



The Washington Food Coalition (WFC) and the American Heart Association (AHA) collaborated with More Than Food Consulting (MTFC) to evaluate better practices in increasing access to healthy, nutritious and culturally relevant foods through charitable food organizations in Washington State, specifically through nutrition policies. Through a policy review, surveys, focus groups and interviews, the evaluation team explored the process of developing nutrition policies and the impact of nutrition policies at pantries. Based on the findings of the study, recommendations are included for all key partners in the charitable food system to support healthy food access in Washington State.



**Washington
Food Coalition**

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A note on language:

- In this report, “**food pantry**” refers to an agency that distributes free groceries directly to customers. Many food pantries in Washington State use the term “food bank” to describe themselves.
- In this report, “**food bank**” refers to an organization that warehouses and redistributes food to a large network of food pantries. There are three regional food banks in Washington State: Northwest Harvest, Second Harvest and Food Lifeline.
- In this report, “**customer**” refers to an individual who visits a food pantry and receives free food. Other terms may include neighbor, guest, client.
- When analyzing for significant associations or comparing differences between pantries, we include the “**p value**” for statistical significance at $p < .05$, meaning there is less than a 5% probability that the results were caused by chance.
- Emergency Food Assistance Program (**EFAP**): State program to provide funds for food assistance in Washington State, administered through EFAP leads.
- The Emergency Food Assistance Program (**TEFAP**): Federal program that provides people with low income free food assistance. USDA provides 100% American-grown USDA Foods and administrative funds to states to operate TEFAP.

BACKGROUND

Food insecurity is a complex issue. The issues of hunger and health are closely connected, leading to a growing focus on nutrition security. People living in food insecure households face barriers to eating healthy food that make them vulnerable to diet-related chronic diseases, including obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. Charitable food organizations (food banks and food pantries) distribute [billions of pounds](#) of food every year to people facing food insecurity in the U.S. These organizations are a key food access point for many families and present an opportunity to support community health through nutritious food access.

One way to increase healthy food access at food banks and pantries is to formalize efforts to source and distribute nutritious foods through a nutrition policy. A 2018 study, [A Tipping Point](#), surveyed 196 food banks and found that one-third of food banks had formal nutrition policies and more than half (59%) had informal nutrition guidelines. Of these food banks, 85% said their policy had not negatively impacted either annual donations or pounds of food.

Defining “healthy” foods poses another challenge for food banks and pantries, many of which do not have the expertise of a dietitian on staff. This led to the creation of the [Healthy Eating Research \(HER\) Nutrition Guidelines](#) for the Charitable Food System, which provide clear, specific, measurable guidelines for charitable food. When food banks and food pantries rank their food nutritionally with the HER Guidelines, they are working to increase access to healthy, nutritious foods for their neighbors. Adoption of the HER Guidelines has spread through food banks and pantries nationally since their publication in 2020.

In the annual Feeding America Network Activity Report, member food banks are asked what nutrition ranking system the food bank uses. Results from November 2022 found 73 food banks were identified as using the HER Nutrition Guidelines or the revised SWAP system, which aligns with the HER Guidelines. In addition to these food banks, MTFC is aware of several other food banks who either received funding from Partnership for a Healthier America to implement the HER Guidelines or have indicated that they are using the HER Guidelines. In total, we estimate that approximately [101 food banks nationally were using the HER Guidelines](#) as of June 2023.

MTFC collaborated with Feeding America to administer a survey to food banks in the spring of 2023. To better understand “how” food banks are using the HER Guidelines, the survey asked several additional questions. Just over half (59%) are ranking food in their inventory. Many food banks use the HER Guidelines to set goals for nutritious food and when making food sourcing decisions. One third of respondents have a nutrition policy that includes the HER Guidelines, and another 35% said they were planning to create a nutrition policy. Far fewer food banks said they used the HER Guidelines to talk with financial donors or food donors (19%). HER Guideline adoption and nutrition policy use in food pantries is not tracked consistently.

WFC and AHA support pantries in Washington State on nutrition initiatives and provide training and resources on nutrition education resources using the HER Guidelines. Since 2021, these two organizations have worked with over 80 food pantries, coalitions and meal programs in the state to develop and pass nutrition policies. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the impact of these nutrition policies and explore better practices in policy development and strategies to increase access to healthy foods in Washington State.

PROJECT GOALS

WFC and AHA collaborated with MTFC to evaluate better practices in increasing access to healthy, nutritious and culturally relevant foods through charitable food organizations in Washington State, specifically through nutrition policies. This study included two goals:

Process evaluation – to understand the process for creating, implementing and sustaining nutrition policies

Impact evaluation – to measure the impact of nutrition policies on food inventory, staff/volunteer experience and funding opportunities

This study included a policy review and both quantitative and qualitative data collection including surveys, focus groups and interviews. This report provides a comprehensive overview of the research project, complete with methodology on data collection, key findings and recommendations for WFC and AHA to shape their future work supporting food pantries in Washington State.

POLICY REVIEW

The first step in our evaluation was to review existing nutrition policies. WFC and AHA identified 55 charitable food organizations that they have engaged with to develop nutrition policies. Of those, 31 had nutrition policies readily available and we reviewed these. To begin the review process, MTFC, WFC, and AHA identified 13 criteria that could result in organizational changes, adoption of healthful practices at an agency, and increased sourcing and distribution of nutritious and culturally relevant foods by the agency. The criteria were sorted into three topics: Setting and buy-in, Defining healthy food, and Implementation.

Criteria of a Nutrition Policy:

Setting and Buy In	Defining Healthy Food	Implementation
1. Connects nutrition to mission	4. Types of food to increase	7. Strategy for different food sources
2. Leadership involved in development of policy	5. Types of food to decrease	8. Strategy for measuring impact
3. Community engagement	6. Nutrition standards	9. Process or plan for implementation
		10. Process for review & updates
		11. Other implementation tools
		12. Mentions choice

All the nutrition policies had strong rationales for why nutrition is a key part of their services and often identified the types of foods they plan to increase (through sourcing and distribution). Slightly fewer policies mentioned foods to decrease in food sourcing efforts. The majority of pantries used the AHA or WFC policy template. Pantries that used the WFC or AHA template were more comprehensive in including the elements listed above. Pantries that used the WFC or AHA template were significantly more likely to have 10 or more criteria (71% vs. 29%) compared to those that didn't use the template ($p=.04$).

SURVEY OF FOOD PANTRIES

In March and April 2024, we invited 56 food pantries who had partnered with WFC or AHA around nutrition work to participate in a survey and 35 pantries responded (63% response rate).

Demographics of Agencies

The sample of pantries in this study are higher capacity than many traditional food pantries. For example, the majority (66%) have at least 1 full-time paid staff, only 9% consider themselves to be small pantries, and 60% have an annual operating budget greater than \$100k. For comparison, a study of 90 food pantries from around the country in 2022 found that 53% had at least 1 full-time paid staff, and 22% considered themselves to be small pantries. The median number of customers per month was 525, with some pantries serving a high number of customers. The median number of volunteers per month was 25.

Characteristic	Description	Number	% of Agencies
Role at the pantry	Pantry leader, Executive Director, CEO	14	40
	Pantry coordinator or manager	19	54
	Paid staff	1	3
	Volunteer	1	3
Full-time paid staff	No paid staff, all volunteers	9	26
	1 – 2 part-time paid staff	3	9
	1 – 2 full-time paid staff	8	23
	More than 2 full-time paid staff	15	43
Size of pantry	Small	3	9
	Medium	18	51
	Large	14	40
Open for distribution	1 – 3 days per month	3	9
	1 day per week	10	29
	2+ days per week, no evenings or weekends	9	26
	2+ days per week, some evenings or weekends	13	37
How often people can receive food	1 time per month	1	3
	2-3 times per month	6	17
	1 time per week	16	46
	2+ times per week	12	34
Level of choice	None	7	20
	Limited	4	11
	Modified	2	6
	Full Choice	22	63
Status of policy	Do not have a nutrition policy	3	9
	Starting drafting policy and work is on hold	1	3
	Actively working on a policy	6	17
	Follow policy of our EFAP lead or coalition	5	14
	Have a completed and adopted policy	20	57

Characteristics of Pantries with Nutrition Policies

Among the 35 pantries, the majority have an active policy (20 pantries, 57%), five follow a policy from their EFAP lead or pantry network (14%), six are working on a policy (17%), and four have no policy (11%). The 25 pantries that selected “Have a completed and adopted policy” or “Follow policy of our EFAP lead or coalition” were asked additional questions specific to their nutrition policy.

Of the policies initially reviewed, 17 pantries also completed the survey. Policy criteria were compared against survey responses about practices currently in place at the pantry. The only significant difference was that pantries with more criteria were more likely to track the percentage of produce in their pantry ($p=.05$). Having more criteria included in the policy was associated with having less unhealthy food and approached statistical significance. There are opportunities for pantries to include a stronger process for reviewing and updating nutrition policies, and to measure their impact.

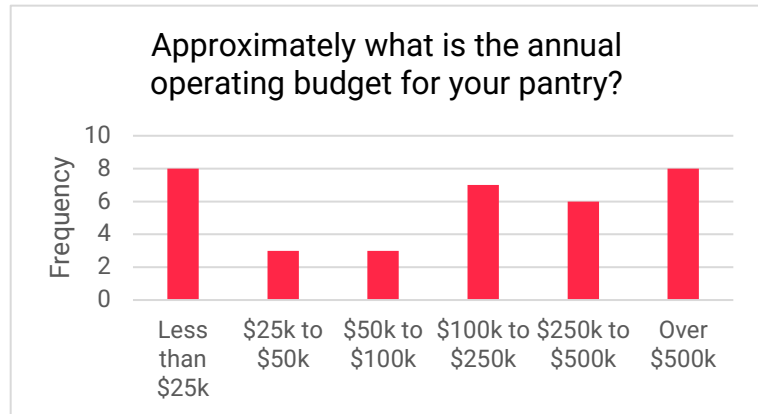
Characteristic	Description	Number	Percent
Time policy in place	Less than 1 year	5	20
	1 – 2 years	7	28
	2 – 5 years	9	36
	More than 5 years	4	16
Implementation plan	Yes	13	54
	Not yet, but planning to	5	21
	No	6	25
Language to review	Yes	14	61
	No	9	39
Has plan been reviewed	Yes	5	21
	No	15	63
	NA, policy was passed in last year	4	17
Resources used to develop nutr policy	Template or support from AHA or WFC	15	60
	Nutrition guidelines (HER or DGA)	17	68
	Nutrition experts	7	28
	Example from another food pantry	11	44
How do you communicate about your policy	Share with staff responsible for purchasing or ordering food	21	84
	Share with food donors and community	12	48
	Share with financial donors	4	16
	Post on website	5	20
	Share in pantry with customers	8	32
	Share with volunteers (eg during orientation)	8	32
	Include in other communications (newsletters, signs, etc)	6	24
	We haven't communicated about our policy	2	8

Communications

There are many opportunities for pantries to communicate more about nutrition in general, and about their nutrition policies specifically. Half of pantries include nutrition in their mission statement, and another three pantries (9%) are planning to include, while 41% currently do not. About one-third (38%) of pantries include nutrition information on their websites, while 25% are planning to and 38% do not include. While the majority of pantries communicate about their policies with staff about purchasing or ordering food, less than half (48%) share with food donors, and far fewer communicate with financial donors, on their website or newsletters. One director said they “share in grant writing”.

Pantry Operating budgets

There is a wide range of pantry budgets, with 23% having budgets under \$25k, and another 23% with budgets over \$500k. For some analyses, we dichotomized the budgets between smaller budgets (under \$250k, 60% of pantries) and larger budgets (over \$250k, 40% of pantries).



Sources of Food

The following are the averages for food sources from all agencies. The major source of food is the regional food bank (32% of food), but the distribution varies *widely* between agencies.

Sources of food – Average for all agencies	Percent of food
Regional food bank	32
Government sources	23
Purchased	20
Retail donations	11
Individual donations	7
Gleaning from farms	3
WSDA FA sources	3

As one example, while 80% of all agencies receive less than 10% of their food from individual donations, one agency receives 80% of their food from individual donations. Another example is that nine agencies (26%) do not receive any retail donations. There may be opportunities to work with food pantries that are outliers and are receiving the majority of their food from only one or two sources to try to diversify where their food comes from.

Food Types and Percentage Change Over Past Year for All Agencies

The table below highlights the variability in food types and changes over the past year for pantries with and



without nutrition policies in place. For several food types, there are almost even splits between pantries that indicate a decrease or an increase.

	Total food	Fruits/Veggies	Low fat dairy	Lean protein	Whole grains	Cultural familiar	Unhealthy bevs/snacks
Decreased	40	23	26	17	23	14	34
Same	14	31	37	46	49	34	40
Increased	46	43	31	34	23	37	20
Don't know		3	3	3	6	9	3
N/A			3			6	3

Comparing Differences Between Pantries with and without Nutrition Policies

For some analyses, we dichotomized the responses into whether factors increased or not rather than a comparison between increased, remained the same or decreased. For several questions, the numbers were too small to run statistical comparisons.

Regarding organizational practices such as mission statement, nutrition staff, and tracking food nutritionally, there were no significant differences between pantries that follow a nutrition policy or have adopted their own policy compared to pantries without a policy. There are a few significant differences listed below between pantries that have their own completed nutrition policy compared to pantries that either do not a policy or follow a policy from an EFAP lead or coalition.

1. Pantries with an active policy were significantly more likely to say that **fruits and vegetables had increased** over the last 12 months (63%) compared to pantries without their own policy (20%, $p=.03$).
2. Pantries with an active nutrition policy are significantly **more likely to collect feedback** from customers about food preferences (80%) compared to those without an active policy, or those who follow the policy of an EFAP lead (40%), $p=.05$.
3. Pantries with an active policy were more likely to say that **customer preferred foods sourced by the pantry increased** (63%), compared to pantries without an active policy, or those who follow the policy of an EFAP lead (25%), $p=.01$.

There were mixed results regarding unhealthy beverages and snacks. Most of the pantries without nutrition policies said these items remained the same (67%). For pantries with policies, 44% said they decreased, 22% said they remained the same, and 33% said they increased over the past 12 months.

Other Insights

- ❖ Pantries with large budgets (over \$250k) were significantly more likely to include information about nutrition on their website, to talk with food donors about donating nutritious food, and to collect feedback from customers about food preferences.
- ❖ Small and medium pantries were significantly less likely to collect feedback from customers about food preferences compared to large pantries ($p<.01$). This was true for both pantries with and without a nutrition policy.

- ❖ Pantries that included nutrition information on their website were more likely to include signage or “nudges” to promote nutritious food (p=.04).
- ❖ Pantries that have staff or volunteers with nutrition expertise were more likely to offer nutrition education (p=.02).
- ❖ Pantries that provided nutrition education training to staff and volunteers were more likely to offer nudges (p=.02).

Resources Needed

While pantries mentioned several factors that would help them source healthy food, the two areas that were consistent were funding and more healthy food from donors and food banks. All 35 pantries were asked to rank the top 3 resources needed to increase access to healthy food at their pantry. The top priorities included:

1. Funding – More than half of pantries (57%) said funding was the top resource needed.
2. More healthy food from donors & food banks – 17%
3. Space – 14%

Among the 10 pantries that do not have an active policy, the top resources needed to create a policy were:

- Time to implement the policy
- Support from food donors and retailers to provide healthy food
- Information to show the value of nutrition for staff and volunteers
- Interest from customers for healthier foods

FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS:

Following the pantry surveys, the evaluation team wanted to learn more about the responses from pantry directors, including actions around nutrition policies. Given the diversity and differences between pantries from the surveys, **three (3) focus groups** were conducted:

1. Pantries with an active nutrition policy
2. Pantries with incomplete policies or following the policy of another organization
3. Pantries without a nutrition policy

These focus groups lasted 1.5 hours, hosted virtually over Zoom. All participants in the three focus groups were asked similar questions about the purpose of a nutrition policy, the development and implementation of a policy, changes seen with or without a nutrition policy, challenges faced, and resources needed. A total of 19 individuals participated across the three focus groups.

Transcripts from the three focus groups were analyzed and compared by two members of the evaluation team. They were reviewed by topic area (purpose of policy, development of policy, implementing the policy, impact of policy, challenges and resources needed) and then coded for key themes. This was an iterative process where the two members reviewed the transcripts independently, discussed possible codes and themes, then reviewed independently again, and had discussions to identify final themes.

The evaluation team wanted to learn more about the Washington State charitable food context and potential contributors for healthy food access outside of the pantry setting. In focus groups, food pantry staff and volunteers identified a few key partners who help with food procurement. The evaluation team conducted **five (5) key informant interviews** with these partners:

- Two grocery retailers who donate food
- The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) who administers commodity programs and grants (three individuals participated in one focus group), and
- Two regional food banks

The questions were tailored to the audience (retailers, WSDA, or food bank), and in each interview, evaluators asked about existing policies and views about nutritious foods, feedback from pantries about food, and ways to support pantries in sourcing and distributing nutritious foods. Transcripts from interviews were analyzed using the themes identified from the focus groups. Additional themes emerged in this process.

Five Key Themes emerged from the focus groups and interviews, listed in order of frequency:

1. Donor Relationships
 - a. Subtheme: Take the good with the bad
2. Scarcity / Lack of Resources
3. Nutrition: Importance and Conflict
 - a. Subtheme: Food Waste
4. Neighbor Feedback & Preferred Food
5. Food Purchasing

Below are summaries and relevant quotes from both the focus groups and interviews for each key theme.

1. Donor Relationships:

Some pantries with a nutrition policy described their relationships with donors (individual, retail, corporate) to have been positively impacted by their nutrition policy. Others described how a nutrition policy allowed more intentional and directed communications and relationships with donors. Among pantries with a policy, several people mentioned being intentional about food they wanted and trying to focus on foods to increase when talking to donors rather than focusing on foods to decrease.

- "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."
- "Instead of saying like, we don't really want candy, you know, we just say, oh, we'd love to get like the health food that is more expensive for people to buy at the grocery store. Because then you're telling them no without actually telling them no."

- “If you start with, we can't accept that anymore, then the people hear, we don't need food anymore. So, which is not the case. It's the, you know, these are the items that, you know, that we need the most.”

Across the three focus groups, there was an undertone of fear or anxiety in talking with donors about nutrition. There were concerns that these requests would reduce donations or donors would find other food banks to donate to. Only one participant actually experienced a decline in donations due to a nutrition policy and most of the negative comments and concerns came from the group without nutrition policies.

- Negative: “We had a large donor that we would get regular truckloads from. And a lot of those truckloads would include like Monsters and Red Bulls and things like that, whole pallets of them. So we had those same conversations with them. And for about three months, we saw a really big decline in what they were giving us.”
- Positive: “When people ask if they're going to do a food drive and they say what would you like. We will typically give them a little list. And then we tend to get that so that's a good thing you know instead of getting Frosted Flakes and FrootLoops.”
- Fear about a nutrition policy: “It would impact donations.” “Funding would be one for sure. Donations would be the other. You definitely don't want to put any barriers in place that people are going to misinterpret.”
- Mixed: “But let's say Coca-Cola wants to donate orange juice, but in order to accept the orange juice, you also have to take the Coke product, which is both not nutritious, super hard to handle, heavy, takes up floor space, none of us have ample floor space.”

Subtheme: Take the good with the bad

The fear of losing donations led to a mentality and subtheme of ‘we will take the good with the bad’ because they had to take everything and strive to increase the proportion of healthy to unhealthy foods.

- “We just kind of say, you know, we're going to take whatever you're willing to give and we will sort it.”
- “We don't turn away any food.”
- “We become the ‘beggars can't be choosers’, because we have to take the crappy food from grocery rescue in order to get the good food.”
- “Because most of my volunteers are older, they've been in the, they've been at the food bank for many years and their mentality was we take whatever we get because we might not have it tomorrow, like our donors might not be there tomorrow.”

Interviews:

In conversations with staff from food banks and retail stores, two key elements of donor relationships with retail partners rose to the surface. The first is the randomness of foods that are donated – retailers and food bank staff acknowledged the lack of control over what foods are available to donate depending on what products do not sell. One food bank staff said, “So from the grocery, like retail side of things that my team oversees, we have a lot less agency to determine like what types of foods comes through.”

On the flip side, the relationships between food pantries and retailers play a critical role in aligning donations with the food pantries' ability to take the foods. Having buy-in from the corporate level, training for pantries and stores about the donation process and building relationships between the pantries and store staff allow for pantries to influence which foods are donated (setting standards for quality and what they can accept) and for store staff to feel engaged with the mission of reducing food waste and supporting the community. Retailers suggested that food banks talk about the human side and the people who will receive the food.

- "I feel like having that open line of communication going both ways where the food bank can reach out to us [the retailer] and we can reach out to the food bank is always beneficial."

The fear and anxiety of losing donations from retailers if they mention nutrition policies was reinforced from retailers who said pantries can't be too picky. Retailers did note that if pantries were to restrict what they were willing to accept, following a nutrition policy for example, it would be problematic for the store, and they would likely find a pantry that would accept all available donations.

- "We do have issues sometimes where our locations will reach out and say the food bank's being picky... But yeah, I would say that would be the only concern if food banks started coming out with a nutrition policy is that retailers might say, well, you have to take everything that I have to offer."

2. Scarcity / Lack of Resources:

In the three focus groups, participants were asked about challenges to increasing access to nutritious foods and additional resources needed. The most common challenge was a lack of resources, which could generally be categorized as external (lack of food due to food costs) and internal (lack of staffing, equipment or suitable facilities). Food costs came up most often and most pantry staff expressed a desire for additional funding to purchase quality, nutritious and local foods. Because of the scarcity mentality, pantry staff commented on the tradeoff between quality vs quantity of food.

- "There's no doubt if we had the funding, there would be some things that we would always have available. Would have way more vegetables and way more fruit available."
- "Purchasing nutritional food is a lot more expensive. So we really had to increase our budget and that is also happening at the same time as serving more people than we ever have before."
- "So if we would have more funding, we would definitely use it for more staff."
- "When we have to fundraise for every damn penny to pay rent and salaries and gas and everything, it's overwhelming. There's not that much money there for us to suddenly have to go and buy all that food."

Interviews:

Across the interviews, individuals noted the increased demand in the charitable food system, with more people seeking food assistance. One interviewee mentioned a possible factor in the demand is the reduced barriers statewide to accessing food assistance, such as the increase in income guidelines to receive TEFAP foods. This increased demand creates a concern around scarcity of resources - even in the face of costs per pound decreasing in WSDA product and increase of pounds of food donated year over year by retailers. Retailers noted a scarcity in time to sort donations and food banks mentioned limited purchasing budgets and limited cold storage at pantries to accept perishable food such as produce. Because of this scarcity, most interviewees addressed the tradeoffs that need to be considered, often nutrition against quantity. Food bank staff framed this tradeoff between nutrition and food scarcity as a "hierarchy of needs": before pantries can feel secure in focusing on nutritional quality, they must have enough food.

- "And so we have limited funds and limited timeframes and limited trucks. We need to try to create an order that works for the entire state at the best we can... Sometimes we don't get all the products we want because we order something else or we order more expensive product and have to cut something else."
- "It's somewhat dependent on Maslov's hierarchy of needs for the pantries who are just, we just need food, right?"

3. Nutrition: Importance and Conflict

Across all three focus groups, staff recognized the importance of offering nutritious foods to the community. People at organizations that had nutrition policies reflected on how the nutrition policy formalized their commitment to nutrition and reflected practices that were already in place. Even some organizations without active nutrition policies mention nutrition in their mission statements and staff emphasized the importance of offering fresh produce and foods that were low in saturated fat, sodium and added sugars.

- "We were wanting to implement or cement in a policy things that we were already doing so that we could then talk about it in the community as well and in grant writing."
- "Our mission statement says we provide nutritious food."

Yet people raise the main concern that a focus on nutrition and quality foods would decrease the total amount of foods distributed. Another conflict that arose in the focus groups came from the way nutrition was discussed and described by the three groups. Many focus group participants highlighted the importance of nutrition education, for the pantry team as well as for customers. Yet across all three groups, it was noted that not all partners and volunteers bought in to the importance of nutrition. In the group without nutrition policies, there also seemed to be some confusion around how to define nutrition. While they identified produce, lean meat and whole grains as desirable and nutritious items, additional complexity was mentioned for the pantry setting:

- “There's a scale on what's nutritious and what isn't, and a canned corn or a canned green bean is still more nutritious than no green bean. And teaching people how to if you need low sodium you know you can rinse your green beans.”
- [Nutrition]: “It's a great buzz word. It's a great area to start a conversation. But quite frankly, the majority of people who are on here who are food pantries or food banks, including ourselves, it's not the first thing that we talk about.”
- “We want nutritious food. Why? it'll improve their health and life overall. And, yeah, some people kind of poo poo it.”

Interviews:

As heard in the focus groups, the discussion around providing nutritious foods started with a need for clarity in definition and measurement. Among all the interviewees, there was a general assumption that the food provided is healthy. However, what this meant was not entirely clear and encompasses foods from produce to meats to ‘not junk food’. Often, ‘nutrition’ was a stand in word for food quality. Better tracking or metrics, which would require a clear definition of nutritious foods, would prioritize and support improving nutritional quality.

- “One thing that would help us talk about this easier is to have better metrics. When we talk about healthy food, know, what is that? How do we measure that? How do we measure culturally relevant food?”
- “With the Food Procurement Policy, it was focused on buying the most economical food... And we removed that emphasis to the Food Procurement Policy to allow people to make some different choices...I think that has made a big turn in how pantries are viewing those procurement policies, giving them that justification to broaden the people that they can purchase from or the types of healthy food that they can purchase.”

Few of the interviewees were directly familiar with pantry nutrition policies or expressed them to be relevant because there was such a varied response across all pantries when it comes to food preferences and nutritional priority. As discussed above for the theme of Scarcity, there is also a conflict between the ideas of nutritious foods and sufficient foods. Food bank staff suggested that larger agencies tend to focus more on nutrition, whereas smaller, all volunteer-run agencies are more focused on quantity versus quality.

- “We're just trying to get food, you know, we just want the shelves to be full.”
- “Nutrition is not a typical focus of conversation.”

Subtheme: Food Waste

From another perspective, one of the priorities for food pantries and organizations is reducing food waste and negative environmental impacts by rescuing food. A focus on nutrition may be in conflict with the goal of reducing food waste and raises the question of what should be done with non-nutritious donations and salvage items. Many pantries have partnerships with pig farmers to keep inedible foods out of the waste stream. This can put pantries in an uncomfortable position of providing food disposal for retailers.

- “Our goal is not only providing nutritious food but we want to keep food out of the landfill.”

- "We take what they give us and then if it's something we can't use we call it pre-bacon – it goes to our local pig farm."
- "The director of operations had to do a lot of talking with our regular donors about the types of things that they were giving us and we had to be ready to accept that those pounds of food were going to look different because we weren't going to be getting energy drinks and you know we weren't going to be the dumping ground anymore" (among a pantry with a nutrition policy)

Most retailers have a divert program to deal with food that can't be sold. The approach to food waste involves a multi-pronged strategy - repurposing unsold items into new products, donating edible food to food banks, and diverting non-edible waste through recycling and composting. Donations make business sense by avoiding disposal fees, while also supporting the community. The retailers we interviewed spoke about the need for staff training to encourage donations and ensuring the burden of disposal is not simply passed on to the pantries.

- "It just invites an easy solution to just throw things in there, so we definitely had to do some retraining."
- "We obviously have two goals. One is food security in our community, but one is to very much minimize food waste."
- "If they're receiving food that they're not going to use, that's not helpful. But the amount of interest in solving the food waste has exploded."

4. Neighbor Feedback / Preferred Foods:

Neighbor feedback was primarily focused on preferred food items and how agencies were prioritizing those foods. Food pantry staff identified protein (specifically eggs and non-pork products) and produce as highest priority items for neighbors. While these high-priority items align closely with nutrition frameworks including the HER Nutrition Guidelines, the group without active nutrition policies did comment that a nutrition policy would be at odds with foods desired by their customers. However, survey results also indicated pantries without policies were less likely to survey their customers' food needs compared to pantries with policies

- "We were really trying to make sure that we source not just culturally relevant foods but foods that they could put on their shelves and people could see a label like a Del Monte label or something that they might find in their actual grocery store."
- "The nutrition policy it makes it difficult to make them culturally relevant."
- "The number one thing was, but if you provide us with spices or sauces, we can take that food and make it taste more like home."

Interviews:

When asked about feedback from pantries and neighbors around preferred foods, WSDA staff, food bank staff and retailers had different perspectives. As discussed under Donor Relations, retailers value relationship building between food pantries and stores. However, retailers mentioned the food available to donate is random and out of their control. The WSDA seeks

food pantry feedback and uses it to make sourcing decisions. Food banks strive to use this feedback to direct desired foods to the communities that prefer those foods and reduce barriers so that food pantries can make their own food sourcing decisions.

- “To the degree we can, we will direct culturally appropriate food to the Indian, to the pantries, et cetera, on the reservations.”
- “We're, I think, relying on agencies to know what's best.”

5. Food Purchasing:

Nutrition policies have the greatest potential and direct application to shape food purchasing. However, it is of note that food pantries without nutrition policies also prioritized nutritious food when purchasing food.

- “When we do use grant money to purchase things, we just know that we're purchasing things according to the nutrition vision.”
- “We use our nutrition policy to prioritize non-processed foods so we pretty much only buy produce, milk, eggs and then all protein.”
- “I follow what the policy says when I'm buying food.”

Subtheme: Local Foods

In addition to prioritizing nutritious and quality foods, Washington State pantry staff expressed a distinct preference and focus for local foods. Local foods were mainly identified as an area for growth and priority for additional funding.

- “We spend a huge amount on fresh produce because you just don't get it as a donation. So we work with a lot of local farmers.”
- “I try to focus a lot of more on our local produce and more on the local farmers.”

Sourcing Food from Food Banks:

Regional food banks (e.g. Food Lifeline, Northwest Harvest and Second Harvest) are key sources of food for many food pantries. From the spring 2024 survey, food pantries received on average a third of their food from the regional food bank(s), although amounts ranged widely from 0% to 90% of the inventory. It was notable that these food banks were not mentioned or discussed much in the focus groups. The few comments about the food banks indicated they were not seen as a support or leader for increasing nutritious food access.

- “So like I get food from Second Harvest which is an amazing organization, they do so much wonders but not all of that food is the best nutrition.”

Interviews:

Food purchasing came up less frequently in the interviews. WSDA staff mentioned some of the tradeoffs of meeting nutritional goals and neighbor preferences in food purchases given supply, the variety of interests and the desire for food to be distributed and not sit on the shelf. Food banks mentioned prioritizing local food, often fresh produce and proteins, with small grants and funding available. It was noted that purchasing food from local farmers was a way to build relationships and increase donations from those sources as well. Being able to financially benefit farmers shows the value placed in the product and opens doors for additional donated product to be added to existing orders/pickups. This could provide a model for how seed funding in farm to pantry grants could have a larger impact.

- “Those same food banks, food pantries could show that we do value what that farmer has to offer, right? It’s not us always begging for food, it’s ‘we can compensate you now’ and what we found out was that once we show that value and strengthen that relationship through that procurement process that the donations went way up.”

LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS OF THE STUDY DESIGN:

One key limitation of this study is that we collected information from a small number of pantries, and not all the same pantries engaged in the policy review, survey and focus groups. It is important to recognize that the pantries who were invited and who participated in the survey are higher capacity than many traditional food pantries. Having larger budgets, paid staff and larger spaces than other pantries may make it more likely that these pantries prioritize healthy food. Therefore, results may not be representative of other pantries. It is possible that with a larger sample we may find additional differences between pantries and other important learnings.

There are also some notable strengths of this study, including the mixed methods design that included quantitative and qualitative feedback. We also gathered feedback from multiple stakeholders in the food system including pantries, food banks, a state agency and retailers.

DEVELOPMENT AND IMPACT OF NUTRITION POLICIES

During the review of nutrition policies, and in conversations during the focus groups and interviews, three primary topics emerged related to the development of policies: Setting and Buy In; Defining Healthy Food; and Implementation. We use these three topics to describe what can make a nutrition policy successful and then provide recommendations for supporting food pantries.

Setting and Buy-In

Among the pantries with nutrition policies, comments about the purpose of the policy mainly focused on cementing practices that were already in place or setting a standard for the future. The development process gives pantry leaders, staff and volunteers an opportunity to come together to solidify their commitment for nutritious foods, provide a clear definition of healthy foods, and create strategies for sourcing healthy foods. A few pantries mentioned using the policy to set aspirations for future work.

- “Moving away from charity and towards health equity.”
- “Aspirational goal: move past poverty and to support the local economy.”

Several pantries praised the WFC and AHA, and it was clear that support from both groups was instrumental for pantries to develop nutrition policies. The pantries were split on the value of having leadership involved in the development of the policy. For some, board members provided key incentives and for other pantries, those involved with implementing the policy (namely operations staff) developed and implemented the policy. Pantries that had more comprehensive policies were more likely to involve leadership, as were policies passed within the last two years.

- “It was driven out of the board's mission for us to provide higher quality service and focus on our customers, which I wrote in their strategic plan for them that we were going to focus more on customers ”

Like leadership, volunteers have the potential to make a nutrition policy successful depending on their buy-in and actions to support the work outlined in the nutrition policy. Having support and buy-in from volunteers, who often are key in implementing a nutrition policy and providing service to guests, was helpful but was not always in place.

- “I need help. So getting the volunteers to back you up is a big one.”
- “Getting the volunteers on board, um, can sometimes yes can be a struggle...just getting the volunteers to follow SWAP in particular.”

Defining Healthy Food

In the focus groups, it was clear that representatives from pantries with nutrition policies felt more confident in being able to define and discuss healthy foods. Across pantries without policies and food bank staff, retailers and WSDA staff, there was mixed language used to describe and define nutrition. Having a clear and consistent definition of nutrition is an important impact of the nutrition policy. The Healthy Eating Research (HER) Nutrition Guidelines provide clear standards for defining, measuring and tracking healthy foods in the charitable food setting. Based on the fear of losing donations, even when foods were clearly defined, pantries emphasized foods to increase rather than saying no to food donations.

Implementation

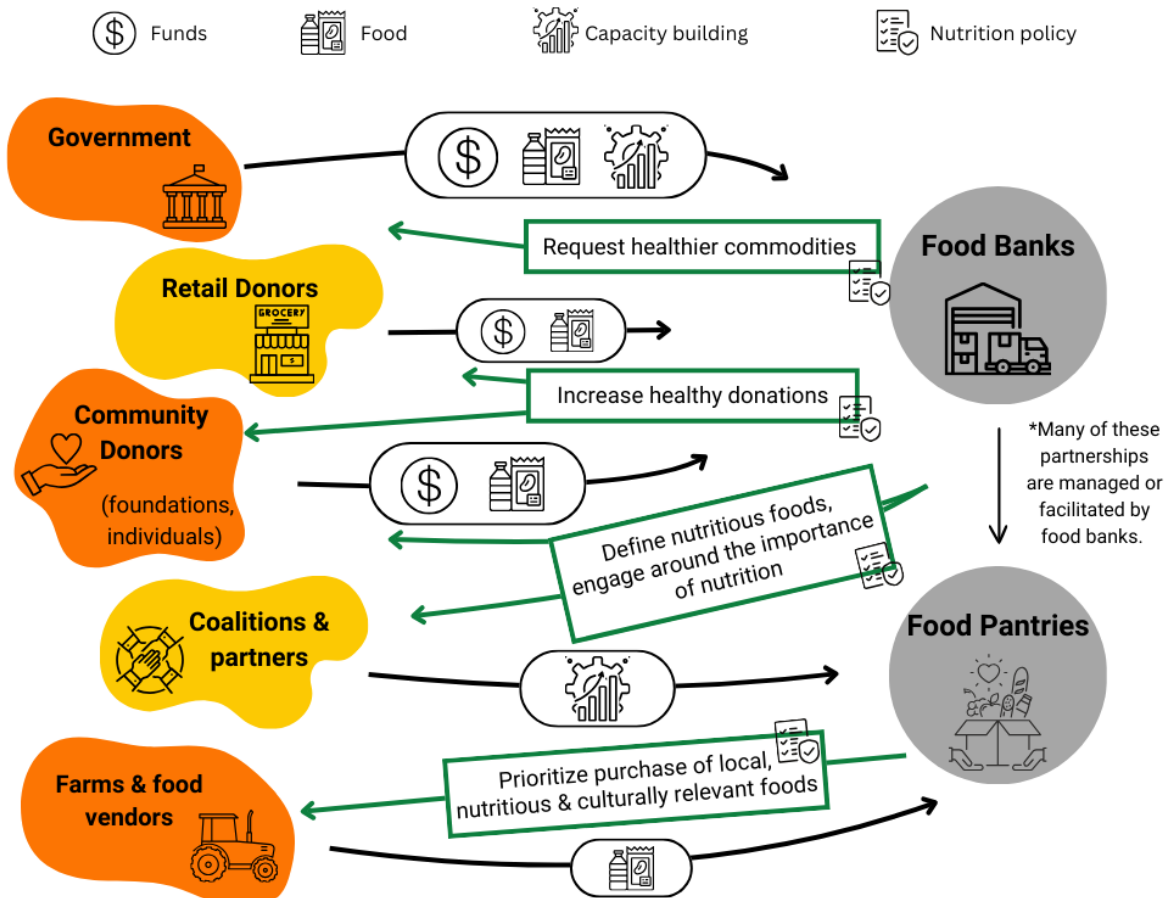
In the focus groups, we heard more details and examples of how nutrition policies were implemented and the impact they had for the organization.

- Fundraising: One pantry staff noted that referencing the nutrition policy in grant applications had a positive impact on grants and funding received.
 - “For our regular donors or anybody that wants to make a donation we basically give them our policy and a list of foods.”
- Sourcing food: Many pantry staff members remarked on being able to share the nutrition policy or donation lists with individual donors who then donated healthier foods. The standards in nutrition policies were also applied to foods ordered – to the extent that some larger agencies would not order from providers that did not provide nutrition facts for their product. Pantries mentioned that policies are important for purchasing foods.

- “I started including ours [nutrition policy] in our grant writing process, specifically when we're asking for money for our senior program. And I've noticed that we've been getting more yeses, you know, because we're more elaborate with it.”
- Sustainability: For many, a nutrition policy was a way of cementing practices already in place to help sustain those practices. Additional funding and resources were seen as critical for the long-term sustainability of a nutrition focus.
- Impact: Pantries with an active policy were significantly more likely to say that fruits and vegetables had increased over the last 12 months and to collect feedback from customers about food preferences compared to pantries that either do not have a policy or follow a policy from an EFAP lead or coalition.

The impact of nutrition policies depends on the implementation and relationships with partners, as illustrated in the graphic below.

Nutrition Policy Influence Points



Technical Assistance (TA) for Pantries



Currently, WFC and AHA have a process for helping pantries to develop nutrition policies. For some agencies that are skeptical about the role of a policy, WFC and AHA can provide a compelling rationale to show the value of nutrition for food banks and pantries. Additional TA could support food banks and pantries to define healthy foods, develop nutrition policies and diversify food sources.

The implementation of nutrition policies varied widely between pantries. There are opportunities to implement policies more robustly, particularly communicating more with external stakeholders about a nutrition policy. A solid next step for technical assistance is to **create an implementation toolkit** to:

- Provide guidance and a template implementation plan to put the policy into action among staff and volunteers. Include suggestions for reviewing the policy on a regular basis.
- Provide training and resources to build nutrition expertise at pantries using clear definitions of healthy food, such as HER Nutrition Guidelines.
- Encourage smaller pantries and those with smaller budgets to include information about nutrition on their website, to talk with food donors about donating nutritious food, and to collect feedback from customers about food preferences.
- Provide example language and support for communications about nutrition in general, and about nutrition policies specifically.
- Retailers suggested that food banks and pantries talk about the human side and the people who will receive the food when requesting healthy donations. Retailers also suggest scheduling meetings in person with store staff to build relationships and discuss food donations.
- Encourage food pantries that receive the majority of their food from only one or two sources to try to diversify where their food comes from and to seek additional food sources.

KEY LEARNINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings from the policy reviews, surveys, focus groups and key informant interviews, 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. These recommendations are based on 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 and nutrition education (e.g. cold storage, nutrition expertise), funding and partnerships
3. Food pantries cannot do this work alone, but together with food banks, retailers and state agencies, they can have significant weight and impact on the food system

Pantries with and without policies identified funding as the top resource to support healthy food access at their pantry. In focus groups, they expanded on the priorities for additional funding.

Priorities for Funding

- 1 FOOD** Food costs are high and nutritious foods are often more expensive. Pantry priorities include: fresh produce, meat, eggs, and spices.
- 2 EQUIPMENT** Offering healthy foods often requires cold storage.
- 3 STAFFING** In addition to volunteers, dedicated staff are also key to building capacity to offer nutritious foods.
- 4 FACILITY** Maintaining a space cost funds that are often not covered by grants.

"Refrigerator space is hard to come by"

"I would probably put more in wages for my staff"

"There's no doubt if we had the funding, there would be some things that we would always have available. [We] would have way more vegetables and way more fruit available."

Strategies for Successful Communications about Nutrition



Less than half of pantries with policies communicate about their policy with food donors, and far fewer share it with financial donors, on their website or newsletters. Most pantries expressed anxiety in talking with food donors about nutrition out of fear of losing donations, and it was most common in the group without nutrition policies. The following strategies were shared by pantry staff:

- (1) Use multiple points of contact:* Include information about nutrition on websites, talk with food donors about donating nutritious food, describe nutrition policies in fundraising appeals and grant proposals
- (2) Start with Yes:* Focus on foods you want donated rather than food that you won't accept
- (3) Focus on the WHY:* Talk with retailers about the human side and the people who will receive the food. Find time to talk with staff by scheduling a meeting.

Everyone has a role to play. Food insecurity is a complex issue that requires a multi-pronged approach for solutions.



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 (staffing, cold storage)
- Implement regulations to support healthy donations from retailers to pantries

Recommendations for Systems and Policy Change

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 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 available for this purpose. Retailers, food banks and food pantries could track donation data and create reports showing the types and amounts of food donated, starting with produce, to set benchmarks and to identify both high and low performing stores. Not all retailers or pantries are equipped to track the types of foods being donated or the nutritional quality of food being distributed.
- **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 program implementation in their communities. Upstream changes are needed to improve the food system, which requires involvement of multiple partners. Suggestions included national food standards to improve the quality of food in the US, grocery store nutrition policies, and higher quality foods through government programs.
 - “One of the things I’d like to see the coalition do is be more of an advocate...you have Food Lifeline, the Feeding America Programs, and they’re advocating for the business and not for us...I would really like to see Washington Food Coalition step up more to challenge organizations like (large retailer)...The smaller organizations have banded together and they are really good access for you to get to the real need and not to pay a lot of overhead.” [edited for clarity]

All of the interviewees mentioned the potential impact of collective action. This starts with a unified vision (e.g. of prioritizing nutrition) and then organizing around a proposed solution. Opportunities include: cooperative retail pick up and redistribution to pantries or a unified vision around nutrition and joint advocacy efforts.

- **Reevaluating 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. When it comes to food purchasing and raising nutrition standards for charitable food, the question was raised:
 - “It’s hard speaking about the charitable food system because I keep seeing it’s trying to like morph itself into the mainstream food system and I’m like, well, why don’t we just give people everybody access to the mainstream food system?”

Access to SNAP and gift cards to grocery stores are methods of increasing access for people experiencing financial insecurity to participate in the larger, mainstream food system. Advocating for increased SNAP funding can help households shop for food in the mainstream food system and also help support the local economy of retailers.

NEXT STEPS FOR WFC & AHA

The WFC and AHA will reflect on learnings from this evaluation to plan several next steps, including:

- 1. Disseminate full report and executive summary to partners throughout Washington State and nationally including through More Than Food Consulting's national network of food banks and pantries.*
- 2. Host a discussion that includes leaders and food system stakeholders to share and address findings and recommendations.*
- 3. Develop and share implementation guidance with food pantries to effectively launch and maintain their nutrition policies.*
- 4. Continue to provide technical assistance and capacity building to food pantries supporting their efforts to distribute nutritious food.*
- 5. Explore collective action with key stakeholders to advocate for larger systems change.*

WFC and AHA hope these findings encourage stakeholders at every level of the charitable food system to better understand the influence they wield within the larger system. By reevaluating and aligning our collective efforts through strategies like nutrition policies, together we can increase nutritious food access for all.

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