

Scientists evaluate food safety practices to help support nonprofit food pantries

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Researchers from North Carolina State University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have done an in-depth analysis of food safety at nonprofit food pantries that distribute food directly to people in need. While the work has identified shortcomings at many such pantries, the goal was to identify how food safety experts can help these pantries

best meet the needs of their clients.

"We knew that food pantries, in North Carolina and many other states, aren't regulated the same way that restaurants are, and that pantries are crucial distributors of food to those in need, but we did not have a good understanding of how [food safety](#) is practiced at food pantries," says Ben Chapman, an associate professor of youth, family, and consumer sciences at NC State and senior author of a new paper on the work.

"This is a particularly important issue because research tells us that the people most likely to rely on help from food pantries are also those who have less access to health care to address foodborne illness in the event that they do get sick," says Ashley Chaifetz, lead author of the paper. Chaifetz completed the research while a doctoral student at UNC-Chapel Hill.

For this study, the researchers examined operating procedures and interviewed managers at 105 food pantries in 12 counties across North Carolina. The researchers found that pantry food safety procedures were often informal.

In many ways, the results were promising.

For example, researchers found that virtually all pantries did a good job of limiting opportunities for cross-contamination and providing adequate handwashing facilities - both of which are incredibly important in reducing food safety risk.

However, the pantry managers lacked full information on storage and handling or did not have available resources to properly store all perishable items. Given the focus on health and poverty, many pantries have increased the amount of fresh produce and perishables they distribute, which require proper handling and refrigeration. But more

than 75 percent of pantries didn't provide volunteers with formal training on how to handle that food safely. Thirty-six percent of pantry managers didn't have a system in place to obtain information on food safety recalls. Additionally, only 32 of the 105 pantries had a protocol in place on how to determine whether sick volunteers should be allowed to handle food.

"This is not about bashing food pantries, which provide an essential service to their communities on a shoestring budget," Chapman says. "But we needed to identify areas of concern so that we could find ways to help them protect the communities they serve.

"Pantries are doing a lot of things right. Our goal was to develop tools to help them do even better, and to help protect underserved groups. We need to know where the gaps are to better support this incredibly important and passionate nonprofit sector."

The research has already been used to develop a [suite of free, online resources](#) for food pantries, which has been used by nonprofits across North Carolina - both those that participated in the research and those that did not.

The paper, "Evaluating North Carolina Food Pantry Food Safety-Related Operating Procedures," was published online Nov. 1 in the *Journal of Food Protection*.

More information: [www.ingentaconnect.com/content ...
78/00000011/art00015](http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/78/00000011/art00015)

Provided by North Carolina State University

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