

# Mobile Food Pantries: A Marketing Opportunity

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## Abstract

The role of food banks is changing. For more than 30 years food banks have existed as a temporary solution to food insecurity and hunger by providing emergency food services. Many food banks recognize that in addition to serving emergency food needs, they now also contend with chronic food insecurity (Hess 2016). The 2016 USDA estimates suggest that 41 million people in the United States are food insecure. This translates into 1 in 8 individuals in households who are unable to obtain the quality and quantity of food needed for basic health and well-being. While this number is basically unchanged since 2015, it is higher than rates before the 2007 recession. Feeding America conducts a study called Map the Meal Gap to better understand variations in food access and costs at the local level (Gundersen et al 2016). With a nationwide network of 200 food banks and 60,000 food pantries and meal programs that provide food and services to people annually, Feeding America attempts to understand the barriers to access for their clients in the communities they serve. The Mobile Food Pantry (MFP) is one of the new programs designed to overcome the barrier of location as many clients without transportation or, who live in rural or remote areas cannot always get to the Foodbank in their community (Parrott 2017). This goal of this paper is to examine the effectiveness of marketing MFP's by select food banks in reaching citizens most in need of this program enhancement. Possible marketing solutions are provided to enable food banks to better overcome the barrier of location in the provision of food services.

Mobile food pantry programs remove location as a barrier to access for food bank clients in hard to reach, underserved or food barren areas. For Feeding America, the nation's largest domestic hunger-relief organization, the MFP program allows for fast, flexible delivery of meat, produce and baked goods at convenient locations such as churches and community centers. In Santa Barbara, CA, the program started in 1999 with a small grant from UPS and a donated 'retired' beverage truck (Smith-Meyer 2013). The food bank made its first MFP delivery to a small parking lot offering 800 pounds of food (consisting of a loaf of bread, a bag of beans and a large chunk of cheese). The Santa Barbara food bank now has 11 monthly MFP distribution sites, targeting underserved neighborhoods and rural corners of the county. Two or three times a week, in church parking lots, community centers and convenient neighborhood locations, you can find their MFP set-up supplying fresh food directly to anyone in need of it. These "pantries on wheels" play a fundamental role in feeding hungry people (Smith-Meyer 2013). Every month, individuals and families living in Santa Barbara and surrounding rural communities have access

to emergency food services which may not be available to them through traditional food distributions sources. Partnering with local farmer's markets allowed the Santa Barbara Foodbank to offer fresh produce to their clients.

The program's impact is measured by pounds of food distributed each month. This MFP provides over 31,000 lbs. of fresh produce a month to 8 underserved areas of Santa Barbara County, directly impacting over 4,500 clients each year (see [www.foodbanksbc.org](http://www.foodbanksbc.org)). The Santa Barbara food bank's website lists the locations of the MFP. The locations in turn advertise the MFP in newsletters, bulletins and flyers. With a program that is available to anyone, word-of-mouth undoubtedly plays a role in communicating the time and location of the MFP. While this program and the marketing thereof appears to be loosely targeted to those most in need, the underlying assumption is that these mobile sites are accessible to those who cannot get to the bricks-and-mortar food bank location.

The food bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina provides food for people at risk in 34 counties across the state (Hunger Studies 2017). The Durham branch serves a six- county area that has approximately 105,000 residents that are food insecure. The food bank does have a MFP program that delivers about three million pounds of food to rural communities annually. The website does not list locations for the MFP's but it does describe them and their impact. Another initiative geared toward combating chronic food insecurity is to partner with other service organizations. The Durham County Department of Public Health recently mailed out post cards to county residents encouraging SNAP participants to visit two area farmer's markets to get fresh fruits and vegetables. For every \$1 spent using EBT (electronic benefits transfer) SNAP will give the, \$1 up to \$10 every time they shop. This is Durham County's effort to get fresh produce into the hands of SNAP participants while using the Farmer's Markets as mobile sites. The assumption is that some of the post cards will fall into the hands of those residents in need who can then drive or catch a bus to the Farmer's Markets that typically close by 12:00 noon. While the intent is noble it is apparent that "marketing researchers have a great opportunity to help people who live in food insecure households and the food pantries that serve them (Norbert 2016)."

With the vast network of food banks and food pantries that partner with Feeding America an opportunity exists to gather and share best practices for MFP programs. Marketers can assist food banks with, among other things effective segmentation tactics such that the MFP's are located in areas of greatest need.

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**Keywords:** mobile food pantry, foodbanks, food insecurity, barriers to access

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:**

The Mobile Food Pantry programs are designed to help reach food insecure individuals who cannot get to stand alone food banks. While location is a well-documented barrier to access, marketers are well equipped to assist food banks in getting the right locations and communicating how best to get to them.

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