



***“It Has to Be Culturally Inclusive”:* Food Distribution Services for Diverse Communities in New York City**

Maya Scherer, MPH¹
Luisa Cárdenas, MPH, CHES¹ 
Rienna Russo, MHS²
Helen Ahn, MPH³
Celine Chan, MPH² 
Victoria Lanza, MPH²
Steve Mei, BA⁴
Rehan Mehmood, MCom⁵
Stella Yi, PhD, MPH²

The COVID-19 pandemic and its related economic challenges exacerbated food insecurity across New York State (NYS). Approximately one third of New York City residents reported use of emergency food services in the pandemic’s first year and, in 2021, approximately 1 in 10 NYS residents was food insecure, with rates among Hispanic and Black New Yorkers more than double that of White residents. Although these numbers have decreased following the acute phase of the pandemic, disparities by race and ethnicity persist and use of emergency food services remain elevated for New Yorkers born outside of the United States. Despite this, few policies and interventions that aim to improve the charitable and emergency food systems focus on the cultural relevance and appropriateness of foods provided. In 2022, researchers conducted 12 interviews with key stakeholders from organizations and institutions providing food distribution services to culturally diverse New Yorkers to understand barriers and facilitators related to providing culturally appropriate foods and elicit lessons learned and recommendations to inform future programs and policies. Findings from this study indicate that organizations serving diverse communities recognize the importance of providing culturally appropriate

food services and make efforts to tailor these services accordingly. However, they face challenges that limit their capacity to offer foods consistent with the dietary needs and preferences of their clients. Additional funding, policies, and support are needed to improve the availability of culturally inclusive food distribution services within the emergency and charitable food systems.

¹The New York Academy of Medicine, New York, NY, USA

²New York University Grossman School of Medicine, New York, NY, USA

³Korean Community Services of Metropolitan New York, NY, USA

⁴Chinese-American Planning Council, New York, NY, USA

⁵South Asian Council for Social Services, New York, NY, USA

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Across New York State (NYS), the COVID-19 pandemic and its related economic challenges exacerbated food insecurity. In 2021, approximately 1 in 10 NYS residents was food insecure, with rates among Hispanic and Black New Yorkers more than double that of White residents (17%, 18%, and 6%, respectively) (Feeding America, 2021). In New York City (NYC), which represents 42% of the state's population, 34% of residents reported use of emergency food services in the first year of the pandemic (Crossa et al., 2021; Office of the New York State Comptroller, 2023).

NYC is diverse, with a population that includes three million immigrants, many of whom are low income (New York City Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs [MOIA], 2021). Although use of emergency food services decreased as the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic waned, disparities by race and ethnicity persisted, with Hispanic and Asian NYC residents reporting less income available for food than White residents (Crossa et al., 2021). Food insecurity prevalence estimates for Asian American NYC residents are not available, but local reports indicate that food access was the top cited concern for Asian Americans during the pandemic, exacerbated by documented closures within the retail food environment (Đoàn et al., 2022; Murray, 2021). One year after the start of the pandemic, use of emergency food services remained elevated for New Yorkers born outside the United States (25% compared to 23% for all NYC residents) (Crossa et al., 2021).

The emergency food and charitable food systems in the United States involve a complex network of food pantries, soup kitchens, food banks, and antihunger relief organizations that work together to address food needs for low-income and food insecure populations (Bazerghi et al., 2016). Traditionally, these systems focused on providing short-term relief to individuals and families with emergency needs; however, over the past decade, long-term use has become more common (Bazerghi et al., 2016; Marmash et al., 2021), and these systems are increasingly utilized in tandem with federally funded programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), which provide monthly benefits to purchase food for eligible individuals and households. Notably, over three-quarters of households that reported

food pantry use at the time of SNAP enrollment continued using food pantries after 6 months (Mabli & Worthington, 2017). Moreover, gaps in SNAP and WIC eligibility may lead certain groups, such as immigrants, to rely heavily on the charitable food system to address food insecurity. Despite this, few efforts are focused on the cultural relevance and appropriateness of foods provided (Hudak et al., 2020; Mabli & Worthington, 2017; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2021).

A common request among food pantry clients is increasing the availability of culturally appropriate foods (Bazerghi et al., 2016; Hosler et al., 2021). In previous research, stakeholders have acknowledged an unmet need for culturally appropriate healthy foods and noted that providing cultural foods is a priority to improve equitable food access (Cooksey Stowers et al., 2020; Templeton et al., 2022). While some pantries have stated an interest in offering culturally relevant foods, there often exists a disconnect between food donors, food bank management, and clientele (Quinn et al., 2021). Food options available via food pantries are often based on current dietary guidelines, with states and localities determining which foods are procured for distribution at the community level. Although foods purchased by food banks may be based on client input, these tend to be the smallest fraction of foods in stock (Food Banks and Food Pantries . . . , 2021).

Recognizing the increasing reliance of diverse populations on emergency and charitable food systems and the limited availability of culturally inclusive foods within these programs, this study was undertaken to understand opportunities to improve culturally inclusive service provision in NYC as well as barriers to implementation and recommendations for change.

► METHOD

In 2022, the Center for Evaluation and Applied Research (CEAR) at The New York Academy of Medicine (NYAM) conducted a set of 12 interviews with key stakeholders who work at community-based organizations (CBOs) and institutions that provide food distribution services in NYC. This work was done in collaboration with the Center for the Study of Asian American Health (CSAAH) at New York University (NYU). Interviewees were purposefully sampled from among organizations and institutions serving diverse communities, with the aim of achieving a sample that ranged in boroughs and populations represented. Potential interviewees were contacted by researchers from NYAM via email and provided with information about the study and its procedures. All organizations approached agreed to participate in the study.

This qualitative study was informed by the Action Research approach, which centers the ability to take action toward societal improvement as a result of research findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The study aimed to shed light on the experiences of food distribution service providers in NYC, the complexity of the existing emergency food system, and current efforts to address the needs of increasingly diverse food insecure populations. Consistent with the Action Research approach, this work also elicited lessons learned and recommendations from those directly involved in food distribution services to inform programmatic decisions and policies that may improve the cultural appropriateness of foods provided. All research protocols, consent materials, and data collection instruments were approved by the NYAM Institutional Review Board (IRB). Interview participants were informed of its purpose and procedures and provided verbal consent.

Semistructured interviews were conducted via Zoom by two NYAM researchers trained and experienced in interviewing and qualitative research. The interview guide explored participants' experiences providing food distribution services, barriers and facilitators related to implementing culturally inclusive food distribution programs, perceptions of the impact of culturally inclusive food services, and recommendations for improving inclusivity. Participants were also asked to briefly describe their organization's food program, populations served, and their role. Additional information about interviewee organizations (e.g., locations) was gathered from program websites. Participants received a \$50 gift card incentive, if their professional duties allowed.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription company. Transcriptions were maintained, coded, and analyzed using NVivo 12.0, a software package for qualitative data management and analysis. The two researchers who conducted the interviews developed a coding scheme based on preidentified topics derived from the interview guide as well as those emerging from the interviews themselves. Analysis was guided by the main objectives of the study and involved repeated examination and discussion of the data. Key themes presented in the findings include those related to the main study objectives that emerged consistently across several interviews.

► FINDINGS

Description of the Sample

Researchers interviewed leadership and food program staff from 12 CBOs and institutions that provide food-related services to diverse populations across NYC. Most organizations interviewed offer food pantry

TABLE 1

Food Services Provided by Interviewee Organizations

Food service provided	Number of organizations
Food pantry	8
Hot meal program	3
Food pantry network ^a	1
Pantry/meal delivery ^b	2
Other services ^c	4

^aManaging procurement and distribution of food to pantries in the network.

^bCurrently or previously.

^cFor example, community-supported agriculture (CSA), food as medicine prescription boxes, sporadic food distribution events, gift cards or coupons to supermarkets, hot meals during events, or individualized food supports.

services; a few manage hot meal programs (Table 1). In addition to these services, a few organizations reported a variety of other food distribution activities—including, but not limited to, provision of gift cards to supermarkets and grocery stores, and administration of farm share programs, some of which occur on an ad hoc basis. Interviewee organizations receive food through a variety of systems, including centralized food banks, donations, and direct purchase from vendors.

Together, participating organizations serve all five NYC boroughs and provide services in a range of languages, including English, Spanish, Korean, Chinese, French, Haitian Creole, Bangla, Urdu, Arabic, Russian, Hindi, Hebrew, Nepali, and Wolof. Interviewee organizations serve low-income adults of different ages as well as families with children, in some cases from multiple program sites across NYC and in others from a single location. Program clients vary in immigration status (e.g., undocumented, asylum seekers, naturalized citizens) and housing type (e.g., private, public subsidized, shelters, housing for formerly incarcerated individuals).

Perceived Importance of Culturally Relevant Food Provision

Across interviews, participants felt it was important to provide culturally appropriate food options to clients and expressed concern that failing to provide these options would limit the benefits of their food distribution services. Specifically, interviewees worried clients would discard food that does not fit their cultural

preferences and reported that unfamiliar foods are less likely to be consumed.

They're used to certain foods . . . so we try to provide food . . . that number one, is gonna be nourishing, and number two, they're not gonna just say, "Oh I came to the pantry, and they give something I'm gonna put to the side and never eat it again." (Interview 1)

The food boxes, the groceries, they are mostly like canned food, right? And then dry food. That's not something, culturally, that we eat. So, even though we had the resources, we had the food for the distribution, people kind of refused to take the canned food. (Interview 2)

The probability that people will consume [the food] will increase. That's another benefit . . . They're gonna eat it because it's culturally relevant. (Interview 3)

Interviewees also drew connections between access to culturally appropriate foods and clients' mental health, asserting that familiar foods provide comfort to individuals and families struggling to adjust to a new environment. In addition, they emphasized that provision of culturally relevant food signals a program's respect for diverse clients and supports a sense of dignity among those facing difficult life circumstances.

I will say [the culturally appropriate food] gives them comfort . . . Sometimes food is more than just a nutritional benefit. I think it gives them some kind of stability as to who they are. (Interview 4)

I think if we're going to be part of the solution and we're being solution-based and we wanna nourish folks and we wanna make sure that they're happy cooking for their families and things like that, then it has to be inclusive. It has to be culturally inclusive. If you're saying that you're gonna provide food to nourish their bodies, I think you wanna make sure that at least that's the one thing they don't have to worry about. They can be happy that they're getting something that they're familiar with. (Interview 5)

Practices That Support Culturally Inclusive Food Distribution

Across interviews, participants indicated that having a general understanding of clients' cultural food preferences helps them make more informed decisions about what foods to acquire for distribution. They explained

that this knowledge is obtained through years of experience serving specific communities or by asking clients about community preferences. Some mentioned that employing staff who share cultural similarities with clients also helps them learn about food preferences.

We are asking, "Do you like your food? What kind of food do you like?" Sometimes clients will explain what kind of—for example, we also [serve] a lot of Chinese families. So, they mentioned about the unbleached all-purpose flour for making the dumpling. So, we also provide this to them. (Interview 6)

Most of us are immigrants here ourselves, so you know what's gonna sell . . . You certainly know what won't sell. (Interview 7)

Interviewees identified several ways their organizations allow clients to participate in deciding which food items they receive. For example, clients are encouraged to return or swap out items that do not fit their needs and are asked to confirm their preferences as bags are being packed. They indicated that allowing for client preference in these ways helps ensure that the food is used.

What we normally do with the Asian community is . . . we put a bin on the side. And they know that whatever they won't want they'll put it back. (Interview 1)

A person comes . . . and they sign in or check in with the staff there and they get their produce box . . . and they get asked, "Go ahead and look at your produce box. If there's any item that you would like to switch out . . . then you can go ahead and turn in that produce item that you don't want and we'll go ahead and supply the new one." (Interview 8)

Food procurement systems that allow staff to make recommendations or directly select the food they receive were also described as important. A couple of interviewees noted that some vendors have increasingly stocked culturally inclusive foods, which increases access to diverse foods.

[The vendor] usually listens to us with what kind of food they can bring in. So, they actually give us Halal everything, which is really good, especially the meat. (Interview 9)

The new City program . . . has a lot more Kosher product than previously available. And they actually do a very good job of labeling it with the appropriate whatever Kosher certification it has. (Interview 10)

Partnering with local, culturally specific organizations (e.g., food trucks, restaurants, and grocery stores specializing in specific cuisines) and with vendors that focus on specific cultural and/or religious groups was another way interviewees said their organizations improve the cultural inclusivity of their services.

We partnered up with one of the Nepali grocery stores so that people can take this and they can buy groceries . . . because one of the issues that we saw while we were doing the food distribution was when we're receiving food from other sources, it was all canned food and other stuff. So culturally, our community members they are not into canned food at all . . . So, we did the coupon system [with the grocery store] and that worked really good. (Interview 2)

We do have a partnership with [another organization] where we hire them to provide meals for the community through a food truck . . . It's Halal . . . It's lamb over rice from a food truck. So, it can't get any more culturally [appropriate]. (Interview 9)

Across interviews, participants also described offering additional food-related information and activities alongside their food distribution services to help make the food offered more accessible to diverse clients. Some interviewee organizations provide recipes, others offer cooking classes or demonstrations, and some offer both—all with the goal of helping clients familiarize themselves with foods that may be unfamiliar and teaching them how to transform these foods into something they can more easily prepare and enjoy.

We know that our population is like “Butternut squash, what is that?” But that's in their produce box. So, we do try to bring an additional chef that does demos. That's one level. Education, nutrition mix, to help make this crazy, new produce item into something that you can recognize using our seasonings, community seasonings. (Interview 8)

I think the cooking classes are based on what they're getting from the pantry . . . If there's something that they don't know that they took, it's a chance for them to get to try this thing and see if they like it, because there are a lot of things that they get. (Interview 5)

Barriers to Providing Culturally Inclusive Foods

Despite the stated importance of culturally inclusive food distribution, interviewees described challenges related to providing these services. The majority felt that limited resources are a major barrier. Some indicated

that funding to purchase and distribute food often comes with restrictions regarding where food can be procured and the type of products programs are able to provide, especially fresh fruits, vegetables, and meat.

I would love to be able to provide chicken all of the time. And I would love to be able to provide eggs and fish all of the time. A month ago, the eggs were crazy [expensive], and that of course limited our ability. (Interview 10)

More money, more variety. More money, better quality of foods. (Interview 1)

Interviewees felt that resource constraints limit the flexibility of food distribution services by restricting how programs operate. For example, they may be unable to develop the infrastructure needed to store and distribute refrigerated and frozen goods, or to hire sufficient staffing to support client-centered food distribution practices such as client-selected food bags.

The challenge has always been just the amount of food that we have available to give. And storage . . . We applied for a grant. It was \$10,000.00 to be able to buy a new fridge/freezer . . . but then you have the space issue, right? . . . The more food or the more that you can provide, the bigger the space you're gonna need to hold it all. (Interview 7)

I know there's some food pantries, we're not one of them, that allow people to select. We just don't have the capacity to kind of do the selection . . . Right now, we don't have the capacity to make that kind of environment. (Interview 11)

Several interviewees said they rely on a larger food bank to procure and deliver food, which limits their ability to control what is ordered and distributed to clients. Even when this system is not in place, options can be limited, and a few interviewees said vendors they work with do not offer culturally diverse foods.

The rice, lentils, and whole wheat flour are very basic ingredients for South Asian food, but they're not available through food banks. So, we have to purchase it with our own funds. (Interview 6)

We even asked if we could have rice instead of pasta. [The food bank is] like, “No, not really sure if we can accommodate that” . . . We've said how we've noticed that the cheese often is one of the things that is least used, that is left behind most often . . . [The staff] are required to give out everything that is in the bags. (Interview 12)

One of the biggest challenges that I've noticed is that because we're dealing with a lot of local [vendors] . . . we've just got a lot of root veggies because that's what grows here . . . So, it's challenging when we have rutabaga and celery root, and none of the populations that we serve eat that. (Interview 5)

► DISCUSSION

CBOs play an important role in facilitating access to food support for diverse populations, particularly immigrant populations, as many of them are prohibited from accessing federally funded food programs such as SNAP and fear of public charge policies deters even eligible immigrants from applying (Allen, 2022; Louie et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2022; Murray, 2021; New York City Department of Social Services [NYC DSS] & New York City Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs [MOIA], 2019). Informed by the Action Research approach, this study centered CBO and other food distribution service providers' experiences to call attention to the important ways in which they currently work within complex food distribution systems to better serve culturally diverse clients, and compile lessons learned and recommendations that can ultimately help improve the cultural appropriateness of foods offered.

Findings from this study indicate that organizations serving diverse communities recognize the importance of providing culturally inclusive food services but face challenges that limit their capacity to offer foods consistent with the dietary preferences of their clients. Consistent with existing literature, interviewees highlighted the importance of providing culturally relevant services to clients to reduce food waste and increase the likelihood that food distributed is consumed (Oliver et al., 2020). Relatedly, previous studies have provided evidence that immigrant recipients of food pantry services prefer fresh food to packaged items and are unsure how to cook American foods that are available to them (Rascón et al., 2022).

Interviewees reported making efforts to meet clients' culturally specific food-related needs by soliciting information about client preference and allowing client choice during the distribution process. These practices were identified as effective ways to adapt programs to clients' cultural needs, echoing successful approaches used by food distribution programs elsewhere. For example, moving from a prepackaged distribution model in which foods are selected and bundled by staff to a client choice model was cited in other food pantry studies as a way to improve the cultural appropriateness of foods (Bryan et al., 2019; Caspi et al., 2021; Verpy et al., 2003). However, not all programs interviewed were able to offer choices to clients.



Interviewees described barriers to provision of culturally appropriate foods related to inadequate funding for services and procurement systems that limit service provider ability to select, purchase, and distribute culturally appropriate and fresh foods. Findings also underscore the need for greater diversity of foods available to pantries more broadly.

Limitations to this work exist. As described above, interviewees were purposefully sampled for their experiences serving a range of populations and geographies in NYC. It was not possible to interview programs serving communities of all backgrounds and therefore some perspectives and experiences may not be represented. Regardless, consistency across interviewees highlights common beliefs, practices, and barriers related to providing culturally inclusive food services to food-insecure New Yorkers. In addition, recipients of food services were not interviewed. However, given the experience of organizations participating in the study, we can assume they are familiar with their clients' perspectives. Moreover, given limited study resources, focusing on staff allowed us to gather information on procurement systems in addition to distribution.

► IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study outlines several key approaches that can be utilized by practitioners to expand the cultural appropriateness of their food-related services. Specifically, programs should aim to understand their clients' food preferences, empower clients through food choice when possible, and offer tools and education that expand clients' ability to prepare unfamiliar foods. This work also highlights several opportunities for system-level change, including expanding the network of vendors able to provide culturally diverse foods to food distribution programs and increasing the availability of resources for programs to develop the infrastructure necessary to store and distribute a wider variety of foods. Overall, findings from this study may serve as a useful blueprint for expanding the availability and reach of culturally inclusive food distribution practices.

ORCID iDs

Luisa Cárdenas  <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8305-5520>
Celine Chan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5230-7619>

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