

TAKE THE FIRST STEP!

PREPAREDNESS AND PUBLIC HEALTH THREATS: Addressing the Unique Needs of the Nation's Vulnerable Populations



Local Food Banks, Community Pantries and Soup Kitchens

Food banks, community pantries and soup kitchens are an important source of nutritional foods for many low-income individuals and families. Their resources may be in even greater demand during a public health crisis if grocery stores are unable to keep shelves stocked or individuals are unable to purchase or afford food. The extent to which local food banks, community pantries and soup kitchens are prepared for emergencies may determine whether or not community residents have access to food.

APHA conducted in-depth interviews with charitable hunger-relief organizations across the nation¹ and found that regional food distribution centers are well prepared for a public health emergency. These centers have invested a significant amount of time and resources into preparing for disaster responsiveness and work closely with local, state and national agencies. Local food banks, which provide direct assistance to community residents, are less prepared for a public health crisis. Very few have disaster response plans in place or are aware of local emergency response efforts.

So what steps can local food banks, community pantries and soup kitchens take to ensure a continued supply of food during a public health emergency? While preparedness needs will differ based on geographic area, number of people served, and available community resources, managers can assess emergency response readiness by answering the following questions:

Step 1: How safe is the building structure?

- Is the facility able to withstand extreme weather conditions?
- Is the structure sound and protected against water infiltration?
- Could we operate a secondary location if the building is damaged or totally destroyed?

Step 2: Can we still operate during an emergency?

- How long would supplies last if the demand for food distribution were doubled due to a disaster?
- Do our donors and suppliers have emergency response plans in place to continue food and grocery deliveries?
- Is there a generator or backup power supply to maintain refrigeration, lighting, and security?
- Is the food supply adequate to meet basic nutritional needs?

¹ Under contract with APHA, Peter Hart Research Associates, Inc. conducted 10 in-depth interviews with regional food bank managers, local food pantry and soup kitchen managers. Regional and geographic diversity was taken into consideration; all interviews were conducted via telephone from February 12 to 20, 2007.



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Step 3: How long can we operate during a crisis?

- What quantity of food would we need to remain operational?
- What is the minimum number of staff members necessary to remain operational? Do we rely upon volunteers?
- How will we communicate with clients and the local community about imminent closings or re-openings?
- How will we maintain communication with suppliers?
- Have we identified alternative suppliers in the event main suppliers are non-operational?

Step 4: Have I assessed staff and infrastructure needs?

- Knowing a disaster is imminent, staff needs should be considered:
 - Should staff be paid early if a disaster disrupts the normal pay cycle?
 - How can I ensure that staff has enough time off to prepare their own homes for a disaster?
- Communications systems:
 - Do we have at least one non-electric land telephone that will remain operational even if power is out?
 - Do we have emergency and staff contact numbers in a safe place and multiple copies stored in off-site locations?
 - Have we established a "phone-tree" to ensure communication during a crisis?
- Are we on the utility company's priority list to restore power in case of an emergency?
- Have we developed relationships and planned response efforts with local law enforcement to prevent possible looting?
- Have we developed relationships and planned response efforts with local grocery stores to increase food donations during an emergency?
- Do we have multiple copies of important records such as insurance policies stored at off-site locations?
- Do we have a small amount of petty cash in case credit and computer transactions are not working?

Other resources:

<http://www.cafoodbanks.org/disaster.htm>

