

Morgan Stanley Foundation Child & Family Choice Initiative

Year 2 Evaluation Brief, October 2023

In 2022, 30 partner food banks were selected to participate in Year 2 of the Morgan Stanley Child and Family Choice Capacity Institute to increase the amount of choice offered by their food distribution sites for children and their families. Each food bank identified two to 10 school pantry or partner agency sites to support in offering more choice during their distributions. NORC at the University of Chicago and More Than Food Consulting collaborated with Feeding America to evaluate levels of choice, assess barriers and facilitators to offering choice at sites and understand the impact of offering choice for site staff, volunteers and neighbors.

Over the grant year, Feeding America and the evaluation team provided food bank staff with tools, resources and technical assistance to work with school pantries and partner sites to increase their level of choice and incorporate other neighbor-centric practices that build on choice (offering healthy foods, being open more hours). Participating sites and families visiting the sites were surveyed in fall 2022 and spring 2023 to better understand barriers and facilitators to offering choice and evaluate the impact of different levels of choice on the neighbor experience.

Project Goals

1. Understand how the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact choice models
2. Discover best practices in increasing choice in programs that serve children and families
3. Examine the impact of offering more choice by gathering direct feedback from families to improve their experience

Year 2 Funding Impact:

With generous funding from the Morgan Stanley Foundation, as part of the Child & Family Choice Initiative, the following were achieved:

- Distributed **\$1,612,500** to **30** partner food banks working with **150** school pantry and partner agency sites.
- Hosted **11 Choice Capacity Institute** calls to share resources, support neighbor feedback collection and foster peer to peer learning.
- Collected pre- and post- data from **98 pantry directors**
- Collected **4,785 neighbor surveys** over two time points
- Visited **7 sites** to contextualize learnings from the fall surveys, provide technical assistance around offering choice and support the gathering of neighbor feedback.
- Food banks distributed **8,079,388 meals** and served **170,112 children**

32% of sites increased choice, and those that offered full choice showed significant benefits

Neighbors at full choice sites reported **greater satisfaction & less food waste** compared to those without full choice

16% of sites remained at no choice, and several cited COVID as an ongoing challenge



In collaboration with:



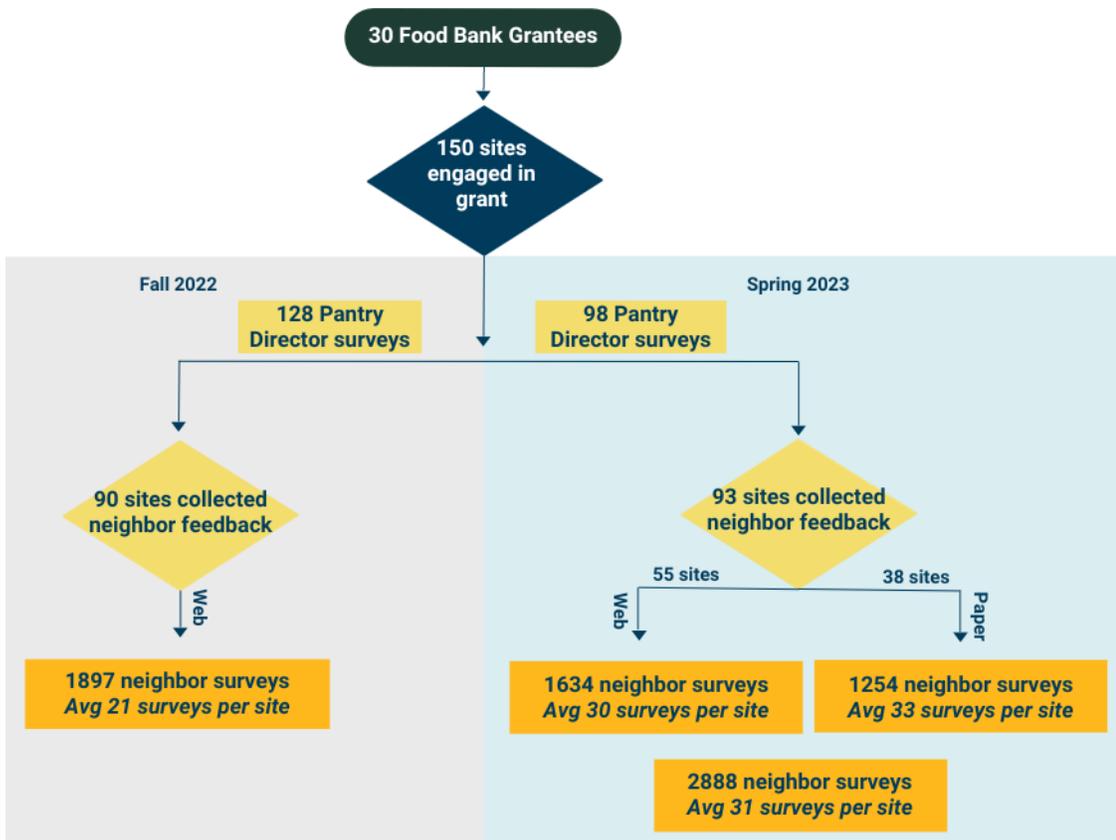
Morgan Stanley Foundation Child & Family Choice Initiative Year 2 Evaluation

In the second year of this initiative, the evaluation team collected feedback from food bank staff, surveyed school pantry and partner agency site volunteers, staff and neighbors. This brief includes key learnings and how those learnings shaped the third year of the project.

Listening to Neighbors

An important addition to the Year 2 evaluation was gathering feedback directly from families to understand the impact of choice on their pantry experiences. We collected 4,785 neighbor surveys.

Year 2 Evaluation Process & Responses



Neighbor Demographics

Majority of respondents were female (78%) and racially and ethnically diverse*:

- 42% White
- 20% Black
- 35% Latino/Hispanic
- 6% Other

*Neighbors could select all that apply from the following: White, Hispanic/ Latino, Black, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern or North African, Other, Don't know

Neighbors have diverse food needs and restrictions

Of neighbors surveyed in spring 2023, half (47%) had at least one dietary restriction in the household. The most common diets included following a low sugar (27%), low sodium (14%) and low carb (11%).

“These neighbors [from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala and Columbia] tend to decline canned food ... in favor of fresh produce and dried beans. In response, we have reduced the amount of canned items for this location and have shifted to increasing fresh foods.” – Food bank staff

Electronic Survey Innovation

For the neighbor surveys, the evaluation team used an innovative approach of using QR codes with online surveys and gift cards in fall ‘22. Several food banks and their sites shared that this method was not accessible for some rural and elderly neighbors. The evaluation team adjusted and offered the option of either online or paper surveys for spring ‘23, which increased participation.

What Neighbors Said about Choice

We asked neighbors about their perceptions of choice, healthy food availability, and food waste. A total of 1,897 neighbors completed electronic surveys in fall '22, and 2,888 neighbors completed surveys (electronic or paper) in spring '23.

“Conversing with students one-on-one about the pantry and allowing them to take what they want reduces the stigma students had felt previously.” – Food bank staff

Neighbor Satisfaction with Level of Choice



Neighbors had better experiences at full choice pantries.

Compared to neighbors at pantries without full choice, neighbors at pantries they identified as full choice were:



We shared data back with food banks and sites.

Food banks were instrumental in supporting agencies to collect neighbor feedback and we wanted them to see the data from their sites. Some used neighbor feedback to influence food sourcing. After the fall 2022 neighbor surveys, for sites that had a minimum of five neighbor responses, a site-level report was created with key findings including neighbor satisfaction, perception of food availability and dietary restrictions. These results were also aggregated by food bank.

“This feedback will be useful in refining our program, but we also hope that ... these survey results can be used as a tool to move more sites back to the choice model.” – Food bank staff

Defining Choice

In Year 2 of this project, the evaluation team continued to build upon the levels of choice introduced in Year 1 of the project. While pantries, mobile distributions and school pantries may follow different distribution practices, the amount of choice offered can be categorized by how restrictive the model is - from no choice to full choice.

None

Limited

Modified

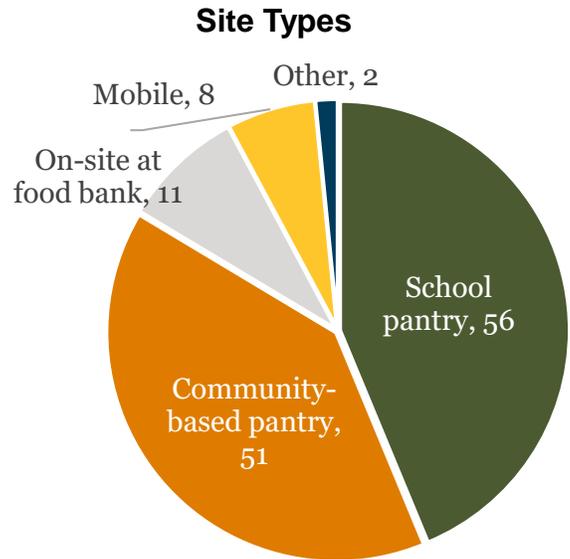
Full

Role of Food Banks

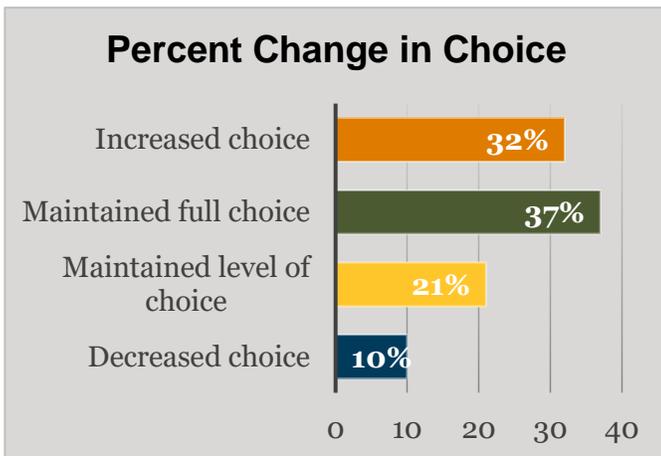
This grant opportunity focused on building food bank capacity to support partner sites to increase choice. To focus on programs that serve families with children, some food banks focused on school pantries and programs that often have higher reliance and support from the food bank in making food selections and setting up the logistics of distribution. School sites leaned on food banks for survey implementation support, maintaining program sustainability during staff turnover, and addressing emergent challenges due to COVID-19 closures in the 2022-23 school year.

Monthly Capacity Institute Calls

The programs team hosted 11 Choice Capacity Institute calls to provide food banks with tools and strategies to support agencies in moving along the choice continuum. These calls were open to the full network, and time was dedicated to connecting with grantees and sharing updates from the evaluation team. Topics for these calls included training staff and volunteers on choice, collecting neighbor feedback, addressing barriers to offering choice, peer support, building buy-in for choice, and highlighting choice in action. We also encouraged sites, including those that started at full choice, to make changes to improve their operations and the neighbor experience.



“Each choice pantry has added extra days and times, including nights and weekends, to offer additional opportunities to visit and shop in the choice pantry.”
 – Food bank staff



Change in Choice Levels Fall '22 - Spring '23

During Years 1 and 2 of the Choice Initiative, food banks could select sites offering any level of choice. Based on the pantry directors' surveys, one third of sites (32%) increased their level of choice. Most sites remained at the same level of choice from the fall to the spring, including 16% that stayed at no choice. One third of the pantries that maintained full choice reported improving their choice program by making changes to the types of food, the layout of the pantry, the days/hours open, and collecting additional neighbor feedback.

School based pantries were more likely to offer full choice in spring 2023 than community-based pantries. Also, sites that did not increase choice were more likely to serve more neighbors (over 100) each week, have small spaces, and identified time as a top barrier.

Barriers to Increasing Choice

In surveys and through qualitative feedback, food bankers and food pantry staff shared the following factors that prevented or reduced their ability to increase choice:



High food costs



Continued impact of COVID-19



Natural disasters



Limited time



Limited space

Evaluation Team Site Visits:

In spring 2023, the evaluation team conducted site visits to seven sites across three food banks. Based on the first round of survey data, the evaluation team identified pantries involved with the grant that were offering different levels of choice, and prioritized visiting sites that were at schools and still at no choice.

Evaluation team members were able to provide one-on-one technical assistance to pantries, including supporting sites that were in the process of transitioning from no choice to full choice. These site visits offered an opportunity for the evaluation team to collect stories from the field, ask about additional barriers and facilitators to offering choice, and gather neighbor feedback. The following case studies show highlights from the site visits:



Anderson Intermediate: Pantry coordinators reduced stigma for students by renaming the pantry after the school mascot. The Pirate Pantry is open to families of students for shopping once a month and provides a variety of fresh produce and healthy options.



South View Elementary School: While already offering a choice model, volunteers were encouraged to step back and allow neighbors to handle and select their own foods, to move from modified to full choice.



McDonald Mission: After a conversation with the evaluation team about the impact of offering choice, the pantry leader was convinced by the potential to reduce waste, build community with guests and offer more variety. The volunteers conducted a brief survey with neighbors and, by the next distribution, began offering a hybrid model where neighbors could come in and shop or receive a pre-packed bag.

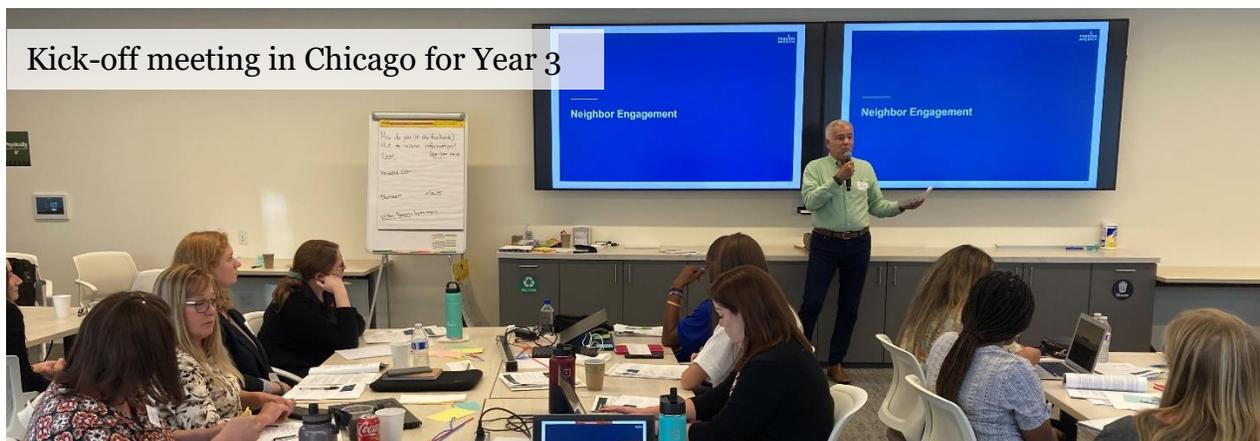
Shaping Year 3 Activities

One learning from the site visits was that food banks were describing choice in different ways to their partners. This finding led to some restructuring of the grant process so that in Year 3 of the grant, food bank and food pantry staff are given the same language and use the same definitions around choice.

Next Steps:

At the beginning of this three-year initiative, quantitative data was quite limited on the impact or process of offering choice. Findings from Years 1 and 2 validated the benefits of offering choice, and in particular offering full choice, as a better practice in food security work and shed light on the barriers and facilitators for school pantries and sites. In Year 3 of the Morgan Stanley Child & Family Choice Initiative, we will continue to build upon these findings and focus on a smaller number of food banks and pantries to gain deeper insight into the process of transitioning to full choice while incorporating feedback from families. The learnings from this process evaluation will support the Feeding America network to adopt sustainable choice models and programming beyond the grant period.

Eleven partner food banks received \$1,612,500 in funding to support 2 to 3 sites serving children, teens, and their families. The evaluation team is working closely with all 11 food banks and their selected partner sites to develop, test and revise tools to build capacity for offering full choice, starting with agencies offering no choice.



In Year 3, we will:

- Assess the process and resources (e.g., time, money, volunteers, food) of implementing choice at sites.
- Support sites to engage families to gather feedback when increasing choice options to enhance dignity and better meet families' food needs and preferences.
- Test and revise tools intended to share learnings about how to collaborate with sites to offer more Choice.
- Support the creation of a Choice Toolkit with resources and case studies that can be disseminated to the Feeding America network.



We are grateful for the generous support from Morgan Stanley and the active participation from partner food banks, school pantries and partner agencies for their enthusiasm to offer choice and improve the neighbor experience.