

Protecting Nutrition in the Charitable Food System

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WHY THIS MATTERS

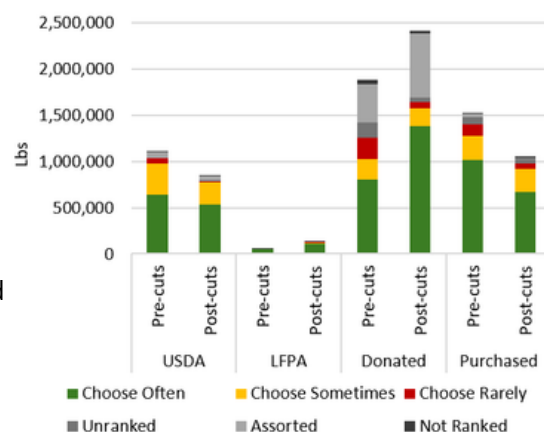
Millions of households in the U.S. rely on the charitable food system – including food banks and food pantries – to meet their food needs. USDA programs provide a healthy, reliable source of healthy and minimally processed foods to food banks. **In March 2025, USDA announced the cancellation of \$1 billion in funding for two USDA programs:** The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and the Local Food Purchasing Assistance (LFPA) program. At the same time, food banks faced increasing demand due to changes and disruptions in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

WHAT WE DID

We examined how USDA program cuts affected food bank inventory using (1) food bank inventory distribution data from 7 U.S. food banks representing averages pre- (2023-2024) and post- (Jun to Dec 2025) cuts, and (2) Interviews with program staff from 7 U.S. food banks. Inventory items were ranked Choose Often, Choose Sometimes, or Choose Rarely based on the HER Guidelines for Nutrition in the Charitable Food System. Interviews were coded and used to contextualize quantitative data.

WHAT WE FOUND

- USDA foods were the healthiest source of foods for food banks. More than 85% of these foods were ranked as Choose Often or Choose Sometimes.
- Food banks depended on USDA-funded programs as a reliable source of healthy, high-value, and culturally connected food products.
- TEFAP foods decreased by 24% post-cuts. LFPA distributions increased, likely while spending down program funds.
- USDA program cuts occurred alongside SNAP disruptions, rising food prices, and growing demand, placing unprecedented strain on the system.
- Food banks were able to make short-term adaptations to maintain distributions during a time of crisis in 2025.
- Staff questioned whether emergency measures can be sustained if demand continues to rise and SNAP constricts further.



Monthly average pounds of food distribution by source and nutrition rank in the pre- (2023-2024) vs. post-cuts period (Jun - Dec 2025)

WHAT WE HEARD FROM FOOD BANK STAFF

"[T]hen we learned that the USDA was actually removing that funding..., it was absolutely detrimental to us as a food bank. We get high-quality, great, nutritious food from the USDA."

"[A]s...our government food has decreased, we've increased our purchasing. And that's how we have personally been coping with it. That's not sustainable though."

"It [SNAP disruptions] just reinforced how dependent that people are on the food bank. Or not being supplemental, but being the primary source of food at this point."

KEY POLICY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Restore federal funding to commodity food programs and local food purchasing programs to ensure food banks have a reliable supply of healthy, high-value, and culturally relevant foods.
- ✓ Expand state funding to food banks to support purchases of healthy foods, including local agricultural products.
- ✓ Maintain access to SNAP and other federal food assistance programs for eligible households, so that food banks can remain a supplement and not a replacement for the U.S.'s primary tool for addressing food insecurity.

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