



Short Brief: Service Territory Restrictions on Food Pantries in Cumberland County

What is a service territory?

The geographic area where neighbors must live to receive regular food assistance from a given food pantry. Service territories, defined individually by each pantry, are based on pantry visitors' place of residence, and thus influence their eligibility for regular services.

Why do service territories complicate neighbors' access to food pantries?

Service territories restrict neighbors' access to food pantries in their direct residential area, but people's lives take them across the county. Neighbors may prefer to access pantries in another part of the county or pantries that are the most convenient for them.

Results from the 2022 surveys of neighbors accessing food pantries in Cumberland County show that **25% of pantry visitors find it somewhat or very challenging to find a food pantry that is open during the times and days when they need it.**

Easing service territory restrictions would increase choice and allow people to access food more easily when they need it throughout a month, regardless of where they live.

State rules do not prevent large and overlapping service territories (PA Dept. of Agriculture, 2018), so food pantries could expand their service territories to increase choice for guests across the county.

How do pantries in Cumberland County classify their service territories?

[The Emergency Food Assistance Program \(TEFAP\) Outlet Manual](#) by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture (PDA) serves as the rulebook for defining service territories. The current version calls for pantries to employ some sort of service territory, stating that pantries "should have a geographically defined service area, such as a school district, county, zip code, or neighborhood"(section 2.3).

The manual suggests for service territory classifications to be as large as a county, but it does not call for or mandate a service territory smaller than the county.

Currently, residential eligibility varies at different food pantries in the county. Some food pantries restrict their services by ZIP Code, while others consider individuals to be eligible for regular services if they reside within select school districts. Two Cumberland pantries serve the “Greater Carlisle area”, and one pantry’s services are open to the whole county.¹

The inconsistency of service territory policies often becomes an unnecessary complication to receiving services and adds further confusion to a disconnected system.

What are some common misconceptions about service territories within food pantries?

One large misconception is that the easing of service territories will lead to a mass influx of households to a pantry, creating a demand beyond pantry capacity. However, allowing households to use the pantry of their choosing will spread demand across the county. Furthermore, neighbors use food pantries when they need the services.²

Another assumption is that service territories are meant to prevent the duplication of services for households across multiple food pantries, however, the *TEFAP Manual does not restrict neighbors from visiting more than one pantry.*³

Pantries should ease service territories where possible to continue serving as low-barrier sites of food assistance to all neighbors in need.

Easing service territories can assist in the shared goal of increasing food security, promoting wellness, and advancing community resilience in Cumberland County. Neighbors should be granted access to as many food pantries as possible to ensure that they are provided dignified experiences within the charitable foods system in selecting services that best fit their needs.

In summary, physical presence of a neighbor at a food pantry qualifies as their self-declaration of residency, regardless of their zip code.

For more information, please:

Contact the Cumberland County Food System Alliance: <https://foodsystemalliance.org/>

See the Cumberland County Food System Assessment: [Assessment](#)

¹ The Central Pennsylvania Food Bank Policy Research Team conducted partner surveys with food pantry partner agencies across Cumberland County in the Fall 2022.

² Growing demand at food pantries reflects a growing need in response to the end of the SNAP Emergency Allotments in March 2023, with a 25% increase of SNAP households at food pantries compared to 5% for non-SNAP households between January and June of 2023. This data was pulled from 40 pantries participating in Service Insights on Meal Connect with the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank.

³ Currently, the PDA is revising the manual to clarify that pantry service areas may overlap and to make the language more accessible.