DRAFT REPORT

Feeding America's Client Choice Program: Evaluation Findings from Year 1

Connecticut Foodshare
Institute for Hunger Research & Solutions

**NORC** at the University of Chicago

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Overview

As part of the Morgan Stanley Child and Family Choice program evaluation, NORC collaborated with the Feeding America National Organization (FANO) and the Institute for Hunger Research & Solutions to design and field a survey of grantees' partner food agencies (referred to here as "pantries") in order to assess their experiences with providing more "choice" during the first year of the program. The survey was fielded in February 2022 to 138 food pantries respresenting 28 food banks across the country. After multiple rounds of nonresponse follow-up by email and by phone, 90 pantries (65%) representing 26 food banks (93%) completed the survey. Since a few food banks provided lists that included many more potential partners than the average, we chose to cap the list of partners at 10, which reduced the "effective" sample to 111 pantries and thus yielded an adjusted response rate of 81% for the survey. This report presents results of analyses for questions related to pantry characteristics and perceived barriers to offering more choice, as well as the impact of choice programs on perceptions of food waste. Survey results were also used to select a sample of pantries for follow-up interviews designed to delve into key findings (see **Appendix A**). A second survey was fielded in May 2022 to pilot longitudinal data collection in preparation for a pre/post study in Year 2 and to gain a retrospective understanding of the impact of choice programs on pantry operations over the first year of the grant program.

Part 1: Key Barriers

The initial survey first asked food pantries to indicate their level of choice in both July 2021 at the beginning of the program and in February 2022 in order to assess, retrospectively, change during the first year of the grant (see **Appendix B** for a full list of survey questions). Out of the 90 pantries that responded, 19 indicated that they were closed in July 2021 due to a resurgence of the COVID-19 pandenmic and thus are excluded from Figure 1, which shows the desired shift from "no" or "limited choice" to "modified" or "full" choice over the intervening 7 months. **Specifically, only 32% of pantries were offering modified or full choice in July 2021, while over 60% were doing so in February 2022. The percentage of pantries offering no food choice options at all dropped from 46% to 16% over the same time period.** Much of the remainder of the survey was devoted to questions about pantry characteristics and perceived barriers to offering more choice in order to help understand these trends and provide guidance to other pantries planning to implement more choice in the future.

Figure 1. Level of Choice, July 2021 to February 2022 (N=71)
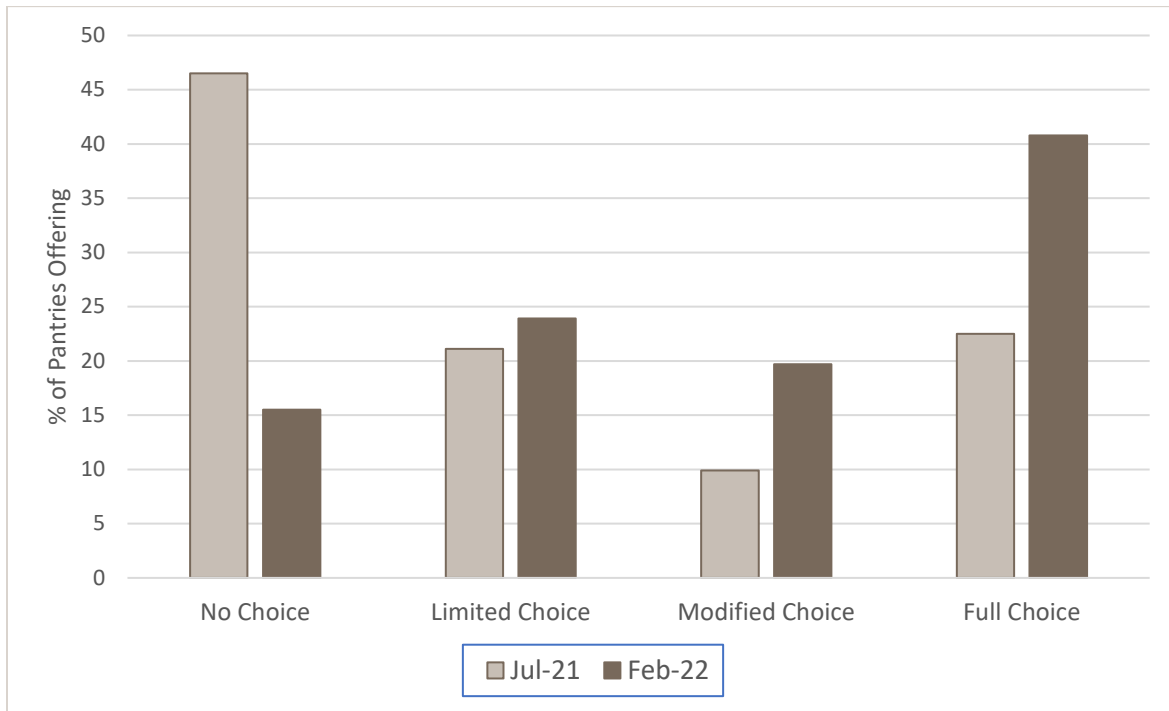
To isolate possible factors related to these levels of choice, we ran a series of analyses to see if particular characteristics of pantries were correlated with their level of choice as of February 2022. Table 1 shows the breakdown of pantries in our sample by the characteristics that we considered to be important for the statistical analyses described below, including physical size, hours open for food distribution, number of full-time staff, number of volunteers, number of neighbors served, and pantry type or location.

Table 1. Characteristics of Pantries in Survey Sample (N=90)

Characteristics of Pantries		Total N	% N
Pantry Size	Small	20	22.2%
	Medium	55	61.1%
	Large	15	16.7%
Hours Open (weekly)	0 to 2 hours	29	32.2%
	3 to 8 hours	33	36.7%
	>8 hours	28	31.1%
# FTE Staff	0 FTE staff	42	46.7%
	1 FTE staff	28	31.1%
	>1 FTE staff	20	22.2%

# Volunteers	0 volunteers	15	16.7%
	1 to 5 volunteers	37	41.1%
	6+ volunteers	38	42.2%
# Neighbors Served (weekly)	0 to 24 served	28	31.1%
	25 to 99 served	25	27.8%
	>100 served	37	41.1%
Site Type	Not school-based	28	31.1%
	School-based	62	68.9%

We started with simple bivariate analyses. Table 2 shows the proportion of pantries offering a particular level of choice that falls into each category of pantry characteristic. For example, pantries offering "no choice" are comprised of equal proportions of small (43%) and medium (43%) pantries and represent just 14% of large-sized pantries. Conversely, only 11% of our 90 pantries offering full choice in February 2020 are "small" in terms for their storage, waiting area, and distribution space (note that 55 out of 90 pantries classified themselves as being "medium" in size, see Table 1).

Table 2.   Pairwise Tests of Pantry Characteristics – Correlations with Choice (N=90)

Characteristics of Pantries		**Level of Choice as of February 2022**			
		No choice	*Limited choice*	*Modified choice*	*Full choice*
		Column %	Column %	Column %	Column %
Pantry Size	Small	42.9%	27.3%	25.0%	10.5%
	Medium	42.9%	59.1%	68.8%	65.8%
	Large	14.3%	13.6%	6.2%	23.7%
Hours Open (weekly)	0 to 2 hours	21.4%	31.8%	37.5%	34.2%
	3 to 8 hours	28.6%	31.8%	37.5%	42.1%
	>8 hours	50.0%	36.4%	25.0%	23.7%
# FTE Staff	0 FTE staff	50.0%	54.5%	37.5%	44.7%
	1 FTE staff	21.4%	13.6%	50.0%	36.8%
	>1 FTE staff	28.6%	31.8%	12.5%	18.4%
# Volunteers	0 volunteers	28.6%	13.6%	0.0%	21.1%
	1 to 5 volunteers	28.6%	27.3%	87.5%	34.2%
	6+ volunteers	**42.9%**	**59.1%***	**12.5%***	**44.7%**
# Neighbors Served (weekly)	0 to 24 served	35.7%	40.9%	31.2%	23.7%
	25 to 99 served	21.4%	18.2%	50.0%	26.3%
	>100 served	42.9%	40.9%	18.8%	50.0%
Site Type	Not school-based	21.4%	22.7%	31.2%	39.5%
	School-based	78.6%	77.3%	68.8%	60.5%

* Values in the same row are significantly different at p<.05 in the two-sided test of equality for column proportions. Tests assume equal variances.

Table 2 also shows results for statistical tests comparing column proportions, with statistically significant differences indicated by the row(s) with subscripts. Here, **we see almost no significant differences between characteristics of pantries and the types of choice they offer, suggesting that pantries of all shapes and sizes are able to provide food choice, up to and including full choice**. The one significant result in Table 2 suggests that pantries with six or more volunteers are more likely to offer "modified" versus "limited" choice but are no more likely to be offering "no" versus "full" choice, which is perhaps an artifact of the small sample sizes represented in each cell of the table. Because of this, we combine levels of choice in subsequent analyses in order to increase our ability to reliably detect factors that may predict whether a given pantry is able to offer either "any" or "full" choice.

We next turned to survey items related to a range of possible barriers that pantries might perceive as limiting their ability to offer food choice, starting with a series of logistic regressions to understand key predictors of pantries that offered full choice compared to pantries that offered no choice or some choice. Each model examined the effect of <u>one</u> potential barrier on whether a pantry offered full choice and controlled for the following pantry characteristics: *site type*, number of *FTE staff*, number of *volunteer hours* in a week, *pantry size*, number of *neighbors served* (logged), and *hours open* for distribution (logged)[1]. Barriers were measured on a four-point scale, where respondents were asked if each barrier "does not affect", "affects a little", "somewhat affects", or "strongly affects" their pantry's ability to offer choice. Preliminary results suggested that most barriers (see Q4.1a) were significant without controls and several remained statistically significant in preventing pantries from achieving full choice after controlling for pantry characteristics, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3.   Individual Barrier Regressions – Predicting Full Choice (N=90)

Barrier	Coefficient (Log Odds)	Odds Ratio
Not enough **space**	-1.498***	.224
Not enough **time**	-1.374**	.253
Not enough volunteers/**staff**	-0.716**	.489
Volunteers are **used to operating** the pantry this way	-0.620	.537
We have always operated our pantry this way and would **prefer not to change**	-0.133	.875
It is more **efficient** to prepare bags in advance	-1.197***	.302

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[1] Logging variables reshapes the data to reduce skew and more closely approximate a normal distribution. This reduces the effect of outliers on the model and results in more accurate predictions.

Neighbors prefer the **convenience** of pre-packed bags	-0.630*	.532
Neighbors may **take too much** food and not leave enough for others	-0.200	.819
We want to keep **distribution equal** by giving neighbors the same items	-.990**	.371

* p < .05; ** p <.01; *** p < .001

Note: Each model controlled for *site type*, # of *FTE staff*, # of *volunteer hours/week*, *pantry size*, # of *neighbors served* (logged), and *hours open* for distribution (logged)

Table 3 shows logistic regression results when each barrier had its own model predicting whether pantries offered full choice after controlling for a range of pantry characteristics (see Footnote #3). The coefficient represents the log of the odds of a pantry achieving full choice, which is converted into odds ratios in the last column for ease of interpretation. An odds ratio of less than one indicates a decrease in the odds of a pantry offering full choice. For example, **the odds of a pantry achieving full choice decreased by 78% (100-22) for each additional level at which *space* was perceived to be a barrier**. Demonstrating changes in predicted probabilities can be a helpful way to build context about what odds mean on a practical level. The model predicts how likely it is for a pantry with a certain set of characteristics to offer full choice. Comparing two simulated pantries with characteristics that are "average" for the dataset demonstrates the impact of changing one variable (*the space barrier)* on the outcome *(offering full choice).* For a medium-sized school food pantry with 0 FTE staff, 2 unpaid volunteers, and average numbers of volunteer hours & neighbors served, saying that space "does not affect" your pantry's ability to offer choice results in a 68% chance of offering full choice. By contrast, a similar pantry with the same set of chacteristics now saying that space "strongly affects" their ability to offer choice, only has a 2% chance of offering full choice.

However, most of the barriers became statistically insignificant when they were combined into a single model. Table 4 shows the results from Model 1A, predicting whether or not pantries offered <u>full</u> choice[2].

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[2] Additionally, a multinomial logistic regression model was run which looked at all categories of choice, not simply full choice vs not full choice. The results were largely similar. *Efficiency* was the only barrier that was statistically significant, and was only significant for full choice (as compared to no choice).

Table 4.   Model 1A – Predicting <u>Full</u> Choice (N=90)

Perceived Barriers	Coefficient (Log Odds)	Odds Ratio
It is more **efficient** to prepare bags in advance	-1.13** (0.412)	0.323
We want to keep **distribution equal** by giving neighbors the same items	-0.329 (0.331)	0.720
Neighbors prefer the **convenience** of pre-packed bags	0.156 (0.358)	1.169
Not enough **space**	-0.306 (0.464)	0.736
Not enough **time**	-0.752 (0.501)	0.472
Not enough volunteers/**staff**	0.510 (0.343)	1.666
Pantry Size: Medium	1.258 (0.739)	3.517
Pantry Size: Large	2.55* (1.076)	12.823

* p < .05; ** p <.01; *** p < .001
Note: Standard errors in parentheses
Note: The model controlled for *site type*, # of *FTE staff*, # of *volunteer hours/week*, *pantry size* (shown), # of *neighbors served* (logged), and *hours open* for distribution (logged)

Table 4 shows that **concerns about *efficiency* remained a significant barrier to offering full choice (versus no or limited/modified choice), while all other perceived barriers were no longer statistically significant**. Note that *pantry size* **was the only pantry characteristic significantly associated with offering full choice**. In a comparison of predicted probabilities, a *medium*-sized food pantry which reported that all barriers "did not affect" their ability to offer choice had an approximately 71% chance of offering full choice, according to the model. When the same simulated pantry moves to saying that efficiency "strongly affects" their ability to offer choice, the probability of offering full choice reduces to approximately 8%. For a *small* food pantry that reported the barriers included in the model "did not affect" their ability to offer choice, the probability of offering full choice was approximately 41%. For a *large* pantry similarly not reporting any barriers, the probability of offering full choice increases to approximately 90%.

Table 5 shows the results from Model 1B, predicting whether pantries offered <u>no</u> choice (compared to any level of choice).

Table 5. Model 1B – Predicting <u>No</u> Choice (N=90)

Perceived Barriers	Coefficient (Log Odds)	Odds Ratio
It is more **efficient** to prepare bags in advance	0.224 (.368)	1.251
We want to keep **distribution equal** by giving neighbors the same items	0.129 (.349)	1.138
Neighbors prefer the **convenience** of pre-packed bags	0.016 (.411)	1.016
Not enough **space**	0.415 (.518)	1.514
Not enough **time**	-0.350 (.528)	0.705
Not enough volunteers/**staff**	1.021* (.400)	2.775

*$p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$
Note: Standard errors in parentheses
Note: The model controlled for *site type*, # of *FTE staff*, # of *volunteer hours/week*, *pantry size*, # of *neighbors served* (logged), and *hours open* for distribution (logged)

Model 1B shows that **only concerns about *staffing* remained a significant barrier to offering any choice at all (versus no choice), all else constant.** Note that both models were assessed for the presence of multicollinearity given the possibility that potential barriers might be correlated with each other, and none was found.

Part 2: Multiple Barriers

The second part of the analysis shifted from considering specific individual barriers to considering the combined number of barriers that pantries face. Again, the survey question about barriers (Q4.1a) asked respondents to select among "strongly affects", "somewhat affects", "affects a little", and "does not affect" for each of the nine potential barriers to a panty's ability to offer choice. For this analysis, barriers were combined in two different ways, either by counting barriers as binary (present or not present) or by taking into account the four barrier "levels" or degrees.

For the binary analysis, barriers were considered "present" if respondents said the barrier "strongly" or "somewhat" affected their pantry's ability to offer choice. Barriers were considered "not present" if respondents said the barrier "does not affect" or "affects a little" their pantry's ability to offer choice. Pantries received a "barrier score" from 0-9, which indicated the *number*

of barriers they faced. The median barrier score was 1. For the levels analysis, points were assigned to each response option (e.g., "strongly affects" = 4) so that higher point values reflected a stronger effect on a pantry's ability to offer choice. Here, pantries received a "barrier score" from 9-34 which indicated the *severity* of barriers that they faced. The median barrier score was 15. Table 6 shows the results of both analyses.

Table 6.   Combined Barrier Regression Output - Predicting Full Choice (N=90)

	Binary Barrier Model		Leveled Barrier Model	
	Coefficient (Log Odds)	*Odds Ratio*	*Coefficient (Log Odds)*	*Odds Ratio*
Barrier Score	-0.706*** (0.193)	0.494	-0.228*** (0.062)	0.796
# of FTE Staff	-0.097 (0.206)	0.907	-0.131 (0.220)	0.877
Hours Open for Distribution (logged)	-0.405 (0.279)	0.667	-0.438 (0.280)	0.645
# of Volunteers	-0.005 (0.006)	0.995	-.005 (.006)	0.995
# of Neighbors Served (logged)	.036 (0.180)	1.037	.056 (.180)	1.057
Size: Medium	0.964 (0.711)	2.622	1.060 (0.702)	2.881
Size: Large	2.074 (1.179)	7.960	1.881 (1.118)	6.561
Type: School	-0.563 (1.014)	0.569	-0.591 (0.985)	0.553
Type: Other	0.047 (1.027)	1.048	-0.056 (0.973)	0.946

* p < .05; ** p <.01; *** p < .001
Note: Standard errors in parentheses
Note: The model controlled for *site type*, # of *FTE staff*, # of *volunteer hours/week*, *pantry size*, # of *neighbors served* (logged), and *hours open* for distribution (logged)

When controlling for pantry characteristics, Table 6 shows that **facing more barriers significantly decreased the odds of pantries offering full choice.** Specifically, each additional point in a pantry's barrier score reduced the odds of achieving full choice by 51% for the binary model and 20% for the leveled model. Note that **neither *pantry size* nor level of *staffing* was significantly associated with full choice in this combined model.**

Predicted Probability Analysis

Predicted probabilities of food pantries offering full choice were calculated for different "barrier scores" using the models from Table 4. All probabilities reflect a "typical" pantry based on the dataset collected for this wave – a medium-sized, school-based pantry with 0 FTE staff, 2 unpaid volunteers, and with the average number of neighbors served and hours open for distribution.

For the Binary Barrier Model (indicating *number* of barriers faced), the predicted probability of a pantry with a "barrier score" of 0 offering full choice is approximately 70%. That percentage decreases to 54% for pantries facing the mean score of 1 barrier, and decreases further to <1% for pantries facing all 9 barriers.

Similarly, for the Leveled Barrier Model (indicating *severity* of barriers faced), the predicted probability of a pantry with the minimum "barrier score" of 9 offering full choice is approximately 74%. That percentage decreases to 42% for pantries facing the mean "barrier score" of 15, and decreases further to 1% for pantries facing the maximum barrier score. This suggests that removing even just one barrier would improve a pantry's chances of being able to offer full choice.

Part 3: Food Waste Analysis

The survey asked five questions about the potential for having distributed food go to waste (Q3.2). For this analysis, a composite measure of food waste was created by assigning a numeric value to each response option (observes "often", "occasionally", "rarely", or "never") such that higher values indicate seeing a sign of food waste more frequently and then summing across all five questions. Food waste measures under this formulation ranged from 1 to 17, and the median food waste value was 5.

A series of analyses were conducted to explore factors that might be related to food waste, especially the relationship between pantries offering full choice and the amount of food waste they reported. A key finding is that offering full choice was generally associated with lower perceived levels of food waste, noting however that the results are somewhat sensitive to model specficiation and analytic technique likely due to the small sample size (e.g., see Footnote 3). Pantry *size* and *type* also emerged as significant predictors of perceived food waste in some but not all statistical models.

Specifically, a linear regression predicting food waste found that **pantries offering full choice (compared to pantries not offering full choice) had, on average, a 1.85 decrease in food**

waste score compared to pantries not offering full choice, when controlling for pantry characteristics[3].

Table 7. Linear and Logistic Regression Models - Predicting Food Waste (N=82)

	Linear Model	Ordered Logistic Model	
	Coefficient	*Coefficient (Log Odds)*	*Odds Ratio*
Full Choice	-1.850* (0.840)	-0.998* (0.466)	0.369
# of FTE Staff	-0.147 (0.230)	-0.163 (0.159)	0.850
# of Volunteers	0.004 (0.005)	-0.002 (0.002)	0.998
# of Neighbors Served (logged)	-0.174 (0.292)	-0.003 (0.154)	0.997
Hours Open for Distribution (logged)	0.336 (0.424)	0.177 (0.223)	1.193
Size	1.503^ (0.781)	0.912* (0.436)	2.489
Type: School	-1.951^ (1.142)	-1.408* (0.596)	0.244

*^ p < .10, * p < .05; ** p <.01; *** p < .001*
Note: Standard errors in parentheses

Another analytic approach broke the (perceived) food waste variable into categories, such that a score of less than 3 indicated "low waste", a score between 3 and 8 indicated "medium waste", and a score higher than 8 indicated "high waste". An ordered logistic regression model was used to interpret the food waste categories. The ordered logistic regression model shown in Table 7 found that **for pantries with full choice, the odds of having more food waste (i.e. medium or high waste versus low waste) is 63% lower than that of pantries without full choice, holding constant other pantry characteristics**. Here we also found that *larger* pantries were more likely to report food waste as a potential problem, while *schools* were significantly less likely to do so. These two results seem reasonable as opportunities to observe food waste should be higher in large pantries and lower in the more constrained school settings.

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[3] Results of analyses are similar when treating food choice as continuous variable. Each additional level of choice resulted in a .619 decrease in the food waste measure, when controlling for the same pantry characteristics (p=.095).

Part 4: Choice in Retrospect

A second survey was fielded approximately three months after the first in order to pilot the longitudinal data collection for the pre/post evaluation that will be conducted in the second year of the grant program. This survey also included several new items designed to ascertain retrospectively the factors that were important to implementing choice and the impacts that choice made on pantry operations. Figure 2 shows impacts on the responding pantries who were offering more choice than they had in July 2021.

Figure 2. Impacts of Choice, July 2021 to March 2022 (N=39)

Figure 2 shows that 31 out of 39 (79%) of pantries said that their overall operations improved as a result of offering more choice. The great majority of pantries also reported improvements in the layout of the pantry (74%), the types of food being offered (77%), the satisfaction of staff and volunteers (77%), the interactions between staff/volunteers and neighbors (79%), and perceived neighbor satisfaction with pantry services (85%). Figure 3 shows the factors that pantries felt were important to being able to increase choice or make plans to do so during the grant year.

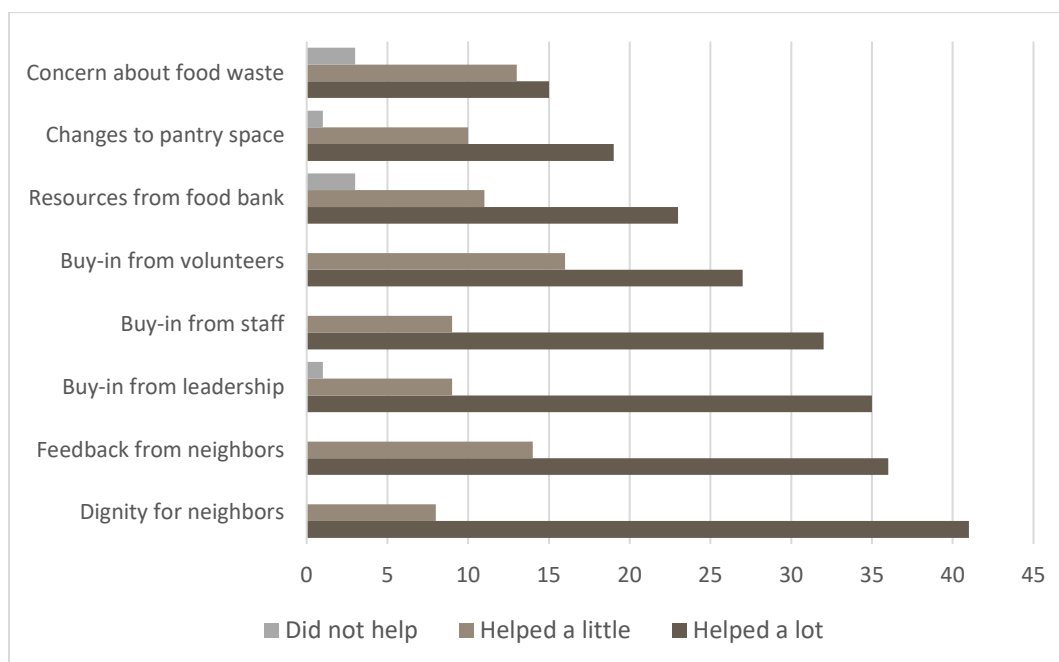**Figure 3.** Facilitators of Choice, July 2021 to March 2022 (N=57)

Figure 3 shows that, of those who had an opinion, about three-quarters of pantries felt that support or buy-in from staff (78%) and leadership (78%), feedback from neighbors (72%), and desire to serve neighbors in a more dignified manner (84%) were critical to being able to plan for or offer more choice during the grant year. The majority of these pantries also indicated that it took them less than a month to plan for the changes associated with increasing choice (67%) and to make the necessary modifications to pantry space and operations (66%) and that there were little to no additional costs associated with offering more choice once implemented (62%).

Conclusion

Main Takeaways

Survey results show that the majority of pantries made significant progress in offering more food choice over the first year of the grant program. The descriptive and multivariate analyses of the Wave 1 and Wave 2 survey data resulted in several key findings:

1. No pantry characteristic seemed to prevent pantries from offering some level of choice, up to and including full choice.
2. Pantries face several significant barriers to offering more choice when considered separately. When considered together, however, a desire for *efficiency* becomes the most

salient barrier to *full* choice, while *staffing* is the most salient barrier in preventing pantries from offering *any* choice at all.

3. Pantries facing more barriers in total are less likely to be offering *full* choice.
4. Pantries that offer *full* choice also tend to perceive significantly *less* food waste.
5. Pantries that increased choice felt that overall operations improved and that satisfaction among staff, volunteers, and neighbors benefited the most.
6. Pantries found that buy-in from staff and leadership, feedback from neighbors, and a desire to make the experience more dignified were critical to increasing choice.

Next Steps

The findings in this report will be replicated and expanded using refined survey instruments and a full pre/post evaluation design with a new sample of food banks and their partner pantries in the second year of the Morgan Stanley Client Choice Program. An additional survey with a sample of pantry neighbors will also be developed and fielded during the second year of the grant program, again using a pre/post design, to better understand the impact of increasing choice on food waste, perceptions of stigma, and other individual experiences.

APPENDIX A

Interviews with Grantee's Partner Pantries

The NORC and Institute for Hunger Research & Solutions evaluation team also engaged in 16 in-depth interviews to better understand and contextualize some of the key learnings from the initial survey that was completed by 90 representatives from food pantries.

Sample and Methods

To select interviewees, the research team developed selection criteria that ensured a diversity of perspectives across the following factors: the degree of change in choice levels offered at interviewees' pantries between July 2021 and February 2022, the pantry's level of choice as of February 2022, pantry type (e.g. school pantry, agency pantry, mobile pantry), pantry size, the pantry's geographic location, and the number of barriers to offering more choice that pantries reported in their survey responses. Certain factors also eliminated pantries from consideration for interview selection, such as reporting that their delays or difficulties implementing choice were solely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All interview candidates were listed as the primary contact for the pantry by foodbank staff. Some interviewees were paid staff and others were volunteers, but all were directly involved in coordinating their pantry's operations.

The interviewee pool was balanced equally between representatives from pantries that made more progress toward increasing choice at their site and those that experienced more difficulties in their attempts to increase choice. The former group was asked to share more about the factors that they indicated on the surveys had contributed to successful implementation of choice, and what the outcomes of this implementation were. The latter group was asked to share more about the difficulties they experienced, what would have helped them overcome these difficulties, and what if anything, they have learned about how to manage these challenges in the future.

Two members of the evaluation team conducted interviews via Zoom in April 2022. All interviewees gave their informed consent to participate, in accordance with NORC's IRB. Interviews were approximately 30 minutes long and were recorded and transcribed. Interview notes and transcripts were then reviewed by the research team, who identified key themes that arose across interviews, as detailed below. These themes were shared with grantees during the May 2022 Choice Capacity Institute meeting.

Key Findings

Theme #1: Mindset-related barriers to increasing choice

A central interview topic was barriers to increasing choice at interviewees' pantry sites. While analysis of the survey data suggested a relative absence of statistically significant barriers to increasing choice, a notable exception was concerns about efficiency—specifically, concerns that increasing choice may lead to less efficient operations and food distribution. Survey findings suggested that pantries that had staff and volunteers who were concerned about choice's impact on efficiency were significantly less likely to offer full choice. This concern was reflected in the interviews, with some interviewees expressing the view that less choice, or offering pre-packed bags, is more efficient, both for pantry volunteers/staff and for neighbors/clients.

- For staff and volunteers, some interviewees expressed concern that offering choice would take too long, especially in school settings when the school day is tightly scheduled; one reflected that school dismissal is *"a massive undertaking and we do it in 30 minutes and so I would hesitate a little bit just because if I'm offering kids choices...we would be here"* for much longer.
- For clients, interviewees shared that certain client groups tend to appreciate, for example, having bags loaded into their cars in a no-choice drive-through distribution model. Interviewees shared a sense that this is particularly true for parents and senior citizens who *"like the fact that they no longer have to wait outside in a line [and push] a shopping cart full of groceries...they literally pull up and within 30 seconds the car is loaded, they're done."* To accommodate clients' range of preferences, a number of sites are doing hybrid distributions, offering more choice some of the time and less choice at others.

In analyses of survey data, physical pantry space was also a marginally significant barrier to increasing choice. The interviews reflected this marginal finding: when interviewees were asked about whether physical space was a hindrance to increasing choice, we heard mixed responses. While some did find it to be an issue, more interviewees said it wasn't really a problem, with one stating that *"most pantries believe you need a great deal of space, but you can do it [choice] with a little or a lot."* To this point, more than one interviewee commented that space is certainly one of the biggest *perceived* barriers that pantry directors experience – a mental hump that needs to be gotten past when adapting to a choice model.

Theme #2: Changes needed to increase choice

Interviewees whose pantries successfully increased choice during the grant year were asked about what key changes they made in order to make choice programming work for their pantry. The most consequential changes interviewees reported included:

- Since staff and volunteers' mindset about choice was one of the biggest barriers to increasing choice, the pantry directors interviewed shared details about the processes they undertook to get staff and volunteers on board with moving to an increased choice model, as well as re-trained in distribution procedures as needed. One interviewee framed this mindset shift as re-orienting the pantry's, and by extension its staff and volunteers', mission around focusing on hospitality and customer service for its clients – something made easier by the shift to the full choice model: *"Our focus now is on customer service with our volunteers....[W]hereas prior to that there was very little conversation, very little interaction,...[but] now we're focused on the hospitality and customer service side of all of this because we have more time with each shopper."* While interviewees did note occasional resistance on the part of staff and volunteers, one commented that *"after the first time [they worked under an increased choice model], when they realized that what an impact it was making, they let go of the fear"* of offering more choice.
- Interviewees also shared that moving to a new, increased-choice distribution model often takes ongoing flexibility, as opposed to making a one-time change that permanently sticks. Interviewees noted that continual adaptation was especially needed for pantry layout and the flow of clients through the pantry space, commenting that *"we played with*

this many times" before landing on an effective traffic flow. Interviewees also shared about the importance of adjusting processes for purchasing or ordering food when preparing their pantry to increase choice. Commenting on the learning curve that is necessary when reconfiguring a pantry's food ordering process to accommodate increased choice programming, one stated that *"There was a bit of a struggle with knowing how to order. We didn't want to have a lot of meal waste, so we wanted to make sure we were ordering enough for our families, while still not wanting to have open cases of every single item."*

Theme #3: Implementing choice in school settings

Interviewees shared additional context about how implementing choice works in specific settings. Most notably, interviewees shared unique contextual considerations for school settings, given that the majority of pantry sites participating in Year 1 of the choice grant program were schools. Learnings particular to school sites were:

- Related to the perceived barrier of efficiency, interviewees indicated that finding a way to incorporate choice in a way that does not interrupt the flow of the school day is paramount for the successful implementation of a choice program in a school setting. Interviewees shared that this is especially true with elementary schools, as their schedules and particularly dismissal times are more rigid compared with middle and high schools. Examples include building pantry visits into health or PE time or into class time.
- We heard a need to be mindful of how and when distribution to students occurs to minimize chances of food waste, particularly in the form of food fights. For example, one school pantry director commented on the challenges of distributing food that students take home on the bus, noting that school administrators are *"absolutely not on board with the bus kids getting the food because…it becomes a food fight on the bus…and it would just be wasted."*
- Several school-based interviewees shared challenges around stigma, with students who use pantries being picked on by peers. A solution to this challenge implemented by one school-based pantry was moving to a choice model where all students shop the pantry as opposed to only a group of students from families who have been identified as being in need. This interviewee commented, "*When we first started the pantry we had selected maybe 50 families but then…I would hear the children say 'oh, it's just the poor children that are getting it'…so that's when we changed into a whole school model."*
- Another challenge specific to school settings is getting the food home. Having students carry the food can be challenging if the bags are heavy. Many schools address this challenge by distributing food during dismissal time, often the only time parents come to school grounds. One school that offered an in-school pantry found parents weren't coming into the space and so started offering pre-packed bags held at the front office. Another school shared that to incorporate choice into the pantry distribution, they would communicate the process in advance to parents and children "*would come with a whole shopping list.*"

Theme #4: The role of food banks in increasing choice at pantries

Food banks have the opportunity to set expectations and examples for their partner agencies, both towards offering more choice or in making no change. Interviewees shared what sorts of supports or resources their partner food banks provided that helped them increase choice at their site. Ways that food banks supported their partner pantries to increase choice included:

- The food bank helping to ensure that the pantry receives enough product variety to be able to accommodate client choice. One pantry director noted that this was crucial in their pantry's ability to increase choice, stating that *"if they [the food bank] weren't helping and making sure that we got a variety of products we wouldn't be able to be offering that choice."*

- The food bank offering technical assistance regarding "best practices" and changes that pantries could make to their space, layout, flow, and *"ways to organize things and set them up"* to facilitate increased choice programming.

- The food bank creating cohorts or peer learning opportunities with other pantries in the food bank's network to provide pantries an opportunity to connect over how to increase choice. Commenting on the usefulness of these cohorts, one pantry director stated that *"It was invaluable to me to hear what other people were doing, to hear how other people are going to achieve their goal to give choice...and just the simple networking that took place...opened my eyes up to how people at other places are doing things."*

Theme #5: Outcomes of increasing choice

Among the interviewees whose pantries successfully increased choice, we heard four themes regarding outcomes they experienced as a result of increasing choice.

- First, many interviewees shared the sense that increasing choice resulted in less food waste at their pantries. Commenting on the multiple benefits of increasing choice, one pantry director noted that in addition to increasing *"the dignity factor"* for clients, a benefit for pantries is that choice increases the amount of food that is used and cuts down on waste. They noted that increasing choice helps pantries better fulfill their missions, because *"if you make me take food that I don't like or I'm not going to eat, it is going to be wasted and then what's the point?"*

- Contrary to the anxieties about efficiency that some pantry administrators expressed before increasing choice, interviewees from multiple pantries found that offering more choice is actually more efficient, noting that *"not only does [a full choice model] take less time, but we can serve a lot more families."*

- Pantry directors also shared that both staff/volunteers and clients come to appreciate and prefer choice. Interviewees shared a sense that choice offers more opportunities to develop personal relationships between staff/volunteers and clients through the increase in interaction that often comes with increasing choice; one noted that compared with a no-choice model, offering choice is *"much more personal, it's much more about being with the person....[W]e have regulars [who] look for certain volunteers,... and it becomes a bond."* Interviewees also felt that, if presented with an option, most clients simply prefer choice: *"90% of folks, when presented with the choice, would choose to shop over just getting what they get."*

Theme #6: Reflections on increasing choice

Finally, when asked to reflect on the experience of increasing choice interviewees shared a few main sentiments:

- The pandemic hindered choice. Among both those interviewees whose pantries were able to increase choice successfully, and those whose pantries were not, there was a shared sentiment that the pandemic caused backward momentum when it came to pantries' choice offerings, noting that generally the choice programming that had been available prior to March 2020 was *"reduced or eliminated from the beginning of the pandemic."* Thus, while some grantees were working to offer or increase choice for the first time, others were working to re-introduce it, which tended to be an easier process as they had previously seen the model to be successful.

- It is simply not very difficult make the transition to increasing choice. Interviewees shared that often, the anxiety around the transition is often much worse than the actual experience of doing it. One summed this up by stating that increasing choice is ultimately *"just not that hard to do. Looking back, it was a lot of worry over nothing. It was very easily done."*

- Finally, interviewees do not regret making the transition and would *"never go back"* to offering less choice, *"because allowing choice has been so powerful for people…. They feel worthy and valued because we care enough to check in with them and provide an opportunity for them to shop."*

APPENDIX B

First Survey to Grantee's Parnter Pantries