

# Client-Centered Approach: Bridging the Benefits Gap by Partnering with Local Community-Based Organizations

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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San Mateo County Human Services Agency (SMCHSA) aims to foster a thriving community by ensuring residents have access to essential resources for safety, health, and prosperity. To address food insecurity and reduce benefit gaps, the agency is exploring the development of on-site emergency food pantries at its regional offices. Inspired by Napa County's successful choice-based pantry, this initiative seeks to improve service delivery, enhance client dignity, and meet urgent food needs effectively.

Despite ongoing efforts to assist the community, challenges persist due to rapidly changing eligibility criteria for assistance programs like CalFresh (SNAP) and CalWORKs (TANF), alongside rising food insecurity nationally. A client-centered approach, through partnering with local community-based organizations (CBOs), is key to bridging these gaps.

Napa County's model illustrates critical steps for establishing such pantries, including collaboration with food banks, securing suitable space, ensuring health compliance, and developing inventory and management protocols. Implementing local food pantries at SMCHSA's in-person offices offers an immediate, practical solution at a low cost.

This strategy aligns with SMCHSA's strategic plan under the stability action area, emphasizing innovative, partnership-driven safety net services. Establishing these pantries fosters resilience, supports vulnerable populations, and advances the agency's commitment to responsive, community-focused public service, ensuring no one faces hunger alone.

## Introduction

The vision of San Mateo County Human Services Agency (SMCHSA) is a thriving community where everyone has the opportunity and support they need to live safe, healthy and prosperous lives. The mission is to promote the well-being of children, adults and families by providing effective services with compassion.

The question is: what happens when the services are not enough? Even when services are provided with compassion, if the SMC community has additional needs that cannot be immediately fulfilled, how can the SMC community thrive?

The eligibility requirements for programs such as CalFresh (SNAP) and CalWORKs (TANF) are constantly changing, but unfortunately, they are not progressing fast enough to meet the increasing community needs and current inflation rates. In addition, the priorities of political decision makers are constantly changing, and that impacts when and if additional eligibility requirements for programs are implemented.

In an ever-evolving landscape, one of the ways Human Services Agencies can bridge the benefit gap is by partnering with local community-based organizations (CBOs) that already offer additional services. Collaboration with organizations such as food banks is vital in making sure communities are not hungry.

## Background

In the Spring of 2024, SMCHSA embarked on the development of a new 5-year strategic plan, marking a pivotal moment in the agency's commitment to adapt and evolve in response to the changing needs of the community. The 2025-2030 strategic plan articulates SMCHSA's renewed vision for a thriving SMC community.

According to the strategic plan, SMCHSA named four major action areas to prioritize: one of which is *Stability*, to meet people where they are and help them move along a sustainable path. One of the Economic Self-Sufficiency branch goals under stability is "to have innovative safety net services to address emerging and critical needs by developing and leveraging robust partnerships to improve access to resources for people SMCHSA serves" (County of San Mateo Human Services Agency, 2025). To achieve this, SMCHSA's goal is to work with local food pantries and CBOs to establish an emergency food closet.

According to the California Department of Social Services (2025), in 2024 SMCHSA received 28,885 new CalFresh applications. Of those, only 4,585 applications qualified and were approved for Expedited Services and received emergency food benefits within 3 days. The remaining 24,300 CalFresh applications did not receive emergency food benefits. In 2024, SMCHSA also received 48,136 additional applications for other programs such as Medi-Cal, CalWORKs, and General Assistance (CDSS, 2025). Of the total 77,021 applications for all programs received in 2024, 36,202 were received at a regional in-person office (County of San Mateo, 2025a).

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, “In 2023, 47.4 million people lived in food-insecure households” (USDA, 2025). SMCHSA’s goal of creating an emergency food closet at their regional in-person offices could alleviate some of the food insecurities, help prevent hunger, and fight food disparities by providing nutritious options to the households that applied for CalFresh or other programs and did not receive emergency food benefits. Especially for those who applied at one of the regional in-person offices, they could then receive immediate food at the time of application.

SMCHSA, through the BASSC Executive Development Program, initiated this case study to learn more about the implementation process and the impacts a localized food closet could provide the community, specifically working with the Napa County Self-Sufficiency Services Division. Napa County, via a client-centered lens, established a food pantry for its Health and Human Services clients.

## **Learning from Napa County**

### ***Napa Population Data***

According to the United States Census Bureau (2024a), Napa County has a population of 137,727 and 8.9% of people are in poverty. Based on the County of Napa Self-Sufficiency Service Division (2024a) demographic data, about 400 residents are active in CalWORKs, and about 5,600 residents have active CalFresh.

### ***Food Pantry Initiative***

Napa County Health and Human Services Agency’s (NCHHSA) objective was to provide an on-site pantry at their main campus to help clients with emergency food needs. They believed this would be helpful when food banks are not accessible and could be useful to meet the needs of both immediate CalWORKs and CalFresh Expedited Services applications. The goal was to create a choice pantry with shelf-stable nonperishable food items where clients can select their own food.

This goal was part of NCHHSA’s client-centered experience approach. They have been “on a mission to enhance the overall customer experience for all those seeking services.” They believe:

“Great customer service is vital for people who seek public assistance because it can significantly impact their well-being by providing essential support, ensuring access to vital services, reducing stress & anxiety, promoting dignity, and fostering a sense of respect and fairness when attempting to navigate such complex systems.” (Ayala, E., Muller, A., & Ortiz Spulveda, N., 2025)

Napa HHS collaborated with their local food bank, Community Action of Napa Valley (CANV). All food is donated to Napa HHS through CANV. Through their partnership, there is no additional expense to Napa HHS for the food.

## ***Implementation***

According to the County of Napa (2024b), to establish the food pantry, they had to complete the following steps:

1. Expand the existing contract with their local Food Bank to include an on-site pantry.

Napa HHSA worked in partnership with their local food bank, Community Action of Napa Valley (CANV). CANV provides 110,000 meals annually to Napa County residents. CANV assisted Napa HHSA in creating an emergency food pantry and becoming part of their distribution.

2. Designate a location for the food pantry. Napa HHSA utilized an existing meeting room that was available.
3. Obtain necessary approvals/inspections. In order to have an emergency food pantry, Napa HHSA needed to comply with several local and state regulations based on food handling safety. Examples include:
  - There must be certified food handlers that manage the food pantry (Napa HHSA had a manager and a staff services analyst certify).
  - Food must be stored at least 6 inches from the floor.
  - To avoid critters, certain foods must be stored in closed containers.
  - Storage space must not have carpet.
4. Purchase supplies and convert the room. To convert the space, Napa HHSA spent about \$3,300 to purchase the following:
  - Metal shelving to ensure food was stored 6 inches from the floor. A total of \$1,862.54 was spent on shelving.
  - Plastic storage bins to store rice, grains, etc. A total of \$824.43 was spent on storage bins.
  - Updated their flooring to comply. A total of \$585.03 spent on temporary flooring.
  - A lockbox to store registration forms. A total of \$28.45 was spent on the lock box.
  - Other miscellaneous items such as a broom, dust buster, step ladder, etc.
  - They also created signage.
5. Develop tracking mechanisms. Napa HHSA purchased a lockbox for all registration documents (image in Appendix B).
6. Develop protocols and related documents. Napa County created protocol documents, including a staff quick guide and client pantry tracking registration sheet. Napa HHSA

took an estimated 45 hours to create protocols and training, which includes planning/research, creating an outline, drafting the content, editing, approval, publishing, and creating the training material and presentation slides per division request. Examples included in Appendix A.

7. Publicize to the agency. When the food pantry opened, Napa HHSA announced it in their newsletter, had division presentations, and held an open house to publicize as much as possible.
8. Ongoing maintenance, promotion, and education.

### ***Inventory Management***

CANV provides an online purchasing site that Napa HHSA can log in to and order new nonperishable food items when needed. Napa HHSA submits new orders biweekly and ensures proper rotation of stock. They follow a first-in, first-out (FIFO) method. The new food received cannot be given out until the older food is given out first.

Napa HHSA maintains records of inventory levels and distribution. They created a client registration sheet to be completed by each client to keep track of usage data. This data is maintained and reported back to CANV. Napa HHSA spends 2-4 hours per month in ongoing stocking, 2-3 hours per month in inventory, 0.5 hours per month in ordering products, and about 1.5-2 hours per month in reporting and tracking (County of Napa, 2024b).

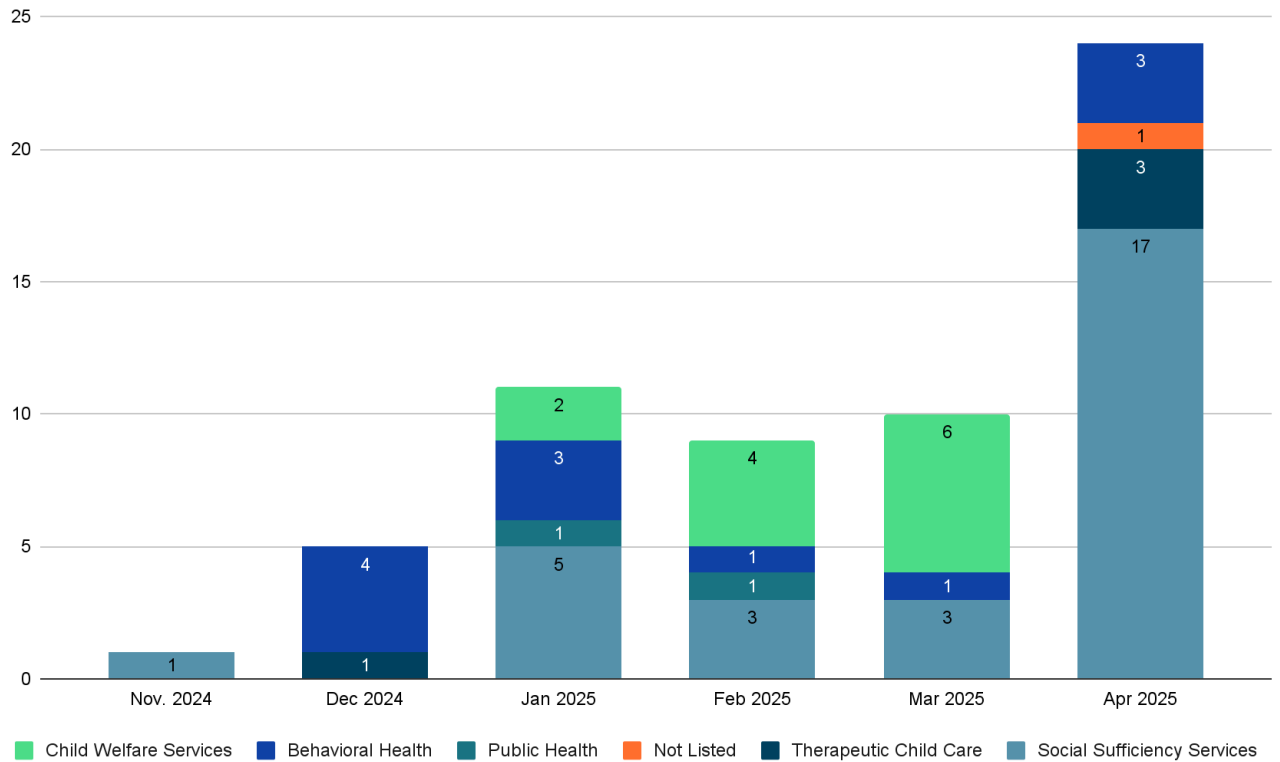
### ***Access***

According to the Napa County Food Pantry Protocol (2024b), although the food pantry was established and is maintained by their Self-Sufficiency Services division, they have allowed all their Napa HHSA clients to utilize it. Each division has access to a pantry key and can walk their clients to the pantry. There are no limits to the frequency with which staff can refer clients to the pantry, as needed. Income guidelines were provided by CANV, and clients can self-certify that they meet those guidelines. Verification of income, residency, or household size is not needed. The pantry is a choice pantry, meaning clients will select the items of their choice from various categories. Each category has a limit to the number of items based on household size, but the items of choice can be any available (County of Napa, 2024b).

### ***Impact in Napa County***

Since its implementation in November 2024, Napa HHSA has had 60 client visits to the food pantry. The number has gradually increased and is expected to continue to rise. See Figure 1 for details:

## County of Napa HHSA Client Food Pantry Usage by Division



Napa HHSA works with the most vulnerable population of Napa County. The food pantry has allowed for additional food services to those individuals and households who are most in need, assisting in reducing food insecurity and disparities within Napa County. See Appendix B for photos.

### Implications For San Mateo County

#### *San Mateo County Population Data*

According to the United States Census Bureau (2024b), San Mateo County has a population of 742,893 and 7.3% of people are in poverty. In March 2025, San Mateo County had about 2,061 residents active in CalWORKs and 35,180 residents had active CalFresh (County of San Mateo, 2025b).

#### *Impact in San Mateo County*

Napa County’s experience highlights critical steps for establishing a client-centered food pantry. The Napa model demonstrates that a well-organized, choice-based pantry can serve vulnerable populations efficiently, with minimal investment, and significantly reduce food insecurity. Given that in 2024 over 36,000 applications were submitted at SMCHSA’s in-person offices, with only 4,585 qualifying for emergency food benefits, implementing local food pantries offers a

practical, immediate solution to mitigate hunger and disparities (County of San Mateo, 2025a). This approach aligns with SMCHSA's strategic plan and priorities under the "Stability" action area, emphasizing innovative safety net services through robust partnerships. A food pantry could help bridge the benefits gap.

### **Challenges**

Possible challenges that may arise in food pantry implementation would be budgetary concerns, finding appropriate and available space for the food pantries, and confirming the partnership and availability of food from the local food bank, Second Harvest.

Napa HHSA implemented its food pantry by spending only about \$3,300 in supplies. By following their guidance and working along with the SMC local food bank, the minimal investment needed would assist many community members with food insecurity. SMCHSA has additional offices; therefore, the investment could be larger due to opening a food pantry in every office. Although Napa HHSA utilized a meeting room, there are other smaller options if space is of concern, such as a cabinet or the utilization of current unused space, such as an EBT room.

With current federal budget changes, there is a possibility that the food banks will have less funding and, in response, less food available. SMCHSA would need to work with Second Harvest Food Bank and confirm the partnership and availability of food. Careful planning and collaboration will be essential to ensure the successful and sustainable establishment of the food pantries.

### **Recommendations and Next Steps**

It is recommended that SMCHSA implement local food pantries at its in-person Economic Self-Sufficiency offices. 2025 has quickly become a year of changes. With the anticipated changes to funding, policy, and eligibility regulations, our communities are expected to have a huge impact. The SMC community needs services now more than ever. Although a food pantry is not a mandated program and will not fulfill all the potential needs, it is a start. Collaborating with local community-based organizations, such as Second Harvest Food Bank, in a time when communities are most vulnerable would allow SMCHSA to work towards its mission.

Following the Napa model, SMCHSA would need to follow the steps below to implement its own client-centered food pantry approach:

1. Determine available budget.
2. Collaborate with local food banks.
3. Secure appropriate space in the in-person regional offices.
4. Comply with health regulations and receive suitable approvals.
5. Purchase supplies needed.

6. Develop inventory, client management and data tracking protocols.
7. Promote access to all eligible clients.

## **Conclusion**

As stated in the SMCHSA Strategic plan by the Agency Director, “it is impossible to know the extent to which our programs and services will be impacted by the Federal government’s changing priorities. Our strategic plan is intentionally designed with flexibility, anchored by a strong operational foundation to adapt to the evolving needs in our communities” (2025). A food pantry in the SMCHSA offices would allow SMCHSA to evolve to the current needs of the community.

Establishing food pantries at SMCHSA’s in-person regional offices represents a strategic, adaptable, and client-centered response to community needs. It complements existing programs, reinforces the agency’s mission, and fosters resilience in a time of policy and funding uncertainties. This initiative is a vital step toward ensuring no community member faces hunger alone, and it exemplifies SMCHSA’s commitment to evolving and responsive public service.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Appendix A

	Client Food Pantry Quick Reference Guide	Updated <b>08/22/202</b>
<p><b>Location:</b> South Campus – 2257 Napa Valley Corporate Drive, Building A, Wildrose Conference Room – A106-14</p> <p><b>Hours:</b> Monday – Friday, 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM – Closed on weekends and county holidays</p> <p><b>Access:</b> Each division will have access to a pantry key to check out when accompanying a client to the pantry. The key is to be maintained within the division. Ensure the door is closed and locked when leaving the pantry.</p>		
<p><b>Referral Criteria:</b> Client need based on HHSA staff member assessment of the client’s circumstances. Client will self-certify meeting the income guidelines.</p>		

### Registration Form



#### HHSA Client Food Pantry Registration

Date		Time	<input type="checkbox"/> AM	<input type="checkbox"/> PM							
Client Name <small>(please print)</small>	<small>First Name</small> _____ <small>Last Name</small> _____										
Client Address	<small>Number and Street</small> _____ <small>City</small> _____ <small>Zip</small> _____										
Household Size	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 6	<input type="checkbox"/> 7	<input type="checkbox"/> 8	<input type="checkbox"/> 9	<input type="checkbox"/> 10	<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____
Is this the first time receiving USDA food this month?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No										
HHSA Staff Information											
Staff Member Name (printed)											
Division	<input type="checkbox"/> SSSD <input type="checkbox"/> BH <input type="checkbox"/> CWS <input type="checkbox"/> PH <input type="checkbox"/> CSOA <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____										
Notes											

*(County of Napa, 2024)*

## Appendix B

County of Napa Food Pantry, Main Campus. (2025)

