

CHARTING A COURSE TO FOOD SECURITY

DATA CONSIDERATIONS FOR FOOD DISTRIBUTION

Many Community Action Agencies (CAAs) have a role in food distribution as a means of promoting food security for their customers. This may be through food pantries, community gardens, meals-on-wheels, or other variations of distribution. In order to pave a path to food security, CAAs need to document a household's consistent/regular access to food. The type of data collected about households and food dispersed varies from agency to agency but is intended to inform agency decisions and educate the community. Data collection is often driven in part – or in full – by funder requirements. **There are several considerations to remember when collecting data, starting with -- what do you want to know? Then you can decide the best way to collect and ultimately use the data.**

"Food security means access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life."

-- USDA

1 Define your goal: What you want to know?

CAAs often collect different categories of information, starting with basic data on their level of investment and types of activities (inputs). Agencies typically collect data on the outputs resulting from these investments and activities, such as the number and demographics of participants and the amount of food provided or produced. Agencies also often want to measure the results of their programs (outcomes). These may include initial outcomes, such as temporarily reducing hunger and increasing individual's healthy food intake, as well as longer-term outcomes that measure progress toward achieving a program's overall goals around food security.

Case Example

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) is a federal program that helps supplement the diet of Americans with low-incomes by providing emergency food assistance at no cost through local pantries that directly serve the public. Many CAAs are part of TEFAP and are required to collect a few basic data points about households receiving food. This may be all the CAA chooses to collect, or it may collect additional data to tell a broader story.

Data Categories - These are measurable individual/family level activities, outputs and outcomes a CAA may choose to pursue. This is not an exhaustive list.

- **Inputs**
What is going into the program?
 - Staff
 - Facilities
 - Food
- **Activities**
What are your daily tasks & efforts?
 - Individuals receive food from pantries
 - Home delivery of food to seniors
 - Participation in community gardening
- **Outputs**
What are the products of your efforts?
 - # of individuals utilizing food banks
 - # of meals delivered to individuals
- **Potential Initial Outcomes**
What are the results of the activities?
 - Individuals temporarily reduce hunger
 - Individuals increase healthy food intake
- **Potential Long-Term Outcomes**
Did the program achieve its goals?
 - Individuals meet basic needs for 90 days; 180 days
 - Individuals are food secure
 - Individuals experience less stress due to availability of food

2 Decide how to collect the data

Different categories of data require different methods of collection. Input data may be the easiest to collect, since this information comes from the agency itself. Data on outputs and outcomes, especially long-term outcomes, may be more difficult to collect, sometimes requiring more sophisticated methodologies and additional resources. However, there are multiple approaches to data collection.

Data on outputs can be collected the day the service is provided and can be as simple or extensive as a CAA wishes. However, it is best to limit the data collected to information the CAA will use. This type of data can touch on the scope of need, as well as the reach of the Community Action Agency.

A CAA that wants to know about outcomes will need to do follow-up with each household. This may be via text message sent to a household asking if the household has “a better sense of food security” due to the food received, or the next time the household contacts the CAA for assistance a question is asked about increased nutrition or reduced stress due to accessing food through the agency.

Follow-up can be challenging due to difficulty reaching households and securing the funding needed to support follow-up efforts. Even so, quality follow-up and measurement tools are critical to understanding the benefits experienced by clients. It should not be assumed that one meal or one box of food increased food security or improved health and well-being. Rather only through consistent access and follow-up can a CAA demonstrate that a household attained food security through program activities.

[Click here](#), to view data collection tools. Share your examples of data collection tools specific to food distribution with the network by sending them to NASCSP.

3 Consider how you will store the data

Many CAAs use a database to store food distribution data; others use spreadsheets or check-in sheets stored in files to document household participation in food programs. Regardless of method of storage, the goal is to ensure that the data is safe and easy to access and analyze for your purposes.

4 Decide how to use the data

CAAs collect multiple categories of data for a wide variety of purposes and end-users, including agency staff and board members, local partners and stakeholders, private and government funders, as well as the individuals, families and communities they serve. Here are examples of ways in which agencies use data about their programs:

- Refer households to other programs like Head Start, LIHEAP, and Weatherization
- Debunk stereotypes of who is food insecure
- Share data during community presentations
- During crisis (i.e. pandemic or natural disaster) reach out to households to see if they need food or other services
- Coordinate food distribution efforts (i.e. locations, hours of operation, etc.) with other organizations providing food, fresh produce, etc.
- Utilize data to support requests for donations
- Report service and/or outcomes in CSBG Annual Report
 - CSBG Client Characteristics
 - Service: Section 5, Individual & Family Services, Nutrition and Food/Meals (5jj)
 - NPI: Other - Better Sense of Food Security
 - NPI: Other - Temporarily Reduced Hunger
 - NPI: Other - Reduced stress due to availability of food