions based on a percentage of the number of people in their state who are subject to SNAP's work-reporting requirement. The debt ceiling agreement lowered the number of individual hardship exemptions that states receive from 12% to 8%, as well as limited states' power to carry over unused exemptions into the following fiscal year, significantly restricting their ability to accommodate circumstances that may prevent otherwise SNAP-eligible individuals from employment (Bergh and Rosenbaum 2023, 7). There is no evidence that work requirements for benefit programs improve long-term employment or earnings. However, they do inarguably limit access to food assistance, reducing SNAP participation among those subject to them by over 50% (Gray et al. 2023, 1). This makes the newly expanded work requirements especially concerning, as many of the individuals now at risk of losing their benefits have incomes significantly below the poverty line and will be pushed into deeper economic hardship if they cannot meet the requirement or attain an exemption.

Over the past several years, accelerating inflation has placed additional pressure on low-income families, making it significantly more challenging to finance their basic needs. Data from the Urban Institute's Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey shows that U.S. adults are facing drastic increases in household grocery costs; in December 2022, over 63 percent of surveyed adults reported significantly higher grocery costs. Those who reported increased costs were almost twice as likely to face food insecurity, and 62% reported either buying less food or not buying the kinds of foods they wanted (Martinchek et al. 2023, 2). 16.8% of those who reported increased costs relied on charitable aid, which is slightly higher than the 16% of all survey respondents who received charitable food assistance (Martinchek et al. 2023, 2). Food prices have been demonstrated to have a positive and significant effect on the probability of food insecurity, which is unsurprising given that low-income households spend nearly a third of their household budget on food (USDA 2023). As food prices have spiked, an increased proportion of low-income households have reported receiving SNAP assistance (Moquin and Baig 2023, 1). However, SNAP benefits' purchasing power has significantly decreased due to food price inflation. Coupled with the reduction in monthly SNAP payments after the end of the EA program, this provides low-income families with a much weaker buffer against food insecurity.

The strength of the SNAP program is further threatened as the 2023 Farm Bill undergoes renegotiation. The Farm Bill is the most impactful piece of federal legislation related to agriculture and nutrition; Title IV of the Farm Bill contains a number of nutrition assistance programs, including SNAP, TEFAP, and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (Aussenberg et al. 2023, 1). While some of the Farm Bill's programs are permanent, nutrition assistance programs require reauthorization with each new version of the bill. The Farm Bill's omnibus nature is beneficial because it creates coalitions of support from various stakeholders to push for policies that would likely not be able to pass individually. However, the broad nature of the bill can also serve as a barrier, leading to conflicting priorities in fund allocation (Aussenberg et al. 2023, 1). Although the previous Farm Bill is set to expire in September 2023, negotiations are likely to roll into 2024. SNAP work requirements are one of the primary points of partisan contention, and many GOP leaders are aiming to expand the three-month time limit to include all able-bodied adults aged 18-65 (Bacharier 2023). As previously mentioned, time limits on SNAP have not been shown to raise employment or earnings but significantly lower program participation rates and increase program exits by over 60% (Gray et al. 2023, 1). 50 to 64-year-olds are the fastest-growing group of SNAP recipients: the number of 50-64-year-old program participants has doubled over the past two decades and constitutes nearly one-third of household heads, outnumbering able-bodied adults aged 18-49 (Rachidi and O'Rourke 2023, 1). Among this group, less than 30% are employed, meaning that expanding the work requirement would undoubtedly have devastating effects on food security and force millions of older adults to lose their SNAP benefits (Rachidi and O'Rourke 2023, 2).

Any reduction to SNAP spending requires a reduction in the number of people who can receive benefits, which would significantly increase food insecurity levels, particularly amidst current inflationary pressures. Limiting SNAP eligibility and benefit levels also forces more people to rely on food pantries to bridge this gap in assistance, putting additional pressure on the charitable food aid system, which is already struggling to meet heightened demand. Rather than continue to limit SNAP eligibility and push more people below the poverty line, the 2023 Farm Bill must work to protect and strengthen its nutrition title and allocate supplemental spending toward expanding federal nutrition assistance programming.

1.5 Study Intent

Due to its large scale, federal policy inherently cannot factor in the efficacy of food assistance in localized contexts. Therefore, to effectively argue for more robust food assistance at the government level, we must approach the issue from the ground up and demonstrate the gaps in capacity and consequent limits in efficacy among charitable food assistance organizations. This is not to imply that charitable food assistance is ineffective: over 50 million Americans depend on food banks for assistance, and these organizations provide necessary support to households that are not eligible for federal food aid or cannot meet their needs with government benefits alone. However, the fact that food banks are facing increasing demand, particularly in the midst of SNAP policy changes and benefit reductions, makes it especially important to analyze their capacity and determine whether charitable food assistance is able to ameliorate food insecurity adequately and efficiently.

Nonprofit organizational capacity is defined in terms of the assets and processes used to improve organizational effectiveness and sustainability and can be viewed as the set of structures and functions a nonprofit organization needs to effectively serve its community (Despard 2017, 2). The need for service efficiency amidst a harsh economic climate has generated a greater focus on capacity within the nonprofit sector. Smaller nonprofits face particular difficulty in competing for necessary resources, and building their organizational capacity is critical to ensuring organizational survival and maintaining effective service provision (Brown et al. 2016, 2). Several nonprofit capacity measurement frameworks have been developed, including the Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool developed by McKinsey and Company in 2001. This tool allows nonprofit organizations to self-assess their organizational capacity across several core elements and breaks the broad concept of capacity down into concrete and measurable indicators. While food assistance organizations are at the frontlines of combating food insecurity, little research has focused on their organizational structure and management, and there is subsequently limited academic literature that specifically addresses the organizational capacity of food assistance organizations. Given the substantial regional variations in food insecurity and access that result from concentrated areas of poverty across Pittsburgh, analyzing the capacity of food assistance organizations on a local scale is particularly valuable, offering insights into the challenges they face in meeting community-level need. Developing this knowledge is essential both to optimize organizational performance and to guide the development of more effective and equitable federal food assistance policy.

1.6 Study Overview

The overarching aim of my work is to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of Pittsburgh's food assistance network through the framework of organizational capacity. To effectively set the theoretical groundwork for my primary research, I compiled an extensive literature review covering the prevalence and consequences of food insecurity, the development and efficacy of the American food assistance system, and nonprofit capacity, both broadly and as it pertains to charitable food assistance specifically.

Chapter Two of this thesis focuses on the evolution of food insecurity as a term, as well as various methods of food insecurity measurement that work to assess both behavioral and psychological indicators of food insecurity. This chapter also examines the prevalence of food insecurity nationally and in Pittsburgh, considering the structural inequalities that result in disparate food security levels across economic, gender, and racial demographics, and discusses food insecurity as a social determinant of health, highlighting the various physical and mental health consequences of inadequate food access. The final section of Chapter Two discusses the development and use of food assistance in the United States, including federal benefit programs such as SNAP as well as charitable food assistance organizations. This chapter explores the evolution of federal food assistance policy approaches in response to shifting trends in food insecurity and reliance on charitable assistance. We are currently at a critical juncture, with federal benefits proving to be inadequate to meet the need for food assistance, and nonprofit food assistance organizations are facing tremendous strain as they work to bridge this gap in support. It is evident that policy approaches must undergo a transformative shift in order to effectively alleviate food insecurity and to guarantee that food aid organizations possess the capacity required to serve those in need.

Chapter Three covers the role of nonprofit organizations in the social safety net, examining government failure and interdependence theories in the context of food assistance. This chapter also discusses existing literature on the definition of nonprofit capacity, methods of nonprofit organizational capacity measurement, including the McKinsey and Company Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool (OCAT), and relevant studies of capacity within the charitable food aid sector. Previous literature on the organizational capacity of food assistance organizations shows an overreliance on volunteer labor, a lack of extra-organizational communication, and overall fragility and isolation. This thesis aims to expand on this literature and determine the consistency of these capacity deficits within the Greater Pittsburgh context.

Chapters 4 and 5 consist of an overview of the study's methodology, as well as analysis and discussion of primary interview and survey data on the organizational capacity of food assistance nonprofit organizations in the Greater Pittsburgh region. I used a modified version of the McKinsey OCAT to interview seven nonprofit organizations with missions centered around food insecurity (including a food rescue, a food policy advocacy organization, a transitional employment and hunger relief organization, a food assistance ministry, a grassroots philanthropic organization, a soup kitchen, and a food bank) and gauge their strengths and weaknesses across nine capacity areas. I also conducted capacity survey to determine the presence of various capacity indicators and understand primary challenges and needs among 56 regional food pantries. Findings from both the interview and survey portions of the study highlight the insufficiency of funding and resources, lack of succession planning, and struggles to meet client demands among charitable food assistance organizations in Pittsburgh. By demonstrating the fragility of Pittsburgh's charitable food aid network, I argue for the importance of strengthening federal food assistance to increase food security both regionally and nationally. These policy amendments, discussed in Chapter 6, should include raising SNAP benefits back to pandemic (EA) levels, restricting any further increases in work requirements and ending the arbitrary three-month time limit for SNAP recipients who do not meet employment requirements, and ensuring that SNAP eligibility requirements align with social security benefit adjustments. Additional mandatory funding should also be granted to the TEFAP program to adequately accommodate heightened demand for charitable food assistance. Further, given the charitable food aid sector's dependence on government funding, it is vital that federal support is responsive to the dynamic needs of food assistance organizations. This would involve maintaining a higher degree of communication between food banks and state Departments of Agriculture to ensure that food banks receive proper levels of financial and administrative support to effectively serve their communities.

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2.0 Chapter Two: Food Insecurity and Food Assistance

2.1 Defining Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is defined as the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. (cite) The term has evolved significantly over the past few decades: first used in the 1970s, it referred to shortfalls in the food supply, describing an issue in national and global food availability. By the 1980s, the term became more frequently applied at a household and individual level, acknowledging disparities in food access despite an adequate overall food supply and considering the dimensions of vulnerability across regional and demographic groups that lead to inequities in food access (Maxwell 1995, 1). In 1986, the World Bank expanded the concept of food security by defining it as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life,” centering the experience of the individual and linking the concepts of adequate quantity, quality, and security of food supply to the individual’s state of health (Castetbon et al. 2017, 36). The term became increasingly holistic in the 1990s, both in the United States and internationally, factoring in elements of “preference, quality, safety, and an emphasis on the stability of food access” (Coates 2015, 51). A 1992 bibliography constructed by Maxwell and Frankenberger identified nearly 200 definitions of the term, which were broadly similar but emphasized various facets of the issue, as well as traced the evolution of food insecurity from “concern with national food stocks… to a preoccupation with individual entitlements” (Maxwell and Frankenberger 1992, 136). The authors stated that there was no singular definition of the term, but rather a “complex weave of interrelated strands,” and accurately predicted a growing concern for food insecurity as it relates to matters of “human rights and cultural dignity” (Maxwell and Frankenberger 1992, 136).

The evolution of food insecurity as a term has also led to a shift away from using "hunger" to describe inadequate food access. Instead, food insecurity is broken down by levels of severity, and hunger is regarded as an outcome of more severe levels of food insecurity. This allows for the distinction between food insecurity as a household and community-level social and economic condition and hunger as an individual-level physiological condition (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2022). This distinction was codified by the USDA in 2006 at the request of a Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) panel, which stated that hunger "...should refer to a potential consequence of food insecurity that, because of prolonged, involuntary lack of food, results in discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain" (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2022, 1). By this definition, hunger can only be assessed on an individual level, and measuring hunger would therefore be beyond the scope of the Current Population Survey (CPS) food insecurity survey, which collects responses on a household scale. The CNSTAT panel also suggested developing labels to communicate the severity of food insecurity that do not include the word "hunger" since hunger is not properly assessed in the CPS. The USDA consequently introduced the categories of "low food security" and "very low food security" in 2006, respectively defined as "Reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake" and "Reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake" (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2022, 1). Although the word "hunger" is omitted from these definitions, it can be inferred that individuals experiencing very low food security have likely experienced hunger as a result of reduced food intake.

The definition of food insecurity has developed significantly since its initial usage in the 1970s due both to a broadened understanding of the social and economic factors that impact food availability as well as the desire to optimize the strategies used to measure food access. As the understanding of the causes and consequences of food insecurity continues to grow and methods of measuring food insecurity continue to strengthen, the way that the term is defined will likely continue to evolve.

2.2 Measuring Food Insecurity

As the definition of food insecurity shifted from a focus on overall food supply to household and individual experiences with food access, methods of measuring food security evolved accordingly. Initially, measures of food insecurity primarily focused on national food availability, measured through food balance sheets, which tracked and quantified food production through an overall estimate of available food for consumption. This metric then expanded to include not only large-scale food supply but economic access to food and the consequences of food insufficiency, measuring individual-level calorie and nutrient sufficiency, income, and food expenditure. During this period, caloric intake was viewed as the standard for quantifying food sufficiency, however, it fell out of favor due to its one-dimensional and quantitative nature (Coates, 2015, 52). To gauge households' food access from an economic standpoint, measures of household income and expenditure have been used to measure their "entitlement bundle," or economic power to purchase an adequate amount of food (Coates, 2015, 58). This measure is often standardized as the proportion of total household expenditures devoted to food, with households that spend a higher proportion of their budget on food typically experiencing higher rates of food insecurity. Such measures, while they may provide an overview of households' food intake and economic status, are not ideal for measuring food insecurity because they are resource-intensive to estimate and do not measure food insecurity directly, rather focusing on a single quantitative dimension of food access (Coates, 2015, 58).

As a greater focus was granted to household and individual food insecurity throughout the 1980s and 1990s, more research began to be conducted to better understand its dimensions and develop more effective methods of gauging and quantifying food security levels. Studies conducted by Kathy L. Radimer in the early 1990s proved to be seminal in the evolution of food insecurity measurement. Radimer and her team performed the first qualitative study among low-income women who were experiencing or at risk of experiencing hunger. Through interviews, they were able to discern that food insecurity was a multidimensional experience and developed a description of hunger with two levels, individual and household, and four components (quantity, quality, psychological, and social) (Radimer 2002, 3). Based on these concepts, Radimer developed a questionnaire that prompted government-university collaboration between Cornell and the USDA and serves as the basis for the Food Security Supplement of the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS-FSS), which is the primary method currently used to monitor food security in the United States. Through her work, Radimer established the conceptualization of hunger as the ultimate, but not unilateral, consequence of food insecurity, as well as demonstrated that food insecurity involves a process of adaptation and decision-making in response to income reduction and limited food access. These concepts remain present throughout nearly all widely used tools for measuring food insecurity (Castetbon et al. 2017, 37).

The CPS-FSS is an annual survey of approximately 50,000 households conducted by the Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics and is the source of national and state-level statistics on food insecurity used in USDA's annual food security reports. The CPS-FSS consists of eighteen survey questions and statements (ten for households without children), the first of which addresses concerns about food running out, and the remainder of which address reductions in food intake because of financial constraints. The USDA divides households into categories of high, marginal, low, and very low food security, depending on the number of affirmative responses. In most research and policy discussions, the categories of low and very low food security are consolidated into a single “food insecure” category (Gundersen and Ziliak 2015, 1831). This questionnaire primarily focuses on quantitative dimensions of food insecurity, such as the frequency of skipping meals due to insufficient financial resources, and therefore does not capture the individual experiences and perceptions of food access, potentially underestimating the prevalence of food insecurity (Castetbon et al. 2017, 38). Although the CPS-FSS remains the basis for measuring food insecurity levels in the U.S., other metrics have been developed that focus more prominently on people's individual perceptions of their experience with food insecurity.

One notable method is the CSI (Coping Strategies Index), developed by Daniel Maxwell and colleagues in the late 1990s. The CSI is a context-specific method that uses interviews to develop a list of coping strategies that are commonly used in response to food insecurity, as well as achieve a consensus around the relative severity of each strategy, from which an index is then calculated. While coping strategies can differ based on regional context, the six primary strategies identified in the original study sample included eating foods that are less preferred, limiting portion size, borrowing food or money to buy food, maternal buffering (mothers limiting their food intake for their children to eat enough), skipping meals, and skipping eating for whole days (Maxwell 1995, 11). The CSI approach has some advantages as compared to earlier measures, including the consideration of the subjective experience of food sufficiency. The method is designed “not simply to measure gross consumption, but to shed some light on what people actually do when faced with food insufficiency” (Maxwell 1995, 22).

There are several other notable measures that address behaviors and attitudes related to food insecurity, including the U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module (U.S. HFSSM), developed in 1995, and the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS), developed throughout the early 2000s. The U.S. HFSSM is a modification of the CPS-FSS and is based on the idea that the experience of food insecurity produced predictable responses “relating to four dimensions: insufficient quantity and quality of food, having to procure food through personally and socially unacceptable means, and feeling worried over uncertain access” (Coates 2015, 60), and can be quantified in a way that food security itself cannot, with each response representing a particular level of severity. Similarly to the CSI, the U.S. HFSSM collects self-reported responses about household members’ experiences with a set of common manifestations of food insecurity, with divisions on the scale that categorize households as being food-secure, food-insecure, or very low food-insecure (Coates 2015, 61). The gathered data is used by the USDA to report food insecurity levels on the state and national levels, as well as to monitor the impacts of government food aid programs.

The HFIAS was significantly inspired by the U.S. HFSSM, and is another iteration of a scale-based food insecurity metric, a nine-item scale developed to reflect four key dimensions of food insecurity: quantity, quality, preferences, and worry/uncertainty. Due to the presence of worry and uncertainty as additional factors, the HFIAS examines not only behavioral responses but also the psychological effects of experiencing food insecurity. It has since been widely adopted for assessing the impact of programs aiming to reduce food insecurity (Coates 2015, 61). Although measures such as the CSI, U.S. HFSSM, and HFIAS brought major advancements in the way food insecurity is quantified, progress continues to be made towards determining "simple, direct, valid, multidimensional measures that are also cross-culturally comparable" (Coates 2015, 62). This category includes indicators such as the Household Hunger Scale, which is a condensed version of the HFIAS that only includes measures that have been proven to be cross-culturally consistent, as well as The Reduced CSI, a version of the CSI which was similarly abridged to include only those coping strategies that are consistent across cultures and reflect similar levels of severity within various cultural contexts (Coates 2015, 62). Such approaches provide a clear advantage through their cross-cultural applicability, but also omit more culturally specific variables and tend to focus on quantity of food consumption rather than factors of food quality, stability, and personal experience with food insecurity. As a result, metrics such as the HHS measure can measure the most severe levels of food insecurity but are not useful in less acute cases (Coates 2015, 62). A cross-culturally applicable metric that simultaneously factors in experience-based variables has yet to be fully developed. Other newly developed approaches do not attempt to address food insecurity cross-culturally, but rather function on a more localized, community-based level. One of these approaches is the Food Abundance Index (FAI), which assesses food insecurity through the presence of "food deserts," which are "community or neighborhood-wide areas in which residents have little or no access to safe, nutritious food needed to maintain a healthy diet" (Murrell and Jones 2020, 4), typically situated in low-income communities. The FAI, which was developed by University of Pittsburgh professor Audrey Murrell and piloted across nine Pittsburgh neighborhoods, measures food deserts according to five dimensions (access, diversity, quality, density, and affordability), and awards point-based values across three levels in each of the five dimensions (Murrell and Jones 2020, 5). This index is unique in that it attempts to reconcile the disconnect between academic study of food insecurity and practical efforts to reduce community hunger. “While academics and scholarly researchers have been studying these issues for nearly two decades now, the peer reviewed academic research in which these studies and data are published is often not accessed by practitioners and policymakers” (Murrell and Jones 2020, 3). By using food deserts as its key metric and focusing on neighborhoods rather than individual households, the FAI produces results that can be directly affected by private-sector involvement and easily integrated into community development efforts, linking community welfare with business development (Murrell and Jones 2020, 4).

Measuring food insecurity is a difficult and resource-intensive undertaking, and each of the methods described above has both advantages and downfalls. Quantitative methods of measurement such as the CPS-FSS are best suited for large-scale data gathering and can be applied across various cultural contexts, yet do not have the capacity to address the social and psychological dimensions of food insecurity. Methods that are more focused on individual experiences with food access, such as the CSI and HFIAS are more difficult to administer to large populations due to their cultural specificity, while condensed versions of these indices are only able to gauge severe levels of food insecurity. It is unclear whether a method of measurement that is both cross-culturally comparable and adequately comprehensive is feasible to develop, however this issue could potentially be rectified by devoting more resources to the study and measurement of food insecurity and combining methods of both national and community-level scope to maximize the accuracy of food insecurity assessment.

2.3 Food Insecurity Nationally and Locally

According to CPS-FSS results published in 2021, the national food insecurity rate steadily declined from 14.5% in 2010 to 10.5% in 2019 and remained unchanged in 2020 (Coleman-Jensen et. al. 2021). However, given the drastic spike in unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that employment status is a significant predictor of food security status (Nord 2007, 8), it is difficult to believe that food insecurity rates did not follow suit. There are significant discrepancies in reported food insecurity rates in 2020 and 2021, with several studies reporting rates upwards of 20% for households without children and nearly 30% for households with children. This is likely due to several factors, including inconsistent metrics and timelines used to gauge food insecurity as well as increased assistance from both federal food aid programs and charitable organizations.

In April 2020, The U.S. Census Bureau collaborated with multiple federal agencies to institute the Household Pulse Survey (HPS), a multi-phase survey designed to measure the social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on U.S. households, including effects on food sufficiency levels. As opposed to the CPS-FSS, which releases data approximately nine months after survey completion, data from the HPS was disseminated in near real-time to catalyze state and federal-level COVID recovery planning. HPS respondents were asked to determine which of four statements best describes the food eaten in their household: “Enough of the kinds of food we wanted to eat”, “Enough, but not always the kinds of food we wanted to eat”, “Sometimes not enough to eat”, and “Often not enough to eat”. Respondents that chose one of the latter three statements were categorized as food insufficient. The HPS also asked additional questions related to food insecurity, including whether any members of the surveyed household received free groceries from a pantry or other service, or received benefits from the Supplemental

Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). According to the HPS data tables, the additional questions were only given to respondents who were categorized as food insufficient based on their initial response.

A June 2020 study conducted by Diane Schanzenbach and Abigail Pitts at Northwestern University combined CPS-FSS and HPS data to estimate food insecurity rates during the pandemic. The CPS-FSS includes a screening question that is identical to the question asked in the HPS. To estimate food insecurity rates from the food sufficiency question on the HPS, the researchers multiplied the share of HPS respondents reporting each answer by the percentage of CPS-FSS respondents deemed food insecure for each response on the screening question, concluding that 23.0% of overall households and 29.5% of households with children experienced food insecurity between April 23 and May 19, 2020 (Schanzenbach and Pitts 2020, 4), which is a notable difference from the respective 10.5% and 14.8% reported by the USDA. Schanzenbach and Pitts' study was conducted around the height of unemployment rates, likely indicating a similar temporary spike in food insecurity, while the 2020 CPS-FSS was conducted in December, by when unemployment rates had dropped back down to 6.7% from 14.7% in April (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Additionally, during the time that the Northwestern study was conducted, the food supply system was experiencing unique disruptions, meaning that more respondents may have reported that they had enough food, but not the kinds they wanted, potentially creating disparities between the HPS and CPS-FSS data.

Increased use of food assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic is another potential reason as to why national food insecurity rates remained unchanged between 2019 and 2020. According to Feeding America, over 60 million people were served by the charitable food system in 2020, compared with 40 million prior to the pandemic (Feeding America, 2023a).

While the USDA reports lower rates of food bank usage, they still report a significant influx in food assistance, from 4.4% in 2019 to 6.7% in 2020. This increase in food assistance is another potential reason that the overall food insecurity rate did not increase, as spikes in demand may have been mitigated by both charitable organizations and government programs such as The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which provides resources to food pantries (USDA), as well as increased SNAP assistance.

Ultimately, it can be inferred that while there were extreme spikes in food insecurity rates during the pandemic, rates ultimately settled by the end of the year due to increased government response efforts, as well as increased use of charitable food aid services. However, even the USDA statistics are jarring, with more than one in ten households overall and more than 1 in 7 households with children experiencing food insecurity in the United States.

It is also important to consider the ways in which country-wide food insecurity rates can obscure local inequalities in food access. The CPS-FSS aggregates data on a national scale, and therefore food insecurity rates for individual states and counties cannot be directly inferred from the survey results. However, the national hunger relief organization Feeding America began an annual Map the Meal Gap study in 2011, which provides food insecurity estimates at the state and county level. These statistics are calculated using indicators that are closely related to food insecurity, including poverty, unemployment, and homeownership. In addition to estimating food insecurity rates, the Map the Meal Gap study also calculates average meal costs at the local level, using average weekly food spending based on CPS responses in conjunction with local food prices and relevant taxes (Feeding America, 2023c).

Since CPS-FSS surveys are conducted in December of each year and data is not released until the following September (USDA, 2023), Map the Meal Gap reports typically reflect data from two years prior. The most recent food insecurity estimates for Allegheny County, released in 2023, are based on 2021 CPS-FSS data. In 2021, 9.2% of overall households and 11.8% of households with children were estimated to be food insecure in the county, which is slightly below the national averages of 10.4% and 12.8%, respectively (Feeding America, 2023d). However, the experience of food insecurity across Pittsburgh is far from homogenous. According to a 2012 report prepared for the US Department of the Treasury CDFI Fund Capacity Building Initiative, Pittsburgh had the largest percentage of people residing in communities with low supermarket access among cities of similar population size. The report found that approximately 47% of Pittsburgh residents experienced low access, and 71% residents in low access areas were low-income. In the Greater Pittsburgh metro area, including all of Allegheny County, 18% of residents lived in LSA communities (Murray 2013, 4). This highlights that food insecurity statistics on a national and even county-wide level tend to flatten the extremely uneven landscape of food access and consequently diminish the severity of food insecurity that many communities face.

2.4 Disparities in Food Insecurity

Within the United States, the probability of food insecurity is not unilateral, and aggregated food insecurity rates are not representative across income, gender, and racial demographics. To accurately discuss food insecurity prevalence, it is crucial to recognize and address the vast and persistent disparities in food access, particularly as they affect Black and Hispanic households. An analysis examining trends in food insecurity from 2001 to 2016 based on CPS-FSS data found that food insecurity rates for both non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic households were consistently at least double that of non-Hispanic white households (Odoms-Young 2020, 1). 2020 CPS-FSS data demonstrates an even wider gap: the food insecurity rate for White households declined from 7% to 6% between 2019 and 2020, while the rate for Black households increased from 19% to 22% (over three times the rate for White households). For Hispanic households, food insecurity rates were also jarringly high, rising from 16% to 17% between 2019 and 2020.

The relationship between race and food access is complex, and naturally intersects with other predictors of food insecurity such as poverty and unemployment. Structural racism in the United States, leading to persistent social and economic disadvantage among people of color, is a clear and significant cause of heightened food insecurity rates for Black and Hispanic Americans. Large racial gaps in wealth and income have long existed in the U.S., and these disparities remain significant. In the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF), white families were found to have the highest level of both median and mean family wealth, with a net worth of $188,200 and $983,400, respectively. Black families' median and mean net worth is less than 15 percent that of White families, at $24,100 and $142,500 (Bhutta et al. 2020, 1). According to the 2020 U.S. Census, the median household income was $74,912 for white households, $55,321 for Hispanic households, and $45,870 for Black households, meaning that Hispanic and Black households respectively make 26% and 38% less than white households. The natural correlation between poverty and food insecurity provides a partial explanation for why Black and Hispanic households experience food insecurity at much higher rates. However, there is evidence suggesting that the higher risk of food insecurity among people of color persists even when other social and economic factors are removed (Odoms-Young 2020, 2). One contributing factor to heightened rates of food insecurity among Black and Hispanic Americans is uneven resource distribution. Predominantly Black and Hispanic neighborhoods tend to have limited access to quality food sources compared to white neighborhoods of similar socioeconomic status. Areas inhabited primarily by racial and ethnic minorities, regardless of socioeconomic status, have fewer supermarkets than areas that are predominantly white or affluent, and residents of predominantly Black neighborhoods also must travel significantly farther to reach grocery stores than residents of predominantly white neighborhoods, regardless of the neighborhoods' economic characteristics (Myers and Paynter 2017, 1421). Individual-level indicators of socioeconomic status besides poverty are also more prevalent among Black and Hispanic populations, including unemployment, SNAP participation, lack of health insurance, and lower homeownership rates (Myers and Paynter 2017, 1420). These indicators have been linked with higher rates of food insecurity, and therefore can magnify racial disparities in food access.

There are additional social and demographic predictors for food insecurity beyond race and ethnicity. Households with children and female-headed households, as well as individuals with lower levels of education are likely to be more food-insecure than their respective counterparts. Research using multivariate methods has generally found that these characteristics are positively associated with food insecurity, even after other factors are controlled for (Gundersen and Ziliak 2015, 1831). However, it is important to note that all three of these predictors are also inconsistent between racial demographics, with a higher percentage of Black households having children as well as being female headed compared to White households (Goodman et al. 2021, 1). Educational attainment levels are also significantly lower among Black and Hispanic individuals (deBrey, 2018, 160). Therefore, even predictors that are not inherently correlated with race can be drivers of racial inequality in food security, and efforts to combat food insecurity must maintain a keen awareness of the impacts of structural racism on food availability and access.

A 2020 study conducted by Tamara Dubowitz et al., analyzed the impact of COVID-19 shutdowns on food insecurity among the almost entirely African American PHRESH cohort, which consists of residents of two food deserts in Pittsburgh, the Hill District and Homewood. The study examined trends in food insecurity over nine years, before and during the pandemic, measuring food insecurity using the Adult Food Security Survey Module and using self-reported SNAP and food bank participation rates. Across all tracked periods, "food insecurity was, on average, 2 times higher in the PHRESH cohort than in the US population" (Dubowitz et al. 2021, 495). In 2020, food insecurity in the PHRESH sample was 37%, a nearly 80% increase from 2018, with disparities between this African American cohort and the nation as a whole being at the highest levels observed over the past decade. Despite this severe increase in food insecurity, food bank use and SNAP participation among the PHRESH cohort remained essentially unchanged, suggesting that "existing safety nets may be failing to reach those with emerging needs" (Dubowitz et al. 2021, 496), potentially due to difficulties with enrollment, transportation and access issues, or uncertainty about eligibility. In the two surveyed neighborhoods, most residents rely on public transit and shared rides to buy food, and worries about safe travel during the pandemic may have further decreased their access to food sources. The PHRESH cohort study serves as an apt localized example of racial disparities in food access and demonstrates the intersection of existing structural racism with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a further broadened gap in food insecurity levels.

2.5 Food Insecurity as a Determinant of Health

Social determinants of health are social, economic, and environmental factors that influence health and quality-of-life outcomes and produce significant inequities in health between socioeconomic classes. Food security is recognized by the World Health Organization as a significant social determinant of health, and clear links have been traced between inadequate food access and poor health outcomes. Much of the research conducted on the health risks of food insecurity has focused on children and has found that food insecurity is associated with a number of both physical and psychological health issues, including birth defects, anemia, poor oral health, lower nutrient intakes, cognitive and behavioral problems, anxiety and depression, and suicidal ideation. Food insecurity is also correlated with higher rates of childhood hospitalization and poorer general health, with children in food-insecure children having two times higher odds of being in fair or poor health compared to those who are food-secure (Gundersen and Ziliak 2015, 1832). Links have also been established between childhood food insecurity and psychosocial problems, including learning disorders and lowered academic success. A 1998 study by J. Michael Murphy found that children at risk for or experiencing hunger were “twice as likely as not-hungry children to be classified as having impaired functioning” and were also reported by teachers as displaying “higher levels of hyperactivity, absenteeism, and tardiness” (Murphy et al. 1998, 193). The results of the study indicated that hunger was related to the Pediatric Symptom Checklist (PSC) outcome “beyond differences accounted for by poverty” (Olson 1999, 523).

Among adults, food insecurity has been associated with decreased nutrient intakes, diabetes, hypertension, and hyperlipidemia. as well as obesity (particularly among women), cardiovascular illness, and decreased metabolic and immune functioning (Lombe et al. 2016, 442). Food insecurity has also been correlated with poor general health and poor sleep, as well as increased rates of depression and other mental health issues, with food-insecure mothers being "twice as likely to report mental health problems and over three times as likely to report oral health problems compared to their food-secure peers" (Gundersen and Ziliak 2015, 1834). Among senior populations, studies have found lower nutrient intakes and poorer general health, increased rates of depression, and limitations in daily living activities, with food-insecure seniors being "2.33 times more likely to report being in fair or poor health, compared to food-secure seniors" (Gundersen and Ziliak 2015, 1834).

Although clear correlations are observed between food insecurity and negative health outcomes, the cause of this relationship is somewhat more difficult to trace. Links have been found between food insecurity and obesity among women, however a 2009 study by Hilary Seligman et al. found that, even when controlling for BMI, the associations between food insecurity and chronic disease remains, suggesting that they cannot be fully attributed to an increased rates of obesity among food-insecure women (Seligman et al. 2010, 307). What the study did find, however, is that food-insecure adults reported more difficulty in affording a diabetic diet as well as addressing diabetes-related issues than those who were food-secure (Gundersen and Ziliak 2015, 1835). The authors also hypothesized several aspects of food insecurity that can lead to health risks, including the consumption of low-nutrient, calorie-dense foods in lieu of fresh produce and overconsumption of food when it is available in expectation of future scarcity (Seligman et al. 2010, 308). Beyond food intake itself, the emotional and physiological stress brought upon by experiencing food scarcity elevates cortisol levels, which are linked to visceral adiposity, a significant risk factor for diabetes. The poor dietary habits associated with food insecurity, including skipping meals and increasing energy-dense food consumption, are known to persist over long periods of time (Lombe et al. 2016, 442).

The correlation between food insecurity and poor health outcomes is not affected by increased nutrition knowledge (Lombe et al. 2016, 453). Although nutrition knowledge is generally correlated with positive dietary habits, and awareness of the food pyramid is related to improved health outcomes among food-secure individuals, a 2016 study by Margaret Lombe et al. found that this association is not observed among food-insecure households, with food scarcity seemingly moderating the relationship between knowledge of nutrition and health outcomes. The authors hypothesize that in the absence of food security, the negative effects of vulnerability override the protective effects of nutrition education (Lombe et al. 2016, 454). These findings insinuate that the most logical and direct way to ameliorate the health risks associated with food insecurity is not through nutrition education or symptomatic treatment, but the reduction of food insecurity itself. Racial disparities in food insecurity rates also imply that Black and Hispanic households are at higher risk of experiencing detrimental health effects, further perpetuating cycles of structural inequality.

2.6 Food Assistance

The prevalence of food insecurity in the United States has prompted responses both on the federal and charitable level that work to provide both monetary benefits and food to low-income households. The majority of food assistance is provided by the public sector through programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). However, private charitable organizations such as food banks are play an increasingly significant role in helping meet the nutritional needs of the food-insecure population. The growth and institutionalization of the charitable food assistance sector, largely catalyzed by the introduction of the TEFAP program, has shifted private food assistance away from being a source of emergency aid, with more low-income families relying on these organizations for consistent support. Although both federal and private food assistance has been proven effective in improving food insecurity among its recipients, nearly 13% of the U.S. population remains food insecure (Rabbitt et al. 2023). Looking at the development of both federal and charitable food assistance, as well as examining the relationship between these two sectors, is imperative in understanding the inadequacies and inefficiencies in our food assistance system.

2.6.1 SNAP History and Efficacy

The largest food assistance program in the United States is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamp Program. Currently, approximately 12.7% of the U.S. population, and an equal proportion of Allegheny County residents are SNAP recipients (USDA, 2023). The foundations of the SNAP program originated during the Great Depression, when widespread poverty led to an inability to purchase food and a simultaneous surplus in food production. In response, the U.S. government began distributing surplus commodities to the poor and subsidizing farmers for what they produced (Nestle 2019, 1632). In 1939, the USDA established the Food Stamp Plan, which was the first coupon-based food assistance program. The program provided participants with stamps that could be exchanged for food at eligible retail locations. Program participants purchased orange-colored stamps with cash, which could be used to purchase an equal value of most food types, as well as received a bonus amount of blue-colored stamps, worth half the value of the purchased amount, which could be spent on USDA-designated surplus commodities. In this way, the program was simultaneously able to target poverty and reduce food surpluses (Oliviera et al. 2018, 18). The Food Stamp Plan lasted only four years and was terminated in 1943, when wartime conditions decreased agricultural surpluses and brought down unemployment rates, however it provided an innovative model for future federal food assistance.

In 1959, Congress passed food stamp legislation, which was implemented as the Food Stamp Act in 1964 with the purpose of allowing low-income households to "receive a greater share of the Nation's food abundance". The surplus commodity requirement was removed, and participants were required to spend the stamps at qualified grocery stores at retail prices. As the program grew, more stringent eligibility standards were instated, including penalties for nonworking participants (Nestle 2019, 1633). The program underwent various amendments, restrictions, and expansions over the following several decades.

Eligibility requirements continued to tighten in the 1970s, leading to a decline in participation, however declining economic conditions in the late 1980s and early 1990s led to rapid growth in participation, reaching a record high of 27.4 million Americans in 1994. Two years later, President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which further restricted program eligibility and reduced penalties, leading to a nearly 32 percent decline in participation between 1995 and 1999 (Oliviera et al. 2018, 29). In 2004, the Food Stamp Program made a technological switch from paper stamps to EBT cards, which resembled debit card and allowed participants to access their benefits electronically. As part of the Agricultural Act of 2008, the Food Stamp Program was renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, emphasizing the program's purpose of supplementing households' existing food expenditures, as well as reflecting the transition in format from paper to EBT (Oliviera et al. 2018, 31).

In 2020, over 20 million American households participated in SNAP, receiving an average monthly benefit of $301.64 per household ($155.06 per person). In 2021, the average monthly benefit rose to $416 per household ($217.43 per person) (USDA, 2023). Beginning in April 2020, Congress enacted SNAP Emergency Allotments (EA's), which raised households' benefits to the maximum levels for their size. Starting in April 2021, the program also provided at least $95 in additional assistance to households already receiving maximum benefits. EAs kept an estimated 4.2 million Americans out of poverty in the last quarter of 2021, reducing overall poverty by 9.6% and child poverty by 14% (Wheaton and Kwon 2022, 2). The program was terminated in March of 2023, resulting in an average monthly loss of $90 in SNAP benefits for all participants, and an average loss of nearly $250 for households eligible for minimum benefits (Rosenbaum et al. 2023, 1).

Currently, there are two primary ways that households can be eligible for SNAP: they can either meet federal eligibility requirements for the program or be categorically eligible for SNAP due to already receiving benefits from other federal assistance programs. Under standard financial eligibility requirements, households are eligible for SNAP based on low income and limited assets. Households must have gross monthly income below 130% of federal poverty guidelines (which, in FY2024, translates to $2,694 monthly for a household of three), net income at or below the poverty line, as well as liquid assets below a certain level ($2,750 in FY2024). (CBPP, 2023). Households in which all members receive are or eligible for benefits from TANF, SSI, or state General Assistance programs are also eligible for SNAP, bypassing the program-specific income and asset requirements. Additionally, as of July 2019, 42 U.S. jurisdictions implemented “broad-based” categorical eligibility, which makes all households with incomes below a state-determined income threshold eligible for SNAP. In Pennsylvania, this income threshold is 200% of the federal poverty line (USDA, 2023). In most of these jurisdictions, there is no asset test required for categorically eligible households, however their net incomes must still be eligible to qualify for a SNAP benefit, meaning that one can be categorically eligible for SNAP but have too high of an income to actually receive benefits (Aussenberg and Falk 2019, 2).

The most in-depth study of SNAP’s effectiveness, conducted in 2010 by Caroline Ratcliffe et al. at the Urban Institute in cooperation with the USDA’s ERS, found that receiving SNAP reduces the likelihood of being food insecure by roughly 30 percent and reduces the likelihood of being very food insecure by 20 percent (Ratcliffe et al. 2011, 2). A 2013 USDA study by James Mabli et al. produced slightly different statistics, but still corroborated the conclusion that SNAP participation reduces food insecurity rates. This study found that households who participated in SNAP for six months were less likely than newly enrolled households to be food insecure or experience very low food security. In the cross-sectional sample, the percentages of new-entrant and six-month households that were food insecure were 65.5 and 58.7 percent (a 10.38% decrease), and in a longitudinal sample collected six months later, food insecurity rates among the same households dropped to 52.8% (a 19.39% decrease). The percentage of households experiencing very low food security also decreased with SNAP participation, dropping from 39.4% to 32.0% in the cross-sectional sample (an 18.7% decrease) and to 30.4% in the longitudinal sample (a 22.84% decrease) (Mabli et al. 2013, xxii).

Despite the general consensus that SNAP is effective in reducing food insecurity, a high proportion of SNAP recipients remain food insecure. In 2017, 50.1% of SNAP recipients were food insecure compared to 23.4% of eligible non-recipients (Gundersen et al. 2017, 434). Additionally, SNAP participation does not seem to impact healthy food intake, and there is limited correlation between SNAP participation and health outcomes such as hypertension, obesity, and malnutrition (Lombe et al. 2016, 442). The primary reason for this is that SNAP benefits are inadequate in matching our nation's high food prices, and do not sufficiently account for the time burden of food preparation, as well as areas that experience low food access. SNAP benefit levels are determined based on the cost of the USDA's Thrifty Food Plan (TFP), which is meant to represent a diet that low-income families can afford and determines the maximum SNAP benefit amount for a four-person household (Food and Nutrition Service, 2022). The TFP was most recently reevaluated in 2021 and is calculated using nationwide data on the cost of foods consistent with those purchased by low-income households. However, the TFP model departs significantly from what low-income people typically consume to meet necessary considerations such as cost, nutrient standards, and food group requirements, and includes many foods that require considerable preparation, which may not be realistic for working households (Keith-Jennings et al. 2019, 1638). Additionally, since food prices are not standardized throughout the country, the TFP may not cover the same market basket of foods across locations, and households residing in low-access areas face additional challenges with food affordability. The most straightforward solution to reducing food insecurity among SNAP participants living in high-price locations would be to increase SNAP benefits in accordance with food prices by county. According to a 2019 study by Craig Gundersen et al., doing so would require an average 23% increase in SNAP benefits at a total cost of $23 billion, and would result in a 50.9% decrease in food insecurity rates among SNAP participants (Gundersen et al. 2019, 445). Currently, however, SNAP benefits cannot exceed the amount determined by the TFP, and low-income households often turn to community-based food assistance programs to fill this gap in food needs.

2.6.2 Charitable Food Assistance

As explored in the section above, federal assistance alone is not currently sufficient in alleviating food insecurity, and nonprofit food aid organizations play an increasingly critical role in the food assistance network. Most charitable food assistance is conducted through food banks, which are organizations that gather and store food that is then distributed to clients through partnering food pantries. In the United States, most food banks are under the umbrella organization Feeding America, which was founded in 1979 and currently has over 200 food banks in its network, each of which has many pantries and agencies in charge of distribution. All food banks in the Feeding America network, as well as the majority of their partnering agencies, are classified as nonprofit organizations. The Pittsburgh region is served primarily through the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, which has over 850 partners across 11 counties of Southwestern Pennsylvania.

The first official food bank in the United States was St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance in Arizona (White, 2018), which was established in 1967 and intended as an emergency source of food for people in crisis. However, charitable food assistance is no longer solely being used in times of crisis-level need, with more clients using food pantries on a regular basis to meet their food needs. A 2010 Feeding America study analyzed this phenomenon by conducting interviews with 61,000 clients in the Feeding America food bank network and surveying 37,000 food aid agencies. The study found that, in 2008, 54 percent of clients visited a food pantry for at least six months, and 36 percent of clients visited a food pantry at least every month in the year prior to data collection, with an average of over 28 months consecutively (Echevarria and Santos 2011, 3), demonstrating the fact that food banks and their affiliated food pantries are commonly used as a consistent source of food, rather than in isolated emergency situations. This study also provides insight into the way that SNAP recipients engage with charitable food aid organizations. Over half of food pantry clients that receive SNAP benefits were recurrent clients, and SNAP recipients were more likely to visit food banks and pantries the faster their benefits run out over the course of the month, pointing to the use of food pantries as a coping strategy for clients that are not receiving adequate SNAP benefits to cover their food needs and suggesting that, although they do partially aid in alleviating food insecurity, "SNAP benefits do not go far enough in helping families meet their basic nutritional needs" (Echevarria and Santos 2011, 4). The study concludes that food-secure households are more likely to be recurrent food pantry clients than other kinds of households, suggesting that this is "preliminary evidence that food pantry use over longer durations may lower the likelihood of food insecurity" (Echevarria and Santos 2011, 5). This study alone is not sufficient for drawing a causal relationship between food pantry use and food security, and there is a lack of research documenting the impact of charitable food assistance on food security levels in the United States, with most studies either focusing exclusively on nutritional outcomes rather than food security measures, or being based outside of the U.S., in which case results cannot be adequately extrapolated to reflect the American food aid environment. What we do know, however, is that federal aid programs are currently not adequate in meeting low-income households' food needs, and charitable agencies such as food banks serve as a necessary buffer for insufficient government aid. Therefore, strengthening the charitable food aid system would likely have a positive effect on food insecurity levels, particularly among

SNAP-recipient households. Although food banks receive support from the U.S. government both through funds and commodities, they are ultimately dependent on citizen voluntarism. In fact, if food banks had to employ staff to do the work currently conducted by volunteers, they would be unsustainable even if the food was donated or acquired at minimal or no cost. Additionally, although food banks receive both government and private sector donations, the voluntary donation of food or funding by citizens serves as a significant resource (Mook et al. 2020, 836), indicating a significant potential for instability in the charitable food aid system if volunteer labor or donations decline, or if demand significantly increases.

The COVID-19 pandemic aptly demonstrated the effects of both volunteer shortages and increased demand on food aid organizations. In 2020, due to worsened economic conditions, job losses, and school closures (meaning a loss of access to the National School Lunch Program), many more families turned to charitable food assistance (Byrne and Just 2022, 1). Feeding America reported that, at the start of the pandemic, 4 out of 10 people visiting food banks were there for the first time (Morello 2021a, 1). A study by Anne Byrne, a Research Agricultural Economist at the ERS, surveyed 60 out of the 200 food banks in the Feeding America network, and found that all of them reported an increase in demand because of COVID-19. Most of them (81.4%) reported having sufficient food supply to meet increased demand. Some of the food banks that experienced insufficient supply reported rationing as a strategy to continue serving clients, while others entirely ran out of food to distribute (Byrne and Just 2022, 3). This study also found significant changes in volunteer participation, with 58% of the surveyed food banks reporting difficulties in volunteer recruitment (Byrne and Just 2022, 5). Although the COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique economic and public health crisis, these findings highlight the importance of building capacity and resilience in the charitable food aid system, both to prepare for future demand surges and to serve the millions of American households currently experiencing food insecurity more effectively.

Collectively, the information covered in this chapter demonstrates the prevalence and consequences of food insecurity, as well as the evolving methods of food assistance both on the government level and through the charitable sector. Although the SNAP program is proven to be effective in ameliorating food insecurity, benefit levels are simply not adequate to meet the needs of food-insecure households. This has led to an overreliance on charitable assistance organizations, which struggled to meet heightened demand in the midst of a nationwide economic downturn. Now, in the face of decreased SNAP benefits and continued inflation, these organizations will likely face another surge in demand, making this a crucial time to study their ability to adequately meet the needs of the people they serve. The following chapter of this thesis will use a nonprofit theory lens to examine the role of nonprofit food assistance organizations more closely in the broader food aid landscape and cover previous literature on the organizational capacity of the charitable food aid sector, setting the groundwork for my research on the capacity of Pittsburgh's charitable food aid system.

3.0 Chapter Three: Defining and Measuring Nonprofit Capacity

3.1 The Role of the Nonprofit Sector

The previous chapter covered the role of both federal benefits and charitable organizations in addressing food insecurity. Although they serve different functions, these two parts of the food assistance network do not function independently: nonprofit food aid organizations work both in response to insufficient government assistance and in collaboration with federal programs. To effectively examine the role of nonprofit organizations in the food aid landscape, we must first look at the broader role of nonprofits in the social safety net. A number of major theories have been proposed to explain the emergence and role of nonprofit organizations in the United States, including government failure theory and interdependence theory. Government failure theory, introduced by Burton Weisbrod in 1977, suggests that the provision of public goods is affected by the preferences of the public majority, making governments less likely to supply public goods that are driven by diverse needs (Bae and Sohn 2017, 5). Governments respond to the needs of the median voter to maintain political power, meaning that more homogenous societies experience a minimal gap between voter preferences and government services, while more diverse societies are less satisfied by government service provision, leading them to turn to nonprofit organizations to meet their unfulfilled needs (Paarlberg and Zuhlke 2019, 104). The theory therefore suggests that nonprofit organizations are more active in communities with diverse populations. Studies that have tested for the validity of government failure theory have not produced unanimous results. Some have found that, as the theory posits, community diversity increases the size of the nonprofit sector, and nonprofits flourish in communities where there is excess demand, or where certain preferences (such as linguistic and religious) make people willing to pay a higher price for a desired product. Others have described a negative association between social heterogeneity and nonprofit sector size, attributed to a higher likelihood of collective action in homogenous communities as a result of shared values (Bae and Sohn 2017, 6). Following government failure theory, the more heterogeneous a community is, the less satisfied it will be with government provisions, and the more it will demonstrate a demand for nonprofit services and be willing to voluntarily contribute to the production and provision of the desired services (Paarlberg and Zuhlke 2019, 104). However, this theory makes several assumptions both on the supply and demand side of service provision. Firstly, it infers that government and nonprofit services function independently, with nonprofit organizations predominantly serving to fill gaps in demand that are not met by government services. This implies that nonprofits function as responders to government insufficiency, rather than initiators of public service provision. Additionally, it suggests that heterogeneous populations initiate community-level action to fulfill service demands, which assumes a level of self-sufficiency that may not be attainable for low-income communities with scarce financial resources.

Interdependence theory outlines a more collaborative relationship between the government and nonprofit organizations. Interdependence theory, developed in 1987 by Lester Salamon, suggests that the government relies on nonprofit organizations for the provision of public services, while nonprofits need government funding to fulfill their organizational missions. When the government recognizes the benefits of social services provided by nongovernmental organizations, it will sometimes fund those enterprises directly through grants, or make contracts that delegate the production of those services to nonprofits to maximize efficiency (Paynter and Berner 2014, 114). Consequently, the government becomes dependent on nonprofit organizations to provide services that are in line with their social policy agenda, while nonprofits can become reliant on government revenue. The fewer services the government provides directly, the more likely the government is to reallocate financial resources to nonprofit organizations. In doing so, the government uses nonprofits to enhance its capacity and meet population needs in service areas for which it may have client access, expertise, and political influence (Lecy and Van Slyke 2013, 4). Nonprofits are often active in their field prior to government involvement, and therefore develop experience and expertise that the government can later draw on in their own services. Additionally, nonprofit organizations can mobilize political support that can inspire governmental action and secure nonprofit involvement in cooperative service provision (Salamon and Toepler 2015, 16). Despite advantages such as client proximity and depth of knowledge and experiences, nonprofit organizations experience limitations in their ability to respond to public needs, including philanthropic insufficiency, or the "difficulty voluntary organizations have in generating the resources often needed to 'scale up' their operations" (Salamon and Toepler 2015, 16), and a resulting difficulty in establishing self-sufficiency. These limitations provide additional incentive to form cooperative relationships with the government, particularly when there is political resistance to direct governmental action, but a significant demand for social services. This leads to the hypothesis that there is a positive relationship between government spending and nonprofit sector size, particularly in the health and social service fields. Additionally, since government funding serves as a source of revenue for nonprofits, it can be hypothesized that increased government social welfare spending would lead to an increased share of government income for nonprofit organizations (Salamon and Toepler 2015, 16). Therefore, according to the interdependence theory, the cooperative provision of services provides mutual benefits for both government and nonprofit entities.

America's charitable food aid system can be approached through both a government failure theory and an interdependence theory framework. While the emergence of the charitable food system is arguably a result of inadequate social services at the federal level, the food assistance network also works in partnership with the government and relies significantly on federal support.

Nutrition assistance programs began during the Great Depression due to a simultaneous rise in hunger and a collapsing agricultural economy. Under the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1922, surplus commodities such as wheat and dairy were purchased by the federal government and distributed through hunger relief agencies (Bacon and Baker 2017, 901). Beginning in the 1980s, the narrative surrounding food insecurity began to shift away from federal assistance, and U.S. residents were told by the government that the most effective way to reduce hunger and poverty was through the charitable sector (Berg and Gibson 2022, 1). The passage of The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), as well as a reduction in SNAP benefits in following years catalyzed the growth of an expansive charitable food aid network (Bacon and Baker 2017, 901). TEFAP was established in 1983 in an effort to get rid of government-held agricultural surpluses and simultaneously decrease hunger rates during a recession and simultaneous reduction in SNAP benefits. It has since become a permanent program that operates across all 50 U.S. states and provides federally purchased commodities and cash support to food banks and other charitable food assistance organizations. The program benefits the agricultural economy by reducing market supply and consequently raising food prices (CRS 2023). In FY2023, The USDA provided nearly $550 million in base funding for TEFAP, which includes $445.5 million in food funding and $92 million in administrative funding to support distribution through food banks (FNS 2023). Before TEFAP, there were only 13 food banks in the United States, which relied on individual donations to supply local charitable organizations. Since the program's inception, the charitable food network has grown exponentially, with over 230 food banks now operating across the country (Bacon and Baker 2017, 901).

Charitable food assistance organizations play a crucial role in mitigating food insecurity; however, their impact is significantly outweighed by the potential impact of strengthening the federal social safety net (Berg and Gibson 2022, 8). The number of households relying on charitable food aid has significantly increased in recent years, which has placed tremendous strain on food banks as they attempt to meet heightened demand. In 2020, 11.2% of food assistance organizations could distribute enough food to meet demand, and 22.5% had to turn away clients, or reduce the amount of food they distributed due to insufficient resources (Berg and Gibson 2022, 9). This is partially a result of an eroded social safety net, declining real value of the minimum wage, and the rising costs of housing and other necessities, as well as inadequacies in the SNAP program's benefit levels and eligibility requirements (Schwartz and Seligman 2019, 1). Many food-insecure households are not eligible for SNAP benefits or are eligible but do not receive adequate benefits to meet their needs, and charitable food assistance programs must step in to fill these gaps in assistance (Schwartz and Seligman 2019, 1). While food banks can connect clients with federal assistance programs, these links are often not established, and are not relevant in cases where households are financially ineligible for the program or are already receiving insufficient benefits.

The relationship between federal food assistance and the charitable food aid sector is therefore somewhat paradoxical. The food bank network would likely not exist without the federal policy that led to its emergence, and it continues to rely on government funding and USDA commodities to stay afloat. Simultaneously, food banks are forced to mitigate the consequences of inadequate SNAP benefits, demonstrating attributes of government failure theory as they work in response to an insufficient federal social safety net.

3.2 Resource Dependence Theory

Since nonprofits are mission-driven organizations, they rely on various resource providers to support their work. Resource dependence theory (RDT) was proposed by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Gerald R. Salancik in 1978 and has since become one of the most influential frameworks in organizational theory and strategic management. According to RDT, an organization is an open system that is dependent on its external environment, and “the key to organizational survival is the ability to acquire and maintain resources” (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978, 2). This is a challenging task due to environmental scarcity and uncertainty, meaning that resources are not stable or guaranteed. This leads to organizations having to adapt to the requirements of their resource providers (Froelich 1999, 247). RDT relies on an open-systems perspective, acquiring and maintaining resources that necessitates interaction with the parties that control them. An open system is characterized by more than just interaction with its environment; instead, the interaction is a crucial element that sustains the system's viability. This results in environmental dependence and leads to organizations being constrained by their environments because of their resource needs. Relying on few sources for inputs therefore leads to a high level of dependence on those resource providers for organizational survival (Froelich 1999, 247).

Nonprofit organizations typically rely on a variety of resource providers to support their work. This may take the form of traditional fundraising, pursuing grants and contracts from government sources and foundations, as well as commercial tactics such as charging for services or selling products to customers (Froelich 1999, 247). While more commercial strategies often receive criticism for their potential to create goal displacement, changes in the resource environment require re-analyzing resource acquisition strategies to maintain organizational stability.

Private contributions, which include individual and corporate donations, as well as foundation grants, are a significant contributor to nonprofit revenue, although the percentage of total revenue from private contributions has been in consistent decline, dropping from 30% of income in 1980 (Froelich 1999, 249) to only 13% by 2015 (Chang et al. 2018, 13). Although total private contributions increase annually, the rate of increase is less than that of other major sources of revenue. This is due to a combination of factors including reduced tax incentives for donations, more restrictive corporate giving policies, and greater competition for donations and grants among nonprofit organizations (Froelich 1999, 249). Donors tend to support organizations in their local communities, and higher-income donors constitute most total donations. Individual donors account for most private contributions: in 2015, 71% of total charitable giving came from individuals, followed by 16% from foundations. Approximately one third of charitable contributions go towards religious NPO's, followed by educational organizations (15%) and human service organizations (12%) (Chang et al. 2018, 14). Private contributions are highly valued among nonprofit organizations, as they not only provide revenue, but demonstrate popular support for an organization's work and mission, indicating organizational legitimacy (Froelich 1999, 250). Additionally, smaller private donations can often be utilized freely by nonprofits, reducing the potential of goal displacement that may result from "strings-attached" contributions that require particular allocation.

Funding from government sources also provides a significant portion of nonprofit revenue. Of an estimated $905.9 billion in total revenues reported by public charities in 2013, 32.5 percent came from government sources (McKeever 2018, 5). Nonprofits receive financial support from the government in a variety of ways, including direct support through grants and subsidies, and charitable 501(c)(3) nonprofits also receive corporate tax exemptions and the ability to issue tax-exempt bonds. Additionally, government contracts can be made with nonprofit organizations for the provision of certain goods and services. As opposed to individual contributions, government funds often come with specific objectives and limitations for use, and nonprofit managers must determine whether these objectives coincide with their organizational missions. Additionally, the costs of obtaining government grants can be high, making them less realistic sources of revenue for smaller organizations (Chang et al. 2018, 15).

Another funding strategy that has been consistently growing among nonprofit organizations is commercial activity, which may include selling goods and services either related or unrelated to the organization's mission, as well as charging fees for program services. Fees for services are the dominant revenue source for nonprofits as a whole, generating 47.5 percent of total revenues in 2013 (McKeever 2018, 4). This particularly applies to nonprofit organizations that produce marketable goods and services and can therefore compete with for-profit corporations, offering rival products and services (Chang et al. 2018, 15).

An extension of RDT is revenue diversification, which posits that nonprofit organizations which derive equal amounts of revenue from various funding sources are less vulnerable than those that focus on a single form of income and are more resistant to financial uncertainty and instability (Hung and Hager 2019, 6). Diversifying revenue portfolios has been argued to increase organizational flexibility and autonomy, as well as create growth potential and strengthen community networks. However, doing so also has the potential to produce risk and complexity, with each additional source of revenue threatening the loss of existing revenue streams as well as a perceived loss of organizational character. Further, revenue diversification can lead to a decline in fundraising efforts in favor of larger and more reliable sources of income, as well as lead to mission drift and goal displacement if the organization's attention is primarily shifted to their funders rather than their clients (Hung and Hager 2019, 9). Generally, however, revenue diversification has been linked to reduced financial vulnerability among nonprofits, while revenue concentration has been associated with greater potential for revenue decline and organizational insolvency (Carroll and Stater 2009, 949). Ultimately, the goal of any nonprofit organization is to work towards their organizational mission and maintain commitment to their purpose despite the complexity of resource acquisition.

Food banks are reliant on funding from several key sources, including individual and corporate donations and government programs such as TEFAP and the State Food Purchase Program (SFPP). Most of the food that food banks receive is donated by individuals (typically through food drives), farmers, and companies and local businesses (Morello 2021b). TEFAP also sizably contributes to food banks' resource supply; the most recent census of emergency feeding organizations was conducted by the ERS in 2000 and found that TEFAP foods comprised 14% of food distributed by the emergency food assistance system, and TEFAP administrative funds covered 12% to 27% of food banks' administrative expenses (CRS 2023, 5). The State of Pennsylvania also provides additional funding to food banks through the SFPP. This program was initiated in 1983 as an informal complement to TEFAP and was permanently adopted in 1992. The SFPP provides cash grants to counties for the purchase and distribution of food through the emergency food assistance system, contributing approximately $20 million annually

(Hunger-Free Pennsylvania, 2023). The impact of the program has weakened over time, as SFPP funding has remained stagnant for nearly two decades despite significant increases in food prices and demand for emergency food assistance (Hunger-Free Pennsylvania 2023, 1).

Although there is inherent precarity in relying primarily on donations for revenue, food banks generally have a relatively diversified funding base. According to the Greater Pittsburgh Food Bank's 2022 financial report, the organization received 43% of its revenue from donated food, 34% from financial contributions, 20% from government programs and 3% from earned income. Sources of financial contributions were also diverse, split between individuals (51%), foundations (26%), corporations (16%), and organizations (6%) (GPCFB 2022, 6). According to RDT, this demonstrates financial stability at the food bank level. Food pantries, however, are far less diversified in their funding sources, relying on food banks for the vast majority of their resources. Given that a single food bank may be responsible for distributing food to hundreds of food pantries, reductions in individual donations or reductions in federal support could have a tremendous ripple effect, leading to high levels of instability among the agencies responsible for directly distributing emergency food to food-insecure households.

3.3 Defining Nonprofit Efficiency, Effectiveness, Performance, and Capacity

Nonprofit organizations are facing increasing pressures to demonstrate that they are achieving their missions and goals both efficiently and effectively (Vershuere and Suykens 2020, 1). To prove their accountability and legitimacy to funders and other organizational stakeholders, nonprofit organizations have developed a greater focus on measuring organizational performance and capacity. In addition to external pressures, nonprofit managers and board members increasingly demand more accurate performance measures, leading to a significant push towards optimizing performance measurement strategies (Vershuere and Suykens 2020, 1).

Nonprofit efficiency, effectiveness, and performance are closely related terms, however they vary slightly in usage. Efficiency can be defined as the ratio between the organization's resources and their deliverable products and services (in other words, their inputs and outputs) (Vershuere and Suykens 2020, 2). Organizational effectiveness is more closely related to organization mission and can be seen as the ratio of organizational objectives to organizational outcomes. This basic definition is reflective of the goal model of organizational effectiveness, which posits that "organizations have goals, and the extent to which the goals are met by the organization determines the organizational success" (Verschuere and Suykens 2020, 2). Another approach to organizational effectiveness is the systems resource model, which focuses on an organization's survival, proposing that effective organizations are those that can maintain their functioning through the use of environmental resources. The primary critique of the systems resource model is that it may only be relevant from a managerial standpoint and does not necessarily reflect the interests of all stakeholders. A third model of organizational effectiveness, the multiple constituency model, suggests that both organizational effectiveness and efficiency may have different criteria for various organizational stakeholders (Verschuere and Suykens 2020, 2). For instance, the organizational board of directors may view effectiveness as the ability to acquire adequate financial resources for continued organizational survival, while the organization's clients may view program quality and cost as the primary indicators of effectiveness.

While nonprofit effectiveness is goal-focused and can therefore vary in definition and measurement, nonprofit performance is more concrete and can be gauged across specific areas of interest, including financial performance (e.g. donations raised) , stakeholder performance (e.g. volunteer satisfaction), market performance (e.g. organizational reputation), and mission performance (Willems et al. 2014, 1650). Nonprofit performance is also closely related to organizational capacity, which is broadly defined in terms of the assets and processes used to improve effectiveness and sustainability (Brown et al. 2016, 3). For a nonprofit, capacity refers to the resources, skills, and functions needed to effectively carry out the organization's mission (Despard 2017, 2), and strengthening capacity attributes generates improvement in organizational performance. The need for effective and efficient nonprofit service provision, in tandem with a harsher economic climate, has led to an increased focus on organization capacity among nonprofit organizations, particularly as the sector becomes increasingly divided between large organizations with ample resources and smaller NPO's that struggle to compete for funds (Brown et al. 2016, 2). Both among large and small organizations, capacity largely centers on performance, and the presence of organizational capacity is most valuable if it leads to effective program outcomes and mission fulfillment (Paynter and Berner 2014, 115).

3.4 Nonprofit Capacity Frameworks

Although capacity is defined in the nonprofit literature, there are no standardized methods for its measurement, making it difficult to accurately assess. Several frameworks have been developed that break capacity down into specific indicators, however the measurement of capacity remains non-uniform. In 2001, McKinsey and Company developed a capacity assessment tool for nonprofit organizations in partnership with Venture Philanthropy Partners, which breaks capacity into seven core elements. These seven elements are organized in a pyramid, with three higher-level elements (aspirations, strategy, and organizational skills), three foundational elements (systems and infrastructure, human resources, and organizational structure), and an additional cultural element, which connects and reinforces the six domains. Each element of the pyramid contains specific indicators in the McKinsey Capacity Assessment Grid, a tool designed to aid nonprofit organizations in assessing their organizational capacity. Each indicator in the Assessment Grid has a corresponding response scale, ranging from clear need for increased capacity to basic, moderate, and high levels of capacity already in place. McKinsey argues that "nonprofits, just like businesses, need to focus on building the capacity of their entire organization if they want to maximize their social impact" (McKinsey 2001, 29), and that capacity building efforts should be addressed with the same level of importance as program development and management, to simultaneously implement programs and strengthen the organization (McKinsey 2001, 29). McKinsey also suggests several reasons as to why nonprofit organizations tend to neglect capacity-building in favor of program development. Firstly, many nonprofits dedicate most of their resources towards testing and implementing their ideas, particularly in their starting stages, and prefer to spend their limited funds on programs due to the time-consuming and often costly nature of capacity-building in the short run (McKinsey 2001, 30). Nonprofit culture tends to glorify program work over institutional functions, and many nonprofit managers are distrustful of applying business tactics to nonprofit organizations for fear of sacrificing the organization's mission or detracting from important program objectives. Nonprofit funding environments can also impede organizations' ability to focus on capacity building, with many donors choosing to put their contributions towards specific programs and being much less likely to support administrative costs. Further, a lack of knowledge and experience in building capacity across the nonprofit sector creates an additional barrier: "when it comes to nonprofit capacity building, there is no shared conceptual framework or approach that can be applied widely across the sector" (McKinsey 2001, 30). Most importantly, McKinsey argues, it is difficult to establish a clear link between capacity building efforts and organizations' social impacts, making nonprofits less likely to invest time and resources into improving their management and capacity structures. Nevertheless, he maintains that, based on the organizations profiled in his study, capacity building efforts are critical to organizational success, and for the nonprofit sector to maximize their social impact, more organizations must rectify their gaps in organizational capacity (McKinsey 2001, 31).

A 2003 study by Paul Connolly and Peter York through The Conservation Company, which was primarily based on a national survey of management support organizations (MSO's), identified four core forms of capacity for nonprofit organizations: adaptive, leadership, management, and technical capacity. Briefly defined, adaptive capacity is "the ability of a nonprofit organization to monitor, assess, and respond to internal and external changes", leadership capacity is "the ability of organizational leaders to inspire, prioritize, make decisions, provide direction, and innovate", management capacity is "the ability of a nonprofit organization to ensure the effective and efficient use of organizational resources", and technical capacity is “the ability of a nonprofit organization to implement key organizational and programmatic functions” (Marguerite Casey Foundation 2021, 1). Connolly and York argue that adaptive capacity is most critical to nonprofit success, as well as the area of capacity in which many nonprofits are most lacking. Adaptive capacity involves clarifying organizational goals and activities, evaluating program effectiveness, and engaging in flexible future planning, as well as working to create alliances and networks within the community and sharing knowledge with partnering organizations. The authors note that while many nonprofits have strong technical and management capacities that aid in effective program development and service delivery, they tend to struggle with adapting to environmental changes as well as face issues with leadership capacity (Connolly and York 2003, 4).

In 2012, the Marguerite Casey Foundation created a modified version of the McKinsey tool, using the four capacity domains identified by Connolly and York (technical capacity is renamed operational capacity in this model). The tool includes 59 indicators across the four domains, each of which can be self-assessed by nonprofit organizations at one of four levels. Examples of leadership capacity indicators include the clear presence of an organizational mission and vision, shared beliefs and values, board involvement and support, and CEO/ED organizational leadership, strategic thinking, and financial judgment. Some adaptive capacity indicators are strategic planning, performance measurement, program growth and replication, and partnerships and alliances. Management capacity indicators include diverse staff, shared references and practices, diversified funding streams, financial planning, and decision-making processes. Examples of operational capacity indicators are communications strategy, technological and physical attributes such as a website, electronic database, and adequate physical infrastructure, as well as management of legal and liability matters.

Tools such as the McKinsey Capacity Assessment Grid and the Marguerite Casey Foundation Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool are designed to be used as grading frameworks for nonprofit organizations to assess their current organizational capacities and determine areas that require development. While they may prove beneficial to organizations aiming to increase their focus on capacity building, they are less suited for precise capacity measurement due to being self-reported and unfit to track incremental progress. Additionally, since multiple assessment tools are in existence, and they are often tailored for specific organizations, it is difficult to aggregate data across different versions. However, it is still possible to examine data across organizations to find general trends in strengths and weaknesses across capacity areas and indicators.

A 2014 study by Amy Minzner et al. evaluated the Compassion Capital Fund Demonstration Program (CCF), one of the largest capacity-building initiatives in the nation. CCF primarily funded capacity-building training and technical assistance through intermediary organizations, and the study sought to evaluate the effectiveness of capacity-building assistance among nonprofit organizations, and track improvement across different areas of organizational capacity. The Demonstration Program provided capacity-building training across five major areas: organizational development, program development, revenue development, leadership development, and community engagement. The results demonstrated that the CCF program significantly impacted each area of capacity, with the largest improvements spread across the five categories (Minzner et al. 2014, 548). While the study exhibited promising outcomes for capacity-building initiatives, the study was limited in its measurement strategy. Since a large-scale empirical study of organizational capacity-building had not been previously conducted, it was not possible to use an existing instrument for measuring capacity-building. The research team observed that there was no standardized method of measuring or describing nonprofit organizational capacity (Minzner et al. 2014, 556). Resultantly, the study's findings cannot be adequately generalized beyond the framework of the CCF program, and strategies of organizational capacity measurement remain largely unverified.

3.6 **Measuring Nonprofit Capacity Among Food Aid Organizations**

Food banks were initially developed as a safety net for people in crisis. However, they are increasingly being used by individuals experiencing chronic food insecurity, with many recipients frequenting food banks and pantries as often as they are able (Bazerghi, 2016, 738). Despite this increase in use, food banks do not appear to significantly impact food security outcomes or adequately meet the nutritional needs of their recipients, which is disconcerting, especially for those who rely on emergency assistance as their main source of food (Bazerghi et al. 2016, 738). A 2016 review by Chantelle Bazerghi et al. consolidated existing information from thirty-five publications to draw conclusions about the role and efficacy of food banks in addressing food insecurity. Bazerghi's review found that while food banks are limited in their capacity to improve overall food security outcomes, they are effective in providing immediate relief to severe food scarcity and have the potential to positively impact food security with adequate resources and responsiveness to client needs (Bazerghi et al. 2016, 732). Bazerghi identified three key areas of difficulty that food banks face in meeting client needs: an increase in the number of clients, insufficient donations to match client demand, and inadequate nutrition training among food bank staff (Bazerghi et al. 2016, 738). Sourcing sufficient and high-quality food can be a challenge for food banks due to inconsistent donation streams and high costs of nutritious products, and this limits food banks' capacity to provide a range of foods that meet clients' nutritional needs (Bazerghi et al. 2016, 738). A lack of nutrition education also creates a significant barrier to matching client needs. Multiple studies in the review found that the greatest obstacle faced by food bank staff in providing a nutritionally adequate diet for clients was a lack of knowledge and resources (Bazerghi et al. 2016, 732). Food banks that were most effective at meeting client needs and reducing food insecurity provided culturally appropriate and nutritious foods that accommodated dietary needs, in ways that clients perceived as dignifying (Bazerghi et al. 2016, 729). While such practices may be more difficult to implement for under-resourced organizations, efforts to improve nutrition education and cultural awareness among staff, streamline food sourcing and distribution practices, and limit operational barriers to food bank access can improve the capacity of food banks to match client demands, and increase their ability to noticeably impact food security.

Organizational capacity is a highly pertinent issue for food assistance organizations. These organizations face uncertain resources and funding streams, rely predominantly on volunteer labor, and experience high and growing demand. A 2002 study by Peter Eisinger explored the presence and utilization of various capacity attributes among food assistance organizations. The study was based on a survey of pantries and soup kitchens in the Detroit tri-county region, conducted in the winter and spring of 1999. Eisinger defines capacity as a "set of attributes that help or enable an organization to fulfill its missions" (Eisinger 2002, 117) and argues that capacity attributes are latent until they are used. Therefore, he maintains that it is crucial to consider not only organizational capacity, but organizational effectiveness, and that effective organizations both possess a broad range of capacity attributes and are able to utilize these attributes towards mission fulfillment (Eisinger 2002, 116). Eisinger operationalizes organizational effectiveness using four measures: a comparison of an organization's trend in the number of clients served and trend in food donations, a subjective assessment of whether an organization's food donations are meeting client needs, whether a food organization ever has to turn away eligible clients, and whether an organization ever encourages or helps clients apply for federal food assistance (Eisinger 2002, 119). The study found that programs with more paid staff tend to exhibit higher levels of organizational effectiveness and have a better ability to procure adequate food donations to meet demand and direct clients to existing federal assistance programs. Volunteer labor, while it demonstrates a level of capacity, does not directly correlate with organizational effectiveness, which is important to note since most charitable food aid organizations rely entirely on volunteers. The study links organizations that conduct intake interviews and maintain records with higher levels of organizational effectiveness but does not find strategic planning to be a meaningful contributor to effectiveness. Eisinger also observed a low rate of organizations seeking help from external institutions, suggesting the relative isolation of street-level food programs. Generally, he found that the food programs in the study's sample exhibit low capacity and concludes that food assistance organizations are generally fragile and not adequately equipped to handle their growing role in holding up the social safety net (Eisinger 2002, 128).

A 2018 study by Rachel Fyall and Jamie Levine Daniel examined links between organizational priorities and variations in food assistance among nonprofit food pantries, using survey data from 95 pantries associated with a Midwestern Foodbank (Fyall and Levine Daniel 2018, 11). Levels of assistance were operationalized based on the number of individuals served by each pantry and the weight of food acquired from the Foodbank (Fyall and Levine Daniel 2018, 16). The study corroborated Eisinger's conclusions regarding paid staff, finding that the presence of paid staff was associated with 80% more individuals served. The study also found that pantries with high resource needs were associated with at least 40% fewer individuals served. Organizations that prioritized the faith and values of their donors were associated with less food assistance than those who did not, however valuing that faith and values of staff and volunteers was associated with a greater level of food assistance. The study found that prioritizing cost-efficiency was associated with higher levels of food assistance, but that prioritizing high-quality services did not correspond with lower levels of assistance, challenging the assumption of a trade-off between quality and quantity of food assistance services (Fyall and Levine Daniel 2018, 27). The authors also found significant positive associations between food assistance and extra-organizational priorities, including government partnerships and public-sector engagement, suggesting that these priorities may be most notable in understanding variations in food pantry assistance, and highlighting the importance of viewing pantries as members of a larger social safety net (Fyall and Levine Daniel 2018, 28). Given the increasing role of emergency food assistance in the landscape of food assistance, it is necessary to expand upon existing literature on the organizational capacity of the charitable food aid sector. Although large-scale deficits in the efficacy of our nation's food assistance system are evident, to make meaningful changes in the efficacy of food aid organizations or adequately substantiate an argument for increased federal assistance, we must understand challenges in the food aid sector at the ground level.

4.0 Chapter Four: Methods

4.1 Research Questions

Various approaches can be taken to study food assistance, spanning from assessing the effectiveness of federal food aid policies to gaining insight into the experiences and needs of individuals facing food insecurity. In my research, I have chosen to focus on understanding Pittsburgh's food assistance network from an organizational perspective by evaluating the capacity of the city's food aid nonprofits and food pantries. Food pantries serve as ground-level intermediaries between food aid policies and recipients of food assistance, making the evaluation of capacity indicators at the distribution level especially valuable for assessing the overall efficiency of the food assistance network. The aim of this study is to recognize areas of strength and need in organizational capacity among Pittsburgh's food assistance organizations and food pantries in order to identify ways that the city's food aid network can be best strengthened and supported. To reach this goal, the following questions must be addressed:

Q1: What are the areas of greatest strength and weakness in organizational capacity among food assistance organizations in Pittsburgh, PA?

Q2: What are the primary challenges and needs of food pantries in Pittsburgh, PA?

Evaluating the strengths and weaknesses in organizational capacity among food assistance organizations in Pittsburgh provides a descriptive analysis of the city's network of food assistance nonprofits. Trends in areas of strength and weakness within the study sample can be analyzed alongside previous studies of the capacity of food assistance organizations, facilitating the development of recommendations to improve the effectiveness of food assistance both at organizational and policy levels. In addition to contributing to the existing literature on charitable food assistance capacity, understanding the primary challenges and needs of Pittsburgh's food pantries allows for the practical application of this study's findings. Organizations' responses to survey questions addressing their challenges and needs can be accessed by the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank and used to provide more targeted support to their partner network.

4.2 Research Philosophy

Pragmatism is a philosophy that is situated between positivist and constructionist viewpoints, and suggests that knowledge acquisition is a continuum, rather than a dichotomy of objectivity and subjectivity (Kaushik and Walsh 2019, 6). Originating in the late nineteenth century with the work of Charles Pierce, William James, and John Dewey, pragmatism takes a flexible approach to research design, striving to "reconcile both objectivism and subjectivism, facts and values, accurate and rigorous knowledge and different contextualized experiences" (Saunders 2009, 143). Avoiding metaphysical debates about the nature of reality, pragmatism focuses on understanding concrete issues in practical terms, emphasizing practical consequences in the examination of data (Kelly and Cordeiro 2020, 1), and maintaining that research should stem from the desire to generate useful and actionable knowledge (Kelly and Cordeiro 2020, 3). Elements of the research process are considered in terms of their practical application in specific contexts, and knowledge is valued for its ability to facilitate successful action. Pragmatist research designs are primarily determined by the research problems they aim to address, and research questions maintain an emphasis on practical outcomes (Saunders 2009, 143). Accordingly, pragmatist researchers have the ability to select the research methodologies that are best suited to address their research question and are not strictly tied to the qualitative and quantitative dichotomy. Pragmatism is associated with abductive reasoning, which oscillates between deduction and induction, allowing the researcher to be actively involved in generating both data and theory (Kaushik and Walsh 2019, 6).

A pragmatist research philosophy is well suited for research on organizations, as a focus on actionable knowledge and problem-solving links the research process to evolving organizational practice (Kelly and Cordeiro 2020, 3). Pragmatist philosophy allows for a self-directed approach to method selection and an integration of both quantitative and qualitative analysis, giving researchers focusing on organizations the ability to use data from formal documentation as well as to gather qualitative insights from organizational stakeholders. In doing so, pragmatist researchers can surface complex themes relevant to organizational advancement that may not have been uncovered through quantitative or qualitative analysis alone. This is particularly applicable to non-governmental organizations, in which organizational processes are often inadequately documented and rely significantly on the knowledge of their staff (Kelly and Cordeiro 2020, 4).

A pragmatist research philosophy was appropriate for this research, as the study centered on context-specific data analysis, aiming to practically contribute to the advancement of capacity-building methods among food aid organizations within the Pittsburgh region. In accordance with a pragmatist approach, the study approach was driven by the research questions, and specific methods, which will be discussed in detail in the following sections, were chosen to answer the research questions most effectively.

4.3 Research Type

Deductive research aims to apply existing theory by developing and testing specific hypotheses, while inductive research aims to develop theory by working from specific observations to broader generalizations (Streefkerk 2019, 1). Abductive research takes a more pragmatist approach, in which the researcher can change or develop the theoretical research framework throughout the research process, and data is gathered to test and modify existing theory (Saunders 2009, 145). Combining elements of induction and deduction, abductive research is appropriate in cases where there is abundant information on a topic in a certain context, but a lack of theory in the specific context being researched (Saunders 2009, 149), allowing the researcher to take relevant theory into account and modify it to fit a less-researched framework.

Producing relevant and usable knowledge is a significant concern of research on nonprofit organizations, leading to a tension between scholarship and practice (Taylor et al. 2018, 2). Torugsa and Arundel argue that an abductive research approach is the most promising methodological tool for researching the nonprofit sector, as it provides a foundation for building directly applicable theory and works to shift the focus of nonprofit scholarship towards the applied nature of the nonprofit field (Taylor et al. 2018, 21). This study implemented an abductive research method through the application and modification of existing methods of nonprofit capacity measurement to better understand relevant capacity and performance indicators in the food assistance sphere.

A central principle of pragmatism is the lack of dictated research methodology, allowing the researcher to choose the most appropriate methods to address the research question (Kelly and Cordeiro 2020, 5). A mixed methods research approach entails collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data within the same study. Through a purposeful integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches, mixed methods research allows for a study to incorporate diverse research lenses and produce a more complete view of the research landscape (Shorten and Smith 2017, 4). A mixed methods approach was implemented in this study to generate both qualitative and quantitative data and acquire a rounded understanding of organizational capacity among food assistance organizations. While survey response data was primarily quantitative and categorical data, interviews were qualitative in nature.

4.4 Research Strategies

This study uses structured interviews and surveying to gain a multifaceted understanding of organizational capacity in Pittsburgh's charitable food aid sector. Interviews can serve as a sole data source for qualitative research, or can act as supplements to survey research, as they allow for a higher level of information obtainment and the ability to ask for clarification on question responses (Ponto 2015, 170). Structured interviews are interviews in which each respondent is asked the same questions in the same manner. Questions are planned in advance, and a deliberately ordered set of interview questions is used (Mathers et al. 2000, 2). Using a structured interview method increases consistency between interviews and allows for direct comparison of responses. This study conducted structured interviews with seven representatives of food assistance nonprofit organizations to assess the organizations' capacity, with interview questions adapted from Version 2.0 of the McKinsey Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool. A structured interview method was appropriate for this study because it enabled more in-depth responses than could have been obtained using a survey method, which was particularly important due to the small sample size and resulting inability to conduct statistical analysis of responses.

Survey research is defined as the collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses to questions. A rather open-ended strategy, survey research allows for a variety of methods for population sampling and data collection and can implement both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Ponto 2015, 168). This study conducted a survey of 56 food pantries and similar organizations in the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank network. Survey questions were primarily closed, with ordinal response scales. Several open-ended questions pertaining to the challenges and needs of pantries were also included at the end of the survey.

4.5 McKinsey Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool

In 2001, McKinsey and Company developed a capacity assessment tool for nonprofit organizations which breaks capacity into seven core elements. These seven elements are organized in a pyramid, with three higher-level elements (aspirations, strategy, and organizational skills), three foundational elements (systems and infrastructure, human resources, and organizational structure), and an additional cultural element, which connects and reinforces the six domains. Each element of the pyramid contains specific indicators in the McKinsey Capacity Assessment Grid, a tool designed to aid nonprofit organizations in assessing their organizational capacity. Each indicator in the Assessment Grid has a corresponding response scale, ranging from clear need for increased capacity to basic, moderate, and high levels of capacity already in place.

The OCAT was originally developed for Venture Philanthropy Partners, a philanthropy organization in Washington, DC., to guide the organization's investments in nonprofits. Since its development, the tool has been modified several times: in 2003, the nonprofit membership organization Social Venture Network (SVN) modified the OCAT and reorganized it into ten areas of measurement to better match the profile of typical SVN investees. In 2012, the Marguerite Casey Foundation, a grantmaking foundation based in Seattle, Washington, modified the OCAT for use by community organizing and activist organizations. In 2014, McKinsey released version 2.0 of the OCAT, which includes 167 questions (compared to 69 in the original OCAT) across ten capacity areas: aspirations; strategy; leadership, staff, and volunteers; funding; values; learning and innovation; marketing and communication; advocacy; managing processes; organization; infrastructure and technology. 44 of the tool's questions focus on advocacy, which was a topic excluded from the original OCAT. Each question is assessed based on an answer rubric, and responses are aggregated by category to illustrate capacity across the nine capacity areas. Results are intended to show a snapshot of an organization's capacity level to identify areas in need of strengthening.

For the interview portion of this study, I adapted version 2.0 of the McKinsey OCAT. I discarded repetitive questions, as well as questions that would only be relevant to large organizations, and selected indicators that I deemed most valuable to gauging capacity based on existing studies of capacity among food assistance organizations. These included indicators such as strategic planning and performance assessment, adaptability to environmental changes, fundraising ability and revenue diversification, volunteer recruitment, succession planning, internal and external communication, and adequacy of physical facilities. I revised questions to better suit an interview format, which involved simplifying some of the language as well as integrating elements of the tool's multiple-choice responses. The revised version of the assessment tool consisted of 48 questions across nine capacity areas (aspirations and strategy were consolidated into a single "mission and strategy" category).

4.5.1 Interview Capacity Areas

Capacity Area	**Indicators**	**Purpose**
Mission and Strategy	Indicators include mission strength and mission alignment, strategic planning and strategic plan revision, theory of change, and scaling and growth.	Responses to these questions provide an understanding of an organization's vision, strategy, and organizational management, as well as its broader purpose and aspirations.
Leadership, Staff, and Volunteers	Indicators include leadership structure and effectiveness, dependency on the organization's CEO/executive director, size and function of the Board, staff quality and retention, and volunteer recruitment.	Responses reflect the collective capabilities of an organization and the sustainability of its human resources.
Funding	Indicators include fundraising skills, adequacy and sustainability of funding sources, models for revenue generation, and financial management.	Responses indicate an organization's level of financial stability and strategies for fundraising and revenue diversification.
Values	Indicators include alignment of values across the organization, clarity of job roles, and an overall assessment of impact.	Responses demonstrate the level of consensus between members of an organization, both in terms large-scale principles and day-to-day responsibilities.
Learning and Innovation	Indicators include the presence of performance targets, progress measurement and data analysis, understanding of the external landscape, and performance assessment.	These indicators demonstrate higher-level knowledge management in accordance with the organizations' mission, and the capability to adapt programs based on measures of performance.

Marketing and Communication	Indicators include internal and external communication, use of media to reach external audiences, and stakeholder management.	Responses demonstrate the degree to which an organization is integrated with the larger food assistance landscape.
Advocacy	Indicators include an understanding of advocacy goals, advocacy progress measurement, adaptability of advocacy approaches, formation of partnerships with other organizations, and community mobilization.	Responses demonstrate an organizations' commitment and ability to further their mission beyond program operations.
Managing Processes	Indicators include the presence of decision-making processes, appropriate people and resources to run programs effectively, and effective program execution, including timelines and budgeting.	Responses demonstrate the effectiveness of an organizations' management structure and ability to successfully work towards mission fulfillment.
Infrastructure and Technology	Indicators include adequate facilities, appropriate financial management technology, and adequate database and reporting systems.	Responses demonstrate whether basic infrastructural and technological assets are in place to support program functioning.

4.6 Research Method

4.6.1 Study Participants

The population for the interview portion of the study consisted of eleven 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations in the Pittsburgh area with missions focused on food insecurity and food assistance. Of these eleven organizations, seven agreed to be interviewed. The final study sample consisted of a food bank, a food rescue organization, a soup kitchen, a hunger advocacy organization, a grassroots philanthropic group providing grants to organizations addressing childhood hunger, a culinary training and hunger relief organization, and a cooperative ministry providing Meals on Wheels and other food assistance programming. Organization names are not disclosed to preserve the confidentiality of respondents.

The target population for the survey portion of the study consisted of 119 food pantries in the Pittsburgh region, all of which work in partnership with the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank. Due to the small scale of the target population, a sampling method (randomized or nonrandomized) was not implemented. In total, 56 organizations participated in the survey. Due to the relatively small scale of this study, findings are not generalizable across all food pantries, however focusing solely on organizations in the Pittsburgh region allows for the development of context-specific conclusions that can both expand our understanding of Pittsburgh's food aid landscape and directly assist the Greater Pittsburgh Food Bank in understanding the strengths and needs of their partner agencies.

4.6.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study was collected using two methods: structured interviews and a survey. The interview questions were constructed based on Version 2 of the McKinsey Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool (OCAT). The tool was modified to reduce the total number of questions while retaining all of the original tool's core elements, and the chosen questions were reworded to simplify the language used and better facilitate an interview format. The full list of modified interview questions is provided in the Appendix 1.

Interviews were conducted over the video conferencing tool Zoom and recorded electronically for transcript purposes. The verbal informed consent of each respondent was confirmed prior to beginning the interview process. Interview recordings were transcribed using the online platform Sonix, and then edited manually in the program. Key findings within each capacity area were recorded for each organization individually and then analyzed across all organizations in the sample.

A capacity survey for food pantries was constructed using themes and questions from the OCAT, as well as other studies specifically focused on food pantries. These studies included the Utah Food Bank's 2007 Emergency Food Capacity Study, which surveyed emergency food providers on topics such as food sources, funding sources, staffing and volunteers, facility information, and storage and equipment needs, as well as the 2017 Southeastern Pennsylvania Food Pantry Coordinator Survey, which was conducted by three Southeastern Pennsylvania anti-hunger organizations and focused on pantries' resource, staffing, and infrastructural needs. The survey was reviewed by the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank's director of Government Affairs to tailor it to the needs of the Food Bank, particularly regarding organizations' interest in policy advocacy. The survey was broken into nine sections, covering basic organizational information, mission, strategy, funding, facility and equipment, resources and food supply, staff and volunteers, communication and advocacy, and challenges and needs. All responses to survey questions were designed to be categorical or numerical, with the exception of the final three questions, which prompted open-ended responses regarding necessary support for advocacy participation, as well as pantries' primary challenges and needs. Survey questions were entered into the University of Pittsburgh's Qualtrics Online Survey System, and the link to the survey was distributed to the study sample through a variety of methods, including the Food Bank's monthly newsletter, flyers in the Food Bank's agency dock, phone, and email. The newsletter was sent out to 373 partner organizations, some of which were outside the City of Pittsburgh, however only organizations within the city were contacted directly. A consent form was included at the start of the survey to clarify the study's intent and ensure transparency. Respondents were compensated $15 for their participation in the survey. A full list of survey questions is provided in the Appendix 2. Numeric and ordinal survey responses were analyzed automatically through Qualtrics. Written responses were manually analyzed to determine themes across organizations.

It is worth noting that initially, a large portion of the study's data was intended to be comprised of IRS 990 forms. 990 forms are the primary tool used by the IRS to gather financial information about tax-exempt organizations and can provide valuable insight into organizations' revenues, expenses, as well provide necessary information to calculate financial ratios such as months cash on hand, reliance on income, and personnel and functional expense ratios. All tax-exempt organizations (with the exception of faith-based organizations) are mandated to make their Form 990 public. However, most organizations in the study sample were faith-based, and only 9 had publicly available 990 forms through the IRS database, making this an unsuitable data source for meaningful analysis.

5.0 Chapter Five: Capacity Strengths and Needs in Pittsburgh's Charitable Food Aid Sector

Pittsburgh's nonprofit food assistance organizations employ a variety of approaches to combatting food insecurity, including policy advocacy, food rescue and redistribution, grantmaking, and more traditional methods of direct aid. Through interviews with leaders of seven Pittsburgh food aid nonprofits, this portion of the study illustrates Pittsburgh's diverse landscape of food assistance and highlights areas of strength and weakness in the organizational capacity of these organizations.

Interview questions assessed indicators across nine capacity areas, adapted from the McKinsey OCAT 2.0. These included mission and strategy; leadership, staff, and volunteers; funding; values; learning and innovation; marketing and communication; advocacy; managing process; and infrastructure and technology. Collectively, these capacity areas provide an understanding of organizations' broad purpose and strategy, leadership and financial sustainability, clarity in management and internal communication, adaptability, basic infrastructural capacity, and integration within the broader food assistance network.

The following section covers detailed findings from each interview, and illustrates significant variations in organizational capacity between organizations, particularly in their levels of strategic planning, diversity of funding and financial sustainability, performance measurement, and extra-organizational communication. The most notable area of weakness in capacity among the interview sample was succession planning; many of the interviewed organizations are heavily reliant on their executive director and ill-prepared to navigate leadership transition, making them highly vulnerable in the event of unforeseen leadership departures. While this sample of organizations is not large enough to determine overarching trends in capacity strengths and weakness among Pittsburgh's food assistance nonprofits, findings from these interviews are useful as in-depth case studies of organizational structure and capacity among some of the key players in the city's food aid network.

5.1 Overview of Interview Findings

5.1.1 Interview Participants

Organization Type	Year Founded	Description
Food Rescue	2015	Partners with food donors such as grocery stores, wholesalers, and caterers to rescue food that would otherwise go into the waste stream and redistribute it to food-insecure individuals. A network of over 20,000 volunteers uses the organization's mobile app to pick up food from donors and transport it to nonprofit partners, which include housing authorities, churches, and community centers.
Hunger Advocacy Organization	1986	Aims to address the root causes of hunger by utilizing public policy and existing government programs to reduce poverty and improve food access. This organization's approach consists of individual-level assistance with government program enrollment, public and private partnerships to increase food access in underserved areas, lobbying and advocacy for hunger-reduction policies, and public education initiatives.
Food Assistance Ministry	2011	Faith-based organization that offers Meals on Wheels, free congregate lunches, emergency food boxes, senior food boxes, and a grocery buying club for residents of Pittsburgh's Greater Hazelwood community.
Transitional Employment and	2013	Offers job training programs, transitional employment opportunities, apprenticeships, and job placement services in the culinary industry.

Hunger Relief Organization		Additionally, the organization is involved in hunger relief efforts including preparing meals for local shelters using rescued produce from partnering food assistance organizations, preparing meals for agencies participating in Child Nutrition Programs, and promoting the SNAP program.
Antihunger Community Giving Circle	2013	Grassroots philanthropic organization that pools member donations and grants them to nonprofit organizations addressing childhood hunger and food insecurity in Southwestern Pennsylvania.
Soup Kitchen and Social Service Organization	1979	Provides a daily meal and a food pantry for residents of Pittsburgh's Hill District and Polish Hill, financial support and counseling for households facing homelessness, and support services including showers, transportation assistance, and SNAP registration.
Food Bank	1980	Feeding America food bank that sources and distributes food to over 1,000 partners across 11 counties in Southwestern Pennsylvania. The food bank also provides direct support through regional mobile pantry distributions, summer meals, and child nutrition programming, has an on-site food pantry, and engages in anti-hunger advocacy at the regional, state, and national levels.

5.1.2 Overview of Findings

Among the seven interviewed organizations, organizational capacity seems to be correlated with organizational size, particularly in the areas of mission and strategy, funding, learning and innovation, and marketing and communication. Two of the three smaller organizations in the sample lack strategic plans, and the third has a strategic plan in place but does not use it to guide day-to-day decisions at the organization. All three smaller organizations have limited to no paid staff, rely on undiversified funding sources, have weak external communication (particularly with other anti-hunger organizations), and lack a comprehensive understanding of their external landscape. Across the four larger organizations, there seems to be a greater focus on strategic planning: strategic plans guide day-to-day activities and are regularly revised. The larger organizations in the sample generally express more confidence in fundraising, have more diversified funding sources, and are effective at communicating with other organizations and understanding stakeholder needs.

Consistent areas of strength in capacity include adherence to mission, shared values, and high-quality staff. All respondents described alignment between organizational mission and activities, as well as shared values and commitment to the organization's mission among staff. Only one respondent expressed concern regarding the ability of current staff to effectively run programs. The most significant area of weakness across nearly all organizations is a high dependence on the organization's leader and a lack of succession planning. Respondents from the four larger organizations expressed more confidence regarding finding potential replacements for leadership roles but still acknowledged succession planning as an area for improvement. The three smaller organizations did not have anybody that could take over the leadership role if needed, which poses a significant threat to organizational stability. Lack of clarity in job roles and unsustainable or inadequate funding were also frequent areas of concern, with the smaller organizations demonstrating a significant lack of diversity in funding sources.

These interviews provide detailed insights into the capacity of a diverse sample of Pittsburgh's food assistance nonprofits, demonstrating significant variations in the sophistication of their organizational management, financial stability, and adaptive capacity. The majority of the city's food assistance network, however, is comprised not of independent nonprofits, but of food pantries, which work in partnership with the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank to directly distribute food to Pittsburgh’s food-insecure residents. Food pantries operate at the ground level of the food assistance system, and assessing their capabilities is essential for determining the effectiveness and efficiency of charitable food aid.

5.2 Interview Findings

5.2.1 Interview 1: Food Rescue

The organization’s mission is to prevent good food from going into the landfill and to distribute that to people in need and organizations serving people in need where they are. This mission is strong and guides daily work, and there is a strategic plan in place that is largely understood across the organization. The organization is currently in the process of bringing in a new CEO, and updates to the strategic plan are on hold until the transition is complete. Currently, their work is strongest in Allegheny County, and they are working to deepen their presence in surrounding counties.

The organization’s leadership structure is hierarchical, consisting of a CEO, COO, department heads and programmatic managers. The leadership team has strong financial judgment and acts in a timely manner (which is necessary given the last-minute nature of food rescue work). The organization is highly dependent on the CEO and is currently working with an interim CEO to lessen this dependence and prepare for leadership transition. The board is effective and aligned with organizational needs, and the staff team is extremely strong, with opportunities for advancement within the organization. The organization is also very effective at volunteer recruitment, and the volunteer base has a high level of skill and commitment. The fundraising team is strong, and the organization has a generally sustainable funding base, but is currently working on decreasing its reliance on foundation funding.

Values are shared among leadership and staff, and the organization's work is definitively creating impact in the community, as demonstrated by data-driven impact reports. The respondent repeatedly emphasized that the organization originated as a startup and continues to operate as a startup in some respects, applying a "development mindset" to their work and always looking for areas of potential improvement. While this approach is largely beneficial, the respondent noted that job roles and organizational structure could be more clearly defined and "less startup-y", which would benefit employees.

The organization is committed to data collection and analysis and uses an input-based standard for impact measurement, quantified by pounds of food rescued. This data, as well as other growth metrics such as number of volunteers, number of rescues, and number of donors, is consistently tracked by the organization through their app and used to improve and adapt programs. Output, however, is more difficult to quantify; to gauge output, the organization focuses on three areas: growth, impact, and efficiency. Although growth and efficiency are easier to measure, impact is where the organization's largest goals are focused.

The organization has a strong understanding of their external landscape and relevant policy issues. Internal communication is generally effective but overlap in job roles as well as the real-time nature of food rescue work can occasionally lead to over-communication. External communication with partner organizations is extremely strong, and something that is highly prioritized. The organization's media presence is also very strong, and both the CEO and former COO have media backgrounds. Stakeholders are managed effectively, however the respondent noted that there is always room for growth in this area. While the organization has engaged in advocacy work in the past, there is no focused part of the organization that works on advocacy projects. Prior advocacy work has been led by the COO alone, and advocacy does not appear to be an organizational priority.

The organization is currently hiring for several positions; however, the current staff are highly effective in their roles, and program planning is generally strong despite occasional timeline delays. Although there are no formal processes for decision-making in place, this does not present an issue due to high levels of communication between staff. The organization is extremely data-focused and has high-level and effective data collection and reporting systems in place, as well as a data scientist on staff. The organizations' physical facilities are currently inadequate for the organization's needs due to a recent fire.

5.2.2 Interview 2: Hunger Advocacy Organization

The organization's mission is to promote a just system of food access by addressing the root causes of hunger, systemic poverty, and inequity through policy advocacy, grassroots organizing, community-based solutions, and connecting people to benefits. The organization's major priorities are aligned with the mission, although there is occasional tension regarding whether the organization "pulls (itself) in too many different directions" and whether every organizational endeavor is responsive to the mission.

A three or four-year strategic plan was put in place ten years ago but has not been revised since then, and the organization aims to implement a new strategic plan within the next year. While there are ideas for future growth, financial means to currently expand are lacking. The structure of the leadership team is evolving, with more people entering supervisory and leadership roles, and leadership structure has become more hierarchical over time, with the executive director holding nearly all authority over financial decision-making and budgeting. The leadership team, particularly program directors, act in a timely manner and are generally effective in delivering results, but face financial and resource constraints, sometimes “biting off more than (they) can chew”; the organization is currently in the process of moderating realistic expectations in order to not overpromise results to partners.

The organization is dependent on the executive director, who is anticipating retirement in the next several years. While there is an increase in staff taking on more responsibility, the organization is not yet prepared for a smooth transition at the executive director level. Since implementing a new supervisory structure, no steps have been taken in terms of succession and leadership planning.

The board’s level of engagement has varied over the years, with more difficulty engaging the board since the start of the pandemic, and some remaining unreplaced board positions. Although several new members have recently been introduced to fill vacancies, current board members feel overburdened, and there is less mutual support among board members than there was prior to the pandemic. The organization has high quality staff with diverse skills and perspectives, and volunteer recruitment is effective, particularly for the organization’s tax preparation program. Many volunteers are recurring, and essentially serve as part-time staff.

The organization often struggles to meet its budget, sometimes having to draw from the previous year’s balance. Their funding base is diversified, and the organization has several sustainable funding sources. Formal processes are in place for financial planning and budgeting, but there are substantial issues with the organization’s financial management system, which are currently in the process of being resolved.

There are diverse perspectives across the organization regarding priorities, but a shared commitment to the mission; although core values of the organization are widely agreed upon, prioritization among them has been a source of tension. There is also variation in the clarity of job roles: some are narrowly defined, while others are more flexible in order to accommodate the unpredictability of the organization's work. Some of the organization's programs are better suited for outcome-focused performance measures than others; for those that are measurable, there are clear outcome targets, and a lot of attention is paid to data analysis.

There is a strong understanding of the organization's external landscape, and an awareness of constant changes in the policy environment. The organization tries to assess gaps in programming, particularly through understanding where there may be a lack of good contacts in order to strengthen coalition partnerships and organizational relationships. Earned news media is one of the organization's key assets; while fewer people are reached directly through social media, much of the organization's work is "newsworthy". Communication with potential clients is generally very strong, and the organization has strong long-term relationships with partners at the local, statewide, and federal level. There is a clear understanding of advocacy goals, and the organization is effective at adjusting advocacy approaches as external conditions change, however the success of advocacy work can be difficult to quantify.

The organization is generally well-connected to the people they serve but recognizes room for improvement in this area. Many of the organization's programs are one-time services, making it difficult to build long-term relationships, and legal constraints further complicate the ability to connect with clients. Forming partnerships with other organizations is a key organizational strength, however there could be improvement in community mobilization, which has become more difficult since the pandemic began. Many formerly in-person gatherings are being conducted remotely, making it harder to engage constituents.

The facilities generally match the organization's needs, although there is a lot of unused space because much of the staff still works remotely. This has created a much greater dependence on remote technology, which has required significant investment. Financial management technology is adequate, but the organization could be more effective at using it. Database and reporting systems are in place and are being upgraded to better keep up with the organization's needs.

5.2.3 Interview 3: Food Assistance Ministry

The organization's mission is to provide healthy food to people in the greater Hazelwood and Greenfield community. The mission is widely understood, and guides work at the organization. However, there is no strategic plan or theory of change in place, and no plan for scaling and growth.

The leadership team has strong financial judgment and acts in a timely manner but having a strategic plan would allow the team to be better equipped to guide the organization through change. The organization is very dependent on the operations manager, and there is nobody who could currently replace the executive role. The organization also has two paid staff: a part-time cook, and an operations specialist that is responsible for running the organization's lunch program. While somebody could take over their roles on an emergency basis, there are no staff succession plans in place. Volunteer recruitment is moderately effective, and mostly conducted through word of mouth. Occasionally, staff must fill in for volunteers when they are not available.

Fundraising skills are moderately effective; the organization relies entirely on grants and donations, and the funding base appears to be sustainable, although the respondent noted that "they could always change their mind". Finances are adequately managed, but financial management is conducted solely by the operations manager, who could use additional support.

Values are shared across the organization. While there is some overlap in job roles, this does not interfere with operations. The organization has minimal performance targets in place; there is an understanding of maximum output capacity and outputs are consistently tracked and reported to the Food Bank, but targets are not set ahead of time. Performance measurement is not directly used to adapt programs; however, attention is paid to gaps in service.

There is limited knowledge of the organization's external landscape, and a desire to know more about the activities of other food aid agencies. Internal communication is strong and external communication is effective with community members, but not with other food providers. The use of media to reach external audiences is limited, and the organization is not engaged in advocacy.

There are no formal processes in place for efficient decision making. Currently, the organization has the right people and resources to run programs effectively, but the lack of succession planning is a significant vulnerability. Physical facilities are a good match for the organization's needs, and financial management software and database and reporting systems are in place and effective.

5.2.4 Interview 4: Transitional Employment and Hunger Relief Organization

The organization's mission is to use food as the foundation to change lives and strengthen communities. The organization's activities are in alignment with its purpose, and activities are routinely reviewed in order to maintain this alignment. There is a strategic plan in place that is widely understood and revised every six months. There is no formal theory of change, but an understanding of how inputs translate into outputs, as well as a plan for future scaling and growth.

Current leadership consists of the executive director and the operations director, but the organization is currently undergoing a process to enhance staff development and expand the number of people that can step into leadership roles. The current leadership team has strong financial judgment, acts in a timely manner, and is well-equipped to guide the organization through change. While there is somebody that could take over the executive role, if necessary, the "Achilles' heel" of the organization is their dependence on the executive director's knowledge and experience. The board is effective and works primarily on a strategic level, rather than engaging in day-to-day operations. The board's size and function are generally well-aligned to the organization's needs, but the organization could benefit from an effective fundraiser. The staff is generally strong and diverse in skills, but there is a lack of people in management roles. Staff retention and succession planning are areas of concern that are currently being addressed. Although volunteer recruitment is not effective, the organization isn't extremely dependent on volunteer labor, and existing volunteers have the appropriate skills and commitment to the organization.

The organization has strong fundraising skills, a sustainable funding base, and effective financial management. Finances are unusually robust for a nonprofit because the organization keeps a double bottom line through cash-based businesses.

There is a shared investment in the mission across the organization, but occasional disagreements arise regarding whether or not certain activities are in alignment with the organization's purpose. Clarity in job roles and expectations for staff could use improvement, and the organization is currently working on revising job descriptions in order to define staff roles more clearly.

Performance targets and progress metrics are strong on an organizational scale, but not on the individual staff level. The organization has the ability to analyze data about programs but does not adequately assess performance and use performance measures to adapt programs, which is a current focus area for improvement.

Staff are not consistent in their primary methods of communication, and the organization is working towards developing a clearer and more streamlined approach to internal communication in response to staff feedback. External communication is generally strong, but the respondent noted wanting to focus more on using media to reach external audiences. There is a good understanding of the external landscape, and stakeholders are managed effectively. While the organization doesn't spearhead any advocacy initiatives, it will participate in advocacy efforts organized by other agencies.

Processes for informed and efficient decision-making exist on certain levels of the agency, but not on others. The organization does not entirely have the right people and resources to run programs effectively and needs to do some restructuring in order to bring more people into leadership. Physical facilities are mostly adequate for the organization's needs, and financial management technology and database and reporting systems are in place and effective.

5.2.5 Interview 5: Antihunger Community Giving Circle

The organization's mission is to alleviate hunger for the children of Southwestern Pennsylvania by providing grants to organizations addressing this need. The organization's activities are in alignment with the mission and the service area has recently been defined in more detail, but there is no strategic plan in place. The organization is currently undergoing a "generational transfer" as many of the founders and early leaders are leaving the organization. The organization is growing steadily each year, and 2022 was the first year that no highly mission-aligned grant requests had to be turned down.

The leadership team consists of a president, a secretary, and a treasurer, as well as three committee heads. The leadership team has strong financial judgment and acts in a timely manner on a set schedule. The organization is highly dependent on the president, and succession planning is an area of concern; a vice president is also needed. The board represents and advocates for the organization effectively, but roles are currently being reevaluated so that some of the president and secretary's responsibilities are redistributed to board members. While the board is very effective overall, there are varying levels of knowledge between individual board members, and mastery of bylaws needs to be strengthened among board members.

Member's dues are the organization's primary source of revenue. As the organization grows, it will be necessary to expand the membership base in order to fund additional grant requests, as well as consider additional funding sources; most members are acquaintances of existing founders and members, leading to a limited pool of potential future members. The organization doesn't budget and distributes all funds to grantees. New financial management software has recently been installed in order to produce more robust and formalized financial records.

Values are shared across the organization, with little difference in opinion about whether or not a potential grantee is adequately mission-aligned. Although job descriptions are present, there are no measurable goals for board members. There are no performance targets in place for board members, however grantees must specify goals for their programs and provide a year-end report before the next round of funding is granted.

The organization's founder had a strong understanding of the organization's external landscape, but current members have limited awareness of other hunger relief organizations and resources, as well as potential grantees that do not seek out the organization for funding on their own. External communication is limited, and media presence is negligible, partially due to concern of "reaching out too much" and having success in fundraising without enough grantees to whom the funds could be distributed.

The process for approving grantees is formalized and streamlined and the organization has the appropriate people and resources to effectively run programs, but succession planning needs to be highly prioritized. The organization has effective database and reporting software are in place, and does not have any physical facilities, with all meetings conducted remotely.

5.2.6 Interview 6: Soup Kitchen and Social Service Organization

The organization's mission is to improve the lives of people in poverty by providing needed services in a caring environment. The organization's actions are in alignment with the mission and there is a strategic plan in place which is widely understood across the organization, however the plan does not guide day-to-day decisions and there is no process in place for its development or revision. Although there is a rough theory of change in place, it is not used as a driving tool; the organization would like to expand operations but is unable to do so due to financial constraints.

The leadership team consists of the executive director, director of operations, director of the childcare center, and kitchen manager. The team has strong financial judgment, acts in a timely manner, and is equipped to guide the organization through change. The organization is quite dependent on the executive director and there is nobody that could currently fill the role if needed. The board is somewhat effective in advocating for the organization, but the organization lacks high-quality staff, and there are no leadership succession plans in place. The volunteer base is strong, and the organization is effective at volunteer recruitment.

The organization lacks effective fundraising skills, and the current funding base is not sustainable. Historically, the organization has only relied on individual donations; it is currently trying to extend its funding base to foundations and corporations and has begun a capital campaign to reach funders but is struggling to gain financial support. On the management level, financial oversight is effective, and the organization maintains formal processes for financial planning.

Values are shared across the organization, and individuals have clearly defined roles and expectations. There are no performance targets in place, and performance metrics are output-focused, measured by the number of meals distributed and the number of people served.
There is room for improvement in the organization’s ability to analyze data about their performance, however organizational performance is assessed and used to adapt programs.

Internal communication is effective, while external communication with partners and stakeholders could be improved. Media is not used to reach external audiences, and the organization is not involved in advocacy work, but is effective in managing stakeholders.

The organization does not currently have the right people and resources to effectively run programs. Currently, they are trying to expand services to assist people in moving from stability to economic self-sufficiency and need to enhance the number and skills of staff and improve outreach in order to do so. Although programs are planned and budgeted effectively, “it all comes down to funding”.

Financial management technology and database and reporting systems meet the organization's needs adequately, but the physical facilities are sufficient. Currently, the organization is renovating its building to expand service facilities.

5.2.7 Interview 7: Food Bank

The organization’s mission is to leverage the power of community to achieve lasting solutions to hunger and its root causes. While this mission generally guides the organization's daily operations, it was recently revised, and a new strategic plan that aligns more closely with the updated mission statement is currently in its final development stages. The respondent highlighted a heightened emphasis on addressing root causes in the new strategic plan.

Familiarity with the new strategic plan varies across the organization, however there was a large organizational effort to include input from various levels and departments during the plan's development. The prior strategic plan guided day-to-day decisions at the organization, and there is a plan in place for development and revision of the strategic plan. While there is a model for how inputs translate into outcomes, it is not formally regarded as a theory of change.

The organization's leadership team consists of a CEO who is governed by a board of directors, an executive team, and department directors. Leadership has strong financial judgment, acts in a timely manner, is equipped to guide the organization through change, and is generally effective in delivering results. The organization isn't overly dependent on the CEO; staff on the executive level manage a lot independently and are able to take over responsibilities when the CEO is unavailable. There is also a qualified staff member that could take over the executive role full-time if necessary.

Board members represent and advocate for the organization effectively, and the size and function of the board is well-aligned to the organization's needs. The organization has high-quality staff with a diverse range of skills and does a lot of work around staff development and retention, with opportunities for promotion and internal training and mentorship. Volunteer recruitment is very effective, and the volunteer base is appropriately skilled and committed to the organization.

Fundraising skills are strong, and the organization has appropriate and sustainable funding sources, as well as effective financial management. Values are shared across the organization, and staff have clearly defined roles and expectations. There are performance targets in place which are referred to as “key performance indicators” and are currently being redefined. These indicators are generally output-focused, and each have an annual goal and metrics to identify progress.

Internal communication could be improved, and an internal communications plan is currently being developed in order to have more consistent written communication, rather than information being passed down through word-of-mouth. External communication is strong, and media is used effectively to reach external audiences. Stakeholders are well-managed, and the organization participated in a year-long stakeholder engagement initiative to better understand stakeholder needs and respond to feedback.

There is a clear understanding of what the organization is trying to achieve through advocacy, and advocacy approaches are adjusted relatively quickly as external conditions change. While conversations and visits with elected officials can be counted, measurement of advocacy effectiveness is a goal that has not yet been accomplished. There are many people at the organization interested in participating in advocacy, but this capacity could be utilized more fully. Although the organization is very well connected to the people they serve and very effective in forming partnerships with other organizations, mobilizing people to take action and building community among constituents is an area for growth, and the organization is currently working on identifying ways to better capture advocacy engagement.

Decision-making processes are generally effective, and everybody involved in the implementation of a decision has input in the decision-making process, however efficiency in decision-making could be improved. The organization has the right people and resources to effectively run programs, and programs are planned effectively. There is a strong understanding of the organization’s external landscape, and program performance is assessed and used to adapt:

“We're constantly looking at sort of where we are versus where we expected to be and trying to tweak opportunities to make sure that what we're providing is a good fit for what the need is”.

The organization’s facilities were recently renovated and match the organization’s needs well, although more office space would be beneficial since the organization is already at capacity for staff space. Financial management technology and database and reporting systems are in place and effective.

5.3 Interview Analysis

Mission and Strategy

Mission and Strategy indicators focus on the strength of an organization’s mission and alignment of day-to-day activities to the organization’s broader goals, as well as the presence of strategic planning and plans for scaling and growth. Across all seven organizations, organizational activities are in alignment with the organizations’ missions, which is mandatory for mission-driven nonprofits. Four out of the seven organizations have a strategic plan in place, although at one of these four organizations, the plan does not guide day-to-day work and there are no processes in place for its revision. Respondents from smaller organizations do not seem to view a lack of strategic planning as a deficit, given the straightforward nature of their programs. It is also worthwhile to note that, while strategic planning is a capacity indicator in the McKinsey OCAT, Eisinger’s 2002 study did not find a correlation between strategic planning and organizational effectiveness among street-level food aid organizations (Eisinger 2002, 127). Three organizations have concrete plans for scaling and growth, while several others would like to expand operations but are unable to do so as a result of financial constraints, with one respondent stating that “expanding our fundraising and our financial accountability ... are prerequisites to doing that kind of expansion of capacity" (Organization 2). The desire for organizational expansion is an indication of unmet demand; however, there seems to be a lack of financial resources to adequately address this need.

Leadership, Staff, and Volunteers

Indicators in this area aim to gauge leadership structure and effectiveness, as well as the quality and sustainability of an organization's staff and volunteer workforce. Organizational leadership follows a hierarchical structure across all organizations. Financial management, timeliness, and overall effectiveness of organizational leadership are generally strong. Levels of board engagement and effectiveness vary across organizations; several boards are actively involved in day-to-day operations and essentially function as staff, while others work on a more strategic level. The strength of volunteer recruitment varies but cannot be adequately compared across respondents due to different levels of dependence on volunteer labor. Volunteers are generally adequate for organizations' needs; however, at one organization, paid staff occasionally have to fill volunteer roles.

Six out of seven organizations are extremely dependent on their director or CEO, and nearly all respondents express significant concern about succession planning. Among smaller organizations, a lack of succession planning appears to be a threat to organizational survival, particularly as long-standing leaders near retirement: "I would like to retire someday within the next couple of years. And so, we have people who could do different pieces of it, but ... we haven't found anybody who could do the whole thing" (Organization 3). Several respondents are founding members of their organizations, further magnifying staff dependence on their commitment, expertise, and extra-organizational relationships. At two of the organizations, the executive leader currently serves as a volunteer, which adds a potential financial burden to the process of hiring a replacement.

Funding

Funding indicators include fundraising skills, adequacy and sustainability of funding sources, models for revenue generation, and financial management, demonstrating an organization's degree of financial stability. There is significant variation in fundraising ability and sustainability of funding sources among the interviewed organizations. Two respondents expressed a desire to decrease their dependence on foundations, while two others rely entirely on individual contributions and are aiming to expand their funding base. Two organizations expressed confidence in the sustainability of their funding sources, one of which runs cash-based food service businesses within their agency, allowing them to maintain a double bottom line: "The finances are a lot stronger than maybe they would be at some other nonprofits... we have very robust processes in place" (Organization 4). The three smaller organizations appear to have significantly less diversified funding bases. One respondent expressed concern about securing foundation funding: "We don't have long-term relationships with a lot of the foundation community or government... so we're trying to get up to speed in those areas... I think with the market turndown and the endowments and these foundations that have gone negative, I think the foundations by and large are more conservative" (Organization 6). Another organization relies entirely on member dues, preventing the ability to expand programs without an increase in membership.

Values

Indicators in this area include alignment of values across the organization and clarity of job roles, demonstrating the level of mutual understanding among an organization's staff. All organizations express shared values among staff. While several respondents noted occasional disagreements about organizational priorities, staff commitment to their organization's mission is consistently strong. Four of the seven respondents described a lack of clarity in job roles and overlap in responsibilities. Two of these respondents did not view flexibility in job roles as a detriment due to unpredictability in day-to-day organizational activities, while the remaining two noted clarity in job roles as an area for improvement. One respondent stated that staff "want more clarity in their jobs and more clarity on expectations" (Organization 4), and the organization is currently working on revising and reviewing job descriptions in order to provide more structure for employees.

Learning and Innovation

Learning and Innovation indicators include the presence of performance targets, progress measurement and data analysis, and understanding of the external landscape, demonstrating an organization's level of adaptability and management sophistication. There is significant variation in the presence of performance targets and focus on outcome measurement among the interviewed organizations. Three of the organizations are data-driven and use performance measurement to adapt, and one has a data scientist on staff and advanced technology to measure performance: “We have metrics. Again, we've got an app, which is fantastic because we get data like real time ... I could look and see what our growth is. I can chart it out with a press of a button” (Organization 1). While inputs are easier to quantify, “output is harder to measure and takes a lot of work to identify. But that's ultimately where we really want to be analyzing how we're doing” (Organization 1). Others track performance, but do not set specific targets and seem to function at near maximum capacity: “If people say they need food, we do what we can to meet that requirement, but we don't set a target ahead of time” (Organization 3). There is significant variation in organizations’ understanding of their external landscape; larger organizations seem to be much stronger in this area.

Marketing and Communication

Marketing and Communication indicators include internal and external communication, use of media to reach external audiences, and stakeholder management. Internal communication is generally adequate among the interviewed organizations, although two respondents recognize a need for more streamlined communication between management and staff. External communication is strong among the four larger organizations, and weak among the three smaller organizations. While two of the organizations with weaker external communication noted this as an area for improvement, one respondent expressed concern about “reaching out too much” (Organization 5) and not being able to accommodate the response. The three smaller organizations are very limited in their use of media to reach external audiences.

Advocacy

Advocacy indicators include an understanding of advocacy goals, advocacy progress measurement, adaptability of advocacy approaches, formation of partnerships with other organizations, and community mobilization, demonstrating an organization's ability to further its mission beyond direct programming. Only two of the seven organizations are consistently involved in advocating related to food assistance policy. At both of these organizations, there is a clear understanding of advocacy goals and success in forming partnerships with other organizations, however both respondents express the difficulty of effectively quantifying the progress of advocacy work. Both respondents also note that community mobilization could be improved, and one respondent indicates that this has been made more difficult after the start of the pandemic: "Until recently we've had far fewer in-person opportunities for people to engage in advocacy in any particular way...So all of the barriers to really getting to know people and having more opportunities for intimate conversation with people about what we do and about what they're interested in have suffered" (Organization 2). Two other respondents noted that they have occasionally engaged in advocacy work or signed on to existing advocacy initiatives, but advocacy is not an organizational priority.

Managing Processes

Indicators in this area include the adequacy of staff and resources, as well as effective program execution, including timelines and budgeting. Six out of seven respondents expressed that they have the appropriate people and resources to run programs effectively. One respondent articulated a need to “enhance the staffing, the number of people, and also the skill sets of the people we have running those programs” (Organization 6). Most organizations do not have formal processes in place for decision-making, but this does not seem to be a necessary capacity area among organizations with small numbers of staff. Succession planning, again, is a frequent area of concern: “I think it's a vulnerability that we have, or a weakness that we have, that we haven't done succession planning” (Organization 3). Programs are generally effectively planned in terms of timelines and budgets.

Infrastructure and Technology

Indicators in this area cover the presence of basic infrastructural and technological resources. Among the seven respondents, physical facilities are generally adequate for the organizations’ needs, and all organizations have financial management software and database and reporting systems in place. Although several respondents expressed that their physical facilities are not an ideal match for their organization, this does not seem to be a significant detriment to organizational activities.

5.4 Overview of Survey Findings

The second portion of my research consists of a capacity survey of 56 food pantries in the Greater Pittsburgh region and covers various capacity indicators across eight areas: mission; strategy; funding; facility and equipment; resources and food supply; staff and volunteers; communication and advocacy; and challenges and needs. Recognizing that the primary goal of food pantries is resource distribution and that they are usually small-scale organizations, the survey questions were not as heavily focused on high-level organizational management indicators as the interview questions were. Instead, they primarily aimed to assess the adequacy and sustainability of their funding and resources, gauge the sufficiency of their staff and volunteer support, evaluate their ability to effectively meet the demand of the people they serve, and identify what they perceive to be their primary needs and challenges.

Data collected from the pantry capacity survey yielded several valuable findings. Most surveyed organizations had missions either fully or somewhat centered around food insecurity, and about a third led food assistance programs beyond traditional food pantries, indicating a broader range of services aimed at addressing hunger in the Greater Pittsburgh community. Additionally, 80.77% of respondents reported having a pantry board or leadership group in place, suggesting some level of organizational structure. Responses to questions regarding strategic planning and performance targets indicate significant room for improvement. 53.85% of the surveyed organizations had a formal strategic plan in place, and only 30.77% reported setting specific performance targets. A lack of performance targets and outcome measurement could either indicate low managerial strength, or simply reflect that these pantries are operating at full capacity and expending all available resources, making it futile to set specific output-based goals.

Inadequate and unsustainable funding was a recurring theme in the survey findings. Primary sources of funding among survey respondents included individual donations (34.69%), support from the Food Bank (20.41%), and government grants (18.37%), as well as foundation grants and various local organizations. Less than a third of surveyed organizations reported having a sustainable funding base, and only 39.58% of respondents had adequate funding to support their services, highlighting the instability that charitable food organizations face in securing consistent and sufficient financial support. A significant number of organizations also faced challenges related to inadequate physical facilities. Some reported issues with space limitations, while others lacked essential equipment like freezers and refrigerators. Transportation and accessibility for food delivery also emerged as concerns. These facility-related challenges are concerning, as they reflect a basic lack of infrastructural capacity and hinder the ability of these organizations to store and distribute food effectively.

A lack of volunteers and paid staff was a significant challenge for many surveyed organizations. Most organizations had a somewhat sizable volunteer base, with a median of 15 volunteers per pantry, however over 50% expressed a need for additional volunteers. Paid staff, on the other hand, were extremely limited, with a median of just one paid employee per organization. 40.82% of organizations indicated a need for more paid staff, however given the precarious funding, hiring paid employees is likely unfeasible, leaving pantries to rely almost exclusively on volunteer labor. Additionally, less than half of the organizations had identified individuals trained to take over management roles if needed, suggesting potential instability in leadership.

Client outreach and meeting client needs also posed critical challenges to survey respondents. Organizations faced difficulties in making their services known to eligible clients and coping with increased demand for assistance. Meeting specific client needs, such as language barriers and dietary restrictions, proved challenging due to limited resources. This indicates a fragmented food assistance landscape, with some organizations struggling to adapt to increased demand while others grapple with outreach and communication barriers.

Approximately a third of respondents did not engage in any partnerships or maintain communication with other food assistance programs. This again shows the fragmentation of Pittsburgh's charitable food system, with many pantries functioning in isolation.

Advocacy and policy awareness were areas where organizations saw potential for improvement. Only 45.83% of organizations reported being up to date on local and federal policies impacting hunger, and merely 22.92% were actively engaged in advocacy efforts. Many organizations expressed interest in advocacy but cited barriers like time, resources, and the need for education and guidance. These findings demonstrate a disconnect between the operations of charitable food organizations and the broader policy landscape that largely dictates the food security of the people they serve.

5.5 Survey Findings

The number of households served among survey respondents varied widely, ranging from 6 to 1800 households each month, with a median of 120 households served monthly.
Over 85% of surveyed organizations had missions either fully or somewhat centered around food insecurity, and 33.33% led food assistance programs other than food pantries. 80.77% of respondents reported having a pantry board or leadership group in place. 53.85% of surveyed organizations had a strategic plan in place, and an additional 32.69% implemented some degree of strategic planning. Only 30.77% responded that they set performance targets, with an additional 40.38% responding that they "somewhat" do so. 64% of respondents reported an ability to expand operations, and 75% had a desire to distribute more resources given adequate funding and facilities.

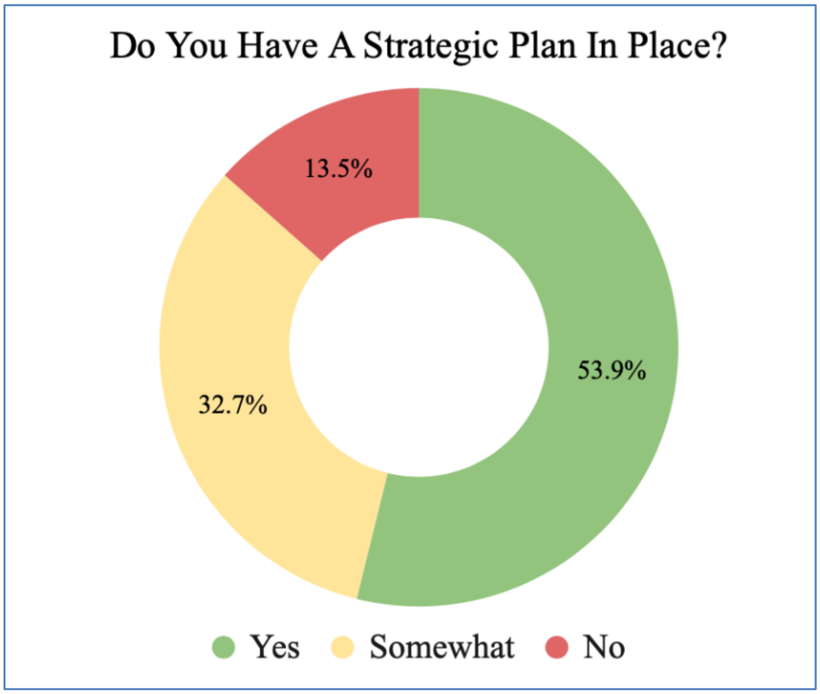

Figure 2: Presence of a Strategic Plan

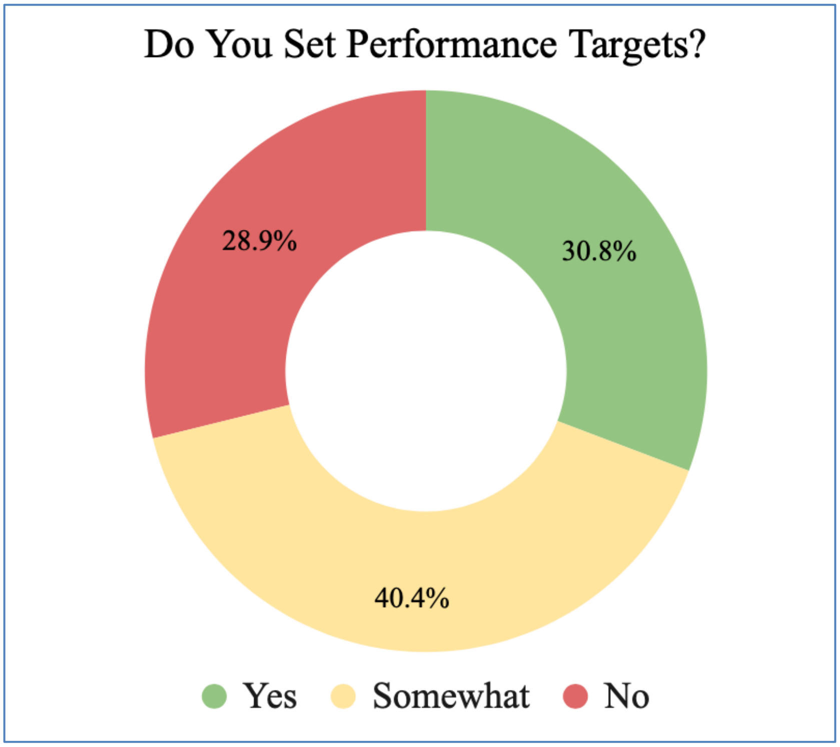

Figure 3: Use of Performance Targets

The most common primary sources of funding among surveyed organizations included individual donations (34.69%), support from the Food Bank (20.41%), and government grants (18.37%). Several respondents reported foundation grants as their primary source of funding. Additional sources mentioned included Highmark Walk, Kingdom Builders Initiative, federal Ryan White funding, and donations from local organizations. Four respondents received equal support from grants, donations, and the Food Bank. The majority of respondents (85.71%) received most of their food donations through the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank. Two organizations received equal donations from the Food Bank and individuals, and three respondents stated that they primarily purchase their own food for distribution.

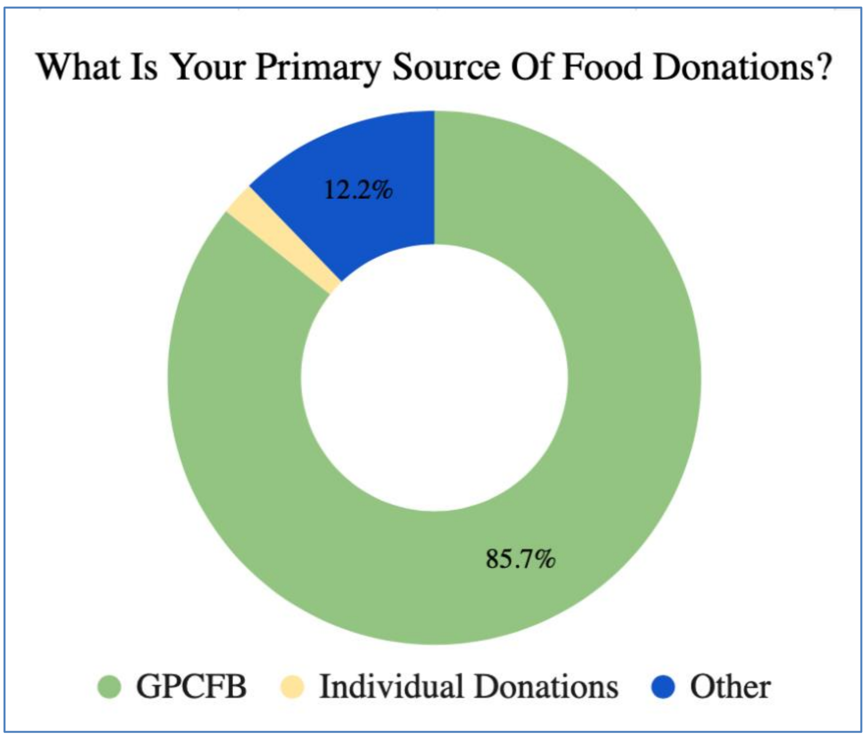

Figure 4: Primary Food Donation Sources

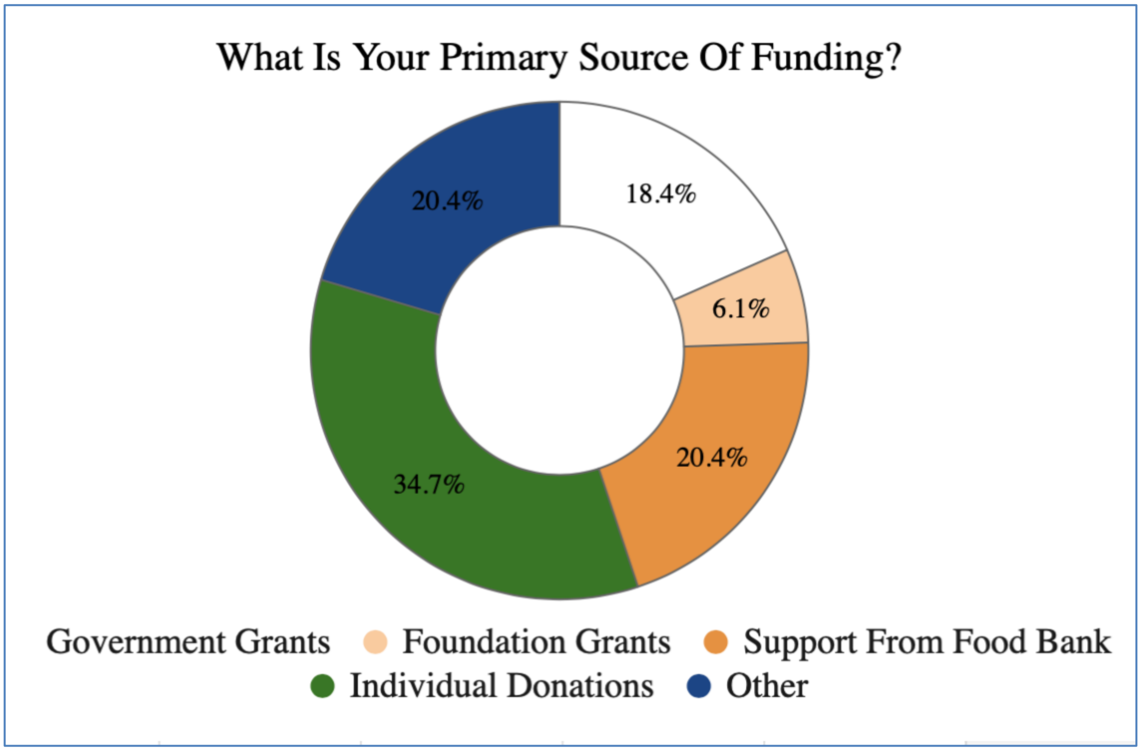

Figure 5: Primary Funding Sources

Only 30.61% of respondents reported having a sustainable funding base. 57.14% reported that their funding base was somewhat sustainable, and 12.24% reported that it was not sustainable. 39.58% of organizations have adequate funding to support their services; 45.83% have somewhat adequate funding, and 14.58% have inadequate funding. Primary methods for fundraising varied, including applying for government and foundation grants, online donations, events, and capital campaigns. 20.41% of respondents expressed a need for support around financial operations, and an additional 34.69% responded that support may be needed.

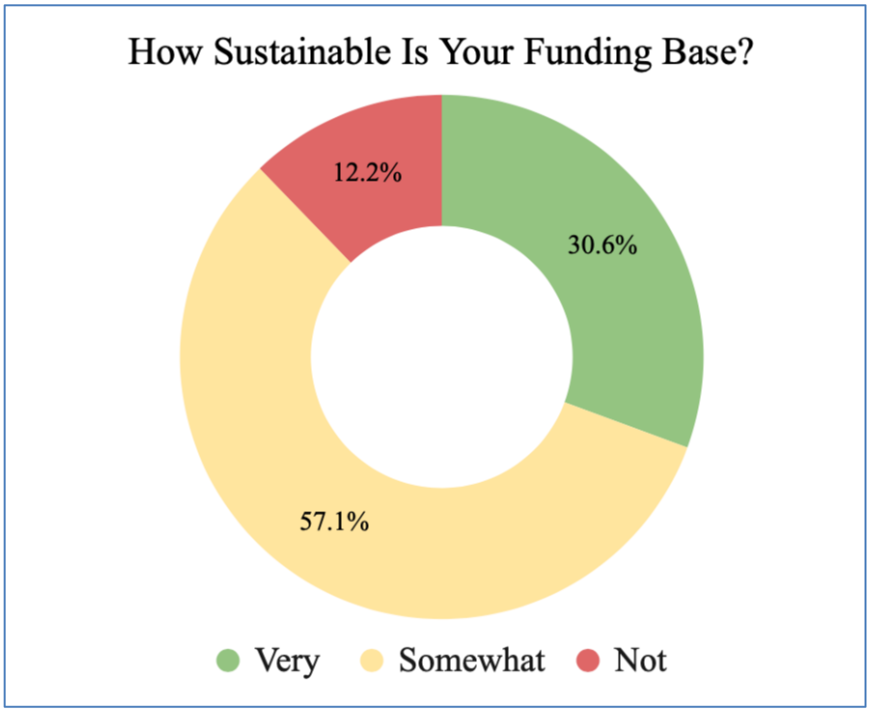

Figure 6: Sustainability of Funding

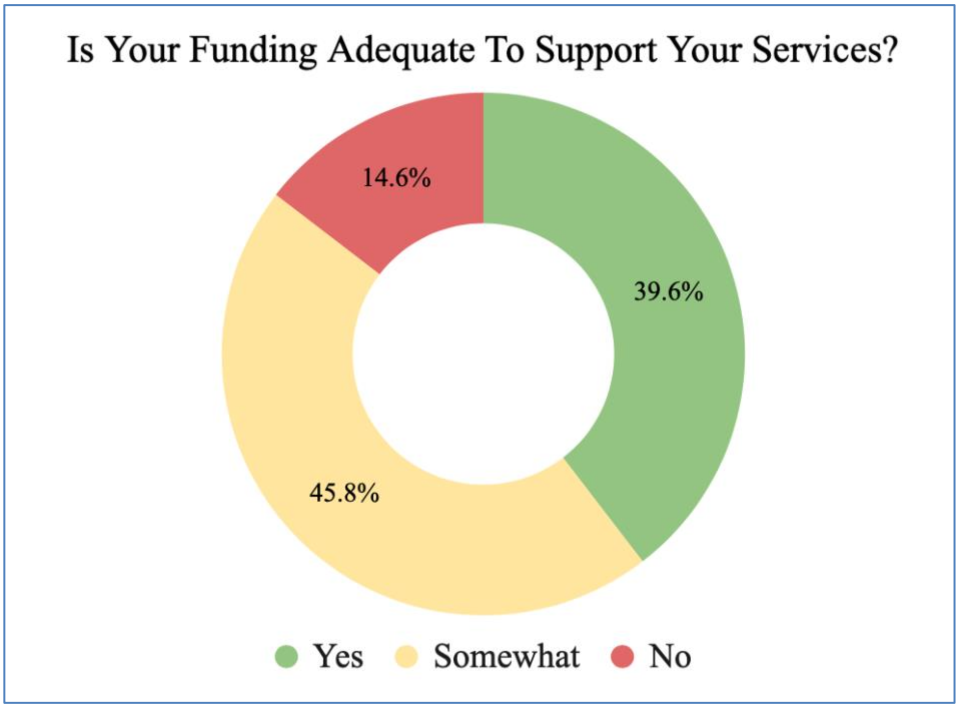

Figure 7: Adequacy of Funding

51.02% of surveyed organizations had adequate physical facilities to support their programming; 38.78% had somewhat adequate facilities, and 10.2% had physical facilities inadequate in space and/or function. 55.1% had adequate storage space, and 73.47% had adequate financial management technology.

55.1% of respondents reported that the amount of food they distribute is enough for the number of people they serve; 32.65% said it was “somewhat” adequate, and 12.24% reported that they did not have enough food for distribution. 14.29% of respondents have had to turn away clients due to limited food availability, and 34.69% have run out of food. 42.86% reported having had an excess supply of food, and 26.53% have had to throw out food. 36.73% of respondents were satisfied with the amount of fresh produce they distribute; 32.65% were somewhat satisfied, and 30.61% expressed a desire to distribute a higher proportion of fresh food. 51.02% of surveyed organizations reported that they had sufficient donations to cover food costs, however 73.47% have had to pay for additional food.

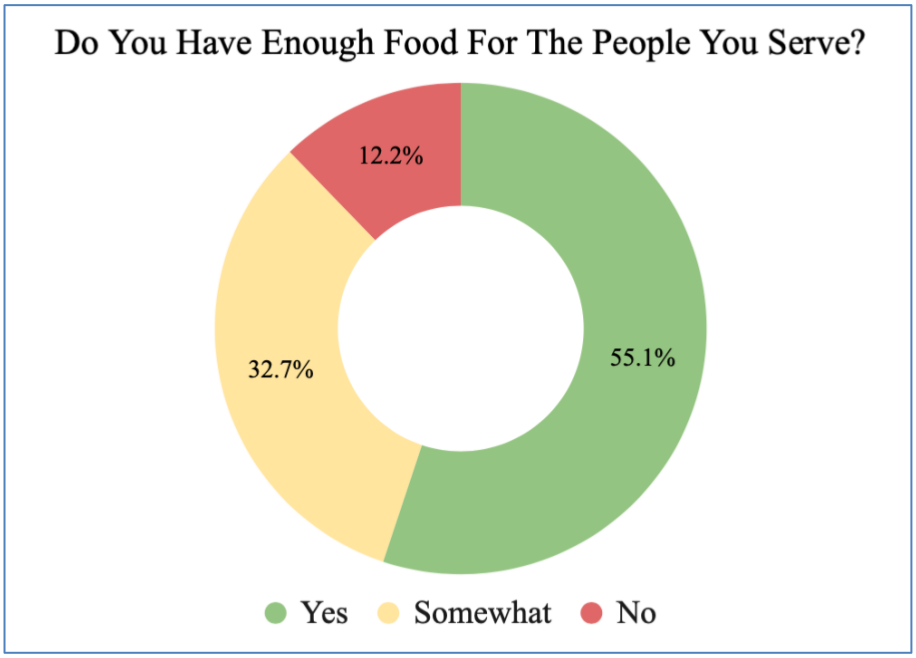

Figure 8: Sufficiency of Food Supply

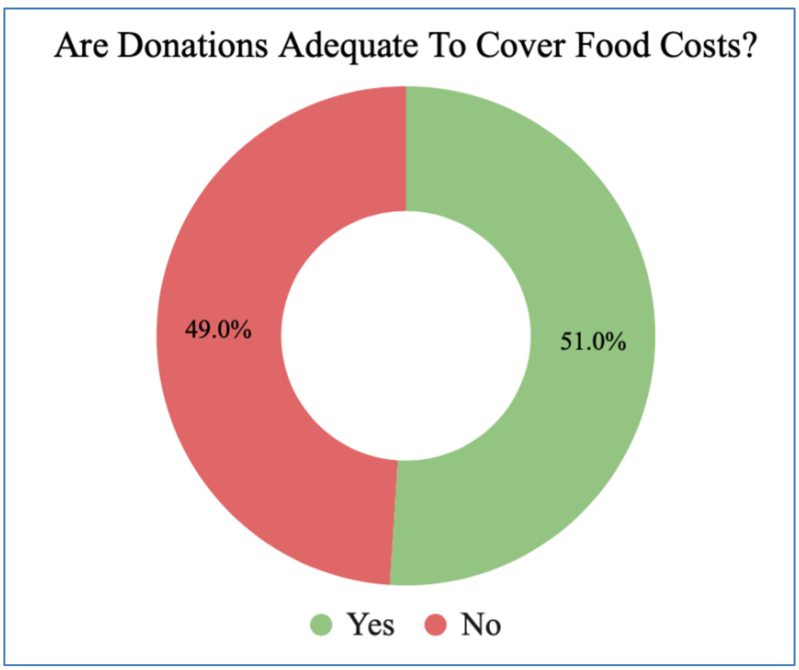

Figure 9: Sufficiency of Donations to Cover Food Costs

The number of volunteers among surveyed organizations ranged from 0 to 85, with a median of 15. 53.06% of respondents expressed a need for additional volunteers. 40.82% reported effectiveness in volunteer recruitment, and an additional 48.98 reported being "somewhat" effective in doing so. The majority of respondents (79.59%) reported that their volunteers have appropriate skills and commitment to the organization. While the number of paid employees among surveyed organizations ranged from 0 to 12, the median was only 1 paid employee, and 21 organizations had no paid employees. 40.82% of respondents reported needing additional paid employees. 44.9% of organizations had somebody trained to take over the management role if needed; 38.78% had somebody somewhat trained to do so, and 16.32% had no succession plan in place.

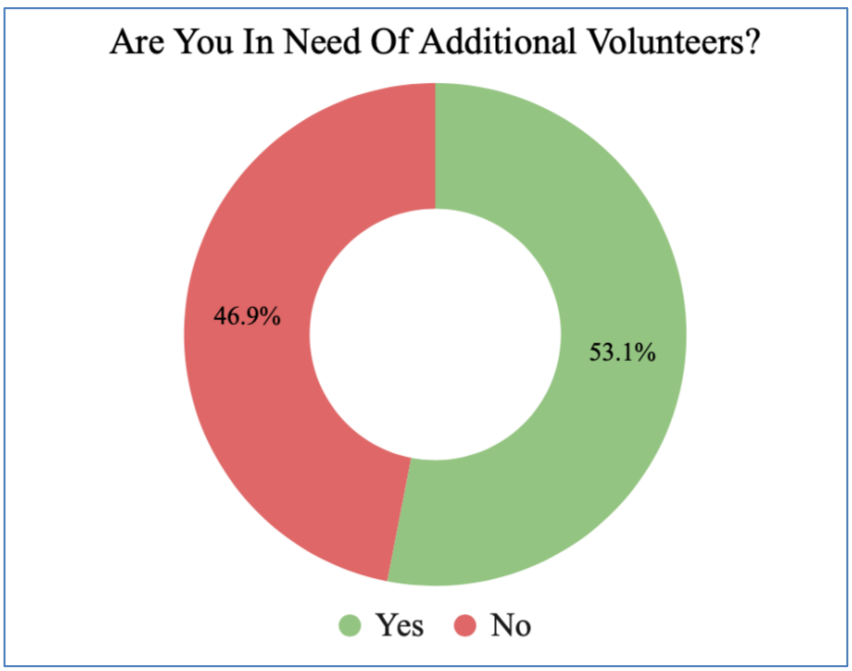

Figure 10: Need for Additional Volunteers

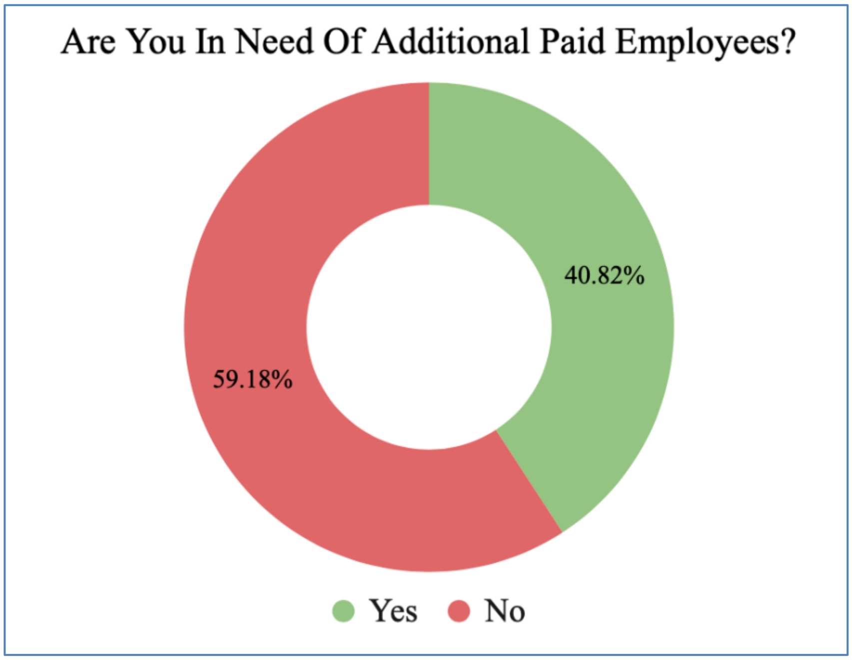

Figure 11: Need for Additional Paid Employees

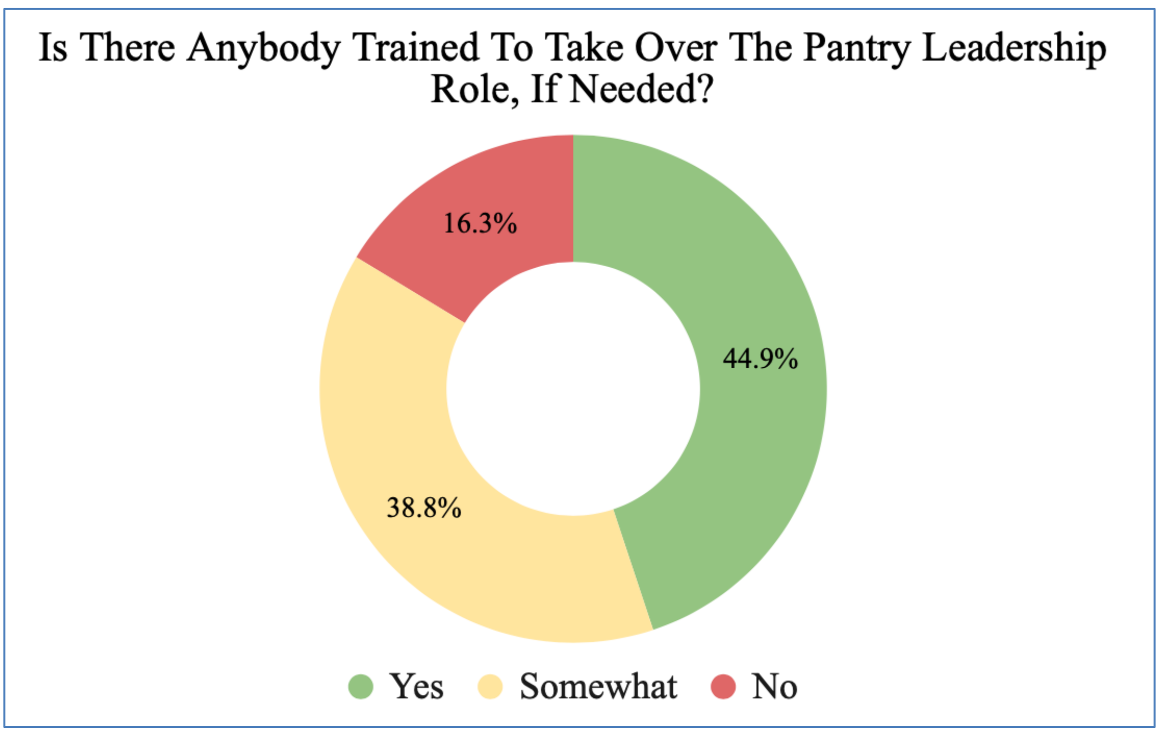

Figure 12: Succession Planning

67.85% of respondents were at least somewhat engaged in partnerships with other pantries or food assistance programs, and 66.67% maintained some level of communication with other food aid organizations. 89.58% of respondents reported having a consistent client registration process, and 77.09% implemented strategies for receiving client feedback to some degree.

45.83% of respondents were up to date on local and federal policies impacting hunger, and 43.75% were somewhat informed on hunger policy. 22.92% were actively engaged in advocacy efforts, and 61.7% expressed some level of interest in advocacy participation. When asked what support may be needed in order to participate in advocacy work, recurring responses included time, additional staff and volunteers, logistic support, and education and general guidance. Two respondents also expressed a need for translators and interpreters.

The final two questions of the survey were open-ended and addressed organizations' greatest challenges and needs. The challenge most prominently expressed by respondents was a lack of funding and lack of food and resources (12 responses). Other challenges included responding to client needs, such as matching clients to pantry schedules, providing transportation, and serving non-English speakers (7), insufficient client outreach and eligibility (5), inadequate facilities and storage (5), a lack of volunteers and a need for volunteer training (4), and a lack of fresh produce and food variety (3). Similar themes were expressed by respondents in regard to organizations' greatest needs. 13 respondents reported a need for funding, 4 expressed a need for additional food, 4 indicated a need for additional staff and volunteers, 8 reported needs related to storage, facilities, and transportation, and 7 expressed needs related to client outreach and responding to client needs, such as providing appropriate food for immunocompromised clients, connecting clients to other social service programs, bettering communication with clients, and expanding to meet growing demand.

5.6 Survey Analysis

Funding and Resources

A lack of adequate funding and resources was the most apparent issue among surveyed organizations. The majority of organizations did not report having a sustainable funding base, and over half of respondents did not have adequate funding to support their services. Approximately half of respondents reported that the donations they received were sufficient to cover food costs, however nearly three quarters of respondents have had to pay for additional food, meaning that some food pantries preemptively expect to have to purchase supplemental resources. Grants were a significant source of funding for many respondents but did not appear to always be a sustainable funding source. One respondent reported "waiting on government grants" to be their organization's greatest challenge, while another struggled with finding "funding to provide when grant money runs out'.

A number of respondents also noted struggling with an inadequate food supply (which implies insufficient funding), as well as lacking variety in the foods they are able to procure. Several respondents reported a lack of fresh produce as their organization's primary challenge, and several others indicated that limited funding and support from the Food Bank prevents them from having a varied and nutritionally balanced food supply. Two organizations also noted inconsistency in food availability as their greatest challenge, with one respondent describing "cycles of feast or famine and extremes instead of a steady source".

Inadequate physical facilities were also a prominent issue among surveyed organizations. Several organizations noted a lack of space as their greatest challenge, and two respondents reported lacking a functioning freezer and refrigerator. Other issues included a lack of transportation and the inability to move fresh product, as well as a lack of parking and accessibility for food delivery.

Management, Staff, and Volunteers

Staff and volunteer shortages were another area of concern for many surveyed organizations. Most surveyed organizations were entirely volunteer-based, and over 40% were in need of paid staff. Over half of respondents reported a need for additional volunteers. Several organizations' primary challenges were related to their volunteer base, including insufficient volunteer availability, a lack of volunteers to schedule clients, and "dealing with aging volunteers". While succession planning was not mentioned as a top area of concern by any respondents, less than half of surveyed organizations had somebody trained to take over the management role if needed, indicating significant potential for organizational instability. Several respondents also voiced concerns related to internal organization, including lacking a "consistent set of rules" and needing "better management support". It is important to emphasize that respondents only reported their greatest needs and challenges, however this does not mean that they do not struggle in areas that they do not explicitly mention. While the majority of respondents had some sort of pantry board or leadership group in place, only 53% had an official strategic plan in place, and only 30.7% reported setting specific performance targets, pointing to an overall lack of formality in organizational management. Communication and partnership with other pantries were also significantly lacking. Only approximately a third of respondents reported that they consistently partner and engage with other food assistance programs, and a third reported not communicating with other programs whatsoever, indicating that many of the surveyed food pantries function in relative isolation, rather than as part of an integrated assistance network.

Client Outreach and Meeting Client Need

Many survey respondents reported facing difficulties with client outreach, as well as struggling to meet increased demand for food assistance. Several organizations' primary challenge was making the availability of their services known to eligible clients and "getting people truly in need to come sign up", while several others noted an increase in client need as their main difficulty. This illustrates the fragmented nature of the food assistance landscape, in which some food pantries do not have the capacity to adapt to an increased need for services while others struggle with "letting people in the community know that (they) exist to serve them".

Survey respondents expressed challenges not only with meeting demand, but effectively communicating with clients and meeting specific client needs, such as coordinating scheduling and serving non-English speaking clients, as well as managing the logistics of referring clients to other assistance programs. This is not surprising due to the extremely small scale of many food pantries and their reliance on nearly exclusively volunteer labor. Insufficient time, labor, and knowledge are likely all contributing factors to pantries' struggles to meet client needs. Particularly when service populations are small, it may be both financially and logistically unfeasible to adequately accommodate clients with issues such as language barriers or specific nutritional requirements. Several respondents also expressed a need for increased cooking education for clients; once again, despite the importance of providing such opportunities to pantry recipients, it may be unfeasible to do so given pantries' limited numbers of staff and volunteers, and insufficient physical and financial resources.

6.0 Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations

6.3 Conclusions

A comprehensive examination of organizational capacity within the charitable food aid sector is essential to ensure the efficient operation of these organizations and to inform the development of more adaptable federal food assistance policies. However, limited prior research has focused on the capacity of ground-level food assistance, resulting in a knowledge gap concerning the stability of these organizations and the obstacles they encounter in meeting the needs of their clientele.

My research focused on determining trends in organizational capacity in a localized context, conducting interviews with seven food assistance nonprofits and surveying 56 food pantries across the Greater Pittsburgh region. Both the interview and capacity survey results reveal similar patterns in capacity strengths and deficits. Organizations generally align their activities with their mission, demonstrating a commitment to their core objectives. While some organizations have formal strategic plans, others, especially smaller organizations and food pantries, lack strategic planning and performance measurement. In certain cases, this absence may signify a deficiency in organizational management, while in others, the straightforward nature and small scale of the operations might not warrant the need for strategic planning. Many of the interviewed and surveyed organizations express a desire to expand their operations to meet unmet demand, but they are often hindered by budgetary constraints resulting from insufficient funding.

Peter Eisinger's study of capacity attributes among food assistance organizations in Detroit found that their effectiveness is highly reliant on the presence of paid staff, a factor that was largely absent in the research sample (Eisinger 2002, 128). This suggests a fundamental instability in the structure of food aid organizations. My findings corroborate this, as most pantries I surveyed have no paid staff and rely entirely on volunteers. Succession planning is also notably lacking, particularly among smaller organizations. Dependence on a single leader poses a significant threat to organizational sustainability, and several interview respondents expressed concerns about succession planning. Dependence on a single leader poses a significant threat to organizational sustainability, and several interview respondents noted succession planning as an area of concern. Although most interview and survey respondents reported that their volunteers possess appropriate skills and a strong commitment to the organization, volunteer labor, by nature, is less predictable and dependable than paid work.

Funding sources and sustainability vary widely among organizations, with most organizations struggling to secure sufficient and sustainable funding bases. Smaller organizations and food pantries particularly struggle to secure adequate funding to support their services, and face challenges in diversifying their revenue streams. Insufficient funding naturally leads to an inability to fully meet client needs with a several surveyed pantries unable to distribute as much fresh food as they would like and struggling to accommodate individual dietary needs among the people they serve. These findings align with those of Bazerghi's 2016 study, which found that food assistance organizations do not receive sufficient donations to meet increasing client demand effectively, resulting in the inability to provide nutritionally adequate and culturally appropriate foods (Bazerghi et al. 2016, 738).

Prior studies on organizational capacity in the charitable food assistance sector have underscored the significance of extra-organizational communication and engagement. Rachel Fyall and Jamie Levine Daniel's study of 95 Midwestern food pantries found that prioritizing public sector engagement was associated with serving 23% more individuals and distributing 32% more pounds of food (Fyall and Levine Daniel 2018, 25). Eisinger's study revealed that few food assistance organizations engage with external institutions, indicating a general isolation within their communities (Eisinger 2002, 115). Similarly, my findings reflect a lack of communication between food assistance organizations and difficulties in community outreach, potentially signifying inefficiency and fragmentation within Pittsburgh's food aid network. While internal communication is generally satisfactory, many smaller nonprofit organizations and food pantries face challenges in connecting with the people they serve and with other food assistance organizations. Only a few organizations are consistently involved in advocacy efforts, with difficulties quantifying progress and mobilizing the community.

Due to the study's small sample, these findings cannot be generalized to all food assistance organizations and remain context specific. However, the consistency of these capacity weaknesses among the majority of the seven organizations interviewed indicates that they may be valuable capacity indicators to assess among food assistance organizations more broadly.

6.4 Study Limitations

There were several limitations inherent in the design of this study, primarily stemming from the small target population and the consequent inability to employ a randomized sampling strategy. As the analysis utilized data from all organizations that agreed to participate in surveys and interviews, there was a potential for volunteer bias to influence the study's findings. The modest size of the organization sample used for interviews is also a limitation, as the results can only be examined descriptively and lack the statistical robustness of larger samples.

Nevertheless, the small sample size did offer advantages, allowing the facilitation of in-depth conversations with key figures in Pittsburgh's food aid sector and enabling individualized analysis, which would have been unmanageable with a significantly larger sample. These interviews can be viewed as exploratory case studies, contributing to a deeper comprehension of Pittsburgh's food aid network.

Another arguable limitation lies in the study's lack of generalizability due to its descriptive nature. Since the research exclusively concentrates on the capacity of food aid organizations within the Greater Pittsburgh area, any conclusions regarding organizational capacity cannot be extrapolated beyond the Pittsburgh region. Despite this, the results from the pantry capacity survey can illuminate existing resource and capacity challenges on a local scale, while also providing directly applicable insights to the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, aiding them in better addressing the needs of Pittsburgh's food pantries and their respective client bases. A similar research methodology could also be applied to other geographic contexts to allow for comparative analysis.

Additional complications that arose during the research process were not attributable to the study's design and were beyond my control. These included a scarcity of publicly available financial records for analysis within my study sample, as well as inconsistency from the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank regarding survey distribution. While I initially intended to analyze organizations’ IRS 990 forms to understand their revenue streams and financial stability, most of the study’s sample did not have any publicly available financial records, due to their small size and/or faith-based status. Food pantries that are ministries or use the tax identification number of a place of worship do not need to file the 990 form or register and report to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, despite the fact that their programs are not religious in nature.

This creates a gap in public knowledge around the revenues and expenses of charitable food assistance programs and makes it difficult to objectively assess their financial stability.

I also encountered substantial difficulties in communicating with the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank throughout the research process. The pantry capacity survey was developed collaboratively with a GPCFB department head, and I had received confirmation that the survey would be sent through the Food Bank directly to partner organizations within Allegheny County. Despite this, the survey was only distributed once as part of the Food Bank's monthly newsletter, and the Food Bank was unable to provide me with a list of partners, requiring me to manually compile a list of food pantries in the Greater Pittsburgh region and contact each organization individually.

6.5 Recommendations

Specific policy recommendations that could substantially increase food security and lessen the strain placed on charitable assistance organizations include raising SNAP benefits to pandemic (EA) levels, limiting further increases in work requirements and lifting the arbitrary three-month time limit for non-working SNAP recipients, matching SNAP eligibility requirements to social security benefit adjustments, and providing additional mandatory funding for the TEFAP program in response to sustained high demand for charitable food assistance.

EA benefits helped keep millions of people out of poverty throughout the pandemic, significantly reducing food insufficiency among SNAP participants (Schanzenbach 2023, 10). Reverting to lower benefit levels has left many vulnerable households struggling to secure adequate food, particularly in the face of rising food prices, and put increased pressure on food banks and their member agencies to meet elevated demand. Raising SNAP benefits back to EA levels would reduce the demand on these organizations, allowing them to focus on emergency cases and maintain their effectiveness.

Policymakers should also prioritize blocking further expansions of SNAP working requirements in the 2023 Farm Bill, which are proven to be ineffective in raising employment levels and detrimental to food security, as well as lifting the three-month time limit on SNAP benefits for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs), which strips assistance from already-struggling households and makes it even more challenging for them to find stable employment. It is also crucial that SNAP eligibility requirements reflect adjustments to Social Security benefit levels. Social Security benefits are regularly adjusted to keep pace with inflation and cost-of-living increases, but are not mirrored by SNAP eligibility requirements, leading some Social Security recipients to lose their SNAP assistance. Aligning SNAP eligibility criteria with Social Security adjustments would ensure that low-income individuals remain eligible for the program and help protect them from the erosive effects of inflation on their purchasing power. Additional mandatory funding in the 2023 Farm Bill should also be granted to the TEFAP program, which is a critical source of support for charitable food assistance organizations. Ensuring that there is mandatory, responsive funding for TEFAP during periods of sustained high demand is necessary in order for street-level food aid organizations to meet the needs of the people they serve.

Drawing from the findings of the interviews and surveys conducted in this study, my primary recommendations for food assistance organizations are to prioritize succession planning and increase extra-organizational communication and partnership. Succession planning is a necessary risk management strategy for nonprofits: without a concrete plan for leadership transition, the sustainability of the organization is highly precarious. Current executives among Pittsburgh's food assistance organizations must prioritize succession planning both for the case of emergency and planned departure and implement ongoing staff and leadership development processes to ensure that the organization isn't overly dependent on the knowledge and skills of a singular leader. A failure to do so could severely threaten the food security of the households that consistently rely on charitable food assistance for support; given the heightened rate of individuals relying on street-level food aid, it is integral to ensure that organizations make a maximal effort to strengthen their stability and focus on their adaptive capacity. Communication and partnership with other food assistance and social support organizations should also be more highly prioritized. By collaborating with other mission-driven food aid organizations in the region, food pantries can create the potential for increased visibility and client outreach and gain a more comprehensive understanding of their community's needs, thereby increasing the efficiency of their operations.

Other capacity deficits identified through my research are not in the control of food assistance organizations themselves, including insufficient funding, inadequate staffing, inadequate facilities, and a lack of fresh and nutritionally varied foods for distribution. These capacity indicators could be strengthened by reducing the burden placed on charitable food organizations created by insufficient federal food assistance to those in need. While it may be unrealistic to propose a food assistance framework that is solely government-provided, strengthening benefits would substantially lower the demand for charitable food aid and result in these organizations having more adequate funding and resources to meet the needs of the people they serve. Food banks and pantries could return to serving their initially intended purpose: providing emergency assistance for individuals in crisis and bridging any remaining gaps in federal assistance provision (for instance, aiding food-insecure households whose incomes fall outside SNAP eligibility requirements).

When considering potential improvements to federal food assistance policies and the capacity of charitable food aid organizations, it is crucial to examine the existing relationship between these two sectors and explore avenues for strengthening communication and collaboration between government and charitable food assistance. Charitable food assistance organizations are both responders to insufficiency in federal food assistance provision and recipients of federal support through programs such as TEFAP, yet many of the organizations within this study's sample appear to operate in relative isolation with a limited understanding of the broader food policy landscape. For ground-level food aid organizations to operate efficiently, it is necessary that federal agencies responsible for benefit and commodity programs remain informed about and responsive to the needs of these organizations. Likewise, these organizations could greatly benefit from a more comprehensive knowledge of the programs and policies affecting their funding and resource procurement. This understanding would enable them to more effectively advocate for federal food aid policies that benefit them and the people they serve.

Considering that these organizations are often very small in scale and often do not have the time or human resources to prioritize advocacy, I argue that the responsibility for enhancing collaboration between federal and charitable food assistance should largely fall on the government sector. This could potentially be accomplished through an increased localized presence of the USDA, with agency representatives directly initiating and maintaining communication with ground-level organizations to ensure that they can effectively address the needs of their communities. This approach would create opportunities for providing emergency support to organizations facing significant challenges in meeting demand. Additionally, it would serve to better inform policymakers about the state of charitable food assistance as a whole, thereby guiding the development of more robust and responsive federal food assistance policies.

Collectively, these organizational and policy recommendations are essential to ease the strain on charitable food organizations and improve food security, both on a local and national scale. Through a combined effort to address organizational capacity issues and advocate for more comprehensive and equitable federal food assistance policies, as well as foster greater communication and collaboration between the federal and charitable food aid sectors, we can work towards a more effective and resilient food assistance network.

6.6 Suggestions for Future Research

This study's findings demonstrate significant capacity deficits in areas of succession planning, funding, and extra organizational communication among Pittsburgh's nonprofit food assistance organizations, underscoring the vulnerability of the city's charitable food aid sector. Although these conclusions cannot be extrapolated beyond the Pittsburgh context, the overarching themes identified in both the interview and survey portions of my research align closely with the existing literature on organizational capacity in the charitable food assistance sector. I hypothesize that applying the same methodology in other urban contexts would produce similar results, especially given the consistent nationwide structure of the food bank and pantry network. Conducting similar studies in other regions would therefore be very valuable, aiding in the understanding of location-specific needs of charitable food organizations across various contexts, and likely broadening the evidence base indicating that the charitable sector does not have the capacity to handle its growing role in the food assistance network.

While it is evident that additional federal funding is necessary for both SNAP and TEFAP, research must be conducted to accurately determine the cost of ensuring that federal benefits are sufficient to meet people's food needs and that charitable food aid organizations are able to effectively meet the demand for their services. Although charitable food assistance organizations should not be primarily responsible for alleviating food insecurity, they can still play a valuable role in supplementing federal food assistance, distributing surplus federal commodities, and serving individuals that fall outside of benefit eligibility guidelines. Thorough research that evaluates the economic efficiency of increasing federal food aid is crucial to determine the most optimal role that charitable organizations should play in the food assistance system.

6.7 Study Implications: Strengthening the Food Assistance System

The charitable food assistance sector was originally intended to provide emergency support to people facing hunger. However, as the federal and private systems of food assistance have become increasingly intertwined, more low-income households depend on both of these sectors for consistent support, leading to an overreliance on food pantries which face funding and resource scarcity and struggle to meet increased demand. While private charitable food providers serve an extremely vital role in mitigating food insecurity, particularly in the face of decreased federal food benefits, these organizations are not adequately equipped to handle their growing role in the food assistance network and should not be expected to take principal responsibility in assisting the food-insecure population. Rather, these providers should serve as a supplement to a robust federal nutrition safety net by providing emergency assistance to households facing acute hardships, facilitating the distribution of surplus commodities, and serving as a gateway to existing benefit programs.

Many of the challenges that charitable food providers face are a product of insufficient funding and resources and cannot be resolved on the organizational level. Strengthening federal benefits would reduce the burden placed on charitable food assistance organizations and mitigate resource scarcity by leveling the capacity of these organizations with the demand for their services. While it is clear that large-scale structural change is necessary to rectify the overdependence on charitable food assistance, this does not alter the fact that one in six Americans currently rely on food banks and pantries for support (Feeding America 2023), and these organizations can take steps towards improving their stability and strengthening their capacity in the areas that are within their control, including succession planning and extra-organizational communication. Charitable food providers should also work to ensure that all of their eligible clients are enrolled in federal benefit programs such as SNAP and WIC and assist eligible non-participants with the registration process. Even these recommendations, however, may not be feasible for some organizations due to a lack of time, resources, and staff: effective succession planning can be very challenging to execute when an organization is entirely volunteer-run, and aiding clients with benefit enrollment requires time and expertise among staff that may not be present.

This study used the concept of organizational capacity to identify areas of need among Pittsburgh's charitable food assistance organizations. However, the predominant challenges faced by the study's subjects stem from inadequate resources and funding, casting doubt on the efficacy of organizational capacity as an approach to analyzing charitable food assistance organization, especially since this lack of resources is a product of inadequate federal funding that uniformly affects the entire charitable food assistance sector. While the organizational capacity framework is effective in pinpointing areas of deficiency, the feasibility of implementing capacity-building measures is very limited for many charitable food aid organizations. The only way that food assistance organizations can substantially increase their capacity is through increased funding, which is largely dictated by federal policy. Although pantries could work to strengthen their fundraising abilities and secure more individual donations, I believe that this would be neither efficient nor ethical. These organizations, which are almost entirely dependent on volunteers, were not originally intended to function as primary food assistance providers, and it should not be their responsibility to find ways to remain financially viable amidst the escalating demand for their services. While the government should certainly provide food banks and pantries with increased TEFAP funding, it is arguably even more important that the demand for charitable food assistance is decreased, which can be accomplished through bolstering federal food assistance and other anti-poverty programs. Working to alleviate the root causes of systemic poverty as well as addressing inefficiency in our food system would lead to a more sustainable solution to food insecurity, reducing the strain on the charitable food assistance sector and making low-income individuals less reliant on an underfunded and fragile network of private organizations.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Mission and Strategy

1. What is your organization's mission? Do you feel like your mission is strong, and does it guide daily work at the organization?
2. Do you have a strategic plan for advancing the organization's mission and vision, and is it widely understood and used across the organization?
    a. Does the strategic plan guide day-to-day decisions at the organization?
    b. Do you have a process in place to develop and revise your strategic plan?
3. Do you have a theory of change, and a model for how the organization's inputs translate into outputs and outcomes?
4. Do the organization's activities align with its purpose?
5. Do you have the ability to successfully expand the scope of your operations, or a plan for future scaling and growth?

Leadership, Staff and Volunteers

1. Does the organization's leadership team have strong financial judgment?
2. Does the leadership team act in a timely manner?
3. Is the leadership team equipped to guide the organization through change?
4. Is the leadership team effective; do they deliver results?
5. Does the CEO or ED serve a valuable role at the organization? How dependent is the organization on the CEO/ED, and is there somebody else on the team that could take over the role if needed?
6. Do your Board members represent and advocate for the organization effectively?
7. Is the Board's size and function aligned to the organization's needs?
8. Does the Board play a strong leadership role and provide good organizational oversight?
9. Do you have high-quality staff to advance the organizational mission, and are they diverse in their range of skills and experiences?
10. Do you develop and retain your staff, and are there leadership and management succession plans in place at the organization, either formally or informally?
11. Are you effective in recruiting volunteers, and does your volunteer base have the appropriate skills and commitment to the organization?

Funding

1. Do you have strong fundraising skills, and the right systems in place to fundraise effectively?
2. Do your funding sources fit the organization's needs, and do you feel that your funding base is sustainable?
3. Do you have a model for generating revenue, and if so, does it ever distract from the organization's mission?
4. Are you able to manage your finances? Do you have a formal process for financial planning and budgeting?

Values

1. Do you feel like you have shared values across the organization?

2. Do individuals at the organization hold clearly defined roles and know what is expected of them?
3. Do individuals at the organization hold one another accountable for day-to-day success?
4. Do you feel that the organization is creating impact?

Learning and Innovation

1. Do you have good performance targets in place? Are they more input or output/outcome-focused?
2. Do you have specific metrics to measure progress?
3. Do you have the capability to analyze data?
4. Do you feel like you have a good understanding of your external landscape (stakeholders, relevant issues and policies, etc.)?
5. Do you assess performance, and if so, do you use the information from performance measurements to adapt?
6. Do you assess existing gaps in programs and identify new program opportunities or adjustments?

Marketing and Communication

1. Do you communicate effectively internally?
2. Do you communicate well externally?
3. Do you use media effectively to reach external audiences?
4. Do you effectively manage your stakeholders? Are there processes in place to understand stakeholder needs and respond appropriately?

Advocacy

1. Do you have a clear understanding of what the organization is trying to achieve through advocacy?
2. How well do you measure the progress and success of your advocacy work?
3. How quickly can you adjust your advocacy approaches as external conditions change (political, funding)?
4. Are there enough people at the organization focused on advocacy work to achieve your desired impact?
5. How well are you connected to the people you serve?
6. How well do you form partnerships with other organizations?
7. How effective are you in mobilizing people to take action and building community among constituents in support of your advocacy work?

Managing Processes

1. Do you have processes in place for informed and efficient decision-making?
2. Do you have the right people and resources to run your programs effectively?
3. Do you feel that you plan programs effectively, including detailed timelines and budgets?

Organization Infrastructure and Technology

1. Do you communicate and coordinate effectively across the organization?

2. Do your facilities match the organization’s needs?
3. Do you have the right technology to manage finances?
4. Do you have database and reporting systems to manage your information?

Appendix B: Survey Questions

Basic Questions

1. Organization Name
2. Address
3. What is your service area?
4. How many people (or households) do you serve each month?

Mission

5. Is your organization's primary mission centered around food security?
6. Do you operate any food assistance programs other than a food pantry?
7. Does your mission guide day-to-day activities at the organization?

Strategy

8. Do you have a pantry board or leadership group?
9. Do you have a strategic plan in place?
10. Do you set performance targets?
11. Do you have the ability to expand your operations?
12. Would you like to be distributing more resources given adequate funding and facilities?

Funding

13. What is your primary source of funding?
14. What is your primary source of food donations?
15. How sustainable is your funding base?
16. Is your funding adequate to support your services?
17. What are your primary methods for fundraising?
18. Could you use more support around financial operations such as budgeting and bookkeeping?

Facility and Equipment

19. Is your physical facility adequate in size and function?
20. Do you have an adequate amount of storage space?
21. Do you have the right technology to manage finances?

Resources

22. Do you have enough food for the people you serve?
23. Do you ever have to turn away clients?
24. Do you ever run out of food?
25. Do you ever have an excess supply of food?
26. Do you ever have to throw out food?
27. Are you distributing as much fresh produce as you would like?
28. Are donations adequate to cover food costs?
29. Do you ever have to pay for additional food?

Staff and Volunteers

30. How many volunteers do you have?
31. Are you in need of additional volunteers?
32. Are you effective in recruiting volunteers?
33. Does your volunteer base have the appropriate skills and commitment to the organization?

34. How many paid employees do you have?
35. Are you in need of additional paid employees?
36. Is there anybody trained to take over the pantry management/leadership role, if needed?

Communication and Advocacy

37. Are you engaged in partnerships with other pantries and food assistance organizations?
38. Are your staff up to date on local, state, and federal policies impacting hunger?
39. Do you actively communicate with other pantries and food assistance programs?
40. Do you have a consistent client registration process?
41. Do you implement strategies for receiving client feedback on pantry services?
42. Is your organization engaged in any advocacy efforts or communication with elected officials?
43. Would you be interested in participating in more policy advocacy work?
44. What kind of support may you need in order to participate in advocacy work?

Challenges

45. What are your organization's greatest challenges around food insecurity programming?
46. What are your organization's greatest needs around food insecurity programming?
47. Would it be okay if somebody followed up with you on any of the answers you have provided?

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