

**INCREASING COMMUNITY
AUTONOMY AND
REDUCING FOOD ACCESS
BARRIERS IN RURAL
TENNESSEE**

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IN COLLABORATION WITH:

The Congressional Hunger Center
&
Second Harvest Food Bank of
Middle Tennessee

ABOUT & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Congressional Hunger Center



The Congressional Hunger Center is a global nonprofit organization dedicated to the principle that access to nutritious, affordable, and culturally appropriate food is a basic human right.

Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee



Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee utilizes a network of nearly 500 partner agencies to end food insecurity in Middle Tennessee.

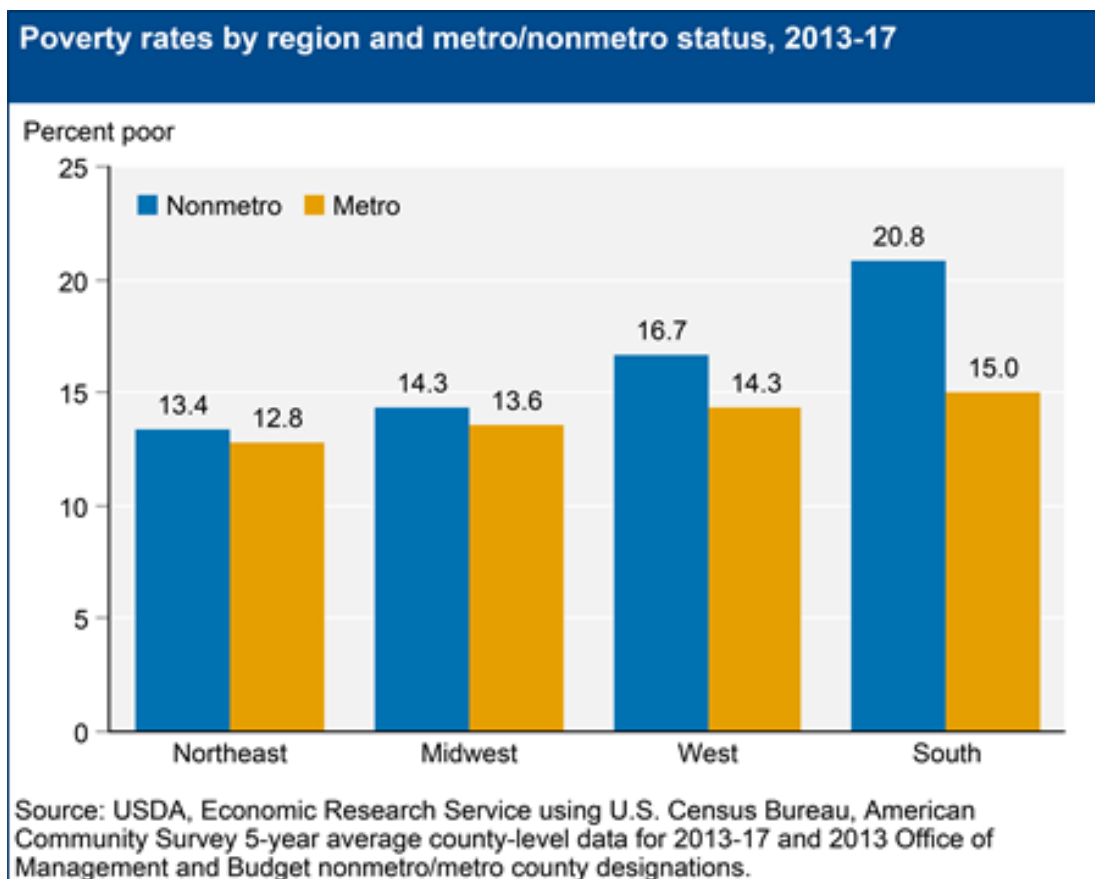


Special thanks to Tyson Foods in their support of the Congressional Hunger Center and Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee.

HUNGER IN RURAL TENNESSEE

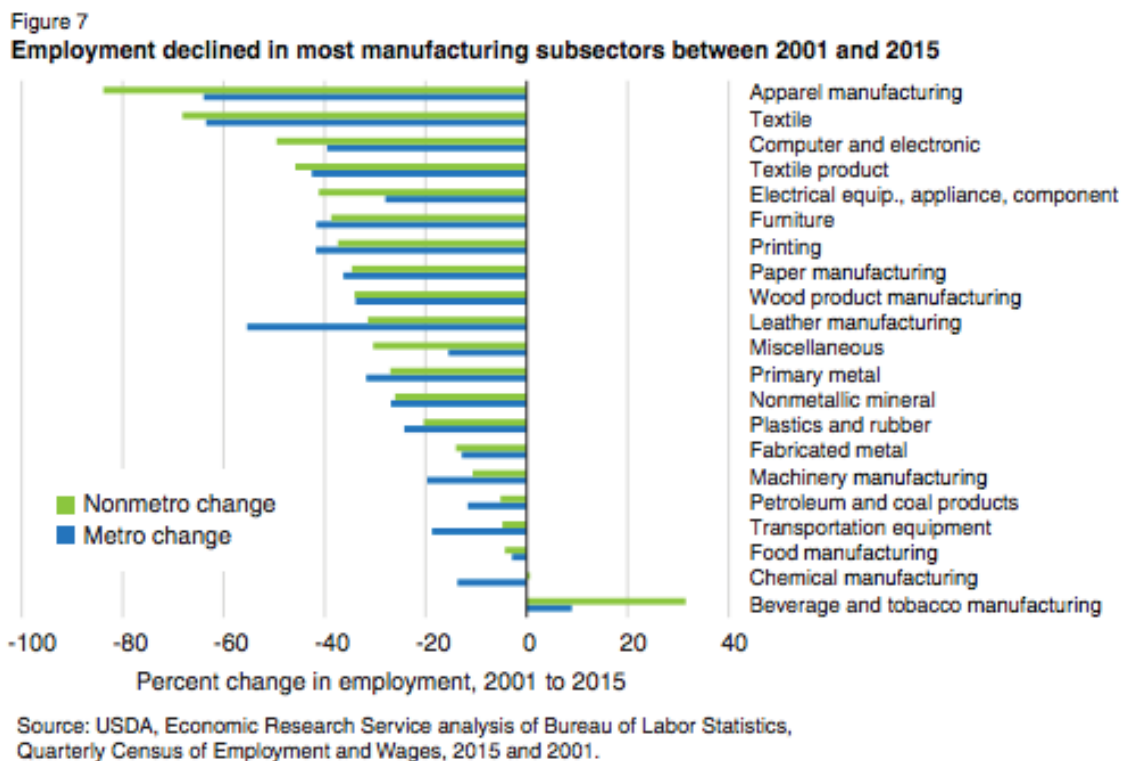
Food Insecurity in Rural and Remote Spaces

Despite economic growth and restoration over the last decade, rural poverty in America has largely remained pervasive and concentrated. The economic downturn related to the 2008 Great Recession played a contributing factor in exasperating poor health and economic outcomes in many rural communities across the United States. Overall rates of poverty remain higher in rural and non-metro areas. This poverty gap is most significantly illustrated between metro and non-metro areas in the American South. Currently, the South's rural poverty rate is nearly six percent higher than that of its region's non-rural areas. [1]



The persistence of rural poverty, much like all poverty in the United States, continues to be perpetuated by systemic factors centered around racism and classism. Rural communities often face additional barriers to economic wellbeing and food security such as a poor infrastructure, low wage work, shuttering health care systems, and an aging population.

Rural communities are faced with increased economic hardship as manufacturing jobs continue to decline in the United States.[2] Existing jobs in rural areas tend to be lower paying with infrequent or unpredictable hours and limited benefits.



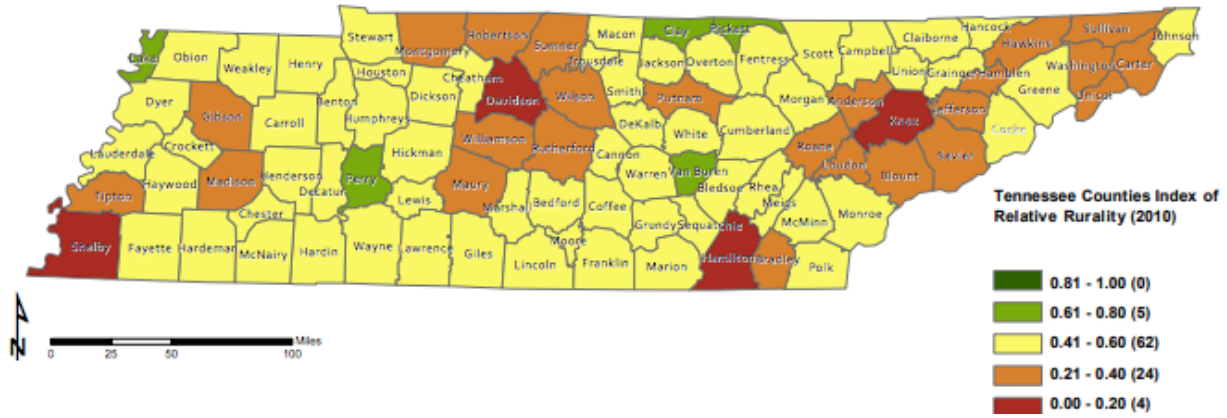
Due to the spatially vast and geographically isolated nature of rural communities, non-metros spaces are predominately car oriented with limited options available for public transit or ride sharing. For the continually growing aging population in rural America, transportation is crucial in accessing necessary medical services and social services.

Clearly defining the term rural can often been difficult as it has many implications based on land-use, socioeconomic status, and population density.[3] Though most commonly used when discussing population density, it is also a term utilized as a narrative of non-metro spaces. Metro and non-metro are often interchangeable with rural and urban.

Rural Huger in Middle Tennessee

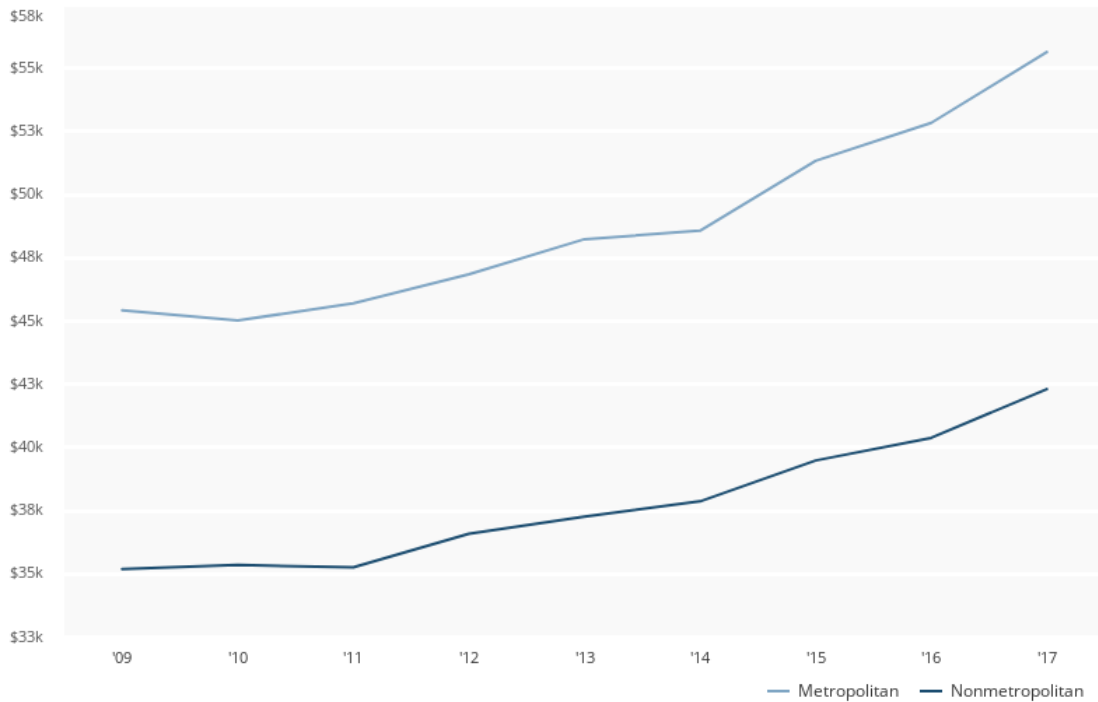
In regard to land use, Tennessee is a predominantly rural state - with over 93% of its land qualifying as rural space. Of the 95 counties that make up Tennessee, 70 had at least 50% of its residents living in the 38,330 square miles of rural Tennessee. Though a majority of the population resides in major metropolitan areas, there are many thriving rural communities scattered throughout the state. [4]

Map 1a. Index of Relative Rurality for Tennessee Counties: 2010
Presented in Five Ranges from Green (Most Rural) to Red (Most Urban)



Despite significant economic growth and development in many large metropolitan areas, Tennessee is a state that experiences food insecurity at a rate higher than the national average. Around 1 in 7 Tennesseans experience food insecurity, with an even higher rate for children in the state. [5] For many more, poverty is just one medical emergency or accident away, as over two million Tennesseans live at or below 185% of the federal poverty line. [6]

Average Median Household Income for Metro and Nonmetro Counties, 2009-2017 - Tennessee



Note: Metro and nonmetro averages are calculated by weighting county median household income by ACS 5-year estimates of total households.



Source: [US Census Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates, 2009-2017](#).

Despite the state's median per capita income reaching \$45,517, the median rural income has only reached \$35,470. [7]

A COMMUNITY SERVICE RESPONSE TO HUNGER

Food Banking's Role in Promoting Food Security

Hunger is a complex economic issue that many organizations, policy makers, and advocates are leveraging a variety of strategies to solve. Food banks are working to end hunger and mitigate its effects through the utilization of donated foods and strategic interventions. Food banks across the country provide a powerful network for smaller direct service organizations to access. Through utilizing the recovery of donated retail foods and leveraging a strong buying power, food banks in America supply nearly four billion pounds of food annually to various food relief organizations.

Tennessee Based Food Banks

Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee is one of five food banks and many more anti-hunger organizations in the state working to solve food insecurity. Second Harvest has been working for over 40 years fulfilling its mission statement to "Feed Hungry People and Solve Hunger Issues in the Community". The food bank distributes over 600,000 pounds of food per week to a 46 county service area. [8]

The Partner Agency Network

In order to service such a large range of communities, Second Harvest maintains a partner agency network of nearly 500 independently-operated organizations and places of faith. These partner agencies include food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, senior centers, group homes, and youth enrichment programs. At least one partner agency distributes food in every county of Second Harvest's service area.

Each organization in the partner agency network is fully autonomous from Second Harvest. All partner agencies are required to sign an agreement outlining non-negotiable guidelines that prohibit selling food or discriminating against clients. Each individual organization maintains its own autonomy in terms of hours, rules, regulations, and food distribution amounts. Each agency is also required to order food from Second Harvest more than once a year to remain active.

KEY INSIGHTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop an internal capacity building strategy for rural counties to ensure equitable access across the network

Rural communities have inherent infrastructure issues that greatly differ than that of metropolitan and suburban areas. Second Harvest's service area covers a wide range of rural counties, though the bulk of agencies exist in urban and suburban spaces. Currently, there is no internal designation for rural counties for an increased focus on strategic capacity building. To best serve these counties, a more comprehensive internal gauge for rural food security must be created. A strategy for growing capacity and solving hunger issues in rural areas would incorporate a multi-prong approach including: working alongside communities to solve barriers, reducing travel time for clients, increasing hours of access, emphasizing client choice, and accounting for dietary and health concerns.

Reduce barriers through utilizing non-traditional partners and existing infrastructure

For any person struggling with food insecurity, there are a multitude of barriers to receiving services. These barriers increase and become more pervasive outside of urban areas. Rural food access barriers include: a lack of public transit, rural specific health concerns, an aging population base, and a lack of modern infrastructure. An effective rural strategy would work to assist in funding the elimination of barriers to strengthen food security. In order to effectively build out a strategy of eliminating barriers, partnering with community members to identify and develop rural programs is highly important.

Increase and emphasize community autonomy to ensure beneficiary insight is integral in program development and resourcing

Solutions that are long-lasting and effective are community-owned. Resources in rural and remote spaces are often limited by a lack of community-based funding. In order to effectively serve rural communities, the participation of intended beneficiaries and communities is imperative. An effective rural capacity building strategy would continue a commitment to implementing community-created and owned programs. Resources purchased to upgrade or improve rural partners would remain in the community.

CLAY COUNTY, TN

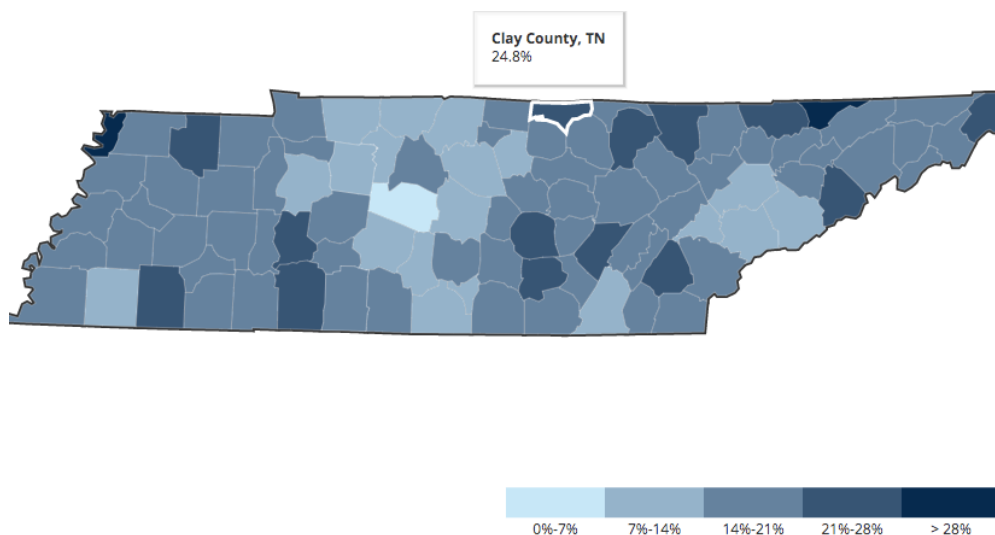


Population: 7,703

Food Insecure Persons: 1,190

Food Insecurity Rate: 15.5%

Clay County, located directly below the Kentucky border, has a modest population of nearly 8,000 residents. The median household income in the county is \$29,784 - much below the national median. The county seat and only incorporated town in the county is Celina. Celina only accounts for roughly 15% of the population with most other county residents living in one of the many unincorporated communities. [9]



Source: [US Census Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates, 2009-2017.](#)

The Partner Agency Network in Clay County, TN

Clay County has one partner agency for community members to access food resources, Clay County Helping Hands. Clay County Helping Hands primarily functions as thrift store but also provides emergency food boxes from Second Harvest food. In addition to supplying the community with food boxes, the agency assists with utility payments to those in the county. Clay County Helping Hands is open Thursday through Saturday weekly.

In addition to Clay County Helping Hands, a local congregation partners with Second Harvest to provide a children's feeding backpack program to local schools. These backpacks are on a referral basis through the school district.

Areas of Growth and County Specific Recommendations:

Build Upon Executive Order Momentum

In 2019, the Tennessee Governor Bill Lee issued an executive order for an accelerated transformation plan in 15 distressed rural counties. These distressed counties rank within 10% of the most economically distressed counties in the United States. [10] Clay County was included in the accelerated transformation plan. Nearly a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line in Clay County. This executive order has allowed for both government agencies, school districts, and non-government organizations to collaborate more efficiently and purposefully. The added emphasis on infrastructure and community development funding allows for modern infrastructure and job development programs to be updated and utilized. During this time of state level government focus, Second Harvest has an opportunity to enhance the infrastructure and service updates that are already being provided by the state government through the promotion of food security in the region.

Strengthen Partnership with Clay County Helping Hands

Currently, Clay County Helping Hands distributes food three days a week. As Clay County Helping Hands is the only provider of food in the county without a referral, Second Harvest should work to build in comprehensive wrap around services and additional federal programs in order to maximize residents experience receiving food. Second Harvest should also work with staff and volunteers to expand hours. Clay County Helping Hands could provide more services and more nutritious fresh food with the use of capacity grants to upgrade and add additional storage and refrigeration ability.

Partnering with School District Backpack Program

Like that of many rural areas in Tennessee, Clay County School District runs a children's feeding backpack program. This program provides snacks and small meals for low-income children over the weekend and during school breaks. In Clay County, where resources are particularly sparse, Second Harvest should work to centralize services through building out this program to include family focused resources alongside the backpack program. School district partners provide powerful opportunities for collaborative food services. The benefits and resources of these programs could extend to the whole family in a comprehensive way.

MACON COUNTY, TN

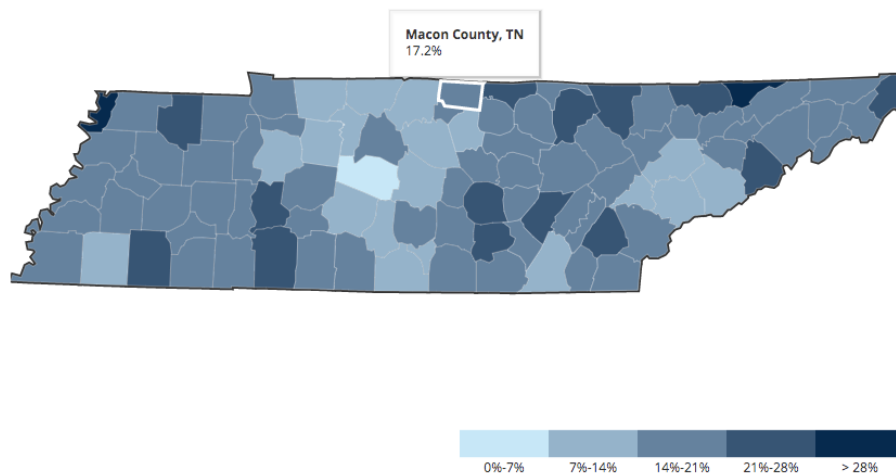


Population: 24,265

Food Insecure Persons: 2,790

Food Insecurity Rate: 12.0%

Macon County, located directly south of the Kentucky Border, has a population of over 24,000 people. The most populous town and the county seat is Lafayette. Residents of Macon are spread throughout the entire county, with a population estimate of 72 people per square mile. [10] Lafayette, the county seat, hosts the all services including grocery stores, public housing towers, and the Department of Human Services. There are two other established towns in Macon but is largely filled with unincorporated communities scattered throughout.



Source: [US Census Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates, 2009-2017.](#)

The Work of Partner Agency Network in Macon

Second Harvest has four partner agencies that operate in Macon County providing a variety of services. As each agency possesses their own internal guidelines and regulations for distributing food to residents of Macon County, only two of the four partners are available to residents without a referral.

Macon Helps, located in the town square of Lafayette, distributes emergency food boxes and hosts a variety of wrap-around services. The services are specifically geared toward seniors, though Macon County residents are not turned away due to age. Food boxes at Macon Helps are created with purchased food from Second Harvest and supplemented with The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) foods. The utilization of TEFAP foods reduce costs for a small agencies and helps to provide a wider range of fresh produce. In addition to supplying food boxes, Macon Helps works to help community members with SNAP applications during visits.

Down the road from Macon Helps, Community Connection Church runs monthly immediate distributions utilizing rescued retail perishables and TEFAP foods. Community Connection distributes food boxes to around 200 community members. Beyond a required TEFAP income declaration, the distribution has no barriers or geographic requirements. Many participants drive down from bordering Kentucky towns in order to receive these boxes. The demand for food is high. Families will wait for up to four hours to guarantee receiving a box.

Areas of Growth and County Specific Recommendations:

Utilize Centralized Services

Lafayette is home to Macon's Department of Human Services, health department, public housing towers, and additional social service agencies such as the Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency. In counties where limited regular pantry hours exist, Second Harvest should continue to build upon the non-food related social services in centralized areas. Health departments, public housing towers, and school districts are natural partners for providing food services in rural areas.

Reducing Barriers through Partnership

In addition to county level services, creating non-traditional partnerships in rural counties should be a priority. The Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency is a great strength of the area and potential partner to assist in removing barriers for Macon County. Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency is a social service agency that exists in 14 counties in upper Middle Tennessee. UCRHA provides intensive casework for residents of the area. The agency provides low-cost and insurance covered rides to doctor's appointments and daily needs such as grocery shopping or errand running. This is an important service in a rural area where there is no public transit system. In addition to the transportation services, UCHRA agency also provides job training, elderly care taking, energy assistance programs, and community assistance block grants. These services are essential to removing barriers for food-insecure folks who are experiencing food insecurity as a result of other systemically based issues.

SMITH COUNTY, TN

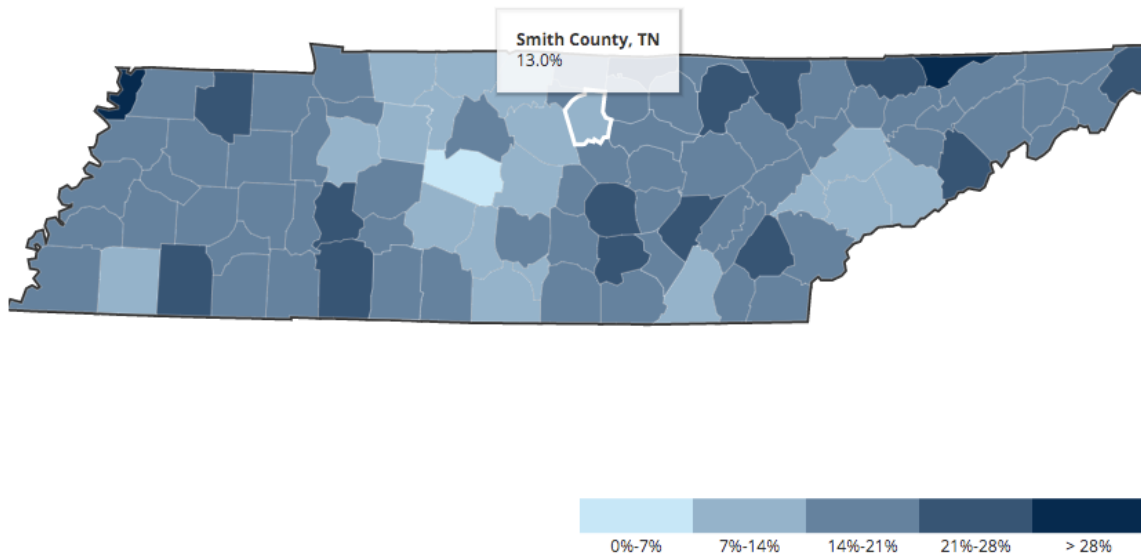


Population: 19,636

Food Insecure Individuals: 2,150

Food Insecurity Rate: 11.2%

Smith County, located at the base of the Cumberland Plateau, hosts a variety of nature focused tourism for the Greater Nashville area. The county seat and most populous town is Carthage. Within Smith County, there are two other towns, South Carthage and Gordonsville. Much like many other rural spaces, Smith County possesses a large amount of unincorporated communities with most resources existing in the county seat. In Smith County, the median household income falls much below the median for the state, at \$35,625 compared to \$52,375. [11]



Source: [US Census Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates, 2009-2017.](#)

The Partner Agency Network in Smith

Currently, Second Harvest has one partner in Smith County, Living Waters Ministry. The ministry has been partnered with Second Harvest for over a decade. Living Waters distributes donated perishables and TEFAP foods twice a month. This distribution has increased in frequency over the years. This program runs entirely with volunteers coordinating both logistics and distribution of the twice monthly event.

Areas of Growth and County Specific Recommendations:

Eliminating Costs to Grow the Partner Agency Network

Smith County has several food pantries that are not currently partners with Second Harvest. In order to be a partner with Second Harvest, food pantries are required to order several times throughout the year and are subject to handling and delivering fees. Food pantries in smaller areas may not possess the budget to access the network through Second Harvest. Pantries that are relying entirely on donated foods directly to their organizations would benefit tremendously from utilizing federal programs such as TEFAP and SNAP. In areas where there are limited resources and no other potential partners available, Second Harvest should work alongside the community to eliminate the cost of handling for donated foods. Adding existing organizations as partners helps to enhance the services provided in a rural area while also helping Second Harvest gain important insight and data within a community.

Enhancing the Experience of the Partner Agency Network

In order to continue to developing new relationships with agencies in rural spaces, the current partnership model should be evaluated. Currently, beyond the ability to purchase food at a considerable discount and the utilization of federal nutrition programs such as TEFAP, there are minimal benefits for an organization to become a partner agency. Offering a more robust partnership between Second Harvest and agencies can help to both expand the capacity of existing organizations through professional development as well as provide stronger incentives for non-partner agencies to become partners.

Organizing and Engaging to Find Community Partners

Much like other rural counties in Tennessee, the county seat of Smith, hosts most public services and resources. Smith County also has several social service providers including a Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency office. Partnerships between social service providers, school districts, and health departments are a natural fit in these areas. Continuing to centralize services where they are currently located in the county, while working to provide food and federal nutrition programs within these services, can continue to promote food security throughout the network.

CREATING A RURAL STRATEGY

A new framework for solving hunger in rural Tennessee

- In order to best serve rural areas, an internal designation should be established to provide non-traditional metrics for measuring food security while prioritizing agency capacity building. This designation will allow food bank staff a framework for solving and assessing barriers, reducing travel time to resources, increasing accessible hours, and gearing nutritional curriculum toward rural specific health concerns. Each county should have measurable and time-sensitive goals and priorities. The designation will exist to adapt to strategic priorities overtime.
- A combination of self-conducted and pre-existing data on the service area should be utilized. In order to utilize existing data and assessments, Second Harvest should partner with other government agencies and public health focused organizations to collaborate on mutual goals. Rural specific research, focus groups, and targeted outreach should inform program decisions and the execution of a comprehensive food security needs assessment.
- The partner agency network has a strong reach within a large service area. Each partner agency within the network interacts regularly with community members experiencing food insecurity. Utilizing the reach and capacity of partner agencies to gain insights on demographic information, local economics, and client preferences is integral in achieving sustainable and impactful results in rural spaces.
- Best practices from other rural food banks and anti-poverty organizations should be utilized. As on-going internal program assessments occur, evaluations and adjustments that emphasize the use of client and community engagement should be applied and maximized in rural spaces. In order to intentionally roll out a rural capacity-building strategy in a large service area will take time. As an organization, it will be important to build sensitive and intentional relationships in small communities. This designation should also focus on vulnerable demographics of rural America such as low-wage workers, aging populations, and rural specific health concerns.
- Consistency is not only important in providing on-going community connection but also creates longer-lasting and sustainable solutions. Consistent outreach and community-focused engagement can allow for better program outcomes and increased food security in rural and remote spaces.

REDUCING BARRIERS

Unique Solutions for Unique Spaces

- Rural communities face additional barriers to economic wellbeing and food security such as a lack of modern infrastructure, lower paying and infrequent work, shuttering health care systems, and generally aging population. The intentional reduction of barriers is as important to strengthening food security in an area as providing food.
- The partner agency network is strong in providing direct relief to rural communities needing food support in the short term. However, due to the constraints of many partners particularly in rural areas, most agencies are not able to combat larger food access barriers or systemic causes of hunger. Partner agencies in rural spaces are frequently volunteer-run and providing the maximum amount of services within their capacity. Providing agencies with capacity grant funding should be seen as a primary strategy in ensuring food security in rural areas. Distributing grant money for small capital campaigns, building maintenance, staffing and facilities upgrades will continue to steward and nurture the relationships of the partner agency network.
- Professional and organizational development from larger anti-hunger organizations such as food banks can help to expand the capacity and scope of work by these communities.
- There are many organizations, businesses, and publicly-funded entities that would make for viable partners in a new model. Examples of this would be school districts, health departments, hospitals, clinics, and public housing towers. Due to the current structure of the partner agency network, only agencies that are independently operated with a poverty relief mission can be traditional partners. Second Harvest should work to create programs in rural areas that utilize non-traditional spaces, particularly where there are no food-specific agencies available.
- In rural communities where issues of transportation and physical access are already limited it is important to meet residents in existing spaces. Rural clinics, school district buildings, libraries, and public housing towers can all serve as effective first responders to food insecurity. Publicly funded social service providers have important client information, insight, and on-going relationships that food specific resources such as churches, immediate distributions, and food pantries may not. This important feedback can be utilized to continue strategically and intentionally partnering in the community to increase food access.

Facilitating Best Practices with Current Rural Agencies

- Federal programs provide important flexibility and autonomy in rural spaces. Continuing to utilize federal programs such as The Emergency Food Assistance Program to supplement partner agencies with no-cost fresh produce can help provide budgetary relief to organizations with limited resources. In addition to strengthening the usage of nutrition programs in rural spaces, Second Harvest should work to incorporate promote economic focused federal programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).

Benefits of SNAP in Rural Areas

- The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is the nation's most effective poverty relief program, particularly in rural and remote spaces. SNAP is a cash-like benefit which offers flexibility for all types of dietary needs including those seen more often in rural areas such as diabetes management. SNAP's ability to be utilized in traditional grocery stores is particularly important in rural spaces where accessible pantry hours are incredibly limited. SNAP's flexibility allows it to be the first and most effective responder in areas that are experiencing natural disasters or wide-spread economic hardship.
- SNAP is a particularly important tool in continuing to generate economic activity in rural areas. Rural counties gained one job for every \$10,000 in increased SNAP redemptions after the 2008 recession. In addition to creating jobs, SNAP helps to boost the local economy, particularly in rural communities. One dollar of federally-funded SNAP benefits generates \$1.79 in economic activity.
- Continuing to conduct county specific SNAP outreach and training rural partner agencies on assisting with SNAP applications can provide a more thorough and effective food safety net in rural areas.

INCREASING COMMUNITY AUTONOMY

Emphasizing Community Input

- Establishing a community board and advocate network can begin to provide meaningful input and feedback to Second Harvest. Community board members may be partner agency staff, school district employees, local business leaders, social workers, volunteers, or anti-poverty advocates. A community board will work to establish program evaluation policies, suggest community specific programming, and provide direct communication for each unique community. Advocates will serve as point of contact for community engagement forums.

Reducing Dependence on Mobile Pantries to Maximize Client Choice

- Mobile pantries exist to supplement high-need areas through the direct distribution of large quantities of food. Despite the benefit of a large and often no-barrier distribution, these mobile pantries have very minimal client choice or acknowledgement of the needs of a community beyond volume of food distributed. In rural spaces where food pantries struggle to continue operating with regular hours due to lack of funding or volunteer availability, mobile pantries are often utilized. Mobile pantries should not be utilized as a longer term solution to rural food access. Mobile pantries can be an important stopgap in high need areas but Second Harvest should continue to seek out longer-term community based partners. Utilizing a farmers market-style for mobile pantry distributions can allow for increased client choice options.
- Client choice pantries offer the most autonomy to food pantry participants. Participants are encouraged to take items they will use, that are culturally appropriate, and sensitive to their health needs. In rural areas, where choice and access are already limited Second Harvest should intentionally work with rural agencies to transition to a client choice model to maximize participant autonomy.

Community Owned and Created Solutions

- Rural communities understand the issues and constraints in their communities best. The most effective solutions will be community crafted and sustained. Relying upon the partner agency network to conduct effective programming requires financially equipping them to do so. The participation of the intended communities should be an integral part of achieving a greater impact in these spaces.

HELPING HAND OF HUMBOLDT: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2020

01

EMPHASIZING CLIENT CHOICE IN ORDER TO MAXIMIZE HEALTHY AND RURAL SPECIFIC OPTIONS

Helping Hand of Humboldt has the unique opportunity emphasize nutritious options in the organization's new space through a client choice pantry model. A client choice pantry recognizes that food insecurity and poor health outcomes are intricately linked and takes proactive steps to ensuring that food insecure residents of Gibson County are able to consistently access a variety of fresh foods. In order to best emphasize nutritious options, Humboldt Helping Hand can utilize federal nutrition programs and specific rural nutrition focused resources provided by Second Harvest including: nudge interventions, themed messaging, and staff support.

02

UTILIZING FEDERAL PROGRAMS IN ORDER TO PROMOTE COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES

Federal programs provide important flexibility and autonomy in rural spaces. Continuing to utilize federal programs such as The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) to supplement and provide consistent no-cost fresh produce can help provide budgetary relief in geographic regions with limited monetary resources. In addition to strengthening the usage of nutrition programs in rural spaces, Helping Hand of Humboldt should work to incorporate and promote economic focused federal programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), low-income tax assistance, and energy assistance.

HELPING HAND OF HUMBOLDT: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2020

03

CONTINUING TO PARTNER WITH EXTERNAL AGENCIES TO CENTRALIZE SERVICES IN GIBSON COUNTY

Helping Hand of Humboldt can continue to bolster services by partnering with existing social service providers and government agencies. In rural areas, eliminating barriers is crucially important in making sure that community members can access services. Partnering with school districts, health departments, hospitals, clinics, and public housing towers for outreach and pop-up services can help to centralize services in the area.

04

STRENGTHENING THE PARTNERSHIP MODEL WITH SECOND HARVEST

Second Harvest possesses a variety of in house resources that could provide immense capacity building support to both Helping Hand of Humboldt and other rural and outlying agencies. Fundraising, grant writing, event planning, and professional leadership development are all areas of expertise that Second Harvest staff can work to provide through regional meetings, the Annual Partner Agency conference, and individualized assistance. Helping Hand of Humboldt should rely on larger organizations such as Second Harvest and Feeding America to continue with their internal staff trainings and development to further their food distribution capacities.

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