



Washington Food Coalition

Nutrition Policies in Washington State: Executive Summary

Updated March 2025

Working with Partners to Increase Healthy Food Access

Food pantries rely on partners (regional food banks, WA State Department of Agriculture, retailers, financial donors, and farmers) to provide free food assistance. The Washington Food Coalition (WFC) and American Heart Association (AHA) collaborated with More Than Food Consulting to evaluate the impact of nutrition policies on access to healthy, nutritious and culturally relevant foods in food pantries in Washington State.

Methods

We gathered feedback from a sample of 60+ charitable food organizations and key stakeholders who partner with the WFC or AHA through surveys, focus groups and interviews:

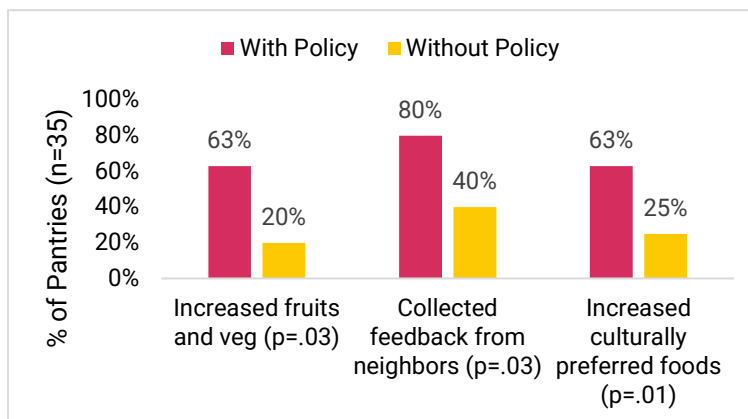
- Review of 31 food pantry nutrition policies for content and scope
- Survey data from 35 food pantries (63% response rate)
- Three focus groups with a total of 19 food pantries with and without nutrition policies
- Five interviews with food banks, grocery retailers and WSDA

Impact of Nutrition Policies

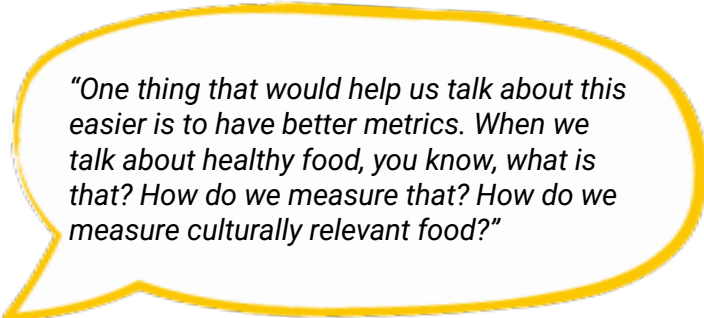
Results show that agencies with nutrition policies:

- Are more intentional and direct in communications and relationships with donors. They shared their policy or donation lists with individual donors who then donated healthier foods.
- Reported an increase in fruits and vegetables, collecting feedback from customers about food preferences and in customer preferred foods in the last 12 months.

"We are very specific about what it is that we want... And then when people want to do food drives, we're very deliberate about what it is that we want instead of just a food drive."



- Felt more confident in being able to define and discuss healthy foods. Among pantries without nutrition policies, and in interviews with food banks and retailers, there seemed to be confusion around how to define nutritious food.



“One thing that would help us talk about this easier is to have better metrics. When we talk about healthy food, you know, what is that? How do we measure that? How do we measure culturally relevant food?”

Key Learnings

Based on our findings from the policy reviews, surveys, focus groups and key informant interviews, we identified the following **three main learnings** from the evaluation:

1. Nutrition policies are useful tools to increase the supply of nutritious foods.
2. Additional support is needed in the form of technical assistance, capacity building to offer healthy foods (e.g. cold storage) and nutrition education with nutrition expertise, funding and partnerships.
3. Food pantries cannot do this work alone, but together with coalitions, food banks, retailers and state agencies, they can have a significant impact on the food system.

From these learnings, we identified opportunities for growth in nutrition security work in Washington State. Below are recommendations for participating organizations (food pantries, food banks, WFC/AHA and retail partners) and opportunities to create larger systems change.

Recommendations

Food banks, retailers, state agencies, and other donors can harness their collective impact to provide greater support for food pantries, using data and understanding the complexity of the larger food system. Pantry staff and interviewees mentioned how food banks, coalitions, retailers, and government agencies can focus on systemic changes to increase access to nutritious food, within the charitable food system and beyond. These recommendations include:

- **Gather better data:** Understanding the nutritional value of food in the charitable food system would be a first step in setting strategies and goals towards increasing nutritious foods. The HER Guidelines are a tool for this purpose.
- **Promote advocacy and collective action for pantries:** Pantries need more support in advocating for changes, such as better quality food and to have more autonomy in decisions around funding and implementing programs in their communities. Upstream changes are needed to improve the food system, which requires involvement of multiple partners.
- **Reevaluate charitable food’s role in the larger food system:** While the charitable food system can play a role in increasing nutrition security, they can’t do it alone. Access to SNAP or gift cards to grocery stores are methods of increasing access for people experiencing financial insecurity to participate in the larger, mainstream food system.

Everyone has a role to play. Food insecurity is a complex issue that requires a multi-pronged approach for solutions. Next, we outline actions individuals and organizations can take to promote nutrition security in Washington State.

Actions to Promote Nutrition Security in Washington State



Food Pantries

- Develop a nutrition policy using the WFC/AHA template
- Create an implementation plan to make sure the policy is put into action, and a plan to review the policy on a routine basis
- Collect feedback from customers about food preferences, and use the feedback for food sourcing
- Diversify food sources and build relationships with new donors
- Communicate about the importance of nutrition (to volunteers and in the pantry through signs or nudges), and about the pantry's nutrition policy

- Model better nutrition practices by adopting the HER Guidelines, developing a nutrition policy, and promoting nutritious foods
- Support pantries to adopt and implement nutrition policies and programs
- Connect pantries to funders, retailers and local farmers to diversify foods
- Collect and share data about the nutritional value of foods in the food bank's inventory system by listing the HER rank
- Create reports showing the types and amounts of food donated by retailers to set benchmarks and to identify high and low performing stores (e.g. amount of donated produce)



Food Banks



WFC/AHA

- Provide a compelling rationale to show the value of nutrition for food banks and pantries
- Continue to support pantries to develop nutrition policies and diversify food sources
- Share strategies to implement a nutrition policy and suggestions for reviewing the policy on a regular basis
- Build a consistent understanding about nutrition using the HER Guidelines
- Advocate for pantries to leverage funding opportunities with partners

- Provide standard guidance and training for retail staff across retail stores about the company's divert programs to encourage healthy donations
- Provide quality food that is responsive to the needs of pantries and their nutrition policy to ensure the burden of food waste is not passed along
- Track donation data and create reports showing the types and amounts of food donated using the HER Nutrition Guidelines (e.g. amount of donated produce)
- Leverage corporate social responsibility to highlight the commitment to food security in addition to reducing food waste



Retailers



Govt Agencies

- Use the HER Guidelines to communicate the nutritional value of foods distributed through USDA commodity programs
- Offer low barrier, multi-year funding to pantries to source healthy food and build capacity (e.g. staffing, cold storage)
- Implement regulations to support healthy donations from retailers to pantries