



# 2025 Service Area Assessment

## OVERVIEW & KEY FINDINGS

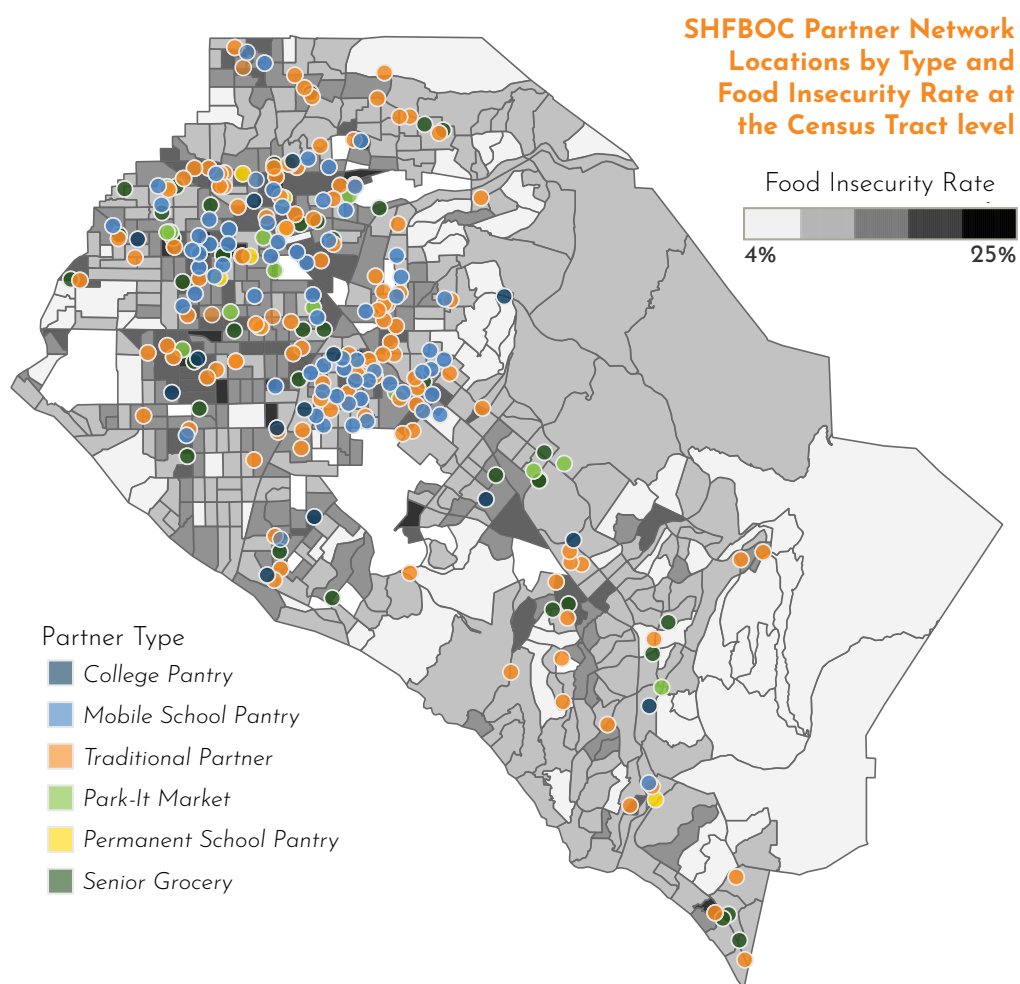
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## WHAT DID WE DO?

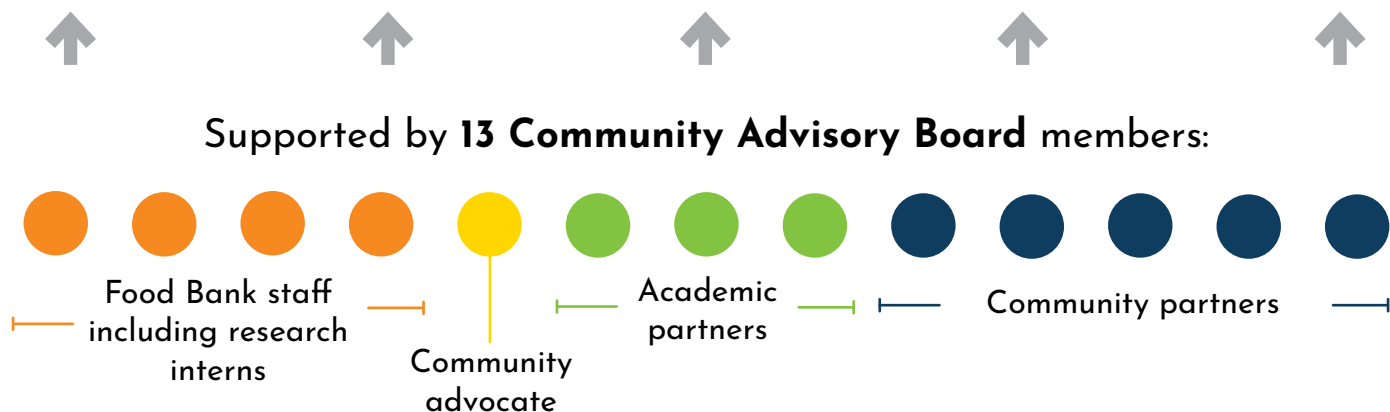
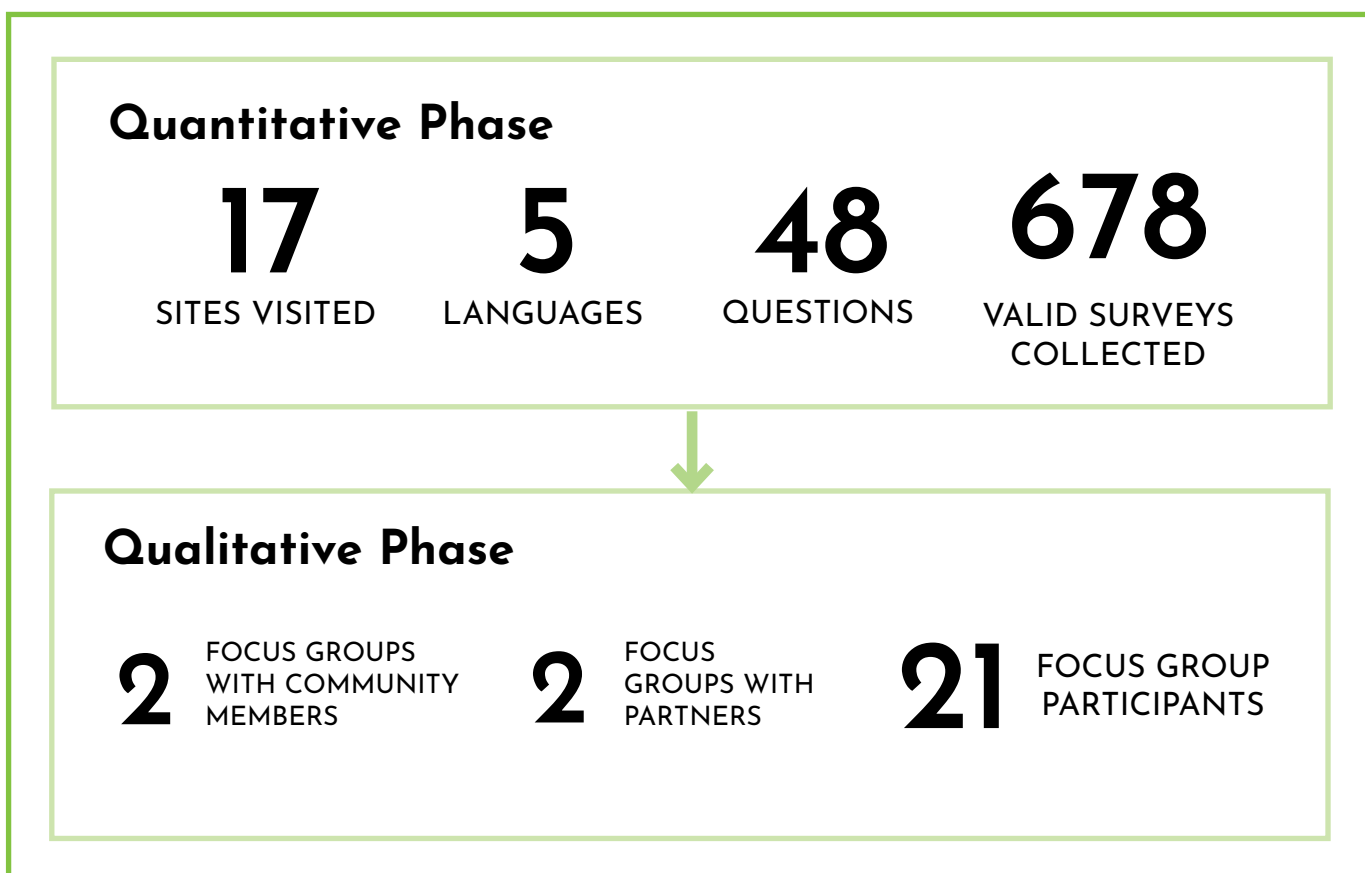
In addition to reviewing external and internal data sources to understand food insecurity and related socioeconomic indicators in Orange County, the availability of partner sites, and proportionality of our food distribution, we also conducted empirical research. For our primary data collection, we examined the perceptions and experiences with charitable food and services among community members and staff at SHFBOC partner food distribution sites using an **explanatory sequential mixed methods** research design, collecting quantitative data (survey) first followed by qualitative data (focus groups).

In April 2025, we began collecting cross-sectional survey data from community members at partner food distribution sites representing different agencies and areas in Orange County. The surveys were pilot-tested, revised, and administered in five languages. In the survey, we asked questions about their demographic characteristics, perspectives on food and services provided, needs and preferences, and access to charitable food. We also included validated measures on food security and related indicators and screened for household resilience, or ability to respond to financial shocks.

We then analyzed preliminary descriptive survey findings and presented those findings back to community members and our partners via **focus groups** to gather additional insight on those findings. This study was supported by CAB members who met monthly with the SAA Project Lead to offer perspectives in the research process and procedures.



## Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Research



# WHAT DID WE FIND?

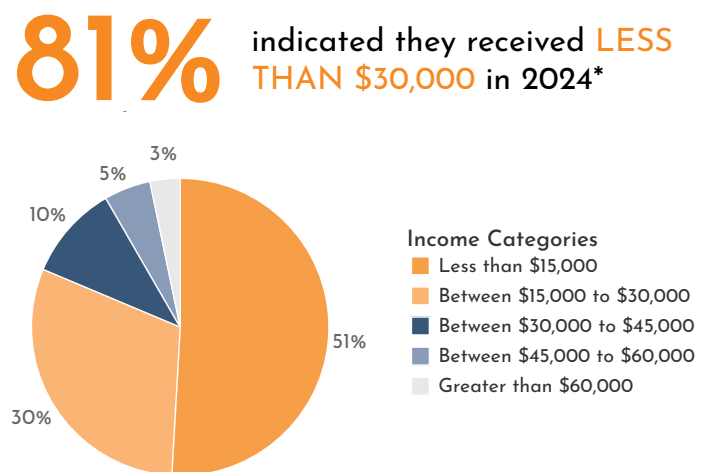
The survey data (n=678) offered insight on the community members we serve across our Partner Network and programs, including demographic characteristics, their perceptions and experiences accessing and receiving charitable food from our partner food distribution sites, food security status and indicators, and household resilience. In the focus groups, we identified four major themes that explain and expand survey findings.

The next several pages highlight descriptive findings from the survey and focus group themes with supporting quotes.

## SURVEY INSIGHTS

### Demographics

- The mean age was 60 years old
- 73% identified as women
- 54% reside with at least one older adult (over 65+ years) and 41% reside with at least one child under 18 years
- 48% identified as Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin with most indicating they were of Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano/a background
- 37% and 7% identified as Non-Hispanic Asian and Non-Hispanic White, respectively
- Employment status varied among respondents: 34% indicated they were retired, followed by 23% who reported being out of work, and 19% who were employed



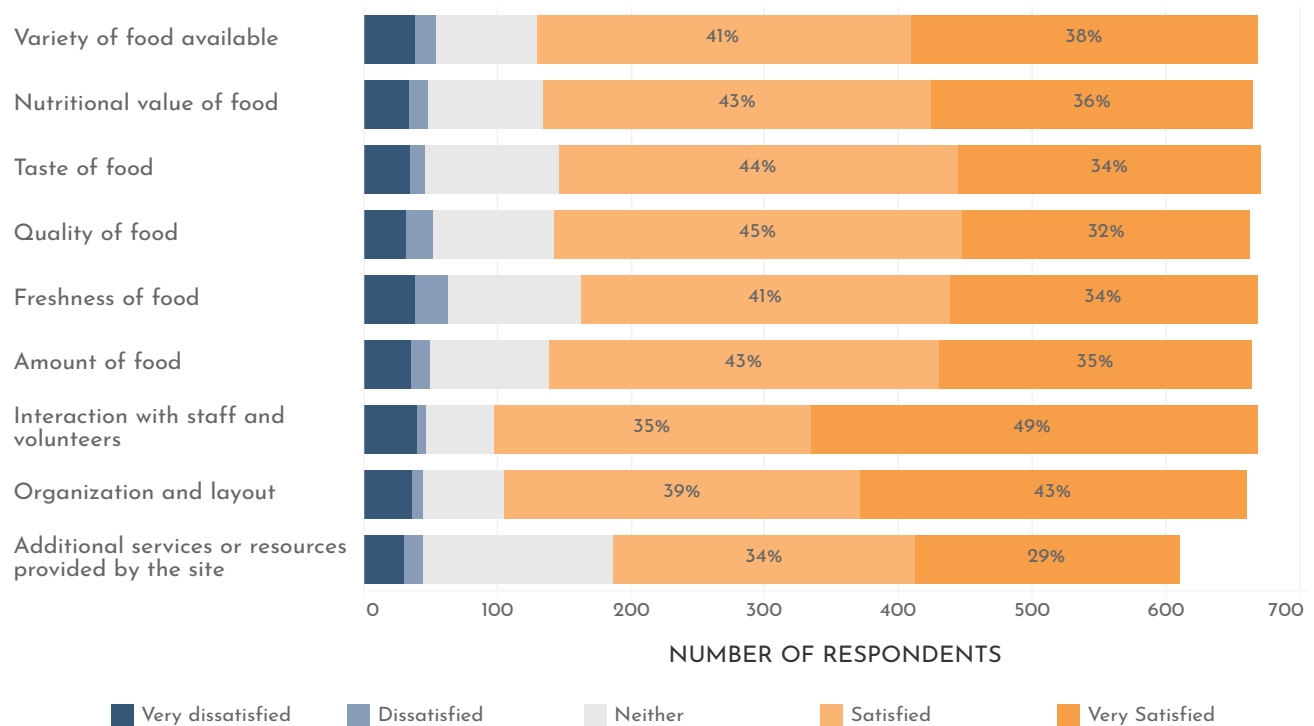
\* = among those who reported an income (n=552)

**76%**  
received **AT LEAST ONE** of  
the following government  
assistance programs

- Medicaid
- SNAP/CalFresh
- WIC
- Free school lunch/breakfast
- TANF
- Unemployment

## Perceptions and Experiences at Food Pantry

- 60% heard about the food distribution site via word of mouth and over half of respondents indicated they received food from the site over five times in the past year
- Most were **SATISFIED** or **VERY SATISFIED** with pantry characteristics such as the type of food offered, amount of food provided, their interactions with staff, and the resources and services provided



- Many **AGREED** or **STRONGLY AGREED** that:
  - The food provided met their needs and preferences
  - They are able to store, prepare, and use the food provided
  - They felt safe and comfortable at the site and instructions on how to receive food were clear
  - They live or work close by and the hours of operations work with their schedule

**51%** knew others who can benefit from receiving food from the site but do not

When prompted to provide reasons why others may not be accessing the site, top three perceived barriers noted were:



**DISTANCE**



**LACKING RELIABLE  
TRANSPORTATION**



**INCONVENIENT  
PANTRY HOURS**

**63%** indicated that they sometimes, often, or always share food received from the site with non-household members

Perceptions and Experiences at Food Pantry

- TOP FOOD ITEMS typically looked for in food pantries are:

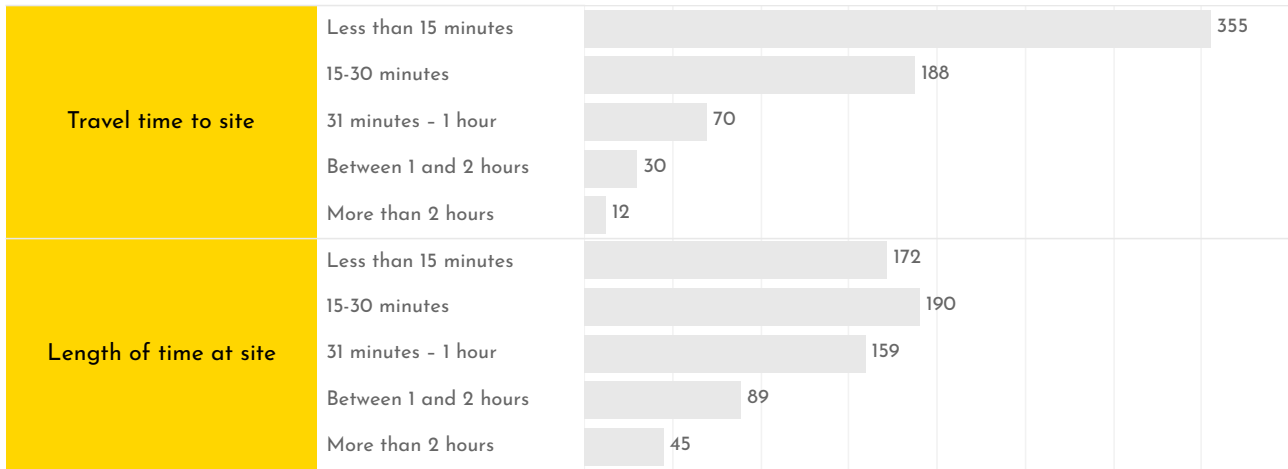


**35%** reported finding a site for free meals/groceries that is open when they need it as somewhat or very challenging



**12%** reported often or always having trouble accessing free meals/groceries due to transit barriers

- Although **54%** of respondents reported **TAKING LESS THAN 15 MINUTES** to travel to the partner food distribution site, time spent on-site varied with **20%** of respondents **SPENDING MORE THAN 1 HOUR** on-site.



Note: Numbers shown on the bar graph above reflect the number of respondents

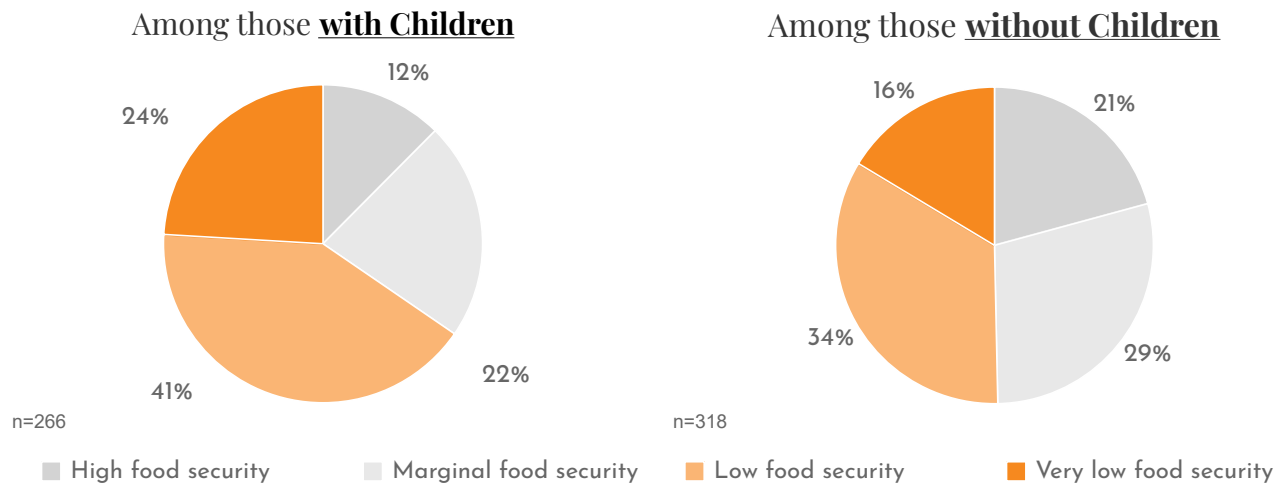
- Only 9% (n=57) reported experiencing judgment on site

**63%** are highly likely to **RECOMMEND** the site to those in their network



## Food and Nutrition Security

- Using the USDA's 18-item Household Food Security questions, we identified that 65% of households with children and 50% of households without children experienced food insecurity (or inconsistent access to adequate food) in the past year.



- Food insecurity was sorted into LOW or VERY LOW food security. Among those who experienced food insecurity, 65% experienced LOW food security or a reduction in the quality and variety of foods consumed. 35% experienced reductions in intake and disruptions in eating patterns, or VERY LOW food security.
- The children themselves experienced food insecurity in 37% of households with children.

27%

Have a greater degree of experiencing **CHRONIC** food insecurity

38%

Have a greater degree of experiencing **MONTHLY** food insecurity

23%

Have a greater degree of experiencing **SEASONAL** food insecurity

21%

Have a greater degree of experiencing food insecurity **RANDOMLY**

Many selected the **END OF THE MONTH** and **WINTER** and **SUMMER** seasons as when they were most concerned about affording and accessing food.

- 23% reported to have low nutrition security, or the uncertain access to nutritious food.



## Household Resilience

- In the survey, we also screened for household resilience, or the ability to respond to household-level financial shocks, which may make community members vulnerable to food insecurity. We identified that:

**34%**

were at risk for  
low **ABSORPTIVE**  
**CAPACITY**

This indicates that a little over a third of households may lack access to **tangible, steady resources that could “absorb” or buffer financial shocks in the short-term**. Examples of household resources could include housing stability, income stability, and savings.

**33%**

were at risk for  
low **ADAPTIVE**  
**CAPACITY**

Households who screened for low adaptive capacity may have limited **intangible resources, such as awareness, efficacy, knowledge, and skills, to react and adapt** to financial challenges when initial buffers are insufficient.

**32%**

were at risk for low  
**TRANSFORMATIVE**  
**CAPACITY**

This indicates that a little over a third of households may lack access to **external support, resources, and opportunities at the community level** that promote the household’s ability to build resilience long-term.

- Findings above suggest that a third of the community members we surveyed are likely to need support navigating financial challenges, whether that’s mobilizing tangible resources in the short-term or building intangible resources such as knowledge and skills to minimize food insecurity risk. Opportunities exist to specifically support those who reside in communities that have limited resources and services.



# FOCUS GROUP INSIGHTS

Across focus groups with community members and partners, we identified four themes that supported or expanded on survey findings. The themes and sub-themes are listed and presented in diagram below. In the next several pages, we describe these themes in detail and provide example quotes.



## MEETING NEEDS AND PREFERENCES

The first theme highlights key pantry attributes (related to food and service) that explain survey findings specific to high satisfaction rates and high agreement with statements that food and services provided met needs and preferences.

### ATTRIBUTES RELATED TO FOOD

Across focus groups, the **quality** and **variety of food** available at SHFBOC partner food distribution sites were collectively described as important pantry characteristics for community members.

#### EXAMPLE QUOTES

“Yes, and **the vegetables are just as fresh**, I mean there’s no difference between the ones in the store and the ones they give us here.”  
Community Member

“**People want variety.** They want it to feel like a grocery store... you have your produce section, you have your dry goods, you have your meat counter, you have your deli. I think they want it that way.”  
Partner Network Member

### ATTRIBUTES RELATED TO SERVICE

Furthermore, focus group participants described specific attributes related to service as important for community members. This includes pantries that offer **choice**, where community members are able to personally select food they want, as well as food pantries that foster **community and connection** between those who distribute and receive food as well as among community members.

#### EXAMPLE QUOTES

“**Being able to select** what you are going to consume and take it home.”  
Community Member

“I think it **gave us the time to really interact with the people**, versus, here's your food, okay?”  
Partner Network Member

“The truth is, we feel like, apart from helping us, **they’re like family because they understand us.**”  
Community Member

## 2

## REACHING OTHERS IN NEED

In the survey, we identified that respondents knew others in their network who can benefit from receiving free meals or groceries from the site, that they shared food with non-household members, and that some expressed challenges finding a site that is available when they need it. This next theme elaborates on perceived barriers to food pantries and opportunities to increase reach and improve access among community members.

### BARRIERS TO FOOD PANTRY

The main barriers noted in focus groups were related to accessibility of food pantries. Both community members and partners expressed that the **distance** to food pantries, **limited access to transportation**, and the **days and times that food pantries are available** may present challenges to many.

#### EXAMPLE QUOTES

“My mother-in-law benefits from the food pantry, but she can’t come because **she doesn’t have transportation**; she earns money by babysitting, so the **hours she’s babysitting are the same hours she would have to come.**”

Community Member

“I think ours is definitely a timing with work, because we’re Wednesdays at 10am which is **not a convenient time...**”

Partner Network Member

### OPPORTUNITIES TO INCREASE REACH

To address barriers and increase reach, especially among non-participating community members, participants elaborated on solutions they have explored or implemented. This includes proxy pick-up, delivery, and referring community members to other local resources.

#### EXAMPLE QUOTES

“Most of them have **caregivers** who can come and get their food.”

Community Member

“Some families state, you know, “I work between that time,” so **we try our best to connect them with other pantries in the area or redirect them to 211** and see if they can get more options.”

Partner Network Member

## FACTORS AFFECTING NEED

This theme describes contributing factors that influence the need for food pantries and similar services among community members. Sub-themes expand on survey findings related to temporal state of food insecurity by highlighting reasons for perceived increase in need and how current events and policies shape need.

### TIME PERIOD

Some reasons why community members perceive an increased need for food at the end of the month or certain seasons are due to changes in their financial circumstances, such as **running out of government assistance benefits**, and **changes to their household composition**.

### POLITICAL CLIMATE

Focus group participants also discussed how the current political climate, such as anticipated changes in government assistance programs and immigration-related activities, will continue to impact the need for food assistance. Immigration-related activities may mask the need for food due to safety concerns, while limits on SNAP may drive community members to rely on food pantries.

### LIMITED PURCHASING POWER

Partners and community members both expressed how essential food pantries are in stretching financial resources to afford the cost of living in OC.

### EXAMPLE QUOTES

“ Well, the end of the month, **when their SNAP cards have run out**, we find an increase there.”

Partner Network Member

“ For example, **in the summer, the children are at home** and eat more, so you spend more.

Community Member

“ They’re hesitant to come, because they go, **‘How is this not a trap?’**

Partner Network Member

“ I think that if they keep putting up more **barriers**, it’s going to affect us a lot.

Community Member

“ I’m also very grateful because there are six of us in my family... the truth is that this helps me **because when I go to the store, I spend more than \$200.00 a week**. Now that I’ve joined here, they help me a lot with vegetables.”

Community Member

## 4

## OPPORTUNITIES TO MEET GROWING NEED

Our survey identified key demographic characteristics of community members we serve - over half experience food insecurity, have limited income, rely on government assistance programs, and are out of work or retired. The themes below provide input on opportunities to better serve those who rely on the charitable system and meet the growing need.

### NEED FOR ADDITIONAL PROGRAMS AND WRAP-AROUND SERVICES

Both partners and community members discussed the importance and convenience of providing additional resources through food pantries, such as professional development opportunities tailored to different audiences and wrap-around services.

### BUILDING PARTNER CAPACITY & INFRASTRUCTURE

Partners expressed willingness to provide additional food and services, however, described limitations in their capacity (e.g. staffing, volunteer) and infrastructure (e.g. storage). To meet the needs among community members, the Food Bank could continue to collaborate with and support partners.

### COLLABORATIVE RESOURCE-SHARING

Some partners expressed needing guidance on identifying credible, wrap-around services and resources for their community members. Providing opportunities and spaces for partners to collaborate and problem-solve with one another would help meet the growing need.

#### EXAMPLE QUOTES

“

For example, we are working with [REDACTED], so they help our families fill out all this Medi-Cal stuff. I sent out the form to sign up, and within minutes, it was completed. Like, full. So it tells me, **they're not asking me for it, but I see the need.**

Partner Network Member

“

You know, you get a lot of volunteers here at Second Harvest, and I'm wondering if you've got a big excess, that it might be helpful to **see if they are willing to come out and take on other pantries that may need help.**

Partner Network Member

“

...Even if we can't receive more food, maybe figuring out a system where we do share with our clients or the individuals that come **what other resources are out there.**”

Partner Network Member



# OUR CONCLUSION

The purpose of the Service Area Assessment was to assess the needs of those impacted by food insecurity and how the Food Bank meets those needs. In reviewing secondary data sources, developing an internal dashboard, and collecting data directly from community members and partners using mixed methods, we were able to identify gaps and strengths in our service.

Overall, the need for food, especially among vulnerable populations who are or likely to experience financial hardship, persists in Orange County. In this assessment, we identified that sites may not be available to certain community members, and that the need for charitable food may be more present at the end of the month and in certain seasons. The focus group data we collected indicated that there is a need beyond food among community members, and that additional wrap-around services, resources, and programs may be necessary to address food insecurity and related indicators.

Our survey data offers a snapshot of the perceptions and experiences of community members who receive food at our partner food distribution sites. Focus group data expanded on food pantry attributes to continue promoting, described ways to address barriers and increase reach, highlighted factors that affect the need, and identified opportunities for us as a food bank to continue to meet the need. Although many community members are satisfied and indicated that the food and services provided meets their needs and preferences, findings indicate that community members who currently rely on our services may be struggling financially. To continue to meet the need, SHFBOC can continue to provide variety and quality food items, promote client choice and connection, and mobilize and support the Partner Network in not only distributing food but addressing root causes of food insecurity.



# NEXT STEPS

Findings from this Service Area Assessment will be used to:

## Take Action

Evidence from the SAA will drive operational and strategic decisions at SHFBOC. Specifically, we will develop an Operational Response Plan (ORP), the second phase of Feeding America's Service Requirements. The ORP is a detailed action plan that identifies strategies and interventions that directly respond to findings from the assessment. In this plan, we will also rely on community member feedback to ensure any changes we make meet the needs of those experiencing food insecurity.

## Dissemination

This assessment captured many insights about our Orange County community members who receive food from the charitable food system. In addition to this public report, we will present aggregated research findings with our Partner Network and community members, as well as donors, food bankers, and other stakeholders who are a part of the charitable food system and committed to addressing food insecurity.

## Additional Research

With the SAA review and dataset, we can test additional research questions and conduct sub-analyses that will expand on the descriptive findings presented in this report. We will build research partnerships and conduct future assessments and program evaluations so that we continue to remain informed by our community members.





THIS RESEARCH IS  
MADE POSSIBLE BY  
THE SUPPORT OF:



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