

Neighborhood Fare

Tools for Connecting
Local Food Systems

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Food Pantries & Soup Kitchens

RETAIL

In a food-forward neighborhood, food pantries and soup kitchens support emergency food needs with dignity and choice.

Food pantries and soup kitchens are part of the emergency food system, which serves New Yorkers experiencing food insecurity. While emergency food has historically been a central focus of food access efforts, this briefing explores how pantries and soup kitchens can connect to other parts of the food system to strengthen diverse strategies for food access.



OBSERVATIONS

Food pantries and soup kitchens fill gaps in food access.

The emergency food system serves New Yorkers who are food insecure or cannot afford to purchase all of their food from larger retailers. It is an essential system that responds to moments of crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic, while also meeting high demand on a day-to-day basis. As of March 2022, an estimated 1.5 million New York City residents are experiencing food insecurity.

Emergency food is not the singular solution to addressing food insecurity. Many New Yorkers who are food insecure do not rely on this system, and for those who do, it can be just one part of how they get their food. But emergency food providers can offer vital resources, while also strengthening the broader food ecosystem to ensure New Yorkers can access food with dignity and choice.

At the center of the emergency food system, food bank systems like the Food Bank of NYC and United Way, as well as food rescue organizations like City Harvest, capture surplus food and deliver it to community agencies. Local organizations distribute the food through food pantries, soup kitchens that serve hot meals, home delivery methods such as Meals-on-Wheels, school and after school programs, and other nonprofit programs.

Emergency food providers can source food from local retail, manufacturers, farms, and restaurants.

Emergency food providers are essential to local food systems, with efficient supply chain management capabilities, volunteers, and strong networks of partners who can supplement government programs to distribute food.

Food rescue organizations source food donations from local grocers, farms, manufacturers, distributors, restaurants, and other sources all along the food supply chain, who donate excess food that would otherwise go to waste. For example, City Harvest partners with distributors

and retailers like Baldor, Hunts Point Terminal Market, Trader Joe's, Whole Foods, and Food Bazaar to procure food, then deliver it to hundreds of soup kitchens, food pantries, and community programs free of charge in their network. Though not all surplus food is appropriate for redistribution, the emergency food system redistributes large volumes of food that might otherwise go to waste.

In the wake of the pandemic, new state initiatives have aimed to connect emergency food providers to regional farms and local restaurants. The Nourish New York program connects upstate farmers with surplus agricultural products to food banks, including in New York City, providing a pipeline of local products available at wholesale prices. The Restaurant Resiliency Program provides grants to restaurants to sell or donate meals to emergency food providers, though funding for this program has been limited.



Current models provide high volumes of food, but fall short in offering healthy, fresh, and culturally appropriate options.

New Yorkers relying on the emergency food system should still experience the dignity of choice and options for fresh, culturally appropriate food. But aligning system supply with customer demand is a nuanced challenge for the emergency food system, which is best equipped to meet basic needs in high volume.

Single room occupancy residents and unhoused individuals might not have access or ability to prepare food, so they may need hot meals rather than fresh ingredients, which is what food pantries typically provide. In other cases, families may seek the right ingredients to prepare culturally appropriate meals, but pantries are not often able to dictate what kind of food they receive to match it with local demand. Many providers operate with limited open hours, which can

make access difficult if these hours conflict with work schedules. During the pandemic, emergency food providers reacted quickly to scale their operations. For example, La Jornada in Queens grew roughly tenfold, from serving around 1,000 clients a week to nearly 10,000. But operational changes, such as closing senior centers, heightened the challenge of meeting culturally appropriate demand. Misalignment between food supplies and demand contributes to food waste.

Emergency food distribution takes place across an array of spaces.

Emergency food distribution happens through food pantries, soup kitchens, mobile emergency hot meals, NYCHA campuses, single room occupancy housing, senior centers, nonprofits, and pop-up distribution centers. These locations range from temporary to permanent, in spaces that range from highly equipped to informal.





|| Funding to scale up operations is a fundamental challenge.

Emergency food programs operate through a mix of private, nonprofit, and public (federal, state, and city) funding. While pantries and soup kitchens have robust networks of food donors, they have limited funding for operations, space, and other infrastructure.

Expenses vary across scale of operation. Common costs include staffing; rent or mortgage; utilities; disposable food service products; equipment such as refrigerators, freezers, and walk-in coolers; pallet jacks, forklifts, and conveyor belts; and transportation vehicles, including refrigerated trucks. Mobile and home delivery operations have higher expenses in transportation and labor, while medium- to large-scale emergency food centers have higher expenses in rent and utilities.

Some resources are available. City Harvest provides one-on-one assessments and operational capacity building to meet needs including equipment, waste management, funding, and client choice conversions. United Way of NYC supports operational costs, including labor costs or even equipment upgrades. The Emergency Food Assistance Program supports reimbursement to cover utilities, equipment, food service products, office supplies and personnel. However, there is a lack of consistent and reliable public funding, and a need for communication regarding what funding is available for existing centers, especially those looking to expand operations.

Many emergency food centers are local efforts organized by community and religious leaders. Many programs are highly dependent on volunteers — often retired residents and immigrants — sometimes with support from paid staff. This structure impedes the ability to scale up operations. Though resources like online reservation systems, discounts for internet access and low cost or free hardware like tablets and mobile hot-spots are available to nonprofits, many emergency feeding providers are not able to access these resources. Citywide efforts like [FeedNYC](#) aim to provide technical assistance, capacity building, and operational support to pantries and soup kitchens.

Given the grassroots, sometimes ad hoc nature of many pantries and soup kitchens, physical infrastructure presents a major challenge. There is a lack of proper storage area and distribution area to serve clients. Many clients need to wait in long lines outside distribution points, receive their foods after long waits, and have no place to have proper meals. There is also a lack of cold storage or walk-in cooler to store highly perishable food. Community needs often outgrow what the spaces can offer.



Site & History

La Jornada food pantry serves Flushing and Corona, Queens with a main facility at NYCHA's James A. Bland Houses and several pop-up locations, including a weekly distribution at the Queens Museum.

Operation

La Jornada rents space from NYCHA at a subsidized rate for their site at the Bland Houses. The site is well-staffed with volunteers. They accept food donations from a range of public and private sources, including Nourish NY and City Harvest. Their operation grew exponentially in the wake of the pandemic, from serving approximately 1,000 families a week in 2019 to about 10,000 families a week in 2021. City Harvest has supported capacity-building needs, including providing a forklift to move pallets. The site has notable constraints: their cold storage capacity is limited, their storage space in NYCHA facilities is vulnerable to flooding, and trucks do not have reliable parking.

Activities

The organization serves a diverse community with many Asian and Latin American immigrants. La Jornada is working with local organizations to identify culturally-appropriate and dietary food, though the ability to direct their supply is limited because they rely on donations. Clients can use the Plentiful app to schedule food pick-up. La Jornada uses supermarket-style distribution, where clients can choose what kind of food they would like to take. According to City Harvest data, La Jornada distributed 425,000 total pounds of food in FY 2019, which grew to 1,824,005 pounds of food in FY 2021. They are projected to distribute over 8,000,000 pounds of food in FY 2022.

La Jornada is generating an immense wealth of knowledge about their community and its needs. Many of their clients are undocumented, without access to public benefits like SNAP or unemployment. La Jornada has offered support with accessing the state's Excluded Workers Fund and would like to have space for expanded social services, such as legal services and a diaper bank.

Loading Requirements

Trucks unload onto the street, forklifts transport goods to storage area

Funding Sources

City Harvest, Food Bank of NYC, United Way

Food System Connections

Through Nourish NY and partnership with their local Assembly Member Catalina Cruz, the pantry has connected with farms upstate. The pantry would benefit from a stronger connection to a composting service, which is not currently available to them.



Case Study
La Jornada

Site Size

5,000 sq ft inside; 5,000 sq ft outside



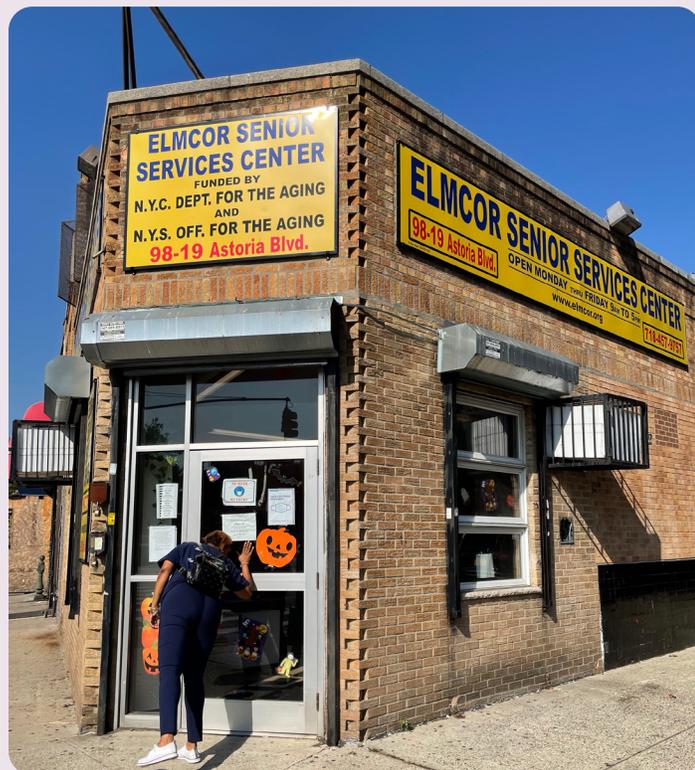
RECOMMENDATIONS

→ Expand access to space with centralized listings.

The City should create a central listing of spaces that can be used for emergency food storage and distribution, including NYCHA-based community centers, houses of worship, and underutilized and vacant buildings. The listing should note available cost storage and any regulations governing use of the space, such as on NYCHA properties. Elected officials can help to steward this listing at a local level, connecting operators to available spaces.

→ Centralize funding opportunities.

Local providers are constantly looking for funding, but may not have hours to invest in researching grant opportunities. The City should centralize private and public funding opportunities for pantries through a trusted, existing platform like FeedNYC. The City should also explore opportunities to streamline applications or support providers in managing application and reporting paperwork.



→ Fund pilots for emergency food providers to test retail offerings.

The City should support food banks, food rescue organizations, and local agencies that want to pilot alternatives to charity-based models through flexible funding. Pilot programs should meet unique neighborhood demands, but may build on successful models like DC Central Kitchen's Healthy Corners, which makes healthy food available at discounted prices, or Foodlink's Curbside Market providing an affordable, mobile market in Rochester, NY.

→ Co-locate emergency food with other resources to support client needs.

Many pantries already provide additional resources to support clients, such as workforce development resources, financial literacy training, or English as a Second Language classes. The City should support these efforts with funding or connections to programming partners.

→ Expand access to Nourish New York and the Restaurant Resiliency program.

Pantries small and large would benefit from greater understanding of how new state programs can benefit them and their clients. The City and State should partner to invest in outreach to pantries of all sizes and build their capacity to participate in these programs. The State should also increase feedback mechanisms for pantries to affirm whether the food and meals they receive through this program are high quality and culturally appropriate.



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