Food Shelves in Minnesota

by Janine A. Laird

In 1989 and again in 1993 CURA funded an operations survey of Minnesota food shelves. Half of the shelves in the state were mailed questionnaires. Eighty-one percent responded. This article reports some of the results of those surveys.

—the Editor

There are about 330 food shelves in Minnesota—places where people can go for free groceries. Unlike congregate dining sites, where hot meals are served, food shelves allow people to take food home and prepare it themselves. The first food shelf was opened by the Salvation Army in Duluth in 1886, but over half of today’s food shelves began in the early 1980s, between 1981 and 1985. Today’s food shelves are located in churches, in community centers, in city halls, and in store fronts. There are about one hundred in a nine-county area of the Twin Cities metropolitan region. The rest are scattered across the state.

Food shelves serve people within defined geographic boundaries. In Minneapolis and St. Paul, the service areas are described by streets. In other parts of the state, service areas may include entire city limits, county limits, or school districts. However boundaries are defined, food shelves work with their neighboring food shelves to ensure that there are no gaps in service, and that there is no duplication of service.

At first, food shelves viewed themselves as meeting only emergency needs for food, but over time, the gap between people’s needs for food and their ability to provide it themselves has widened. Today, only about a quarter of the food shelves define themselves as for emergencies only. Close to another quarter define themselves as sustaining food shelves. They supply food to fill the ongoing gaps. The rest combine both roles, serving in emergencies and as sustaining food shelves.

Food shelves serve hungry families in other ways beside the distribution of food. Nearly 80 percent of food shelves routinely refer people to a variety of other programs, including legal assistance, jobs and training programs, parenting support, counseling services, and government support programs. Many food shelves take a “case management” approach to serving their clients and require them to participate in government benefit programs like food stamps and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) as well as attend classes on nutrition, stretching food budget dollars, or general financial management.

Who Uses Food Shelves?*

Most food shelves do not require a financial needs test. They believe that those who come for food must need it because asking for charity is not an easy thing for most people to do. Nearly 90 percent of the households served at Minnesota food shelves have incomes below the official poverty level. For households reporting some income, the average was $578 a month in 1990. The largest major source of income was Aid for Dependent Children (AFDC) for two-fifths of the households. Yet one in four households received their major income from paid employment. In fact, in greater Minnesota and the Twin Cities suburbs work was the most common source of income—for 33 percent in greater Minnesota and 44 percent in the Twin Cities suburbs. Work does not pay enough to bring many families above the poverty line.

Nearly two-thirds of the households using food shelves in 1990 included children. People of all races and ethnic backgrounds come to Minnesota food shelves. Most are white (57 percent), but ratios vary from region to region. In the Twin Cities 35 percent are white and 35 percent African American, in the suburbs 84 percent are white, and in greater Minnesota 82 percent are white. In southwest Minnesota 25 percent are Mexican or Latino and in northwest Minnesota 20 percent are American Indian.

Food shelf use has skyrocketed in the last ten years. In 1982, the year that data were first collected, there were approximately 180,000 visits to food shelves. By 1992 visits had reached 1,400,000. On average, an individual or a family visits a food shelf five times a year. Using this average, approximately 280,000 people were served at food shelves in 1992, or one out of every sixteen Minnesotans.

But while food shelf use has increased, there is still a surprising turnover in clients. In January of 1990, more than one-fourth of households had been using food shelves for more than two years, but nearly 40 percent had used food shelves for six months or less.

How Do Food Shelves Operate?

No two food shelves are alike and how they operate depends on who is running the food shelf and what the community needs are in each area. When food shelves first started, they were operated almost exclusively by volunteers and many were housed.

in the corner of a church basement. Now, as demand has increased, more and more
food shelves pay rent, utilities, salaries, and
office expenses.
In 1989 over 70 percent of food shelves
did not have even one part-time paid em-
ployee. By 1993 that number had changed
dramatically. Fifteen percent of food
shelves now have at least one full-time paid
staff person and 24 percent have at least
one part-time paid staff person. But all food
shelves still rely on a large army of volun-
teers. Eighty-five percent of food shelves
report that they usually or always have
enough volunteers.
Hours of service at food shelves vary.
Many shelves in the metropolitan areas of
Minneapolis, St. Paul, St. Cloud, Duluth,
and Rochester are open every day, while
shelves in smaller communities may be
open only one morning or afternoon a
week. Forty percent are also available for
"on call" service in addition to their regular
hours.
How frequently will a food shelf supply
food for an individual or a family? Nearly
half (47 percent) serve their clients once a
month. Others (11 percent) supply them
once every three months, or four times a
year. In 1989 nearly 20 percent of food
shelves allowed clients to come in as often
as needed, but in 1993 only 8 percent
placed no restrictions on frequency. The
change reflects increasing use and increas-
ing difficulty in acquiring food.

What Kind of Food is Available?
Food shelves, generally, provide a family
with three to five days of food. A standard
food order for a family of one adult and
two children averages 53 pounds.
The food shelves try to provide a nutri-
tious, well-balanced food order. Many have
received advice from extension offices, nu-
tritionists, and dietitians in planning their food
packages. There is, however, often a differ-
ence between what is planned and what is
delivered. We asked food shelves to what
extent they had been able to supply people
with different kinds of food in 1992.
Some foods were products that most
shelves could supply fairly well or complete-
ly throughout the year:
- canned vegetables could be supplied by
  94 percent of the shelves;
- bread, cereal, and pasta by 93 percent;
- canned fruit by 66 percent; and
- meat and other proteins by 60 percent.
Other foods most shelves found they
could not supply or could supply very little of:
- fresh fruit was generally not available
  at 73 percent of the shelves;
- fresh vegetables at 67 percent; and
- dairy products at 40 percent, although
  20 percent of the shelves said they
could supply the need for dairy prod-
ucts completely during the year.
Food shelves need to educate the pub-
lic that donations of fresh and frozen foods
are needed and can be handled. Nearly all
food shelves have freezers (89 percent)
and refrigerators (82 percent).
Some people ask for special foods when
they come to food shelves. Baby formula
was always available at a quarter of the
shelves, but rarely or never available at
another quarter. Food shelves were even
less able to supply low-salt and low-sugar
foods. Non-food items (such as personal
care products and paper products) were
available fairly often or moderately often
at 62 percent of the shelves.
What food runs out first? Most shelves
said meat. What remains in stock for more
than a month? Canned vegetables, and,
then, cereal were most frequently mentioned.
We asked food shelves to compare their distribution in 1992 with their distribution in 1990. Nearly all said it was about the same or slightly more in all food categories.

How often did they have to cut back on service in 1992 because they were low on food? Fifty-five percent said never, 23 percent said rarely, and 31 percent said sometimes. When food shelves were asked this same question in 1989, 63 percent said never, 19 percent said rarely, and 16 percent said sometimes.

Where Does the Food Come From?
Many food shelves have their origins in a religious community’s mission to serve the less fortunate. The link between food shelves and religious communities continues to be a strong one. Minnesota FoodShare is sponsored by the Minnesota Council of Churches, the Minnesota Rabbinical Association, the Minnesota Catholic Conference, and other local religious councils. Every March since 1982, it has conducted a food drive throughout the state to raise food and dollars for food shelves. In 1982 the drive was confined to the Twin Cities, but the following year it expanded to the entire state.

Minnesota FoodShare commits itself to raising 20 percent to 25 percent of all Minnesota food shelf needs each year. This goal is achieved through the efforts of 2,600 churches and synagogues working closely with food shelves throughout the state. In March of 1993, Minnesota FoodShare raised 4.7 million dollars and pounds of food.*

Another partner in supplying food for food shelves is the Minnesota Food Bank Network, a consortium of seven regional food banks that are affiliated with Second Harvest, a nation-wide food bank network headquartered in Chicago. Second Harvest is one of the largest charities in the country—185 food banks in forty-six states. Because of its nation-wide membership, Minnesota receives food from across the country and distributes food across the country.

Food banks solicit large donations of food from food industries and make it available to nonprofit feeding programs such as food shelves, senior dining centers, group homes, and other on-site feeding programs. The donated food is food that might otherwise have gone to waste because of a flaw in packaging or an over-run, or other reasons unrelated to quality.

In 1992, Minnesota’s food banks distributed 13 million pounds of food. Approximately 6.4 million pounds went to food shelves at a cost of 12 to 15 cents a pound to cover storage and transportation. Bread, cereal, and pasta are the foods most often bought through the food banks.

Community food drives also make substantial contributions to food shelves. The Lyons, Elks, Boy Scouts, Jaycees, Girl Scouts, grade schools, and others work hard to raise food and public awareness. In 1992, they raised approximately 8.5 million pounds of food and over $5 million. Canned vegetables and fruits are most often obtained from community food drives.

Additional financial resources come to food shelves from corporations and businesses, from foundations, and from government. In 1992 government support amounted to more than $1.3 million.

The money received by food shelves goes toward buying more food as well as toward office expenses. Food shelves must...continued on page 16

Food in a Time of Floods
This past summer saw a tremendous increase in food shelf demand as rain, floods, and cool weather took their toll on rural and urban communities alike. Many migrant farm workers were unable to work in the fields and turned to food shelves for assistance. By last June, the food shelf in Marshall had spent as much money for food as it had spent in the entire previous year. Many shelves were hard pressed to keep up with demand and several, including one in Crookston, were forced to close periodically for lack of food.

State of Minnesota employees and the Governor’s office sponsored a food and cash drive for flood areas which raised $13,000, and 18,000 pounds of food. Simultaneously, Pillsbury, General Mills and Second Harvest Food Banks brought in an additional 115,000 pounds of food. The National Guard and the Minnesota Trucking Association helped with collection and distribution. Last fall the government of Taiwan gave the Minnesota Department of Agriculture $100,000 for flood relief. Half went to food shelves and was a welcome addition to strained budgets.

As generous and gracious as these efforts were, they were not enough. The Hennepin County network of twenty-six food shelves was short $100,000 in contributions from individuals last year. Many believe that the worst is yet to come in the rural communities where the loss of farm income will have an impact on rural main street businesses as well. Farmers, who view themselves as providing food for the world, have been reluctant to turn to food shelves to feed their families. Food shelves have worked with the Farm Advocates Program to reach out to the farming community.

The continued ability to feed increasing numbers of hungry Minnesotans depends on the continued ability of communities to support their local food shelves. Fifty-seven counties were declared disaster areas last summer. Those devastated communities many need extra help to support their food shelves this year.