

# Morgan Stanley Foundation Child & Family Choice Initiative

## Year 1 Evaluation Brief, August 2022

In 2021, Feeding America selected 28 member food banks to participate in the Morgan Stanley Child & Family Choice Initiative to increase the amount of choice offered by their food distribution sites or return to offering choice as the country recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic. NORC at the University of Chicago and the Institute for Hunger Research & Solutions at Connecticut Foodshare (researchers are now at More Than Food Consulting) collaborated with Feeding America to evaluate levels of choice and assess barriers and facilitators to offering choice among the partner program sites. In this brief, we describe activities involved with the project, highlight research findings, and describe next steps for Year 2 of this 3-year project.

### Project Goals

With generous funding from the Morgan Stanley Foundation, our goals are to:


- Build the capacity of food banks and pantries serving families and children to offer increased choice for neighbors
- Understand the barriers and facilitators to offering choice
- Measure change over time in the level of choice offered on a range from no choice to full choice
- Measure the impact of choice on program operations and staff and volunteer satisfaction



Full choice at University Settlement Pantry

### Year 1 Activities

- Administered 28 grants to food banks working with 138 community sites
- Held 10 Choice Capacity Institute calls to share resources and foster peer to peer learning
- Surveyed all sites in February (asking about July 2021 and February 2022) and May 2022 to measure the level of choice being offered and to understand barriers and facilitators to offering increased choice
- Interviewed 16 site staff to add detail to year 1 findings and inform year 2 evaluation activities

 There is no substitute for [people choosing their food]. None. Because they're not thinking of it as a hand-up, they're thinking of it as shopping. – Site staff

### Initial Findings

- The majority of sites increased the amount of choice offered between July 2021 and May 2022
- Sites of all types could offer full choice
- The most cited barrier to offering full choice is the desire for efficiency among staff and volunteers
- Staffing concerns are the most salient barrier to offering any choice at all
- Full choice pantries report less food waste

## The Dignity of Choice

An important way to show the values and culture of a food pantry is by allowing neighbors to handle and choose their food with dignity. Many food pantries distribute identical prepacked bags to neighbors, regardless of food needs or preferences. While such a model may seem efficient for the volunteers and for distribution, it can create stigma for neighbors to ask for “charity” and create a power dynamic between the “giver” (food pantry volunteers or staff) and the “receiver” (neighbors). Anecdotally, we know offering choice promotes dignity, better accommodates dietary needs and culturally preferred foods, decreases food waste, and provides opportunities to offer healthy nudges or nutrition education. But very little research exists to measure what may make it hard to offer choice in a pantry setting, and the impact of offering more choice for staff, volunteers, and most importantly the neighbors who shop at pantries.



Neighbor at choice mobile market, Colorado Springs

## Project and Evaluation

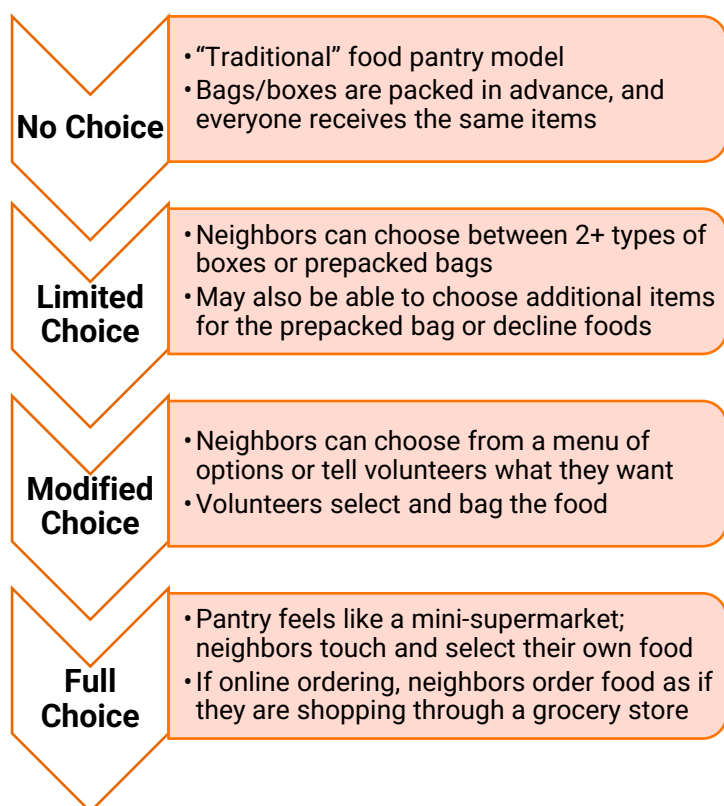
During Year 1 of the 3-year project, representatives from the 28 grantee food banks attended monthly Choice Capacity Institutes – virtual calls to learn about building capacity in partner sites to offer choice, share successes and challenges with other grantees, and build a common language around discussing choice. The evaluation team collaborated with Feeding America to design and field a survey of 138 partner sites from the 28 food banks in February 2022 (asking about choice from July 2021 and also February) and again in May 2022 to measure changes regarding choice. Based on survey results, a sample of 16 pantry sites were selected for follow-up interviews to delve into key findings.

### Year 1 evaluation goals were to measure:

1. Different levels of choice offered,
2. Perceived barriers and facilitators to offering choice, and
3. Effects of offering different levels of choice on operations, food waste, and staff/volunteer satisfaction

### Levels of Choice

Allowing neighbors to choose their food in pantries is often seen as binary – either you offer no choice with pre-packed bags, or you offer choice. Through the Capacity Institute meetings, the evaluation team described four levels of offering choice (see graphic on left). One goal of this first year was to create shared language and understanding around choice. We provided resources and encouraged food banks and pantries to consider ways to move along the continuum to offer more choice.

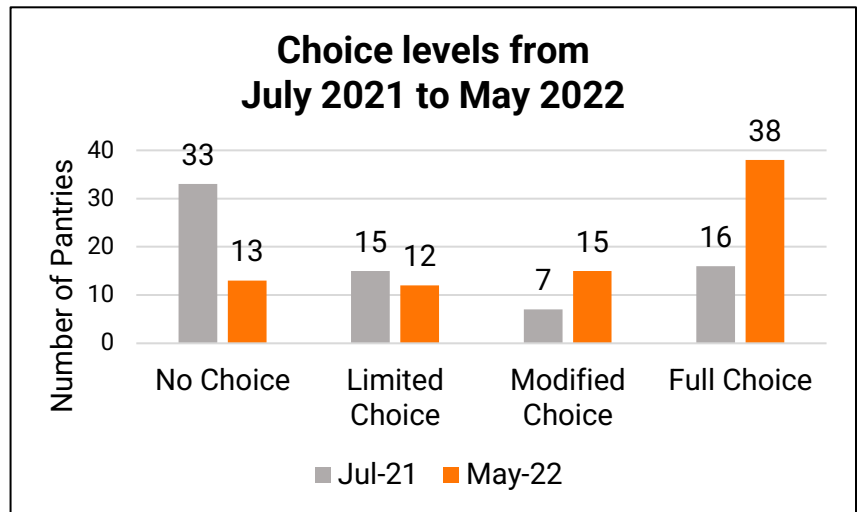


## Key Findings

### 1. ANY PANTRY CAN OFFER CHOICE.

Comparing levels of choice offered by sites in July 2021 and May 2022, there was a significant decrease in pantries offering no choice and a significant increase in pantries offering modified or full choice. We found that no pantry characteristic (number of staff and volunteers, pantry size, pantry resources, hours) seemed to prevent pantries from offering some level of choice, up to and including full choice. While pantry staff and volunteers identified several barriers to offering choice (limited space, convenience of pre-packed bags, lack of staff/volunteers), desire for *efficiency* was the only significant barrier to *full* choice, while *staffing* was the most important barrier in preventing pantries from offering *any* choice at all. Pantries facing more barriers in total were less likely to be offering *full* choice.

In this project, the majority of sites engaged were school-based pantries, with some traditional and some mobile types as well. School pantries were able to increase their level of choice, although they had additional considerations including how to incorporate pantry time into the school day, minimize opportunities for students to open food before they get home, and reduce stigma.



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“Most pantries believe you need a great deal of space, but you can do it [choice] with a little or a lot. -- Interviewee

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### 2. INCREASING CHOICE AT PANTRIES REQUIRES ORGANIZATIONAL BUY-IN, FEEDBACK FROM NEIGHBORS, AND A DESIRE TO MAKE THE EXPERIENCE MORE DIGNIFIED.

According to the second survey in May, of the pantries that increased their level of choice, about three-quarters felt that support or buy-in from staff and leadership, feedback from neighbors, and desire to serve neighbors in a more dignified manner were critical to being able to plan for or offer more choice during the grant year.

Since staff and volunteers' mindset about choice was one of the biggest barriers to increasing choice, pantry directors described the processes they undertook to build staff and volunteer buy-in for changing to a distribution model with increased choice. One interviewee framed this mindset shift as re-orienting the pantry's mission to focus on increasing dignity for its clients. Because of the shift to the full choice model: *"Now we're focused on the hospitality and customer service side of all of this because we have more time with each shopper."* While interviewees did note occasional resistance on the part of staff and volunteers, one commented that, *"after the first time [the volunteers worked under an increased choice model], when they realized what an impact it was making, they let go of the fear."* In this case, experiencing the impact of offering more choice was crucial to building buy-in.

Interviewees also described how moving to a new, increased-choice distribution model often takes ongoing flexibility – hard to do without bought-in volunteers and a desire to make the experience dignified. Interviewees noted that continual adaptation was especially needed for pantry layout and the flow of clients through the pantry space, commenting that *“we played with this many times”* before landing on an effective traffic flow.



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Community input is vital to our work. Over the grant period, the Foodbank gathered feedback through surveys about what our neighbors wanted to see in the pantry. Survey responses illustrated the need to add extra days and expanded hours to our pantry schedule. At this distribution, neighbors are welcomed into the building to choose the groceries they want from a varied selection of items. – Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank, Ohio

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### 3. PANTRIES REPORTED A NET BENEFIT IMPACT WHEN OFFERING CHOICE.

Of the pantries that increased their level of choice over the year, 79% said that their overall operations improved as a result of offering more choice. The great majority of pantries also reported improvements in the layout of the pantry, the types of food being offered, the satisfaction of staff and volunteers, the interactions between staff/volunteers and neighbors, and perceived neighbor satisfaction with pantry services. Pantries that offer full choice also tended to perceive significantly less food waste.



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Milo Elementary School set up a more open shopping experience and reported a large increase in the number of families served, as well as an increase in overall participant satisfaction with the program.  
– Good Shepherd Food Bank, Maine

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### 4. FOOD BANKS PLAY A PIVOTAL ROLE IN BUILDING CAPACITY TO INCREASE CHOICE IN THEIR NETWORK.

There are many meaningful ways food banks can support their partner sites to offer increased choice. In this grant program, sites reported that grant funding, increased variety of offerings from the food bank and peer learning/technical assistance offered by the food bank were impactful in their transitions to offering more choice. One pantry director noted that this was crucial in their pantry’s ability to increase choice, stating that *“if they [the food bank] weren’t helping and making sure that we got a variety of products we wouldn’t be able to be offering that choice.”*

Food banks can offer technical assistance regarding better practices and changes that pantries could make to their space, layout, flow, and *“ways to organize things and set them up”* to facilitate increased choice programming. This technical assistance could be paired with peer learning opportunities with other pantries making these changes. Commenting on the usefulness of peer cohorts, one pantry director stated that *“it was invaluable to me to hear what other people were doing, to hear how other people are going to achieve their goal to give choice...and just the simple networking that took place...opened my eyes up to how people at other places are doing things.”*

## Choice Visual Library

During year 1, network food banks were invited to share video footage of partner agencies offering different levels of choice, highlighting the challenges they overcame and the benefits they experienced with offering choice. The Choice Visual Library is now available for Feeding America member food banks and their agencies and will be a powerful motivating tool to help encourage other agencies to offer full choice.

*The Visual Library will be available on Feeding America's new Learning Hub. Partner agencies can reach out to their food bank to receive a link to access the library.*



Neighbor shopping at Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley distribution

### Next steps:

In Year 2 of the Morgan Stanley Child and Family Choice Initiative, we will continue to build upon these findings. In the second year of the grant, \$1.619 million was awarded to 30 food banks, half of which were grantees returning from Year 1. The grantees participating in Year 2 will join in on an impact evaluation measuring the impact of choice on site staff and volunteers and the impact of choice on the neighbors visiting the sites. The surveys to each group will be administered twice between September 2022 and May 2022. Results from surveys will be expanded upon with additional interviews and/or site visits.

We are grateful for the generous support from Morgan Stanley and the active participation from food banks and member food pantries to offer more choice with dignity for neighbors.