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# Strategic Food Sourcing Consultations Qualitative Report

Between March and May 2025, FFEN conducted 72 strategic food sourcing consultations, drawing on food sourcing and service data from July - December 2024. Consultations reached 147 unique food shelf sites across Minnesota, western Wisconsin, and eastern North Dakota. These conversations explored sourcing practices, financial planning and operational models. This report synthesizes key findings, highlights exceptional practices, identifies challenges, and provides actionable recommendations for navigating current and upcoming challenges.

## Food Shelf Profile

**Consultation Scope:** 72 Organizations (147 total sites), including 17 (24%) new to FFEN's Strategic Food Sourcing consultation process.

**Service Models (68 responses):** 52 sites (76%) offer full shopper choice, 12 (18%) partial choice, 4 (6%) pre-packed boxes. Visit frequency ranges weekly to monthly, with 11 sites (16%) providing access multiple times per week and 29 (43%) providing monthly visits.

**Food Bank Delivery Frequency (68 responses):** Ranges from multiple times per week (13 sites- 19%) to once a month (11 sites - 16%). 30 sites (44%) receive weekly deliveries.

**Financial Structure (67 responses):** 48 sites (71%) maintain annual food budgets; 17 (25%) do not.

**Food Waste Tracking (62 responses):** 22 sites (32%) track food waste.

## Outstanding Achievements

### Nutritious Food Distribution Excellence

Participating food shelves regularly achieve 50%+ sourcing in "most important" categories (fresh produce, protein, dairy), with many outperforming state medians. Strong TEFAP utilization and creative strategies (high cost product food drives, produce partnerships) allow food shelves to meet their shoppers' needs for nutritious and high quality foods.

### Community-Centered Service

Majority provide full-choice shopping experiences with many noting the importance of culturally appropriate options (Halal meat, Masa flour, tortillas, etc.) and specialized programs for students, elders, and unhoused individuals. Food shelves are tailoring their services to the needs of the community by expanding the use of mobile pantries, student cupboards, and unattended models.

### Data-Driven Operations

Increasing use of dashboards and tracking tools for budget planning, sourcing guidance, and waste evaluation. FFEN's Strategic Food Sourcing Reports are actively shared with boards and staff to promote organizational transparency and strategic decision-making.

### Strong Partnerships

Effective partnerships with growers, retailers, and community organizations boost fresh food access and reduce waste. Food Shelves are purchasing from local stores or wholesalers more frequently than in the past. Over 70% of the food shelves noted getting significant amounts of food from outside of their regional food bank.

## Key Challenges

### Access & Availability

A majority of food shelves (63%) reported difficulty accessing all of their food through food banks, because of cost, availability or infrequent deliveries. Regional disparities exist, with access to low-cost USDA foods through the TEFAP program, food bank delivery frequency, and fresh product access being the areas with the most difference.

### Financial Constraints

Several sites lack formal food budgets, hindering strategic planning. Protein, eggs, and shelf-stable foods are increasingly unaffordable. Many sites are unaware of current and upcoming  cuts to federal funding and food programs that will further impact their costs.

### Operational Limitations

Limited staff and time make it hard to track data, try new food sourcing ideas, and improve operations. In the challenging food sourcing environment, smaller and more rural food shelves noted difficulty in maintaining SuperShelf stocking standards.

## Strategic Recommendations

In anticipation of continued strain on food and fund resources, food shelves will need to focus on these areas for continued sustainability.

### Financial Planning

- **Create formal food budgets** (16 organizations) for organizational planning and sustainability.
- **Creative fundraising** by targeting certain items or funds to cover certain items (like a peanut butter drive or a specific dollar amount to cover different meat items).
- **Contingency planning** for projected cuts to federal programs impacting low-income individuals and hunger relief organizations.

### Sourcing Optimization

- **Use Food Sourcing Prioritization Tool** (40 organizations) for spending evaluation and order planning
- **Expand vendor networks** (32 organizations) beyond food banks alone
- **Adjust ordering behaviors** (30 organizations) in food categories and patterns

## Conclusion

Minnesota's food shelves demonstrate exceptional creativity, resilience, and commitment under challenging circumstances. Their cost efficiency, nutritious distribution, and community-centered models represent hunger relief best practices. Strategic data use, robust partnerships, and innovative delivery position these organizations for continued impact.

However, persistent challenges around food access, rising costs, staffing limitations, and system coordination require continued support. By investing in data-driven strategies, expanding partnerships, fostering innovation, and addressing system barriers, Minnesota's food shelves can navigate current constraints while building a more equitable, effective, and sustainable statewide hunger relief system. FFEN remains committed to providing tools, consultation, and insights to strengthen operations and maximize community impact across all Minnesota regions.