

Advocacy and Support for Healthy Foods at Local Food Pantries in IL

Healthy Eating, Active Living (HEAL) serves as a priority action group to foster and promote healthy eating and active living to reduce obesity and food insecurity in Peoria, Tazewell, and Woodford counties in IL. There are four HEAL teams comprised of healthcare and community professionals that collectively share in the desire to improve the health of the community. HEAL initiatives are funded by the Community Foundation of Central IL and managed by Tazewell County Health Department.

Objectives

HEAL Team #4's objective is to increase advocacy and support for healthy and locally procured foods. Part of the scope of this work is to develop a healthy food policy for the local food banks and the pantries to specifically encourage healthier choices that support the cultural and dietary needs of the recipients/guests. In Nov/Dec of 2020, HEAL Team #4 developed two surveys to obtain information about the adequacy of the foods provided by food banks and pantries as it relates to nutrition and cultural needs and preferences.

Methods

The survey for food pantry staff was sent via email to 330 staff affiliated with Midwest Food Bank and Peoria Area Food Bank. 168 food pantry staff/volunteers completed the survey. Food pantry staff were then asked to distribute the second survey for food pantry guests. This survey was delivered in English and Spanish with the option to complete it via paper or electronically. 418 food pantry guests completed the survey.

An evaluation team from the University of Illinois at Chicago analyzed the finding for statistical significance.

Demographics of Respondents

	# Respondents	Preferred Language	Ethnicity	Zip Code
Food Pantry Guests	418	397 English (98%) 10 Spanish (2%)	72% White (298) 19% Black (79) 5% Hispanic/Latino (23) 2% Amer. Indian/Alaskan Native (7) 5% other (20)	12% 61605, 10% 61604, 9% 61523, 8% 61554, 8% 61603, 5% 61610, 5% 62301, 43% Other*
Food Pantry Staff/Volunteers	168	N/A	N/A	11% 61605, 7% 61603, 6% 61604, 6% 61554, 5% 61614, 3% 61611, 3% 61401, 59% other

* For all zip codes [SEE MAP](#)

Key Results

Both food pantry staff and pantry guests responded that offering more lean protein/meats would help food pantry guests eat healthier (78% and 65% respectively). While food pantry guests requested more fresh fruits and vegetables (63% and 57% respectively), food pantry staff requested more canned fruits and vegetables (77% and 69% respectively).

When food pantry guests were asked about the availability of foods that meets guests' cultural or religious preferences or dietary restrictions, significant differences were found by rural vs. non-rural respondents, and by race/ethnicity. Non-rural and non-white respondents were significantly more likely to report challenges finding foods that meet their preferences (p-value <.001). Significantly more food pantry guests that identify as Black or African American wanted more soul or southern food options to better support their food preferences (63% of those responding, p-

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value $<.001$), and significantly more food pantry guests identifying as Hispanic or Latino/a wanted more foods from Latin America (90% of those responding, p-value $<.001$).

75% of guests would like healthy food recipes to help their families make healthier choices.

Food pantry staff responded that storage, shelving, and/or refrigeration is the largest barrier to their ability to provide healthier foods to pantry guests (56%).

Conclusion

Food pantry staff and recipients identified and requested lean meats, fruits, and vegetables along with healthy food recipes as the most helpful options to improve access to and intake of healthier foods. The high demand for soul or southern food options among all ethnic populations may be explained by multi-cultural households, southern heritage, or other factors.

Results will be used to develop recommendations for a nutrition policy and education for food banks and food pantries in the tri-county area.