A Trauma-Informed Approach to Charitable Food Distribution: The Nutrition Pantry Program

Bethany Hendrickson, MPH, Adrienne Markworth, MA, Leah Quinn, Carrie Richerson, MS, CHES

Summary

The Nutrition Pantry Program (NPP) provides a framework for creating client-centered health promoting food pantry through resource development, technical assistance, and training. In 2018 and 2019, 13 pantries completed both a baseline and follow up Healthy Food Pantry Assessment Survey. On average, pantries increased their total Healthy Food Pantry Assessment scores after completing NPP. “Food Distributed to Clients” and “Policies” accounted for the highest increases while “Storage & Food Safety” and “Services” accounted for the lowest increase in scores.

Objective

The study’s objective was to evaluate the change in environment, inventory, policies, services, and overall healthy scores of pantries in NPP, a trauma-informed policy, systems, and environment (PSE) intervention.

Description of the Nutrition Pantry Program

NPP utilizes behavioral economics, trauma-informed principles, and the transdisciplinary model to change environments that promote healthy choices and mitigate retraumatization. In response to a need for more support at the food pantry level, NPP was developed by SuperFood Drive in 2016. In 2018, SuperFood Drive became a part of Leath Pantry. Development of the intervention continued in collaboration with food distributions in California, including both faith-based and secular pantries. In 2019, NPP was adopted by 13 California counties and in 2020, the intervention was accepted into the USDA SNAP-Ed Toolbox.

NPP offers training, technical assistance, and certification to sites interested in creating client-centered, health promoting distributions that follow best practices across six focus areas: nutrition education, policy, inventory and waste reduction, dietary and cultural responsiveness, community resources and environment. This program is for both individual pantries and organizations (such as food banks or health departments) that want to work with multiple distribution sites.

Pantries first complete the Healthy Food Pantry Assessment Tool (HFATT) and a client needs assessment. Pantry staff obtains client and volunteer feedback, as necessary. Next, pantries create a work plan which details proposed changes in the six focus areas. Resources and technical assistance are provided to support the implementation. In 2018 and 2019, 66 California pantries participated among faith-based, higher-education, general social services, housing, and K-12 food distributions.

Evaluation Methods

The Healthy Food Pantry Assessment Tool (HFATT) is a validated survey used to evaluate policy, systems and environment (PSE) initiatives in pantries. It assesses five total scores of the environment. Food pantries complete the tool at baseline and then again at the end of the intervention. Fifty-eight pantries completed a baseline HFATT and 13 also completed a follow-up HFATT during the evaluation period.

Results

- Fifty-eight pantries completed a baseline HFATT, and 13 also completed a follow-up HFATT during the evaluation period.
- The average time between a baseline and follow-up HFATT, which aligns with program completion, was eight months.
- On average, total HFATT score at baseline of all pantries with a completions (n=68) was 44 points compared with a baseline total of 51.6 points for pantries who completed both pre- and post-assessment (n=13).
- For pantries that completed both pre- and post-assessments, total HFATT score increased by 7.6 points after NPP intervention.
- Categories with the most improvements included “Food Distributed to Clients” and “Policies” sections (See Table 1).
- Sections with the lowest improvements include “Storage & Food Safety” and “Services for Clients” (See Table 1).

Focus Areas in the Nutrition Pantry Program

Table 2 outlines implementation examples within the six focus areas of NPP assessment and activities aligned with [TI].

Funding

Funding for this project was generously provided by these sponsors.

Breaking News—Pantry Response to Covid-19

We would be remiss not to acknowledge the impacts of COVID-19 on the charitable food system. The response of our pantry network has shown the resilience of our sites, community, and the model and system. Meeting the increased demand for food and safety needs has rightly become the priority at food distribution sites and much additional work has paused.

The decision to include network components in NPP made it easier to be responsive to needs and quickly highlight emerging best practices across the network. The NPP focus areas have remained relevant but specific tactics within each focus area have shifted. For example, in the environmental focus area, signage used to nudge clients to select veggies is no longer a priority but urgent need to provide food in an environment safe from infectious diseases has spurred dozens of new strategies. The flexibility of the program, the emphasis on client needs, and the existence of a dynamic and growing network keeps NPP relevant in the age of COVID-19.

Conclusion

When given a framework, technical support, and resources, pantries are able to improve their current “healthy” score by using PSE and trauma-informed interventions. Pantries are, however, limited in their ability to make changes that require larger infrastructure investments, such as increased refrigeration/refreezer space. Changes that may require increase in staff time, such as support services, are also difficult to change. While the HFATT highlights many healthy food pantry practices, there is opportunity for trauma-informed framing of pantry activities and program impact. Next steps will be to analyze work plans to identify policy, systems, and environment changes that were implemented at pantries.