

How data drives food distribution during COVID-19

When first arriving at a Community Food Distribution (CFD), no matter the location, clients and volunteers are often in awe of the volume of cars lined up to receive food. In fact, the Food Bank of the Southern Tier services up to 500 households at each CFD and has been doing so since mid-March.

What many also do not know, is what happens behind the scenes before food is placed in a client's trunk. Every detail, from the location, food, volunteers, and number of families served, is carefully planned. All of this is completed by a team of dedicated Food Bank employees, including Jen Bertron, Food Bank community impact manager.

Each morning, Jen fires up her computer and evaluates the numbers behind the food distributed by the Food Bank and its network of partner agencies across the region.

On March 16, her day was like most others, until news coverage of the looming pandemic confirmed that New York State would be shutting down nonessential businesses and schools for the foreseeable future.



Volunteers help to distribute emergency food boxes to families in need during a Community Food Distribution.



*Jen Bertron,
community impact
manager*

Prior to the pandemic, Jen's primary focus was to evaluate how agency partners use Food Bank resources and how to better serve children and families through our school food programs.

To do this, she develops surveys and utilizes data from PantryTrak, our client management system, as well as Primarius, our inventory management system. She overlays this internal data with external data from the Census and Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap to provide a better picture of where hunger gaps exist in the Food Bank's service area.

The Food Bank invested in PantryTrak in 2016 in order to simplify and centralize client data. At the time, client information and service records were kept primarily by hand or on electronic spreadsheets. Each month, agencies and program partners submit basic statistics to the Food Bank on the number of households and individuals that came to them for assistance. Those numbers provided little insight on household composition or what drives demand.

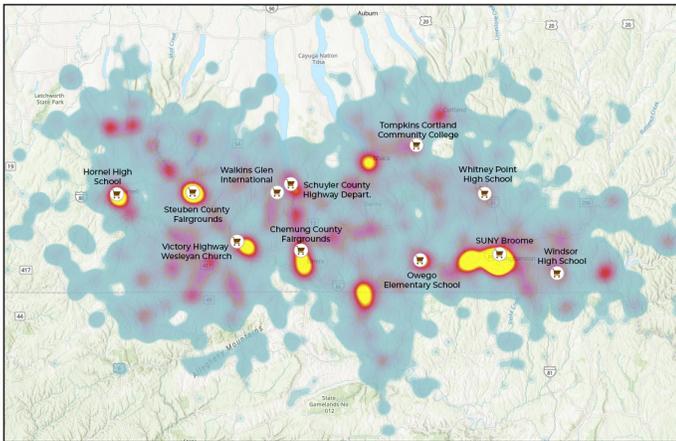
"We transitioned to PantryTrak because it minimizes paperwork, simplifies the client registration and check-in process, and it has great reporting accuracy," explained Jen. "PantryTrak is also a great

resource for the Food Bank because it allows us to see client need in real-time and understand how we can better advocate for our community's needs while providing an unduplicated number of households served."

Because PantryTrak held key information about where clients live and how they were receiving food prior to the pandemic, the Food Bank was able to launch the first CFD 13 days after New York State shut down.

"While partner agencies and the Food Bank have leveraged the information provided from PantryTrack for years, we never expected that it would be the single resource to help us seamlessly pivot the model of food distribution during a global pandemic," reflected Jen.

With the help of Lucius Willis, professor, and Ben Levine, graduate student, from Binghamton University's Geography Department, the Food Bank's data was transformed into visual maps that showed hotspots throughout the six-county service area.



This map demonstrates the areas of need within the Southern Tier. The areas in yellow and red show the areas with the greatest overall need. The shopping carts are where CFDs have been placed.

"We have worked with the Food Bank for many years to conduct annual studies to evaluate food insecurity throughout the service area," shared Lucius. "We felt that this was a great use of our time while classes were temporarily on hold, to help evaluate the Food Bank's data and Center for Disease Control Vulnerability Index to help develop the maps."

Ben also shared that he is passionate about food insecurity and disparity, and has conducted research in the past, to map community meal sites in the Binghamton area to visualize what the community has to offer those in need.

primary locations where CFDs needed to be placed to reach the most households, which resulted in the establishment of 10 CFD locations across the region.

The maps provided by Lucius and Ben enabled the Food Bank team to quickly identify the

"The CFD locations were selected based on their layout and their ability to safely manage the volume of vehicle traffic we needed," said Tim Currie, Food Bank chief operating officer. "Our CFD partners' enthusiasm and support gave us a lot of confidence. That momentum continued as we implemented new locations and provided for a seamless experience for our clients."

Once the CFD sites were established, Kathryn Miller, service insights manager at the Food Bank, and James Wade, business services coordinator, created and managed a web and phone registration system to ensure the Food Bank had enough food at each CFD for all registrants.

With the help of PantryTrak, the Food Bank has served 6,687 individual households since mid-March and distributed over 1,219,670 pounds of emergency food boxes containing meat, dairy and fresh produce through CFDs.

"The work completed over the last four months has been a learning experience for all of us. I believe that as we navigate the future, these experiences, whether it is leveraging data or evolving distribution models, will open new opportunities for our program offerings and encourage our team to push the envelope on what was previously possible," shared Tim.