

CASE MANAGEMENT IN FOOD PANTRIES: RESEARCH BRIEF

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Background Food pantries were initially created to provide emergency food in times of crisis, but today many households rely on them chronically, month after month. Food insecurity, defined as limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods¹, is an issue that is intertwined with a household's financial situation. Since poverty is a primary cause of food insecurity, the problem of helping food insecure households seems unlikely to be solved only through the provision of food. Many food pantries do not provide services geared towards addressing the root causes of poverty or promoting self-sufficiency, such as education and employment training, housing and utility assistance, and health insurance information. The provision of these services through individualized case management within the food pantry setting may be one way to increase rates of food security and promote self-sufficiency among food pantry clients. This hypothesis is currently being tested through a randomized controlled study of Freshplace, an innovative food pantry in the Upper Albany neighborhood of Hartford, Connecticut offering fresh foods through a client-choice pantry and personalized case management.²

Case management can be understood as a collaborative process of assessing, planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating clients' options and services to meet their long term, or self-sufficiency needs.³ Self-sufficiency is often defined broadly as holding a paying job or being in a state of well-being, with limited reliance on welfare benefits.⁴



Sal Mancini, a graduate student from the University of Connecticut, Master of Public Health Program conducted research from July 2011-February 2012 in the form of seven interviews with food pantry case managers, one group interview, and an online survey (via Survey Monkey) to:

- ❖ Assess the extent to which food pantries in Greater Hartford, Connecticut are utilizing case management and connecting customers to other services in addition to food, and to
- ❖ Examine the relationship between case management and food pantry size, mission, and staff competency.

Research Results and Key Findings

Table 1: Participation and Characteristics of Food Pantries in the Online Survey

	N	%
Foodshare food pantries sent Survey	140	100%
Survey responses submitted	100	71%
Surveys excluded from data analysis (duplicate agencies)	15	15%
Surveys included in data analysis (overall response rate)	85	68%
Pantry size		
Small (serves < than 30 Households per month)	23	27%
Medium (serves 30-150 Households per month)	33	39%
Large (serves >150 Households per month)	29	34%
Location		
Food pantries located in Hartford	34	40%
Food pantries located outside of Hartford	51	60%

Food pantries of all sizes, offering individualized case management in Greater Hartford, provided many services to clients in addition to food when compared to pantries that did not offer case management. Pantries offering case management were found to be well connected to community resources and provided a broad range of services and self-sufficiency supports.

Overall, though, food pantries participating in this research were more likely to provide a brochure or referral to another agency than to offer SNAP (food stamps) eligibility assistance or individualized case management.

Among food pantries in Greater Hartford there was a lack of agreement as to what case management is and how to implement the practice in food pantry settings. The online survey found that food pantries were more likely to assess a client’s needs than develop a self-sufficiency plan or meet monthly to follow-up and monitor progress.

Key Themes from Interviews with Food Pantry Case Managers:

- ❖ There is little uniformity or consistency in the way case management services are defined and implemented.
- ❖ Case management requires a dedicated staff member(s) and a volunteer base.
- ❖ There is limited correlation between case management and an agency’s mission statement.
- ❖ Case managers in food pantries have limited training.



Almost half (46%) of the food pantries surveyed reported providing individualized case management. However, only one quarter have mission statements containing the terms self-sufficiency or food security. More research is needed to better understand the linkages between a food pantry’s mission and the provision of individualized case management.

Table 2: Types of Services Provided in Addition to Food

Percent of respondents that said that their agency provided the following services in addition to food:	Provide case management %	Do not provide case management %
Fill out the SNAP (food stamps) application	76%	33%
Use the 2-1-1 Navigator benefits survey	68%	31%
Provide referrals for other services	100%	80%
Provide brochures for other programs	92%	66%
Help food pantry clients to develop a budget	62%	12%
Provide computers on-site for clients to use	49%	7%
Attend community meetings or collaborate	95%	51%

Recommendations for Providing Case Management in Food Pantries

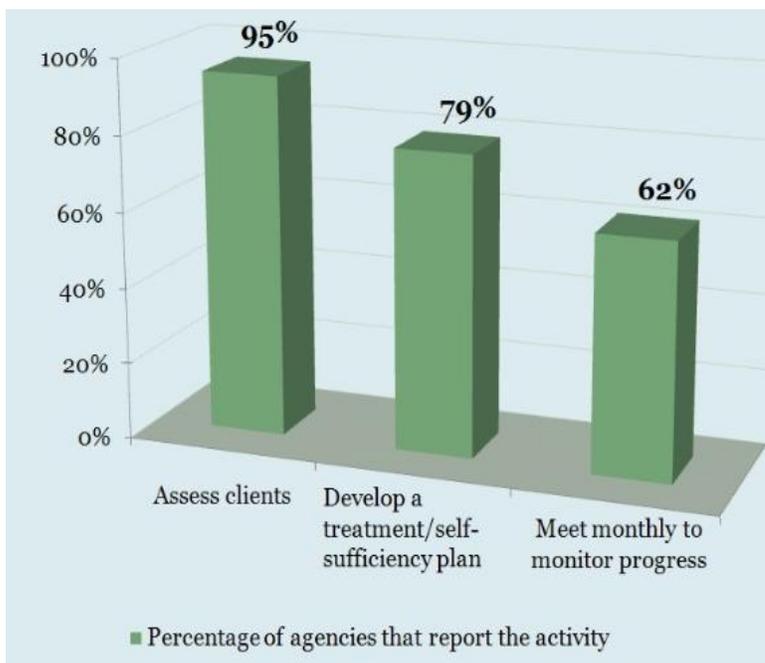
Food Pantries should:

- ❖ Begin with an assessment to determine if they have the capacity (e.g., staff, volunteers, leadership) to provide case management services.
- ❖ Consider how the provision of case management aligns with their mission or philosophy.
- ❖ Deliver case management within the framework of assessing a client's needs, developing a plan, assisting with connection to services, and monitoring/changing the plan.
- ❖ Work collaboratively with other systems providing case management services (e.g., prenatal support, primary care, substance abuse, mental health, and housing).

Food Banks should:

- ❖ Host case management strategy meetings and trainings with local partner agencies to develop a uniform assessment and treatment and monitoring forms.
- ❖ Consider funding staff to provide case management services (possibly shared between food pantries), or giving small grants to provide computers for client use to access the United Way 2-1-1 Navigator tool and other online resources such as job search activities.

Figure 1: Activities Reported by Food Pantries that Provide Case Management



Conclusion

This research provides the first assessment of the emerging practice of case management in food pantries in Greater Hartford, Connecticut. Food pantries offering individualized case management were found to be well connected to community resources and provided a broad range of services and self-sufficiency supports. Overall, though, staffing patterns within food pantries, an insufficient volunteer base, and limited training among case managers in food pantries may severely limit the ability of food pantries to provide more time-consuming case management services with customers.

Going forward, these findings provide a backdrop on which to frame discussions regarding case management services both in Connecticut and nationally.

References

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3. Commission for Case Management Certification. (2011). *Definition of Case Management*. Retrieved September 16, 2011, from Commission for Case Management: <http://www.ccmcertification.org/about-us/about-case-management/definition-and-philosophy-case-management>
4. Long, D. (2001). From support to self-sufficiency: how successful are programs in advancing the financial independence and well-being of welfare recipients? *Eval and Prog Planning*, 24 (4), 389-408.