

The Emergency Food Assistance Program and Food Pantry Eligibility Requirements

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Issue

This report examines how The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and other eligibility requirements affect food pantry access and provides an overview of Connecticut Foodshare.

Summary

According to the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) (USDA), in 2021, 9.6% of households in Connecticut faced food insecurity (i.e., difficulty at some point during the year providing enough food for all their members because of a lack of adequate resources). Hundreds of food pantries across Connecticut assist residents in need. Though many pantries receive food donated by the public or industry partners, pantries may also be stocked with food received through [TEFAP](#). Only individuals or households that meet certain eligibility requirements may receive TEFAP food, which means not everyone who visits a food pantry may receive assistance. Though donated food is not subject to any state or federal eligibility requirements, food pantries may set their own eligible criteria to receive this assistance.

The Emergency Food Assistance Program

TEFAP is a federal nutrition program that aims to supplement the diets of low-income Americans by providing food at no cost. Through TEFAP, the USDA purchases food and ships it to state distributing agencies. The amount of food each state receives is based on its unemployed and low-income population. States administer the program and select local organizations, usually food banks, to either distribute food received directly to households or partner with other organizations,

such as food pantries or soup kitchens, to perform this function. The primary difference between a food bank and food pantry is to whom they distribute; food banks are warehouses that store food to distribute to food pantries, which are organizations that distribute food directly to those in need.

In Connecticut, the Department of Social Services (DSS) administers TEFAP and contracts with Connecticut Foodshare to distribute food received through this program to eligible food pantries, shelters, and soup kitchens. [According to DSS](#), Connecticut received over \$3 million in food value and about \$900,000 for administrative expenses through TEFAP in federal FY 22.

TEFAP Household Eligibility

A household must meet income standards set by the state to be eligible to receive food distributed through TEFAP. In Connecticut, an eligible household must (1) be a resident of Connecticut and (2) have an income at or below 235% of the [federal poverty limit](#) (FPL) for their household size (e.g., \$34,263 for a household of one, \$70,500 for a household of four). The income limit to qualify for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) [benefits](#) in Connecticut is 200% of the FPL, so households that qualify for SNAP also qualify for TEFAP.

Food pantries that distribute TEFAP food for home use must determine household eligibility by applying state standards. According to the DSS [TEFAP Program Guide](#), someone seeking to receive TEFAP food at a food pantry (i.e., “client”) must attest to their income and household size using a [self-attestation form](#). Food pantry staff collect this form and may store clients’ information for future food pantry visits. The client is responsible for reporting any changes in household income to the food pantry.

Connecticut Foodshare developed a [flow chart](#) that pantries may use when determining eligibility. TEFAP assistance is subject to a “benefits cliff” (see OLR report [2023-R-0100](#)), as an individual or household becomes ineligible for TEFAP as soon as their income exceeds 235% of the FPL. However, as the flow chart shows, someone ineligible for TEFAP food may still receive other food donated to or purchased by the food pantry.

Connecticut Foodshare

[Connecticut Foodshare](#) is a nonprofit organization that addresses hunger and food insecurity primarily by collecting donations from food industry donors (e.g., grocery stores, farms, etc.) and redistributing this food to partner organizations, such as food pantries or meal programs. It also operates a [mobile food pantry](#) to directly distribute food donations to individuals. According to their [FY 22 annual report](#), Connecticut Foodshare distributed food to more than 500 organizations or assistance programs and at over 100 mobile pantry sites. The mobile food pantry is open to all

regardless of residency or income, and food collected from industry donors is not subject to any federal or state regulations for redistribution.

Additionally, Connecticut Foodshare contracts with DSS to store and distribute USDA food received through TEFAP. In turn, Connecticut Foodshare then contracts with local organizations, such as food pantries and soup kitchens, in communities across the state to distribute to individuals in need. An organization eligible to receive TEFAP food and distribute it to the public must (1) qualify as an emergency feeding organization ([7 CFR § 251.3\(e\)](#)), (2) be a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and (3) not be a penal institution. Households must meet the eligibility criteria discussed above in order to receive food from a food pantry if that food was purchased and distributed through TEFAP.

Food Pantries Across Connecticut

In addition to TEFAP food eligibility criteria, many food pantries also establish their own eligibility and application process to access non-TEFAP food. Food pantries are not required to set eligibility standards, but among those that do, common criteria include residency, income limits, or frequency of use. Though there is no definitive count of food assistance programs in Connecticut, Connecticut Foodshare [reports](#) working with a network of over 650 food pantries, community kitchens, and mobile food distributors across the state. [211](#) maintains a searchable database of food distribution sites and organizations across the state and lists unique eligibility requirements in the results. Connecticut Foodshare's mobile pantry schedule can be found [here](#).

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