

# Toward an Understanding of Food Pantry Food Recipients and the Agencies that Serve Them

Journal of Applied Social Science  
2015, Vol. 9(1) 65–74  
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DOI: 10.1177/1936724413509249  
jax.sagepub.com  


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## Abstract

Second Harvest North Florida (Second Harvest) provides food for approximately 450 organizations/agencies covering 17 counties in North Florida. These organizations that receive food include meal providers (“soup kitchens”), food pantries, religious organizations, and small, independent groups. In 2011, Second Harvest distributed more than 20 million pounds of food, an increase of 162% since 2008 (Second Harvest 2012). While it is clear that Second Harvest provides a large number of agencies and providers with increasing amounts of food for distribution, much less is known about who is hungry and what the “profile” of these recipients looks like. Local news reports and anecdotes from providers cite the increased number and “changing face” of poor requesting food assistance, but a more in-depth analysis of recipients is very much needed. In this paper we reflect on the process and results of surveys conducted with approximately 250 North Florida agencies and with more than 500 people waiting in line at 26 food pantries across the seven-county Northeast Florida region. The findings from the surveys with the agencies and the clients are clear that a number of people are facing significant problems with regard to food security, and that little optimism exists that things will get better anytime soon.

## Keywords

community action research, poverty, surveys, program eval

## Introduction

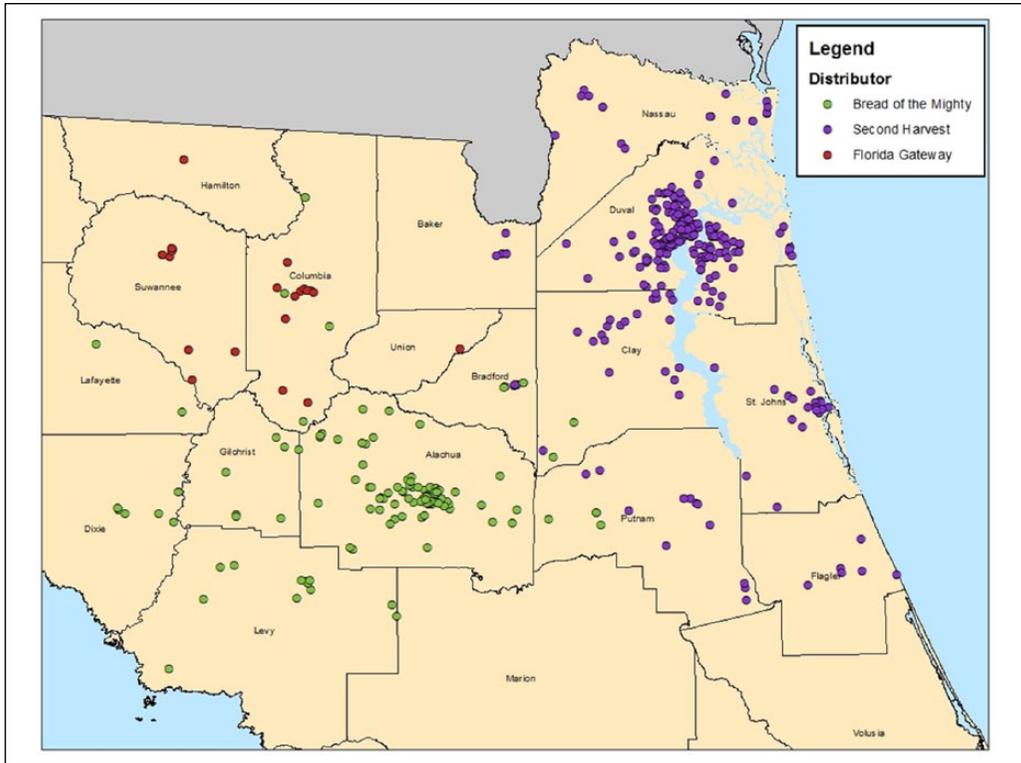
Second Harvest North Florida (Second Harvest) provides food for approximately 450 organizations/agencies covering 17 counties in North Florida. Second Harvest collaborates with two food distributors to assist in getting the food to agencies in the Gainesville and Lake City areas; Bread of the Mighty and Florida Gateway, respectively (see Figure 1). The organizations that receive food include meal providers (“soup kitchens”), food pantries, religious organizations, and small, independent groups. In 2011, Second Harvest distributed more than 20 million pounds of food, an increase of 162% since 2008 (Second Harvest North Florida 2012). While it is clear that Second Harvest provides a large number of agencies and providers with increasing amounts of food for distribution, much less is known about who is hungry and what the “profile” of these recipients looks like. Local news reports and anecdotes from providers cite the increased number

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**Figure 1.** Second Harvest North Florida member agencies.

and “changing face” of poor requesting food assistance, but a detailed analysis of recipients is very much needed.

To better understand the food recipients as well as the agencies it serves, Second Harvest partnered with the Northeast Florida Center for Community Initiatives (CCI) at the University of North Florida. Thus, a two-phased project was collaboratively designed. The first phase involved an online survey of the agencies and organizations to which Second Harvest provides food. The survey focused on the services provided as well as whom they serve. Phase II of the project included face-to-face surveys of food recipients at select agencies as well as observations of the facilities and operations.

## Method

### *Phase I: The Agency Survey*

The agency survey was an online survey that focuses on the services provided by the agencies as well as whom they serve. In Spring 2012, the Executive Director of Second Harvest sent all affiliated agencies an email to explain the research project and prepare them for the forthcoming online survey request from CCI. Using contact information provided by Second Harvest, CCI staff sent a link to the online survey in an email to agencies. A weekly reminder was sent via email to the agencies that had not yet responded to the survey for the next several weeks. All of the emails provided an explanation of the project and contained contact information for CCI if agencies had any questions or concerns.

After about six weeks, CCI staff and UNF students began to call agencies without an email address and those that still had not responded to the online survey. The callers explained the project and offered the respondents the opportunity to complete the survey over the phone. The online survey was closed to respondents approximately 11 weeks from when the initial invitation was sent.

A total of 433 agencies were asked to take the survey and 251 completed at least a portion. The overall response rate for the survey was 58%. The response rate by region ranged from 45.0% (Bread of the Mighty) to 65.2% (Florida Gateway).

### *Phase II: The Client Survey*

During the second phase of the project, researchers turned their focus to clients served by the agencies, specifically those visiting food pantries. In many ways, the research team is very familiar with people, often-homeless people, receiving food at soup kitchens, as CCI has helped conduct the annual homeless census and survey for most of the past two decades. Indeed, these individuals are visible in any community. The primary goal for Phase II was to better understand—to put a face on—the “hidden” hunger in our community.

Potential sites for conducting client surveys and observations for Phase II were selected from the 137 Second Harvest food pantries in Northeast Florida (Baker, Clay, Duval, Flagler, Nassau, Putnam, and St. Johns Counties) that had completed the agency online survey. Thirty-eight food pantries were initially selected based on conversations with Second Harvest staff and their geographical location. Each food pantry was called by CCI staff to explain the purpose and procedures of the client survey and to schedule a time when a research team could conduct the surveys. A number of pantries were subsequently eliminated from the list for a variety of reasons, including that there was no food delivery scheduled during the data collection period, clients were served only during specific appointment times and arranging interviews was not possible, and clients were regular clients at other sites in the interview sample. Furthermore, two locations declined to participate at all, and two additional sites never returned repeated attempts to set up site visits.

The remaining 27 food pantries were visited by a research team during the Spring/Summer 2012. The research team consisted of a faculty or senior CCI staff member, assigned as “team leader,” and CCI staff and/or student volunteers. The team leader was the primary contact for the food pantry and checked in and out with the staff during the visit. The team leader also made detailed observations, noting information about the procedures for the food distribution, the facilities, clients, and volunteers, while the other team members conducted surveys with the food pantry clients.

The instrument used for the client survey was created by CCI researchers with input from Second Harvest staff. The survey primarily includes demographic and household characteristics as well as a set of questions known as the food security core module. The core module is a set of 18 questions that were identified from the U.S. Census Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement to create a reliable measurement scale that determines the level of food insecurity for a household (Bickel et al. 2000).

While pantries’ procedures for distributing food varied somewhat, the research teams typically conducted surveys an hour or so prior to food distribution while clients were waiting. Surveys were conducted with as many adult clients as possible at each site and the research team had members who speak fluent Spanish to prevent the exclusion of Spanish speaking clients. Surveyors explained the purpose of the survey and read consent information to each potential survey participant. Once a participant provided oral consent, he or she was offered a copy of the consent information for future reference and the survey was conducted.

**Table 1.** Completed Client Surveys By County.

	Surveys completed <sup>a</sup>	Number of pantries	Surveys by county (%)
Duval	199	11	38.5
Putnam	120	3	23.2
Flagler	78	2	15.1
Baker	42	4	8.1
St. Johns	35	1	6.8
Nassau	24	2	4.6
Clay	19	3	3.7
Total	517	26	

<sup>a</sup>Completed at least a portion of the survey.

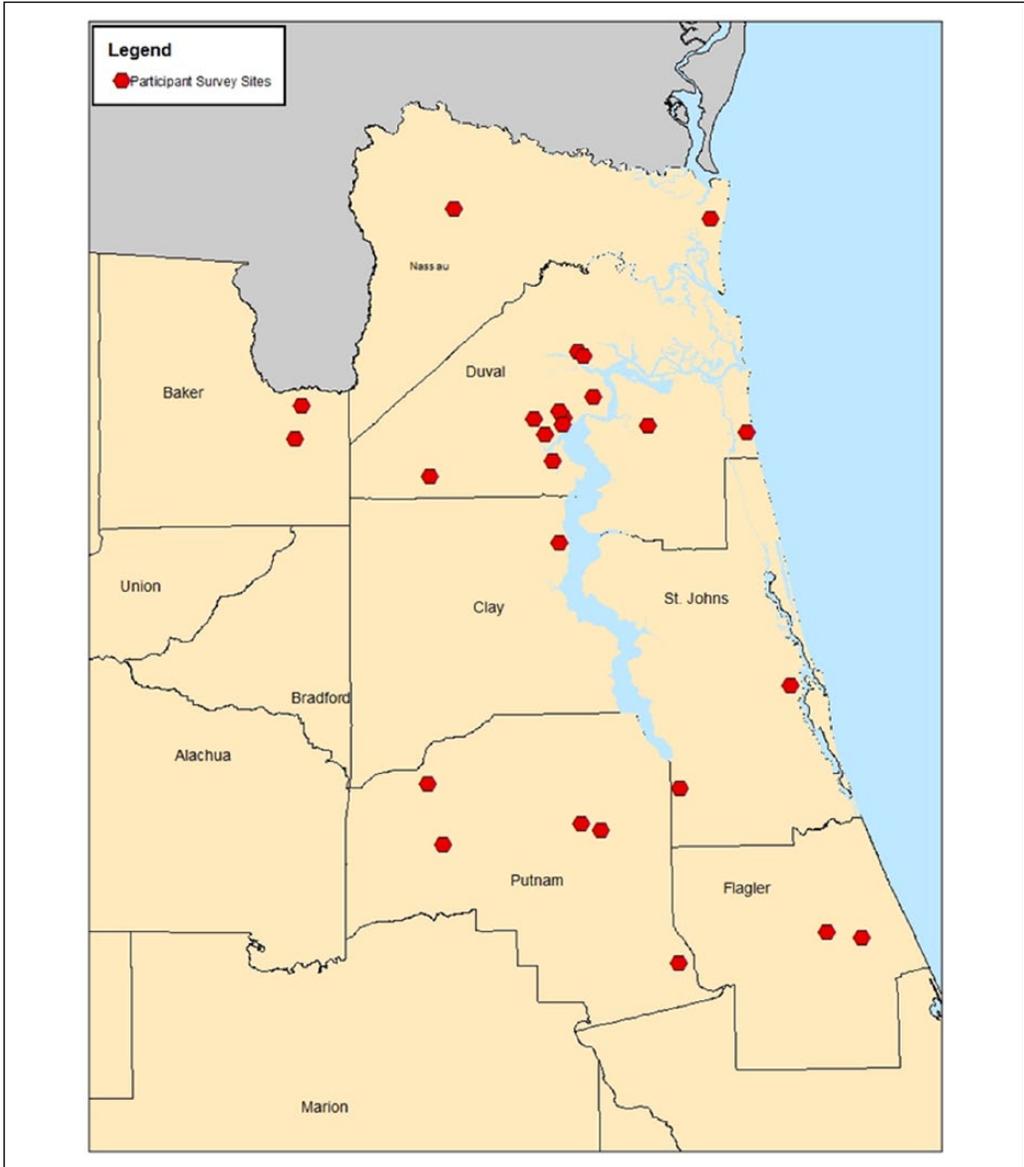
## Results and Reflections

Nearly 1,600 individuals were observed and 517 surveys were conducted at the food pantries located across seven counties in Northeast Florida (see Table 1).<sup>1</sup> Nearly half of the food pantries surveyed were located in Duval County where 199 surveys were collected at 11 different food pantries. Putnam County, where only three locations were surveyed, had the second highest number of surveys at 120. In Flagler County, 78 surveys were completed at two different locations. About 75% of completed surveys were collected in these three counties. The remaining 25% of completed surveys were collected at food pantries in four other counties: Baker (42), St. Johns (35), Nassau (24), and Clay (19) (see Figure 2 for a map of the survey sites).

To better understand client characteristics and their food security issues in relation to their communities, food pantries were identified according to their location as “urban area,” “urban cluster,” or “rural.” These designations are based on definitions and thematic maps from the U.S. Census Bureau. Urban areas represent densely populated areas of 50,000 or more people, whereas urban clusters consist of populations between 2,500 and 50,000. All regions outside of these two designations are considered rural.<sup>2</sup> Over half of the visited food pantries were in urban areas while the rest of the sites were evenly distributed in urban clusters and rural locations (see Table 2).

As seen in Phase I of the research project, Second Harvest serves a wide variety of agencies including residential programs, homeless shelters, school programs, and food pantries. Furthermore, there is diversity among the types of food pantries ranging from small “mom and pop” operations to pantries with multiple staff and volunteers who provide additional services such as thrift stores, clothes closets, referrals, and counseling services. For example, a Second Harvest food agency representative explained, “We are a small pantry compared with some others in our community, but the services we provide to our clients are very important.” Another respondent described the services her agency provides, “In addition to our food pantry, we also operate a free medical and dental clinic as well as offer baby support (baby clothes, baby care items, pregnancy testing).”

While many of the agency survey respondents are proud of their work and appreciate and acknowledge the vital role Second Harvest plays in their agencies’ mission delivery, a number of agencies are faced with challenges including shortages in funding, donations, storage, and staffing—all while experiencing an increase in demand over the past couple of years. An agency representative reflected on the availability of food in contrast to the demand, “The number of people that are eligible is increasing, while the amount of food remains the same.” Indeed, storage and refrigeration, as well as staffing issues are problems other researchers have found when studying food pantries, and there is no clear answer to them (Paynter, Berner, and Anderson 2011; Rochester, Nanney, and Story 2011).



**Figure 2.** Participant survey sites.

Based on interviews with food pantry recipients and tallies of clients in the lines during the second phase, the Face of Hunger in North Florida is much like the face of all of North Florida.

Whites represent the largest group of recipients, although minorities are overrepresented among pantry clients. Four out of 10 pantry respondents were homeowners, and many cited difficulties paying the bills. The overwhelming majority had lived in North Florida for most of their lives. Forty percent of the households had children under 18. As could be expected, most of the people “shopping” at the pantries were women. Twenty percent of the respondents had a veteran living in the household. Indeed, many of the people interviewed were what one would expect to hear about the “folks next door” (see Table 3).

**Table 2.** Completed Surveys By Type of Area.

	Surveys completed <sup>a</sup>	Number of pantries	Surveys by area (%)
Urban	222	15	42.9
Urban Clusters	118	5	22.8
Rural	177	6	34.2
Total	517	26	

<sup>a</sup>Completed at least a portion of the survey.

**Table 3.** Respondent's Demographics.

	Urban	Urban clusters	Rural	Total
Sex	(n = 201)	(n = 117)	(n = 173)	(n = 491)
Male	35.8%	30.8%	33.5%	33.8%
Female	64.2%	69.2%	66.5%	66.2%
Race	(n = 214)	(n = 116)	(n = 174)	(n = 504)
Black or African American	36.4%	17.2%	19.5%	26.2%
Hispanic or Latino	5.1%	3.4%	0.6%	3.2%
White	48.6%	69.0%	74.1%	62.1%
Other	9.8%	10.3%	5.7%	8.5%
Mean age	52.8	52.2	50.0	51.7
Home owner	(n = 208)	(n = 114)	(n = 175)	(n = 497)
	29.9%	40.7%	49.2%	39.0%
	(n = 221)	(n = 118)	(n = 177)	(n = 516)
Mean years lived in North	23.7	22.2	19.5	21.9
Florida	(n = 207)	(n = 115)	(n = 175)	(n = 497)
Children under 18 in	42.1%	37.3%	41.2%	40.7%
household	(n = 221)	(n = 118)	(n = 177)	(n = 516)
Veteran in household	19.2%	19.5%	20.1%	19.6%
	(n = 208)	(n = 113)	(n = 174)	(n = 495)
Household income less than	88.8%	86.7%	78.3%	84.7%
\$20,000	(n = 205)	(n = 113)	(n = 162)	(n = 480)
Working part- or full-time	14.6%	9.0%	16.2%	13.9%
	(n = 205)	(n = 112)	(n = 173)	(n = 490)
Currently receive SNAP	43.5%	58.1%	40.9%	46.0%
	(n = 216)	(n = 117)	(n = 176)	(n = 509)
Began visiting food pantry	64.4%	74.3%	73.0%	69.7%
within 1 year	(n = 219)	(n = 117)	(n = 174)	(n = 510)
Food lasts less than 1 week	66.9%	71.6%	69.3%	68.7%
	(n = 202)	(n = 102)	(n = 153)	(n = 457)
Knows others in need of food	52.7%	53.1%	50.3%	51.9%
from pantry	(n = 205)	(n = 113)	(n = 171)	(n = 489)
Food insecure	75.4%	74.1%	72.8%	74.2%
	(n = 211)	(n = 116)	(n = 173)	(n = 500)

Note. SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Yet the people waiting in line were also facing dramatic, often debilitating roadblocks. The vast majority of food pantry clients in line fell significantly below the poverty line. Only 14% had a job—only 4% worked full-time. Many talked about how difficult it was to find work—a particularly prescient issue given that well over half of the respondents were above 50 years of age.

Despite being poor, as researchers from Mathematica found in an earlier study (Mabli et al. 2010), less than half of respondents' households from the Second Harvest client survey were receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; food stamp) benefits. Of those who were receiving SNAP, many commented about how little their benefit amount was. Two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they had started going to a food pantry only within the last year and almost 70% reported that the food they received from the pantry would last less than a week. More than half of the respondents knew of others who were in need of help from the food pantry but did not come for food

"Food insecurity"—a measure created by the Federal Government to assess the problem of hunger—is rampant. Overall, 75% of the respondent households were considered "food insecure." Almost 85% of households with children were "food insecure"—12% with "severe hunger." Contrary to national data, White households interviewed in this study were more likely to be food insecure than Black households (Nord et al. 2010).

Despite these hardships, or perhaps because of them, the clients at food pantries were thankful for the help they got from the food pantry. Many of those who provided additional information about their situation at the end of the survey expressed their gratitude to Second Harvest and their local food pantry for the services provided. One client responded, "the food pantry has been a blessing. It helps a lot. If we were not coming, there are things we just wouldn't eat." Overall, the clients felt "fortunate" and "blessed" and that it "really helps us out through the month." One respondent indicated he was, "surprised that there are still food pantries. I thought people stopped caring."

Of course a number of pantry clients also expressed less positive comments at some of the pantries. While many were thankful for the food they receive at the food pantry, there were comments regarding the lack of quantity or quality of the food. These respondents discussed the need for more meat, fresh fruit and vegetables, milk, and diabetic food choices. Some of the clients were concerned that the pantry was only open once or twice a month, even though the supplies received lasted less than a week. Some respondents pointed out a variety of issues they have experienced at the food pantries or offered suggestions on how to improve the services. Some suggestions included shelter for clients waiting in line, transportation or delivery for those unable to visit the pantry, and more services or information about surrounding services.

The process the food pantry clients went through to get their food—many waiting hours in the sun or rain to receive a simple bag possibly consisting only of a few cans of food, some overripe fruit, boxed pasta, a head of cabbage and some snack cakes, all meant to last two or more weeks—was bothersome for most of the research team members. At the same time, however, interviewers often came away amazed at the resilience of the people interviewed in the food pantry lines and the humanity displayed by most of the food pantry workers and volunteers. One interviewer noted an older woman who reported that she traveled the 15 miles each month with a couple of other pantry visitors. "I would never make it here without my friends!" she declared. "They take good, good care of me." She went on to note that the friends she had made since she had started visiting the pantry (less than one year ago) were some of the best and most "real" friends she had ever had in her life.

Another interviewer found it interesting to see the volunteers at work. They took SERIOUS PRIDE in their "jobs"—everyone was friendly, helpful. They carried bags for the old, infirmed, and "accompanied" (with kids or elderly).

## Conclusion

The findings from the Second Harvest agency survey and the interviews with clients in line at food pantries are clear that a number of people are facing significant problems with regard to food security, and that little optimism exists that things will get better anytime soon. The current

economic and political landscape does not appear to offer optimism that food insecurity levels will be reduced anytime soon either. It is hoped, however, that these findings can be used to provide a better understanding of the food pantry clients in North Florida, and lead the important discussion about how to address food insecurity in our community.

As an “umbrella” organization, Second Harvest is in an advantageous position to disseminate information and guidance effectively and to foster communication, coordination, and advocacy. Indeed, when surveyed, some agency representatives requested improved access to the food bank, assistance in obtaining information or guidance, and voiced a desire to coordinate with other service providers. Requests for information included locating other funding sources or food donors, ways to prevent clients from lining up prior to opening, and strategies for reaching the needy. Although only one agency requested assistance in regard to data, agencies can benefit in a number of ways from collecting data on the services they provide and clients they serve. Second Harvest could conduct workshops or webinars on best practices concerning the raised issues for the different types of agencies they serve.

Increased coordination between the agencies would also be valuable to the service providers and clients. While some agencies indicated that they coordinate with others, a few respondents spoke of the desire for such partnerships. An agency representative suggested that Second Harvest create “a website where agencies can register their food programs in one location” so that agencies and clients can have access to up-to-date information. While there is a list of member agencies with their address and contact information on the Second Harvest website, there is no information on their services and no links to their individual websites. A discussion board webpage might also be useful for agencies to discuss strategies and information that they believe could be helpful for others.

In addition to communication and collaboration, Second Harvest could use their position to promote hunger advocacy for community education, funding and grassroots efforts. Second Harvest North Florida has been in the community for nearly 35 years and is frequently highlighted in the media for food drives and other events. While direct lobbying efforts may be out of the direct approach for Second Harvest because of legal concerns (Warshawsky 2010), they should continue to shine a spotlight on the issue of hunger and examine creative ways to educate the community and policy makers to this issue. The distributor should also coordinate the agencies and organizations to which they provide food to lobby and educate federal and state legislators for funding. In addition, Second Harvest and the agencies could form a grassroots effort with the food recipients, including expanding on advocacy through their websites and other social media (e.g., the Feeding America website has a direct advocacy page).

Finally, given the economic hardships facing the food pantry clients interviewed, it is essential that additional referral support be provided by the Second Harvest agencies. One promising area concerns getting those eligible enrolled in the SNAP. Second Harvest currently has a very successful SNAP Outreach Program in rural Flagler County (about 60 miles South of Jacksonville), where an outreach worker visits various food pantries in the county and helps eligible food recipients apply for SNAP on site. As Fiese et al. (2011) has indicated, such efforts are needed to get food pantry clients enrolled into public food assistance program for which they are eligible. While a very successful program, Second Harvest has yet to find the funding to expand this type of service to other areas, and given the complicated nature of the SNAP application process, training volunteers, or other already overworked pantry staff is not feasible.

It is clear from subsequent conversations with the Second Harvest Executive Director that the information gained from the agency and recipient surveys has been invaluable. Second Harvest is working to increase (and improve) communication between agencies and the central office, as well as to better coordinate food distributions. Information from the studies is also being used for outreach to corporations and nonprofits, community education programs, and funding appeals to the general public.

The desire for “fresh” foods has become a major focus for Second Harvest agencies and for recipients of food at the food pantries. To that end, Second Harvest is in the process of finalizing details for a one-acre community garden. The garden will include not only a place where locals can grow food, but Second Harvest will also provide educational experiences on how residents can better use the food they harvest. Additional staff to assist in improving intra-agency communication and client assistance programs (e.g., SNAP application support) are essential if Second Harvest hopes to overcome hunger in the community.

Unfortunately, many of these changes and expansion efforts have been tough to enact. Since the study was completed in fall 2012, Second Harvest has lost five staff positions in the main distribution center that cannot be filled because of budget constraints. With the staff reductions, a significant amount of donated fresh food has been lost because of the inability to sort and store the produce before it spoils. To exacerbate the issue, Second Harvest has seen more than a 15% increase in food distributions in the past year, with even more requests coming every week. With efforts to reduce funding for food assistance programs in Congress gaining ground, obstacles to alleviating hunger continue to grow.

While the future appears grim, Second Harvest agency members are dedicated to doing what they can to serve their communities. Aptly stated by one such agency,

[T]his food program has brought more than just food to this community. It has brought a sense of community back to an area long divided by race and economics . . . and we are able to network with resources to get those needs met . . . It is truly incredible what we can accomplish with a food pantry as a base.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Funding for this research was provided in part by Second Harvest North Florida.

### Notes

1. At one of the food pantries visited, food was distributed on a “drop by” basis rather than at a specific time. Only one client came for food while the research team was present and she declined the survey. As a result, the research team was unable to conduct any surveys at this site.
2. More information and thematic maps can be found on the U.S. Census Bureau website at <http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/2010urbanruralclass.html>.

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