

Conceptualizing food justice in the food charity system in Prince George's County, Maryland, USA

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Abstract

The well-documented flaws of the American food charity system include accessibility challenges, lack of food choice, and a dearth of nutritious food

options. Creating a more just food charity system would require significant restructuring of existing networks and would emphasize agency and choice, allowing clients to select foods that are fresh, nutritious, and culturally appropriate and to do so at times and places that are convenient for them. Our study focuses on Prince George's County (PGC), Maryland, and engages with people at each stage of the supply chain: urban growers as producers, food pantries as distributors, and food pantry clients as consumers. Our holistic analysis of the food charity system reveals the differences in perspectives about nutritional food access, equity, and convenience

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within it. Although confronting the root causes of food injustice is beyond the scope of this study, harm-reduction lessons from the food justice paradigm can meaningfully improve the existing system in the short term. Our recommendations highlight the ways that food pantries can alter their operations to reduce harm and move the food charity system closer to one that is just, accessible, and provides nutritious food options.

Keywords

food insecurity, food charity, food justice, urban agriculture, right to food, nutrition

Introduction and Literature Review

The private emergency food system (PEFS) is a national network of private food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters that distribute food to millions of clients, serving as many people as public food assistance does (McEntee & Naumova, 2012). The PEFS operates on a charity basis, providing food to individuals whose public assistance options, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), do not meet all of their needs, or who do not receive those assistance benefits. While a large percentage of the food distributed by the PEFS comes from private food donations, organizations within the PEFS can also request food through the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), a federal effort funded by Congress every five years. Through TEFAP, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) purchases a “variety of nutritious, high-quality USDA foods” (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2024, para. 2) produced on American farms and makes them available to state distributing agencies (USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, n.d.), which distribute the food to local food banks, which in turn distribute to smaller, local food organizations such as food pantries and soup kitchens. Because the federal government requires individuals receiving TEFAP benefits to submit four pieces of information—name, number of household members, address, and income—some food pantries do not participate in the program as they believe that collecting this data could prevent some clients

from seeking the assistance they need (Costanzo, 2024b).

Although important, federal TEFAP funding is small compared to private donations; Feeding America, the largest charity working in hunger relief, states that only 20% of its food comes from TEFAP purchases (Feeding America, n.d.). By far, most food distributed by the PEFS comes from private food donations from businesses and companies with surplus food. These companies are protected by the federal Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act of 1996, which provides tax relief as well as federal liability protection for anyone donating food in good faith to a 501(c)(3) nonprofit (USDA, n.d.). As a result, businesses such as grocery stores and restaurants can distribute surplus food to food banks and food pantries (Haley, 2013). As businesses can deduct the cost to produce the food and half the difference between the cost and full fair market value of the donated food, the tax deduction benefit has encouraged many businesses that may not have previously considered food donations to start donating surplus commodities (Buzby, 2020; Daponte & Bade, 2006). Despite its name, the PEFS does not act as an emergency service; rather, it de facto serves food-insecure individuals for long periods of time (Mabli & Worthington, 2017). For example, a two-year study of food pantries across Minnesota showed that about three-quarters of clients had been visiting the pantry for a year or more (Caspi et al., 2021).

The Food Charity System

Critiques of the PEFS have been wide-ranging (Fisher, 2018; Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010; Martin, 2021; McEntee & Naumova, 2012; Pine et al., 2022; Poppendieck, 1999; Winne, 2008). Following Poppendieck’s (1999) groundbreaking book, recent critiques discuss lack of nutritional value that arises from the surplus food model, failure of food charity to meet all client needs, system unpredictability, locations and times that do not meet client needs, and the impact on human dignity, among other problems (Vlaholias-West et al., 2018). Scholars and activists critique the fundamental point of view of PEFS, which disconnects hunger from larger economic problems such as poverty, inequality and

low-wage labor (Dickinson, 2019; Fisher, 2018), and interrogate the extent to which food charity exacerbates the problem of hunger by accepting the current system and diverting attention away from solutions that empower the poor (Vitiello et al., 2014; Winne, 2007). The Global Solidarity Alliance for Food, Health and Social Justice (n.d.), a group of activists, NGOs, and scholars advocating for a rights-based rather than a charity-based approach to addressing hunger, published a letter with 180 signatories to *The Guardian* in 2023 that advocated for “cash-first” and labor-based approaches to hunger (Garthwaite et al., 2023). Research shows that SNAP participants also prefer a cash-first approach (Gaines-Turner et al., 2019), the call for which has been gaining popularity among activists and even some governments (Goodwin & Marshall, 2023), with Scotland recently announcing that it is moving away from food charity to a cash-first model (Somerville, 2023).

Food charity in the U.S. has become increasingly privatized and corporatized since the 1980s, when federal food assistance programs were cut and food rescue and distribution institutions became increasingly run like big businesses (Booth & Whelan, 2014; Daponte & Bade, 2006; Dickinson, 2019; Fisher, 2018; Poppendieck, 2011; Vlaholias-West et al., 2018). Although the PEFS cannot fully address the systemic causes of food insecurity and inaccessibility, which include poverty, inequality, high housing costs, transportation obstacles, and unemployment, and will always be a short-term or band-aid solution (Dutko et al., 2012; Joyner et al., 2022; Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2011; MacNell et al., 2017; Raskind, 2020; Strome et al., 2016; Wolf-Powers, 2017), the problem becomes urgent as hunger is increasingly privatized and depoliticized. As private food charity networks continue to expand as well, there is less onus on the public sector to address food insecurity, and cuts to the social welfare system over the last several decades are forgotten or normalized (Dickinson, 2019; Fisher, 2018; Lohnes, 2023; Lohnes & Pine, 2023), leading to less critical analysis of the root causes of the problem of hunger.

Furthermore, while the dominant narrative is that food charity is demand-driven, the reality is

that it is also supply-driven and partly caused by the overproduction of certain kinds of foods, mostly commodity crops, supported in the U.S. by subsidies (Ehrenberg, 2018). Hunger is a real problem, of course, but its cause is not a shortage of food. Rather, the root causes are multi-faceted and linked to the gaps in the social welfare system, as well as federal subsidies for commodity crops and a lack of financial support for produce, which are labeled “specialty crops” and are underproduced. For example, a USDA estimate shows that if the U.S. produced enough vegetables to meet demand, 10 million acres of vegetables in addition to what is currently in vegetable production would need to be planted (Ehrenberg, 2018). This demonstrates the need for a reassessment of the current model for subsidizing commodity crops and for a concerted effort to increase the amount of produce available. The current American PEFS relies substantially on the diversion of overproduced surplus foods, reliance that occurs from the start to the end of the supply chain. Food banks and food pantries are expected to accept the foods that they receive, as they also expect their clients to be grateful for the foods that they are giving them (Fisher, 2018; McEntee & Naumova, 2012). This attitude that clients should be content with any kinds of food that are available undermines food justice and highlights the “non-nutritional focus” pervading food charity (McEntee & Naumova, 2012, p. 240).

Food Justice and Food Charity

Although the food charity sector might not regularly use the language of food justice (Bacon et al., 2024), and we did not explicitly discuss food justice with our research participants, in this paper we use a food justice theoretical framework as we believe that this is the ideal food system that should be aspired to. The food justice movement arose in response to the intractable problems of hunger and food insecurity. Focusing on inequality, it connects many seemingly unrelated issues across the food system, from farmworker rights and other production inequalities, to distribution, consumption, and access (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; McEntee & Naumova, 2012). Food justice can be simply defined as the “right to grow, sell and eat healthy

food” (Boston University Student Leadership & Impact Center, n.d.):

The Food Justice Movement works to ensure universal access to nutritious, affordable, and culturally appropriate food for all, while advocating for the well-being and safety of those involved in the food production process. The movement aims to address disparities in food access, particularly for communities of color and low-income communities, by examining the structural roots of our food system. Food Justice addresses questions of land ownership, agricultural practices, distribution of technology and resources, workers’ rights, and the historical injustices communities of color have faced. (Boston University Student Leadership & Impact Center, n.d.)

Food justice scholars and activists highlight inequities in the food production system and lack of access to nutritious foods as two interconnected sides of the same coin, and maintain that one cannot be addressed without considering the other. Food justice also emphasizes the place of BIPOC and other historically marginalized communities within the food system (Penniman, 2017). The food justice movement also criticizes the neoliberal dumping of excess foods on low-income and marginalized populations and denounces the overemphasis on the neoliberal values of individualism and independence. McEntee and Naumova define neoliberalism as a “political philosophy that promotes market-based rather than state-based solutions to social problems, while masking social problems as personal deficiencies.” (2012, p. 248). The neoliberal framework stigmatizes people who need help from charity instead of critiquing the larger system that creates hunger in a land of overproduction (DeSouza, 2019). Food charity, while addressing immediate hunger, is reactive and typically operates within the bounds of surplus redistribution. In contrast, food justice is proactive and systems-oriented, advocating for the redistribution of power, land, and resources. This distinction is central to our analysis.

We recognize that the PEFS is fundamentally misaligned with food justice due to its differing

foundational paradigms. However, we use the food justice framework to recommend incremental changes to the food charity model that could improve it and further reduce harm. Since there is a crucial role for food banks and other distribution institutions, at least in the short-term, improving them using components of the food justice framework is an important goal. Many food donation centers are becoming increasingly engaged in building client capacity, autonomy, and self-efficacy through participation in activities such as gardening, farming, and educating clients on farming and cooking. A 2014 study found that about half the members of Feeding America were involved in some type of local agricultural program, whether practicing farming or gardening themselves, or partnering with a local farm (Vitiello et al., 2014). Furthermore, studies show that food pantries that use a client choice model and offer a wider variety of fresh foods can increase self-efficacy, and that increasing self-efficacy can contribute to decreasing food insecurity over time (Costanzo, 2024a; Martin, 2021; Martin et al., 2016).

We recognize that while actors in the food charity system operate with good intentions, their efforts remain embedded within a corporatized food landscape that is fundamentally misaligned with food justice principles. We argue that food justice cannot be fully achieved within the current framework of food charity, but that incremental changes and harm-reduction strategies derived from food justice can meaningfully improve the existing system in the short term. We believe there are four categories of incremental change: (1) access and equity, providing food pantry clients with convenient access to food in humane conditions; (2) nutrition, providing more fresh produce and healthy options and balancing types of food distributed to clients; i.e., not all the food that food pantries receive should necessarily be distributed if it is deemed not nutritious; (3) agency and choice, offering clients the option to choose the products they want; and (4) education and self-sufficiency, helping clients gain agency through education and greater control over food production.

In this paper, we explore the following research question: how can the PEFS be improved by incorporating components of food justice and

stronger local food systems? We explore this question using a case study of the food charity system in Prince George's County (PGC), Maryland. What makes our study unique and significant is that we engaged with stakeholders at three points in the food supply chain: urban growers as producers, food pantries as distributors, and clients at the food pantries as consumers. While other studies engage with one or two of these populations, our study provides a comprehensive exploration of stakeholder perspectives along the supply chain, which allows us to compare and contrast experiences and opinions of these actors within the PGC food charity system, and to analyze the experiences and perspectives of these three populations that interact with the food charity system in different ways. We analyze the experiences of clients within the charity system, collect information about the services provided by food pantries and the difficulties they face, and engage with urban growers to understand barriers and to discuss potential improvements to increase food justice. We asked these populations general questions about their food charity system experiences, obstacles and challenges in accessing or distributing food, and ideas for improvement. We then provide recommendations that may improve the PEFS using food justice principles. This study advances understanding of how reform-oriented interventions within the PEFS can be informed by food justice principles, while acknowledging the inherent limitations of charity-based models in achieving long-term structural change. We advance understanding of the food donation system in a specific region outside of Washington, D.C. Although this is a regional case study, many of our findings confirm what others have found in similar case studies throughout the nation.

Applied Research Methods

We conducted a case study using interdisciplinary mixed methods. We describe the study methodology in the sections below.

Regional Context

Prince George's County is in the state of Maryland, adjacent to Washington, D.C., and has a population of 967,000, with approximately 60% Black res-

idents, 21% Latino or Hispanic residents, and 11% white residents. We chose this location for several reasons. The county has a relatively higher proportion of people who are experiencing food insecurity, compared to surrounding counties. In the Capital Area Food Bank's *Hunger Report* (2024), PGC had a food insecurity rate of 50%, by far the highest rate of the seven surveyed counties in the National Capital Region, where the average was 37%. Although there are numerous food pantries throughout the county, many of the food insecure do not access them for various complex reasons. At the same time, it is a large county with a growing urban and suburban agriculture sector. The county is very interested in investing in urban agriculture, as evidenced by several bills recently enacted that expand opportunities for urban farmers in the county (Daigle, 2019). However, there is a lack of organized programs that connect these farms to food pantries, which could help address food insecurity issues.

Design

This study uses a mixed methods design to carry out a comprehensive analysis of the food charity ecosystem in PGC. We conducted focus groups with clients at food pantries and urban growers as well as a survey that was given to food pantry managers. We chose to engage with these three populations so that we could gain a comprehensive understanding of the food charity system in the county and its connections with the local, fresh produce sector. One object of our study is exploring the availability of fresh produce at food pantries, so we felt that it was important to engage with the three populations involved in this process: the clients at the pantries, the managers of pantries, and the growers, who could contribute to produce availability through increased connections. We wanted to understand and compare the perspectives of these three different populations on the food charity system.

Participants and Data Collection

We worked with the three types of participants: urban growers, staff and managers at food pantries, and clients at food pantries. We describe these populations in the sections below.

Urban Growers

We conducted four focus groups with a total of 11 urban growers. Group sizes ranged from two to four participants. The focus group protocol was semi-structured and focused on understanding decisions and obstacles related to production and distribution, connections with food banks and food pantries, and motivations for undertaking urban growing. We recruited growers via our partnership with the PG County Food Equity Council (PGCFEC), the county's Soil Conservation District, and other local venues and email lists. We asked these local partners to send recruitment emails out to their lists of growers in the county, and interested growers emailed us expressing their wish to participate. Growers were compensated for their time with US\$75 gift cards.

Most of the growers were small-scale, ranging from just backyard gardening/farming on a half-acre of land to a few acres; one participant, however, had a 15-acre farm. We focused on small-scale operations close to major cities in the county and that cater mostly to urban clients. The urban growers in our groups cultivated a variety of products, from produce to some value-added products such as honey and artisanal products such as body care products. The majority were growing and selling produce.

Food Pantries

We conducted a survey to inquire about food pantry logistics, such as food acquisition and distribution, as well as about client experiences with agency, choice, and client feedback. Our questions also helped us better understand the connections between urban growers and food pantries, and obstacles and opportunities for greater collaboration. We had access to a list of all county food pantries through our partners at the PGCFEC and we distributed the survey to this email list. A total of 122 food pantries were emailed and we received 26 responses, a 21% response rate. We were able to reach this number after sending out one round of email reminders. In addition to the formal survey, we had informal discussions with several food pantry managers. Before the client focus groups, we usually met with food pantry managers and informally asked them questions about their operations,

their challenges, their food sources, and other issues. We also have a Co-PI on our project team who is the founder and president of the LindaBen Foundation (Beavan, n.d.), a community nonprofit that helps marginalized populations and runs a weekly food pantry, and we regularly discussed relevant issues with her.

The food pantries surveyed obtain their food from different sources. On average, 52% of the food they distribute is acquired via donations while 48% is purchased. Food pantries had different approaches to food donations. While some claim to accept all donations, others have specific lists of products they want to distribute (e.g., vegetables, low sugar/sodium), and do not accept foods that do not abide by their requirements. Food pantries ranked food banks as their top source for food donations, followed by grocery stores, farmers, and restaurants, and the least frequent source was food rescue services. On the other hand, when buying food with their own funds, food pantries ranked the local food bank (Capital Area Food Bank) as their main source since they can buy at a discounted rate. The second ranked source was grocery stores, followed by farmers and restaurants as least frequent sources. When purchasing food, most food pantries stated that they did have the ability to choose or reject specific foods.

Food Pantry Clients

We ran 10 in-person focus groups with food pantry clients in PGC, five with English-speaking clients and five with Spanish-speaking clients; we spoke with a total of 53 participants. Each focus group had an average of five participants, ranging from two to eight, most of whom were women. Our focus group protocol was semi-structured and discussed food provisioning, food preferences, and use of food assistance initiatives including food pantries and SNAP and WIC programs. Our main objective was to understand their agency in the choice of pantries and food and the obstacles they face when accessing food, information about food pantries, and accessing culturally appropriate food.

Participants for focus groups were recruited by our contacts at food pantries. Each food pantry informed clients about the opportunity to participate in a focus group and receive a \$50 Visa gift

card. We did not restrict participation in our focus group via any food security assessment, but we assumed that clients at the food pantry were currently experiencing or had previously experienced food insecurity. Table 1 shows the food pantries and the number of participants per food pantry for each focus group.

Data Analysis

All focus group conversations were recorded and digitally transcribed. Spanish focus groups were translated into English before coding. We used Atlas.ti to conduct two thematic analyses: (1) the experiences of food pantry clients with the food charity ecosystem, and (2) the experiences of urban growers.

Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the coding scheme organization used for this study. The codes were developed separately for the two sets of focus groups because the nature of the conversations and the types of questions were different. We developed the initial set of codes based on notes we took during the focus groups and engaged in preliminary coding to test them. At least two coders went through each transcript assigning codes. After a first pass, coding disagreements were discussed to increase intercoder reliability, and codes were reviewed to assess if new codes were necessary. We repeated this process three times for each set of focus groups until a final set of codes was agreed upon. For additional reliability, coders did not conduct any focus groups and exclusively focused on the coding process. We used the final set of codes and the frequency of code occurrence within a focus group conversation to identify themes and their relevance.

The food pantry survey consisted primarily of multiple-choice questions. To analyze the data and present findings, we used the statistics, percentages, and response summaries that were provided by Qualtrics (Tables 2 and 3).

Results

The structure of this section follows the food supply chain for the three population. First, we describe urban growers' (indicated by "UF" for urban farmer) motivations for practicing agriculture, their distribution obstacles, and donation processes; then, food pantry logistics and pantry distribution to their clients; then, feedback from consumers, the clients themselves (indicated by "FI" for food insecure).

Urban Growers

In the focus groups with urban growers, we asked them about their motivations for participating in this work and about their production and distribution practices and obstacles. Findings from these groups are detailed in the sections below.

Motivations

We asked urban grower participants about their motivations for practicing agriculture. This was an important window into the reasons that they chose to grow despite the many obstacles and very little to nonexistent financial gain. Understanding these motivations can help us to better recommend targeted approaches to support urban growers and facilitate linkages between them and the food charity sector.

The most frequent response to this question, by a factor of two, was "community." Participants

Table 1. Food Pantries Where Focus Groups Were Held and Number of Participants and Language per Focus Group

Food Pantry Name	English Focus Groups	Spanish Focus Groups
Institute for Public Health Innovation, Food Insecure Individuals Advisory Board Program, Largo, MD	6	2
Fountain Community Enrichment, Upper Marlboro, MD	5	8
St. Stephen Baptist Church, Camp Springs, MD	8	2
LindaBen Foundation, Riverdale, MD	3	7
Capital Christian Fellowship, Lanham, MD	5	7
Totals	27	26

stated that they enjoy providing fresh, healthy food to their neighbors and community. A few mentioned that they consider their food production a type of community engagement. Others mentioned educational or outreach programs that they run at their farms, such as bringing children to their farms

to teach them how to grow food. One participant stated that they like to maintain connections to the people using their food: “I just want to be connected to where my food is going. I didn’t get to use it, but someone is chopping it up right now in the kitchen” (UF FG3). Along with the motivation

Table 3. Themes and Codes from Food Pantry Client Focus Groups

Food Acquisition	Transportation	Food Characteristics	Food Store Characteristics
Grocery store	Personal car	Price	Discounts
Wholesale	Uber/Lyft	Quality	Cost
Convenience store	Bus	Nutritional value	Safety
Farmers market	Carpool	Organic	Customer service
Amazon	Walk	Convenience	Bulk
Ethnic market	Metro	Variety	Cleanliness
Home grown			Delivery
			Location
Social Networks	Technology Use	Food Pantry Characteristics	Food Pantry Obstacles
Food sharing	Internet access	Respect	Transportation
Information sharing	Smart phone access	Food quality	Convenience
	Internet access on smartphone only	Food variety	Registration
		Ability to choose items	Food quality
		Specific foods offered	Food variety
		Convenience	Wait time
		Quantity	Pride
		Community	Customer service
			Religion
			No delivery
			Knowledge about locations

Table 2. Themes and Codes from Urban Grower Focus Groups

Production Decisions	Production Obstacles	Donations
Customer demand	Climate/environment	Free food distribution centers
Climate/environment	Pest & diseases	Friends/neighbors
Price	Storage	Food rescue or other similar programs
Culture/history	Space	Events
Labor intensity		Livestock farmers
Market diversity		
Health & wellness		
Distribution	Distribution Obstacles	Motivations
Farmers markets	Marketing	Personal meaning
CSAs	Farmers markets obstacles	Community
Direct distribution	Labor shortages	History/family
Local shops	Time	Lifestyle/passion
Craft fairs/shows	Transportation	Culture
Wholesale	Packaging/labeling	Education
Dining	Business knowledge	Sustainability
Online	Customer product knowledge	Equity
Food pantries		
International markets		

of community, we saw a theme of service, supporting those in need and supporting self-sufficiency. One woman plans to conduct crop cultivation classes at women's shelters:

The ultimate goal is to be able to provide young women at home, if they're pregnant or homeless, and to teach them how to be self-sufficient. Because I didn't have that for myself at 17, when I was all by myself and alone. So that's the ultimate goal. So, however, I can help and be in a position to help, so that people know that you're not alone, and you have support. But not only do you have support, but I want to teach you how to take care of yourself. (UF FG2)

The second most frequent response was "equity." One grower partners with an organization that works with LGBTQ and BIPOC growers to implement what they call a "solidarity add on," adding products from under-represented growers to their CSA boxes. Another stated that they live in a lower-income part of the county and therefore are often overlooked and underrepresented by leaders and officials and that they view farming as a way to contribute to addressing the lack of food availability and accessibility in their vicinity (UF FG1).

The next most frequent response for farming motivations was sustainability. One participant mentioned that they felt that their farming helped them to address climate change. Another mentioned that they use regenerative agricultural practices as a way to heal the soil and restore the environment (UF FG2).

Growers also discussed the personal meaning they got from their farming. One mentioned the "heritage or tradition" of farming and stated that they saw themselves as "what we like to call being a steward of the land" (UF FG5). A subset of participants who were immigrant growers discussed the cultural importance of food production for their communities and the connections that it allows them to maintain to their home country and culture.

Distribution Obstacles

We asked the participants about distribution broadly, then followed up with more specific ques-

tions about food banks, pantries, and other centers. This information helped to shed light on the difficulties that small, local growers have selling or donating their products, the incentives or obstacles in providing products locally, and on their capacities to distribute products to people who might be experiencing food insecurity. The most cited distribution obstacle was labor. Some said that they could not afford to hire labor since their operations were very small. Others said that the training that labor requires was too time-consuming to make it worthwhile to hire people, especially when the jobs would be short-term or seasonal. Some participants even stated that lack of labor has caused them to let some of their crops go to waste.

Related to labor, another distribution obstacle for growers was time. For these small producers who have small quantities of product, having to package and transport products to many different locations might end up costing them more than they are profiting from the operation. For example, a participant who grows ethnic herbs said that they had tried selling at ethnic markets and found that it was not worth the time and effort. The markets wanted relatively small quantities, yet the grower had to purchase packaging, signage for QR codes, and other materials for the sales. The profit they made from the sales was marginal to nonexistent (UF FG1).

Another common distribution obstacle was transportation. One farmer rents a van twice a week to distribute her products:

I have resisted buying a delivery van because I just have so many problems with cars. I feel like we spend an inordinate amount of money trying to keep our cars running. So, every week we rent a U-Haul van twice a week. (UF FG4)

A grower said that the cost of fuel was a big distribution obstacle, and another mentioned the costs of having to buy a truck and pay for fuel and insurance. This participant summarized the issue well:

So you see that there's a lot of money we put into wanting to grow food. So not only do we have to have the proper vehicle for farming,

but now we have gas, we have insurance. We have the time, you know, we have to deliver and then the cost of doing this is not great, for the urban farmer. You know, we're not producing high amounts, quantities of food where we can really see a big income. So that's just part of the acceptance of being an urban farmer that you're not going to be rich ... growing food for people. (UF FG5)

Donations

The growers in our focus groups were mostly small producers who did not have large amounts of surplus product for donation. However, many stated that they wanted to donate some of their products and often do. The most frequent type of donation was informal, either to friends or neighbors, to homeless populations, or online through groups like Facebook Buy Nothing. One farmer who runs a CSA gives away two CSA boxes for needy families each week, which is paid for by the other CSA members. Only two of the eleven growers we talked to stated that they donate to food pantries regularly. We also asked participants if they had heard of the Farm to Food Bank program which operates through the Maryland Food Bank in neighboring Montgomery County; only one had heard of it, but most of them were very interested in learning more and potentially participating if PGC were to launch a similar program.

Food Pantry Managers and Clients

The pantry staff in our survey shared insights about their logistics, food acquisition, and distribution as well as food choice and selection. The clients shared their experiences at pantries as well as general feedback on the food distribution system. We describe our main findings, combining insights from both the survey and the focus groups.

Health and Nutrition

Our data show gaps in the perspectives between food pantry managers and the clients with regard to the healthiness and nutritiousness of the distributed food. Pantry staff overall felt that the foods that they were offering clients were nutritious, or in some cases that nutrition should not be the goal of food donations. Although 65% of the food pantry

managers indicated that they would like to distribute more vegetables and fresh food than they currently do, and 32% stated that they would like to receive fewer canned goods, when asked whether they thought clients could get foods that meet their nutritional needs at their pantries, 74% responded yes. This aligns with the perspective that food pantry clients should be grateful for any foods that they receive and that client health and nutrition should not be a priority, as has been described in the literature (Fisher, 2018; McEntee & Naumova, 2012; Vitiello et al., 2014; Winne, 2008.). Food pantries do not necessarily see their role as empowering their clients or changing the system in which they operate. One respondent even stated, "we don't have any insight on their nutritional needs." There were other managers in our study, however, who seemed to emphasize nutrition and were more aware of the importance of healthy food availability at their pantries. One stated that they have five registered dietitians on staff who create meal plans and ensure that clients receive meals that meet their nutritional needs. But these responses were in the minority. This indicates disconnects and contradictions in some staff thinking about the role and function of the food pantry—while they are aware that more fresh foods are needed, they also believe that overall foods are meeting clients' needs or that food pantries should not be expected to fully meet food needs.

Client Choice and Food Variety

We saw similar responses regarding client choice and preferences. Of the pantries surveyed, 62% offer pre-packaged boxes or bags, while 38% offer a choice-based model, clients choosing the foods they like. When asked if clients could get foods that meet their food preferences at their pantry, 63% responded yes. Most pantry respondents followed up with comments that they provide a wide variety of foods and that clients are grateful, one stating, "clients are more grateful than we will ever know."

This was not what the clients reported overall about the variety of food choices. At the pantries with the pre-packed meals, clients in the focus groups shared that when they are given a box, they often do not know the contents until they open it at home. Sometimes it may contain fresh produce

or meats, other times it may only contain canned goods. One participant described differences between her box and the box her friend received:

The boxes come sealed ... and once she opened her box, I remember that it was tuna, tomato, tomato sauces and things like that and pasta. But my box had meat, fruits and stuff. The boxes were of different types. Then it was my luck with the box. (FI FG1 [Spanish])

When participants receive food that is neither culturally appropriate nor things that they know how to prepare, they may end up throwing the food away. One participant stated, “so, sometimes that complicates things a little: people receive the food and they say no, I don’t eat that... So I think maybe because they don’t know how to cook it, they throw it away.” This results in an inefficient process, people waiting in line for a long time just to receive food that is either of less nutritional quality than the next person in line receives and/or food that they are not familiar with eating or cooking. Most participants stated that they wanted more fresh produce and meats and less canned goods, a desire known among food pantry staff, as we found in our survey. Clients reported frequent mismatches between food items provided and their cultural preferences or dietary needs. From a food justice perspective, these mismatches highlight the disconnect between surplus-based charity models and client-centered food access, in which dignity and agency are prioritized.

Furthermore, 60% of food pantry survey respondents stated that clients show up quite early at pantries to access a larger variety of food. Although the distribution process itself is often quick, clients line up early, in some cases spending up to seven hours in line. Survey responses showed that at 63% of food pantries clients wait up to one hour for food pick-up, and at 20% of pantries individuals often wait between three and six hours in line.

These problems are even more stark considering how frequently these individuals are relying on food pantries as their main source of sustenance. Half the respondents stated that 60–100% of their clients are regular or long-term clients. One pantry

stated that from their own client surveys, 44% of their clients report that the pantry is their only source of food. This shows that consistent with studies in other regions (Caspi et al., 2021; Mabli & Worthington, 2017), our population is not using the food pantry system for “emergency” purposes but unfortunately using it for their regular weekly or daily food needs. Not having a choice in regular food acquisition and not having access to fresh produce, meats, and eggs is a serious food justice issue that needs to be addressed.

Convenience

Another significant problem, and an area in which we saw gaps in perspectives, was in the overall convenience of food pantry distribution. The pantries that responded had a range of operating hours. Some are open daily during working hours (9am–5pm), but others only on specific distribution days. For example, many food pantries only offer food one or two days a week for a few hours. Although some food pantries offered food on Saturdays, potentially allowing more people to attend, they were a minority. In addition, other pantries offer appointments whereby clients could schedule private pickups, but the appointments often depend on staff or volunteer availability. In terms of distribution, 48% of the food pantries distribute their food outdoors and clients line up in their cars for pick-up, and 21% allow people to pick up their food outdoors on foot, without requiring a car. Only 24% reported allowing clients to wait and obtain food indoors.

Clients stated that restrictive hours and locating the pantries made use of pantries difficult. Individuals learned about pantry locations and hours through word-of-mouth, flyers, and the internet. Therefore, if an individual is not tech savvy or has not developed a social network, it can be hard for them to learn about these pantries. One individual stated:

They had very restricted hours; they’ll only be open on like Tuesdays and Thursdays and Sundays, and then on top of that, like they’ll only be open from like 12 to 3, and then I’m at work, you know, so I have to take flex time to be able to make it to the Food Bank in time

and make it back, so it's not as great and convenient as it should be (FI FG1).

Because of day and time restrictions, individuals without a flexible schedule find it difficult to access the food that they need, creating a significant equity problem.

Transportation

Another common obstacle to obtaining food from pantries was transportation, consistent with what previous research shows. Many focus group participants stated that they or others that they knew were either unable to walk to a pantry, did not have a car, were too old to travel, or had poor health, making getting to the pantries difficult. The food pantry survey revealed that only 23% of the food pantries offered delivery of certain foods (e.g., fresh produce). Food delivery also emerged as a theme in the focus groups, with clients saying that the lack of delivery options from the pantry, coupled with their sometimes hard-to-reach locations, made it difficult to access the food pantries.

The lack of good public transit options to reach the food pantries was also raised during the focus groups. One client explains: "You sacrifice too much for three buses to come here. Three buses, imagine. And from there back. It's the same, and loaded" (FI FG 4 [Spanish]). These pantries are inaccessible geographically for individuals who do not have a car, and taking public transportation like a bus lengthens the commute, effort, and time spent. Participants stated that they will sometimes go to pantries for neighbors, friends or family members who do not have a way of getting there.

Client Feedback

Most food pantries (80%) shared that they have communication mechanisms that allow their clients to share feedback with their organizations. However, most of these were informal and client-initiated; generally, clients were welcome to share feedback directly or through phone calls. A much smaller number had formal ways of obtaining feedback, such as regular surveys. Our survey revealed different types of feedback, primarily focused on food suggestions, especially requests asking for fresh produce and culturally appropriate foods.

Another prevalent type of feedback was thank-you notes for volunteers.

Food Pantries' Limitations

We do not want to place the burden of responsibility entirely on food pantries themselves, as we are well aware that the larger problem is structural. Like clients, food pantries are on the receiving end of the donation supply chain and often have little choice in most of what they receive. As previously stated, in our sample a little more than half (52%) of all foods at pantries were donations, and pantries overall accepted all food donations and only had a say in food items that were purchased (48%).

The food pantries surveyed respond generally to a substantial number of clients. About 50% of the food pantries that responded serve 1–100 clients, around 20% serve 100–200 clients, and about 30% serve more than 200 clients weekly (Figure 1). Furthermore, with regards to operating hours and convenience, food pantry staff are very limited by staffing shortages and reliance on volunteer labor. Approximately 50% of food pantries had no paid staff members, 44% had 1–20 paid staff members, and only 5% had 21–50 (Figure 2). Food pantries heavily rely on volunteers, with 95% having 1–50 volunteers. These numbers indicate that most small-scale food pantries operate with little staff.

Actors in the food charity system are only trying to do their best within a corporatized food system that is not justice-focused, while confronting enormous structural and institutional dilemmas. However, food charity institutions can make certain incremental adjustments that are founded on the principles of food justice. We discuss our findings and present a set of recommendations organized in four categories: (1) access and equity, (2) nutrition, (3) agency and choice, and (4) education and self-sufficiency.

Discussion: Recommendations from the Food Justice Paradigm

The following recommendations are grounded in a harm-reduction framework and are not substitutes for the structural reforms necessary to achieve food justice. However, they serve as transitional interventions that can mitigate harm, increase agency, and begin to shift power within the PEFS.

Access and Equity

In terms of convenience, transportation, and wait times, pantries could increase their hours of operations by offering more times throughout the week and more open days. Not all individuals can access pantries in the morning or midday because of work; offering later times throughout the week could be beneficial to the larger population. We recognize that food pantries have staffing issues that limit their hours. However, many of their clients have jobs and families, which makes it challenging or unrealistic to visit a food pantry in the middle of the workday. We encourage food pantries to brainstorm ways to implement extended or alternative distribution hours. Because many clients have school-age children, another potential solution could be to coordinate with schools a shared space where food pantries could set up an at-school distribution center after pick-up time. This would make things easier for families, who could pick up food in a place where they already go instead

of asking them to go to a food pantry at specific times.

Wait times were also a problem; in some cases, we witnessed entire families waiting in cars for long hours. As families think that to be late might mean getting less food or not getting food at all (as our survey showed), we encourage food pantries to think about choice-based systems that might distribute food more efficiently.

Many creative solutions can be found in the literature. For example, the Pennsylvania organization Food Dignity works with farmers to build food stands in high need areas and fundraises with local nonprofits to provide farmers with payment while also allowing customers to pay what they can (Costanzo, 2025).

Nutrition

Nutritional value in the PEFS is one of the most significant and most frequently cited problems (Fisher, 2018; Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010; Martin, 2021; McEntee & Naumova, 2012; Poppendieck, 1999;

Winne, 2008). We found this to be also true in our study, as both food pantry clients and the staff stated that an increase in fresh foods was strongly wished for. Deficient nutrition is a well-known and persistent problem with many complex causes. Nutrition could be improved through closer working relationships with the urban farming community, which is thriving in PGC, and our findings as well as previous research (Ceryes et al., 2023; Stein & Brinkley, 2024) show that urban farmers are motivated to donate food, for many reasons. There are examples of successful partnerships between farms and food pantries (Bacon et al., 2024). There are also federal and state incentive programs and grants such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) Program, which have

Figure 1. Number of People Who Receive Food in an Average Week at the Food Pantries Surveyed

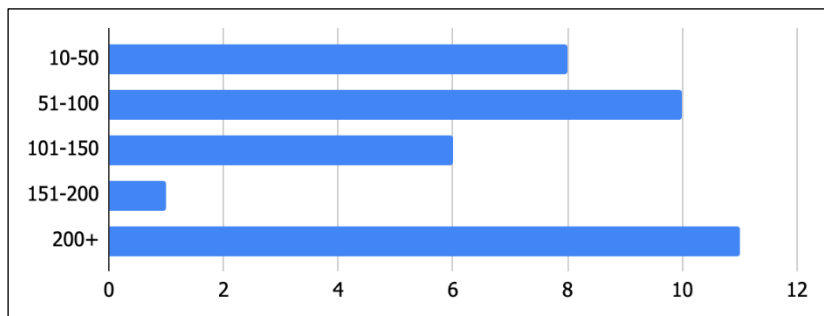
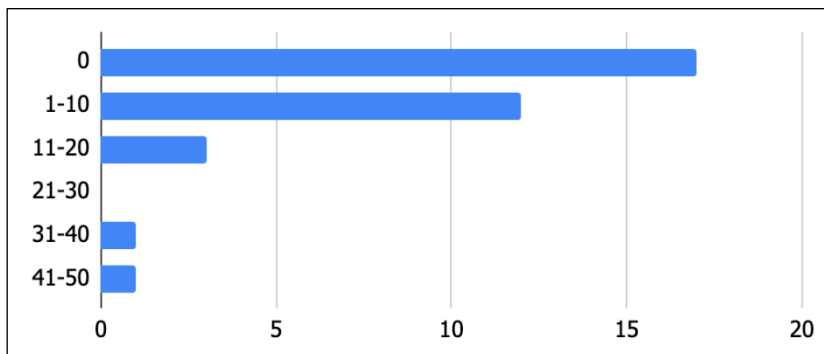


Figure 2. Number of Paid Staff at the Food Pantries Who Participated in the Survey



been supporting local farmers while making more nutritious foods available at food pantries and banks (Costanzo, 2024c). LFPA has been successful and is being expanded by the USDA. Farm to food bank programs gained popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic and have proliferated since. A survey conducted by the Wallace Food Center in 2022 of 300 farm to food bank programs found that half began during the pandemic. Just less than half of the funding for these programs comes from federal funds, and the rest from philanthropic sources (Cohen et al., 2024).

Some states also have state-wide initiatives, such as Maryland Food Bank's Farm to Food Bank program, which directly connects Maryland farmers with food banks for food purchases and donations and provides resources and support such as gleaners, volunteer drivers, and in some cases even contract purchases (Maryland Food Bank, n.d.). The Maryland Food Bank does not operate in PGC, but this model or something similar could be adopted by the food banks that do operate in the county. Increased connection and collaboration between farmers and food pantries would be an excellent way to ensure income for farmers, use produce that may otherwise go bad, and increase the healthy options that food pantry clients desire.

An obstacle for growers who want to donate produce is transportation and cold storage. Pantry staff or volunteers picking up the produce and bringing it to distribution centers would allow for increased donations. Because of understaffing and other limitations discussed previously, this is often not an option for pantries. Programs like Food Rescue US (2025) and ChowMatch (2025) assign volunteers to pick up food that needs to be donated. Limitations of this approach include the number of volunteers and the size of personal vehicles, which might not be sufficient to transport larger amounts of food. However, these programs can help to reduce food waste and make more fresh produce available at pantries. Another potential avenue is creating or strengthening mutual aid networks, most often mobilized during disasters but which could also be leveraged during non-emergency times; but this is a longer-term recommendation that requires increased community engagement and organizing (Spade, 2020).

Agency and Choice

Another significant criticism of the food pantry system is the lack of choice and agency, both for pantries, the clients they serve, and every point along the supply chain of the charity food system. One approach that is gaining popularity is implementing choice-based food pantries (Costanzo, 2024a; Estrem, 2024), where clients can select the foods they want as if they are grocery shopping instead of receiving pre-selected foods. The main obstacles to offering a client-choice model are lack of labor and space (Costanzo, 2023), but pantry staff understand that this type of model provides clients with a sense of dignity, improves relationships between clients and pantries, and might also help to reduce food waste. There are also pantries that use a hybrid model, with some pre-packaged items and other items available by choice (Costanzo, 2023).

Pantries can also increase their efforts to collect feedback from their clients and then try to tailor the food supply to their clients' desires. There has been a lack of research overall on the desires and needs of clients at food pantries, and the pantry managers we spoke with acknowledged that this is an area in which they could improve. While labor and time shortages are obstacles, simple surveys can be developed and conducted with clients who are waiting for their food on distribution days. The capacity of pantries to respond to the needs that they uncover may be difficult, but there could be small changes possible to address client desires. Furthermore, very few pantries have publicly available information regarding the types of food that are available on a regular basis so that their clients can see ahead of time what foods they will receive. If clients had this kind of information, they could make more informed decisions about which pantries to visit and when. Especially as the time spent waiting for food can be so long, this information sharing would significantly increase the agency and choice for clients.

Education and Self-Sufficiency

In our focus groups, growers regularly cited labor shortages as one of their main production and distribution obstacles. A possible solution to labor shortages is for volunteers to help on local farms

and receive fresh produce in exchange. Programs with urban growers and community gardens could allow food insecure people to receive basic training in harvesting vegetables, not only addressing labor gaps for growers but also allowing community members to participate in urban agriculture and learn to grow and harvest their own food, in turn enhancing food justice. Small farms could also partner with local high schools or universities to train students in farming and business practices in exchange for help with their operations. This could even be worked out with their schools so that the students could receive course or internship credits. The arrangement could allow volunteers to be involved in the project for a full semester or academic year, minimizing the need for retraining new volunteers regularly while providing volunteers with valuable training and educational opportunities. There are examples of internship experiences on urban farms, such as the East New York Farms! Youth Internship Program in Brooklyn, NY (Sonti et al., 2016).

Another promising avenue is for increased education about gardening, cooking, and eating nutritious foods at food pantries, a trend that is increasing at food pantries and banks across the country. Many pantries are establishing their own small gardens or farms, or partnering with local farms to create a direct farm to food bank relationship (Costanzo, 2020; Costanzo, 2021; Vitiello et al., 2014). This might be more financially feasible for large food banks than small food pantries, but it is a possibility. One small food pantry that participated in our focus groups had a small community garden at which clients could volunteer. Cooking and gardening demonstrations can be conducted by staff while clients wait at the pantry. Alternatively, recipe cards and nutritional information

could be given as a handout along with the food. One focus group participant from the Dominican Republic explained that although she has experience with cooking, many do not:

Not everyone has that position and that is why I talk a lot about education. I believe that this program, if the beneficiaries were more educated, would be a success, because there are many people who do not know how to eat, but that is precisely because they do not know how to prepare. (FI FG1 [Spanish])

Such programs would encourage food pantry clients to cook a wider range of foods or to garden their own crops, furthering food justice.

Some food pantries are also starting their own community gardens at which clients can volunteer, enabling them to learn skills and to take produce home. In addition to cooking lessons and recipe sharing, food pantries could also provide information about other food pantries in the area, grocery store rewards programs, and resources regarding WIC and SNAP. Table 4 summarizes our main recommendations.

Limitations of the Study

The low response rate (21%) of the survey for food pantry managers is a severe limitation of this study; we did not have sufficient time to try to increase the response rate. The findings from our survey may thus not be generalizable to food pantries across PGC. However, we also had informal conversations with five additional food pantry managers where we conducted focus groups, and we have a co-principal investigator (PI) on our team who is the founder and president of a community nonprofit and runs a weekly food pantry.

Table 4. Recommendations Matrix

Recommendation	Short-term or long-term	Scale	Aligned food justice principle
Expand the client choice model	Short-term	Pantry	Agency and choice
Expand access and partner with community organizations	Short-term	Pantry	Access and equity
Education for clients	Short-term	Pantry	Education and self-sufficiency
Partner with local growers via LFPA	Short-term	Organizational	Nutrition
Develop a mutual aid infrastructure	Long-term	Community	Community sovereignty

These additional conversations also contributed to our understanding of the perspective of food pantry managers in the county. However, future research should attempt to sample this population in a more representative manner.

Ours is a case study which is regionally focused on PGC so it may not be generalizable to other regions. However, most of our findings are consistent with the literature on this topic.

Conclusions

Our findings represent the perspectives of stakeholders at three different points in the PEFS supply chain: producers, distributors, and consumers. Engaging with different actors at different scales gave us a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in the food charity distribution system in PGC, MD. The problems that our participants discussed with us stem from systemic gaps and the failure of a neoliberal market system to address the root causes of hunger and food insecurity. For example, the continual lack of nutritious and fresh foods available at food distribution sites partly stems from the corporate dumping of surplus foods at donation sites and therefore cannot be addressed by the distribution sites alone (Fisher, 2018). Placing the burden on food pantries to fix these problems, when they operate on shoestring budgets and are chronically understaffed, is an unfair and unsustainable response to a very complex set of problems.

However, we recognize that the current PEFS does meet the short-term food security needs of many clients, and many food pantries have moved towards building clients' self-sufficiency and agency, two essential principles of a just food system. Therefore, the PEFS does serve an ameliora-

tive purpose currently and for the near term at least, and therefore it is worth discussing potential improvements. So, while acknowledging that true transformation will require much more significant system changes, we offer recommendations based on principles from the food justice framework. The incremental solutions that we discuss here are needed to improve access, equity, nutrition, and self-sufficiency for populations who are in distress right now. But these solutions alone are not sufficient. Collective action is needed to hold the state accountable to its citizens, as it has abdicated much of its responsibility to market-based solutions and individual action, leaving the private sector and individuals to act on their own to fill the void. For a true food system transformation towards food justice, hunger and food insecurity cannot be tackled in isolation without engaging issues of wages, employment, childcare, and other aspects of social welfare.

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