PAPER 2

Innovative Approaches to Combating Hunger:
How two Jewish federations are leveraging technology
and data to decrease hunger and increase dignity in
their communities

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Executive Summary

The Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia and UJA-Federation New York offer a wide range of comprehensive safety net services to their communities. As food is frequently the impetus for a client to seek help, often leading to a client accessing other services as well, these federations installed digital pantry systems to provide a more dignified, empowering, welcoming, and efficient service at partner food pantries.

In Philadelphia, investments focused on creating a digital pantry system, deduplicating data among partner social service organizations, and increasing SNAP enrollment rates among seniors. UJA-Federation New York similarly built a digital pantry system; however, the system is built on a hub-and-spokes model so that pantries will be able to communicate directly with the region's kosher food warehouse to access food and plan ahead for client and region-wide needs.

At its digital pantry, the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia is currently serving 1,500 households a month, and it receives about 10 to 20 new applications each week. Additionally, its partner agencies helped individuals apply for various public benefits worth $8,000 annually. UJA-Federation New York's digital pantry system has eliminated or significantly reduced lines at partner food pantries, and some sites are serving triple the number of clients as compared to before the digital pantry system was installed.

Introduction

Food pantries have been a source of sustenance for vulnerable populations for over a century. Historically, pantries have provided limited food options for the poor by distributing prepackaged bags of food. This traditional model supplements clients' diets with shelf-stable food items without necessarily taking the clients' health needs or preferences into account. More recently, food pantries (most often those that are linked with other social services at larger organizations) have made great strides in expanding food options and embracing self-direction through a client-choice model where clients choose their food instead of receiving a pre-made package. This paper aims to describe the process and impact of igniting the change from traditional pantry to client-choice pantry through a digital system in the Jewish communities of Philadelphia and New York.

Addressing Food Insecurity in Two Jewish Communities

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The Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia is responsible for supporting critical services that provide care management, senior community centers, meals on wheels, congregant meals, medical adult day, crisis grants, employment/career services, and socialization opportunities for vulnerable populations. In 2009, the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia hired Fairmount Ventures, a Philadelphia-based consultancy group, to study the community's food security efforts, including the five food pantries operated in-house. The study uncovered several areas for improvement: lack of cultural competencies and associated food waste (e.g., discarded jars of unopened peanut butter in Russian immigrant communities, as peanut butter is not a staple in the former Soviet Union); duplicated data (i.e., unclear if clients were accessing similar services in different agencies, or multiple services from one agency); and low rates of SNAP enrollment in the Jewish community.

To address these issues, the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia transitioned its food pantries to a choice model, including two digital-choice pantries. It also created an Integrated Data Warehouse (IDW) as an electronic social service records system to provide unduplicated data from multiple providers, and it engaged Benefits Data Trust in two benefits enrollment campaigns.

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Since its inception, UJA-Federation New York has provided critical safety net services for the community's vulnerable by supporting services that include: benefits and entitlements, screening and enrollment, cash assistance, emergency food assistance, in-office and in-home case management, legal services, financial counseling, employment services, and transportation. In particular, UJA-Federation New York addresses food insecurity by supporting home-delivered meals, food pantries, congregant meals, soup kitchens, SNAP enrollment, and food vouchers/cash assistance.

In recent years, government funding for safety net services had become increasingly unpredictable. New efficiencies in food production and surplus food—which, for decades, was a key staple for pantries—had significantly decreased. These factors, along with the overall limited capacity and infrastructure of food pantries, prompted UJA-Federation New York to leverage its Centennial in 2017 to raise funds for a digital pantry system as part of a larger capital investment that is providing one-stop social service centers in the areas of densest poverty in Brooklyn and Queens. The goal of the digital food pantries is to serve more clients, provide more nutritious food, and empower clients with greater choice in selecting food.

Background

One and a half million Jews live in New York City, Westchester, and Long Island; a startling 560,000 of them live in poverty or near-poverty. While there are many expressions of Jewish poverty, food insecurity remains a premier obstacle regardless of the specific demographic. According to 2014 survey data from UJA-Federation New York nonprofit partners providing anti-poverty services, 78 percent of the total client base (including 64 percent of Jewish clients) received food-related services that included home-delivered meals, food from a pantry, food vouchers, and screening and enrollment for SNAP benefits.

UJA-Federation New York's partner, Met Council, is home to the largest kosher food distribution network in the country. A central food warehouse and distributor to nearly 40 kosher food pantries in the Greater New York City area, it serves approximately 50,000 clients monthly. Met Council's central warehouse stores bulk deliveries (pallets) of food from various sources; however, it did not have a single inventory/food-tracking system that "speaks to" its food pantries to understand, in real time, what food is available and how to best match food to clients' needs.

In an effort to better understand the process of installing a digital pantry, UJA-Federation New York connected with the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia, St. John's Bread and Life, and NY Common Pantry, all of whom had already integrated a digital ordering system at their pantries. Their experiences illustrated the efficiencies of such a system. For example, with the installation of a digital system at St. John's Bread and Life, the number of clients served nearly tripled, and the cost-per-meal equivalent went from $2.19 to $0.51. Additionally, the average number of items taken per month decreased from 100 to 60 as clients were now able to choose food that was desired.

The Digital Pantry Ordering System

The digital pantry ordering system empowers individuals to make their own choices and obtain food in the most dignified and efficient way. The system provides clients with monthly points to "purchase" food, based on family size. Food pantry staff and volunteers—who in some cases are trained nutritionists—take note of any health needs and assess clients for other eligible benefits or services. When clients log into the system (either remotely or at a pantry), they see the pantry's available inventory, customized to meet their dietary needs. For example, only sugar-free or low-sugar items appear for a client who has diabetes. Nutritious foods, such as fruits and vegetables, "cost" fewer points than other foods as a way to incentivize healthy choices. The back end of the digital system keeps track of the number of points a household can use on a monthly basis, and pantry staff can adjust the points based on extenuating circumstances.

Upon logging in, clients are greeted in the language of their choice and all items and prompts are translated accordingly. Clients can then select their food choices by category (i.e., a certain number of grains, a certain number of proteins, etc.), tracking in real time the remaining amount of points they have available to allocate. Once an order is complete, the order is automatically printed, and volunteers either begin packing the client's selections or filing the order away for later packaging and pickup. These customized bags can either be picked up at the food pantry or delivered to clients' homes. Clients are encouraged to make an appointment through the system for their next pickup by selecting a time that works best, perhaps after attending other activities or services at the organization.

Research shows that 52 percent of New Yorkers living in poverty do not use existing food pantries because they cannot physically travel or stand on line. The digital-choice system addresses this challenge by being accessible through the internet; food can be ordered from any location with a mobile device and a hotspot. In addition to providing services more aligned with the Jewish values of dignity and empowerment, the technology allows case workers to reach homebound clients and provide them with the ability to choose food through remote ordering.
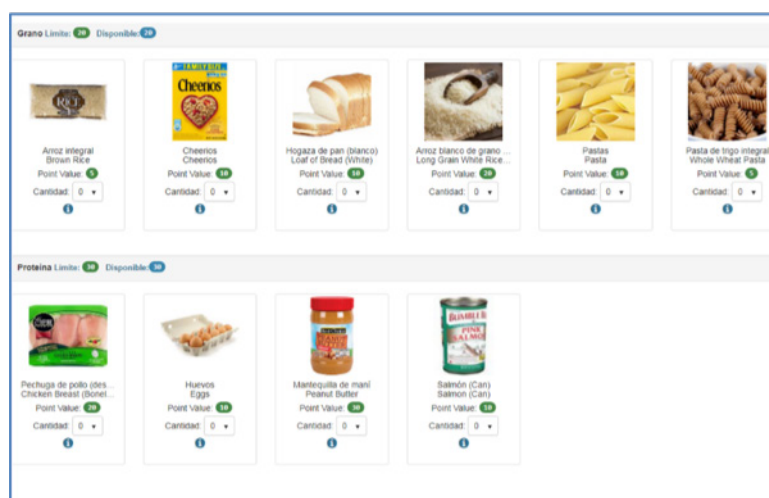
Example of available inventory at a digital-choice food pantry

Innovative Features

PHILADELPHIA: INTEGRATING DATA AND STRATEGIC OUTREACH

Building off of the digital pantry system that collects client information and food preferences, the Integrated Data Warehouse (IDW) was developed to collect, report, and analyze data from multiple agencies in order to measure the collective impact of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia's community funds. Conversations with partner agencies revealed the need to see how multiple programs, either within one agency or between multiple agencies, impacted an individual.

The IDW links information from 17 Jewish federation funded programs at 10 agencies so that the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia can analyze de-identified data uploaded by the agencies either in the aggregate or individually. This system serves as a check on the evaluation data that agencies send to the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia. Because agencies are uploading data directly from their own client data management systems, the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia can be more confident in the accuracy of the information. This allows for further assessment of demographics and geographies in need of specific programs and determines the true number of individuals and households served. The IDW also allows for electronic referrals between partner agencies, improving efficiency and client experience by preventing re-traumatization from repeated assessments. The Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia is able to monitor the number of referrals as well as the length of time that referrals remain in the queue.

The Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia developed client authorization and consent forms, which allow clients to choose the information that is shared with participating agencies. To address the needs of both HIPAA and non-HIPAA agencies, agencies may select which types ("levels") of data are shared with other agencies. These selections can be determined by the agency, but the individual client may always decide to share less information than the agency, in which case that client's information remains de-identified.

Lastly, in 2011, the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia focused on increasing SNAP enrollment among current and past clients of the various communal agencies by partnering with Benefits Data Trust, leveraging its USDA pilot project to allow older adults to enroll in SNAP with a telephonic signature.

NEW YORK: STREAMLINED COMMUNICATION WITH FOOD WAREHOUSE

One innovative feature of the digital pantry system in New York is that it will streamline communication between individual food pantries and Met Council's central food warehouse, the primary source of food for most of the pantries in UJA-Federation New York's network. In doing so, the system can unify metrics and reporting, allowing the entire system to be more data-informed (e.g., knowing which products move at which pantries more quickly) while still providing local autonomy to each food pantry for individual menus of available products.

The system is currently operating at three organizations that house kosher food pantries along with a comprehensive menu of social services: Commonpoint Queens, Met Council, and Shorefront Jewish Community Council. Met Council, through its pantry, has also implemented remote ordering and distributions at three low-income senior housing residences, where caseworkers visit homebound seniors to assist ordering on the digital system, and then caseworkers or volunteers return to deliver the selected food.

Another byproduct of the digital ordering system is creating new partnerships with other community-based organizations. Shorefront JCC has forged a relationship with APNA Brooklyn, a Pakistani social service organization, to provide access to the digital food pantry system. While APNA Brooklyn, itself, does not have the infrastructure to provide a food pantry for its clients, Shorefront JCC is able to leverage the digital system by bringing the food pantry to the clients of a neighboring institution through remote ordering.

Impact

The digital system has so far enabled pantries to serve more clients, reduce wait times and food waste, and distribute healthier food options like protein and fresh produce. Clients are now able to access food in a more dignified way while also connecting to a host of services that will not just solve an immediate crisis but also create pathways to a more stable life.

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In Philadelphia, the program's model promotes healthy eating and budgeting forethought—skills that the clients can then employ in other areas of their lives. Client survey results in Philadelphia indicate that shopping at the digital pantry has caused them to focus more on these critical issues in their own lives. The Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia is currently serving 1,500 households a month, and receiving about 10 to 20 new applications each week. Approximately 10 percent of households order their food remotely and a client's level of food security is measured regularly using the USDA US Household Food Security Survey Module: Six-Item Short Form by staff to document change over time. Under the previous model, produce and proteins represented a fraction of total food provided, and now they represent 22 percent and 8 percent, respectively, of all food.

Additionally, the outreach conducted by Benefits Data Trust reached nearly 2,000 individuals from the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia's partner agencies and helped them apply for various public benefits worth $8,000 annually. Based on benefit enrollment, the ROI after six months was 18:1.

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In the first year and a half of the digital pantry system's operation, participating food pantries' open hours have doubled, and some have even tripled. The amount of protein being distributed has increased by more than 100 percent, and fresh produce has increased by 25 percent.

At Commonpoint Queens—the first site to transition to the system in October 2017—usage has tripled from 600 individuals to 1,800. Additionally, a Passover distribution in Brooklyn that had a line four-blocks long in 2017 had no line at all in 2018 with the digital system in place.

Although the remote-ordering feature will be more fully used in the coming months, Met Council has already seen a 7 percent increase in the number of seniors accessing the system through remote distributions at a series of low-income senior housing sites. The system has additionally provided analytics about trends and preferences as well as greater insight into available inventory at Met Council's warehouse and at partner pantries. Lastly, reporting has illustrated that clients are traveling to use the digital system, as it is a more dignified shopping experience.
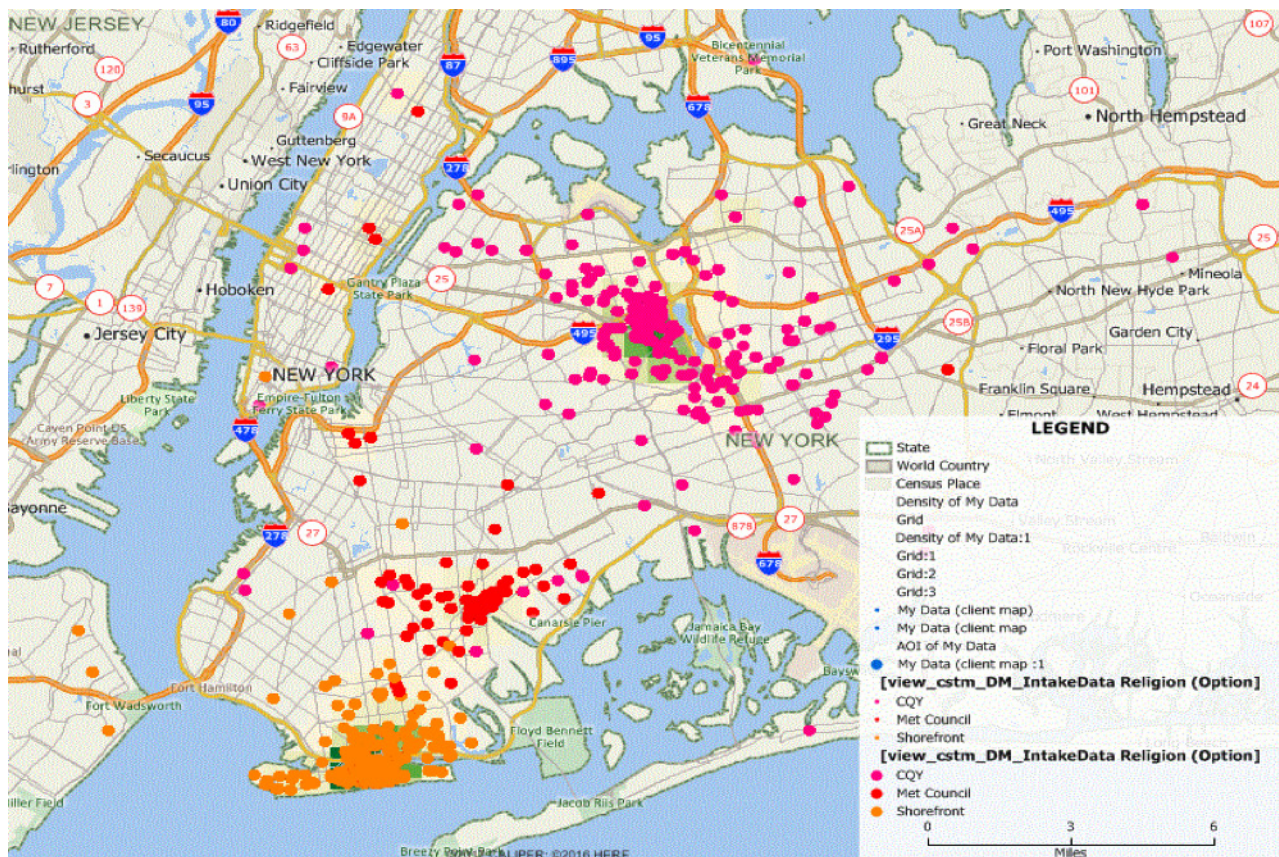
Map illustrating where individuals travel from to access food at the three digital pantries in UJA-Federation New York's system

Future Plans for the Digital Pantry Ordering System

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Jewish Federation, in partnership with the Psychology of Eating and Consumer Health (PEACH) lab based at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, is conducting a National Institutes of Health R01 funded research study in 2019. The overall objective of the one-year randomized controlled trial will compare the influence of behavioral economic interventions to promote healthier food choices on the digital ordering system to the standard client interface.

The interventions will use the following four strategies to promote healthier choices: 1) default settings; 2) healthy placement choice architecture; 3) simple and salient nutrition messaging; and 4) social norms messaging. Food pantry clients assigned to the intervention group will see their "shopping cart" pre-populated with healthy items (clients can opt to remove them), the healthiest foods within the food category appearing on the first page of items, traffic light labels to indicate an item's health value, and messaging to note price discounts on healthier items (e.g., "save 1.5 points by switching to brown rice"). The intervention's impact will be determined by collecting client ordering data; objectively measuring weight, blood pressure, and HbA1c levels at baseline, three months, and 12 months; and conducting dietary recall surveys. The study's long-term goal is to identify low-cost interventions that increase healthy food choice and improve health outcomes among digital pantry clients.

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As the digital food pantry system continues to expand to the entire kosher pantry network in New York, a series of trainings for future digital system users is now in place to manage the change in operations and culture for staff, volunteers, and clients. Met Council is also working to enhance the backend experience that will automate orders from Met Council's warehouse to food pantries, build out dashboards and tools that can be used by pantry managers to manage their operations, and provide real-time data to public and private funders about the state of food insecurity in New York City.

With the support of UJA-Federation New York and other partners, this year, the digital system will expand to the UJC of the Lower East Side in Manhattan. Additionally, Met Council received funding to deploy the digital pantry system to serve frail and isolated Holocaust survivors in Brooklyn and to serve more housing sites and remote deliveries.