

# Statewide Food Insecurity Index Case Study



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## THT Background:

Trenton Health Team's mission is to improve health and well-being in the community of greater Trenton, NJ.

At Trenton Health Team (THT), we are committed to ensuring everyone has access to health care while also addressing societal factors such as food, housing, jobs, and safety.

Our team works for a healthy Trenton through community care, community partnerships, and data & research services.

## CFBNJ Background:

Founded over 50 years ago, the Community FoodBank of New Jersey (CFBNJ) works to end hunger by distributing food to more than 800 community partners (including food pantries, soup kitchens, and child and senior feeding programs) and by connecting neighbors in need with supportive solutions. CFBNJ's mission is to serve as a champion for addressing root causes of hunger, delivering neighbor-centric solutions, and fostering collaborative partnerships across all sectors of society for NJ.

Our vision is to build healthier communities free from hunger across NJ.

In Fiscal Year 25 (July 2024 – June 2025), CFBNJ distributed over 111 million pounds of food to 800 partners. CFBNJ directly serves food to 11 counties across the state (Atlantic, Bergen, Cape May, Cumberland, Essex, Hudson, Passaic, Middlesex, Morris, Somerset, and Union counties). Recognizing that food insecurity disproportionately impacts specific demographics, CFBNJ also provides tailored services focusing on college students, seniors, children, rural communities, and emergency response initiatives when needed.

## In partnership with:



## Executive Summary

The Community FoodBank of New Jersey (CFBNJ) is committed to making data-driven decisions that reflect where the greatest need is throughout our service areas. The Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) Team consistently leverages multiple data sources to inform decision making throughout the organization and ensure equitable distribution of resources.

Trenton Health Team's Food Insecurity Index has been a valuable tool for CFBNJ to strengthen the way we use data to equitably allocate resources throughout our network. CFBNJ developed a unique method to layer the Food Insecurity Index with other data sources to compare the proportional need of our service areas. The MEAL Team has worked with other teams across CFBNJ to apply this strategy for strengthening decision making rooted in equitable principles. The Partner Engagement, Development, Fulfillment, and CSFP Teams have all collaborated with the MEAL Team to leverage the layered data approach for allocating resources equitably and there are future opportunities to continue using this approach. This case study focuses on one example of how this strategy was used to allocate resources equitably, but it can be adapted in other ways to fit the needs of CFBNJ and other organizations.

**Case Study Overview:** In November 2025, the grocery store Acme/Kings Nourishing Neighbors donated 2,000 gift cards to CFBNJ for distribution to neighbors to empower them to purchase food or other household items for their families during the holiday season. The donation was made during the government shutdown, so the strategy for allocating the gift cards equitably needed to prioritize communities that would be most impacted by SNAP delays.

## Problem Assessment

CFBNJ strives to understand the geographic spread of need and ensure proportionality of our services by leveraging multiple data sources. We use a needs proportion to define need, which is the number of food insecure individuals in a geographic area (either county, city, zip code, or Census Tract) out of the total number of food insecure individuals in our whole service area. This formula produces a percentage of need for each area and all of the percentages add up to 100% representing all of our resources. The needs proportion grounds our approach to distributing resources based on where the greatest need is, but this metric is based exclusively on Map the Meal Gap data and does not incorporate other factors impacting of food insecurity. To capture social determinants of health, we incorporate additional internal and external data, including Trenton Health Team's Food Insecurity Index.

### Key Questions:

1. How can CFBNJ leverage multiple data sources in one analysis to understand where to equitably allocate resources based on where the greatest need is?
2. What is the impact of allocating resources equitably to neighbors?

**Case Study Context:** CFBNJ frequently receives donated resources beyond food that are re-allocated to partners for distribution to neighbors. The grocery store Acme donated 2,000 \$50 gift cards to CFBNJ to distribute to our network of over 800 partners in 11 counties across New Jersey. After narrowing down the full list of CFBNJ partners to ones that are near an Acme location to ensure neighbors can geographically access an Acme store, CFBNJ needed a data-driven approach to determine which communities have the greatest need for the gift cards. The food insecurity index methodology already incorporates additional social determinants of health to strengthen our analysis, such as poverty level, household SNAP benefits, and vulnerable demographics.

**Stakeholders & Dissemination Process:** CFBNJ's MEAL Team is the primary department that layers the data and analyzes it to inform data-driven decision making across the organization. The Partner Engagement Team was responsible for distributing the gift cards to the partners selected based on the analysis along with the neighbor survey and the partners gave the gift cards and survey to neighbors.

## Questions? Email us:

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## Index Application

Making data-driven decisions requires strategic methodology for data layering ([World Health Organization, 2025](#)) and recent research shows the value of using a location-based approach for allocation of resources ([Ramirez et al, 2025](#)). In this case study, CFBNJ leveraged the Food Insecurity Index and other sources of data to equitably allocate a limited number of Acme gift cards to partners in communities with the greatest need. Through this example, we demonstrate application of the need severity metric and its impact on the equitable allocation of CFBNJ resources.

**Methodology:** The gift cards were only eligible for use at Acme stores, so partners that were located far away from an Acme location were excluded from further consideration. Due to the government shutdown that delayed SNAP benefits at the time of this analysis, areas with high SNAP eligibility rates were also factored into the decision making process. SNAP eligibility was used as an additional layer in the analysis instead of SNAP participation because household SNAP participation is already factored in the Food Insecurity Index, so adding eligibility avoided duplicative data while still including additional relevant factors. The data points in this analysis were all focused on community need, but partner level data also needed to be included, so we factored in individuals served in the previous fiscal quarter.

**Neighbor Survey:** To measure the impact for neighbors who received a gift card and evaluate the efficacy of the layered data approach, a brief, optional mixed-methods survey was developed and disseminated with the gift cards. Neighbors who chose to participate could complete the survey using a printed or online form. The survey focused on assessing neighbors' difficulty accessing food over the past three months and what items they planned to purchase with the \$50 gift card.

**Analysis:** A weighted score of need severity (based on the Food Insecurity Index and needs proportion), SNAP eligibility, and partner reporting on serving numbers was used to make the final list of 23 partners that received gift cards. Each data point was assigned a weight and quantitative criteria categories determined each partner's score. The sum of the weighted scores for each partner informed the final decision for gift card distribution. Partners with the highest scores received 100 gift cards and lower scores received 50. The quantitative neighbor survey data was analyzed using Excel to determine the percentage of neighbors who have SNAP benefits and their reported difficulty accessing food in the past three months. Qualitative data was reviewed by a Senior Analyst on the MEAL Team and key findings were summarized.

## Outcomes

As a result of this analysis, which was heavily informed by the Food Insecurity Index, CFBNJ was able to equitably distribute the 2,000 \$50 gift cards to 23 partners in communities that had the greatest need.

**Key Question #1:** How can CFBNJ leverage multiple data sources in one analysis to understand where to equitably allocate resources based on where the greatest need is?

CFBNJ has proactively responded to recent budget cuts and reduced food through increasing private donor engagement and sourcing donated food from grocery stores and retail donors to ensure that the number of pounds distributed this year matches the previous year. Resource limitations are a persistent issue and CFBNJ recognizes the importance of distributing resources equitably throughout the partner network based on proportionate need in each community. The method of weighting relevant data points (need severity including the Food Insecurity Index and needs proportion, SNAP eligibility rates, proximity to an Acme location, and partner serving numbers) led to the equitable allocation of the Acme gift cards in communities with the most need.

This approach aligns with the operational experience of CFBNJ staff over time. Partner and neighbor facing staff have found that although the population may be lower in CFBNJ's counties served by the Egg Harbor Township location (Atlantic, Cape May, and Cumberland), there is still a severe need in those communities so resources should not stay primarily concentrated in CFBNJ's 8 counties served by the Hillside branch. This analysis did not prioritize any counties for this reason, but 43% of the partners selected to receive gift cards were located in Cape May and Cumberland counties based on the outcome of the analysis. The observations of CFBNJ team members aligned with the quantitative method that guided the final allocation of gift cards, which is indicative of the accuracy of this approach.

**Key Question #2:** What is the impact of allocating resources equitably to neighbors?

Of the 23 partners that received gift cards, 7 of them (30%) proactively asked neighbors to complete the survey, resulting in a 20% response rate among neighbors that were asked to participate in the survey. Of the 123 survey participants, 39% said it was difficult or very difficult to make sure they had enough food for the household in the past three months and 35% reported that they or someone in their household had skipped a meal within the same time period because there was not enough food in the house to eat.

Due to the recent SNAP delays resulting from the 2025 government shutdown, SNAP participation and eligibility rates were included in the analysis and survey findings confirmed the accuracy of this data layering approach. Neighbors who completed the survey reported SNAP participation rates that are over four times higher (42%) than the New Jersey state average (9.5%). The data layering methodology to identify the communities that would receive the gift cards was an accurate approach because communities with disproportionately high need were selected.

Qualitative data revealed that the most common foods that neighbors said they would use their gift card for were fresh produce, protein, and dairy products. Many neighbors also commented that the gift card they received in December would provide extra financial support so they could provide a holiday meal for their families.

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## Conclusion

Leveraging the Food Insecurity Index ensured that CFBNJ equitably allocated the gift cards to communities that needed extra support the most. For example, there were high rates of neighbors reporting SNAP participation in the survey, which reflects the accuracy of the Food Insecurity Index because this data point is factored into the index score and led distribution of the gift cards to communities that had high SNAP participation rates.

CFBNJ applies the method of comparing need across communities for other equitable resource allocation strategies throughout the organization by adapting the approach to fit the context. For example, this strategy informed allocation of grant funding and guides decision making for determining if new partnerships would fill service gaps in communities. We also tailored the strategy for programs that focus on specific demographics by determining areas where seniors are most vulnerable to allocate Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) resources to those communities.

Based on the success of these approaches and increasing requests from other teams to use this strategy, the MEAL Team worked with the IT Team to create a PowerBI dashboard. The tool aims to increase data access for other CFBNJ teams to guide collaborative decision making rooted in data.

**Areas for Improvement:** An additional feature for the Index that would be useful is creating index scores for larger geographical areas, such as zip code, city, and/or county. Although this analysis benefitted from the low geographical level, higher level data would be helpful for other analyses moving forward.

**Strengths:** The Food Insecurity Index produces one measure that indicates community vulnerability to food insecurity, which simplifies the process of consistently comparing need in communities across the state. For this case study in particular, the SNAP participation data already embedded in the Index made our analysis more comprehensive. We were able to incorporate SNAP eligibility rates into the final analysis because this was an especially important data point for this case, but using the Index still accounted for other social determinants of health influencing food insecurity.

**Recommendations for Other Users:** There are many types of effective data analysis strategies that went into creating the food insecurity indices, which can serve as a guide for other data analysis teams too. We encourage anyone using the tool to dive into the methodology to understand how the tool was developed. Spending time understanding the data we are using is always best practice, but it may also spark other ideas for ways that your organization can collect, analyze, and apply data to inform effective and equitable data-driven decision making at your organization too.

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