

# Assessing the Impacts of a Helping Hand: Findings of the Project Understanding Food Pantry Client Survey

A Qualitative Research Study Conducted by:

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

- **Research design:** This qualitative research study was conducted by students in the Sociology Program at CSU Channel Islands as a service learning project for the senior capstone course. Findings were based on 34 qualitative interviews conducted in a one month period at Project Understanding (PU).
- **Profile of participants:** Our sample consisted of an approximately equal number of men and women (matching the gender composition of intake profiles). Most identified themselves as white, although nearly a third were Latino. In terms of educational attainment, most had high school degrees or less, although a third had some college education, and over 10% were college graduates. Most earn less than \$10K or between \$10K and \$30K. 32% of the sample reported that they live alone, and there were relatively few with sizeable families.
- **Patterns of public assistance:** 36% of respondents have been using the pantry for over five years, another 36% has been using it between a year and five years, and 28% have only used the pantry for less than a year. Eight of 34 respondents reported that their families received public assistance growing up.
- **Circumstances that led to pantry use:** the most common reasons for the pantry use included limited income, homelessness, unemployment, and referral by friend, which meant the friend was aware of some gap in the food supply for the family.
- **Sharing of food:** 18 of 34 respondents reported that they share their food with other members in the community. Some clients share their food because outside family members do not have enough food for the month or because they would see homeless sifting trash and friends were hungry. Only a small proportion of clients (3 out of 18) shared because of their food preferences.
- **Food sources and its importance:** 19 of 33 respondents stated that most of their food supply came from purchases, and 80% reported that they rely on charitable or public sources such as other food pantries in the area, food stamps, and WIC.
- **Food preferences:** Clients generally prefer fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, and cereal. The reasons that they reported disliking some particular foods are because they were not familiar with the food, had limited cooking facilities, foods were expired, or had dietary restrictions.
- **Impact on clients and community:** When asked what the impact would be if Project Understanding were to close, 11 of 26 respondents reported that it would have a major impact; 9 mentioned that it would only have an average impact; and 6 said it would have minor or no impact. 17 of 26 respondents expressed an interest in a budgeting class, and 12 stated that they were uninterested because they already had budgeting knowledge or they did not have any income to budget.

## 1. Background: Project Understanding and the Food Pantry

In Ventura County, among its population of over 820,000, approximately 9% of its citizens live in poverty. Additionally, approximately 59,000 adults live in food insecure households.<sup>1</sup> Many of the challenges associated with serving those neediest members of our community fall on non-profit organizations that supplement public assistance programs provided by the government. Project Understanding is one of many such organizations in Ventura County – and it is also one of the most prominent.

Project Understanding is a faith-based non-profit that was officially established in 1977 with the help of various denominations within the religious community. Its mission is to address the needs of the low-income, hungry, and homeless by providing a range of services that fulfill the basic life needs of individuals and families in crisis.<sup>2</sup> Their programs include: transitional housing; the SARAH Center (offering services to the homeless, such as showers and laundry facilities); tutoring throughout Ventura and Oxnard; and an emergency food pantry. In addition to serving those in need, Project Understanding offers an avenue for volunteers to give back to the community by working in the various programs that the organization offers.

One of the most heavily used services at Project Understanding (PU) is the food pantry that serves about 400 families a month.<sup>3</sup> They partner with organizations in the community such as FoodShare, and seek donations from local stores for perishable items to gather emergency food for the community. As a non-profit organization, PU does not charge any fees for their services and depends on donations and volunteers to run their programs.

***Project Understanding client impact research:*** This research project emerged as a community partnership between Project Understanding (principally, Executive Director Rob Orth) and California State University Channel Islands (CI) students in the Sociology capstone program. As a community partner dedicated to helping the homeless and low income in the Ventura area, PU was interested in finding out how their services, particularly their food pantry, impacts their clients. There is a common

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<sup>1</sup> 2010 Ventura County Nutrition and Food Insecurity Profile, California Food Policy Advocates, <http://www.cfpa.net/2010CountyProfiles/Main.html>

<sup>2</sup> For more information on Project Understanding see, <http://www.projectunderstanding.org/about/>

<sup>3</sup> Project Understanding Montly Report for April 2011.

concern among providers of such social services (e.g. homeless services and food pantries) that while they provide a crucial form of bridge assistance for many people going through temporary crises, they can also perpetuate a state of dependence in their clients. That concern is of particular importance to the Executive Director of PU.

On the university side, the research project represents an extension of CI's commitment to service learning and civic engagement, which is designed to serve community partners while accomplishing key educational objectives. The three principal investigators are Sociology students who conducted the research as part of their senior capstone course under the supervision of Dennis Downey (professor in the Sociology Program). The project required investigators to create a research instrument, conduct and transcribe interviews with food pantry clients, code and analyze qualitative data, and write up this formal report of findings. The project was conducted in close partnership with Project Understanding through all phases (particularly at the design phase) to ensure that their research needs would be met. Additionally, all aspects of the project were monitored and directed by the faculty supervisor to ensure that proper social scientific research standards were met, and that the experience led to meaningful learning outcomes. The research was reviewed and approved by the CI Institutional Review Board (Study #U05111).

**Research questions & goals:** The primary research questions concern clients' needs, patterns of usage, and impacts. Specifically, we focused on food pantry usage among clients, and identify what impacts (if any) the emergency food supply had on clients' monthly budgets. Additionally, the study was designed to discover what other charitable and public sources of support were being used, as well as food preferences, and whether or not clients' shared their food with others in the community. Finally, and most difficult, was the hope that the study could shed light on how and why dependency on public assistance occurs. In order to address that final issue, questions were asked to uncover the circumstances that led to use of the emergency food pantry, the length of use, and prior history with pantries. With the findings from this research, Project Understanding will see the fuller picture of the impact the emergency food pantry has on the clientele. The findings will also better help staff understand why some clients rely on the pantry on a monthly basis, rather than using it for emergency purposes. In

regards to the future of Project Understanding's pantry system this report will provide invaluable information that will help assist in making future decisions concerning the pantry.

## **2. Research Design and Methods**

Research is based on a series of structured interviews with clients at the Project Understanding food pantry. The decision to conduct qualitative interviews (rather than, for example, survey research) was based on the nature of the research questions. Specifically, we needed to fully capture the complexity of pantry clients' stories concerning their personal use of charitable services, their circumstances, their preferences, and the impacts that Project Understanding has had on their households. Forced-choice formats associated with survey methods would have been insufficient to attain such complex and contextualized information. Open-ended questions were essential to meet our research goals.

***Research instrument development:*** The interview guide was a product of collaboration between the partner organization, principal investigators, and faculty supervisor. It required numerous drafts and revisions in order to efficiently elicit the required responses within the ten-minute time frame allowed per interview. All parties involved identified basic areas of interest, and reviewed and commented on multiple versions of the interview guide. The final interview guide used in the research is provided as an appendix to this report.

***Respondent recruitment and interview administration:*** Interviews were conducted on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and one Saturday, between the times of 8:30-11:30, for a four week period between March 23 and April 15. Respondents were recruited via request to participate by either Project Understanding's case workers (as part of their routine intake or update interview) or by the investigators themselves.

One-on-one interviews were conducted in a private room, directly following the monthly intake process performed by Project Understanding's case workers. Before beginning the interview, each client was asked to sign a consent form that explained the purpose of the interview, guaranteed confidentiality, and asked for permission to tape record their responses. All requests for participation included a brief explanation of the

CSUCI commitment to service learning and civic engagement generally, and to Project Understanding specifically, to which clients responded favorably. A total of thirty-four interviews were conducted, of which six were conducted in Spanish and transcribed into English.<sup>4</sup>

**Data analysis:** All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Some components of the interviews were subsequently coded and entered into a statistical database (SPSS, or Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to help organize and analyze the data. Our method of analysis comprised first looking for dominant themes within coded data. Once similar responses were found, we would then mine the appropriate transcriptions for clients' explanations. Through reviewing the transcriptions we were able to identify themes within the data and piece together various stories pertaining to public assistance usage, the reasons why people resort to charitable sources, and impacts of the services. Analysis relied primarily on in-depth reviewing, and collective thinking about why certain answers were being repeatedly given or not given based on the various narrative contexts provided by the respondents.

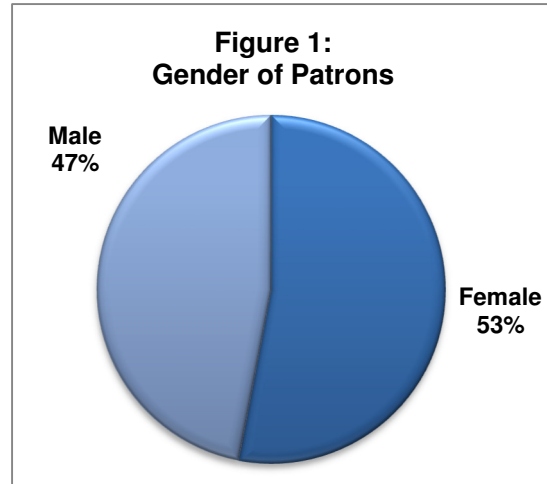
### **3. Profile of Participants**

In this section, we present the basic demographic profile of participants in our research, and (when possible) compare that to the profile of all clients of the food pantry based on intake data collected by Project Understanding for the month of April (when we conducted our research). This allows us to describe our sample, and determine the extent to which our sample is representative of the population of food pantry clients as a whole. Basic characteristics include sex, age, educational attainment, race/ethnicity, income level and the number of people living in their household. As we discuss below, our sample appears to be representative in most crucial ways, although there are several differences as well.

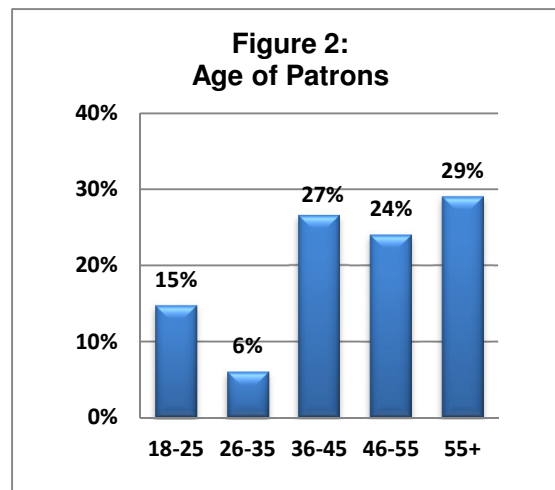
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<sup>4</sup> The original goal was to conduct interviews with forty food pantry clients. Over the four week period, the capstone group began to see repeating clients, and found it difficult to reach the original forty interview goal. The difficulties can be attributed to food pantry clients not wanting to take part in the interview for reasons such as: not having the time to spare to participate in the interview, lack of interest, fear of their identity being disclosed, and not properly being informed about the purpose of the interview by the case workers. Additionally, the enthusiasm regarding the interviews on the part of the volunteer case workers was not universal, as some case workers were more cooperative than others. So due to the lack of clients participating in the interview and time constraints, the capstone group was forced to settle with thirty-four interviews.

**Sex:** In our sample females comprised 53% of clients that were interviewed, whereas males accounted for 47% of those interviewed. (Refer to Figure 1) That closely approximates the gender composition of clients as a whole; based on intake data, there was a total of 601 males (49.1%) and 623 females (50.9%) who visited the pantry during April. The gender composition of the sample closely matched the actual numbers of females to males served in the month of April.



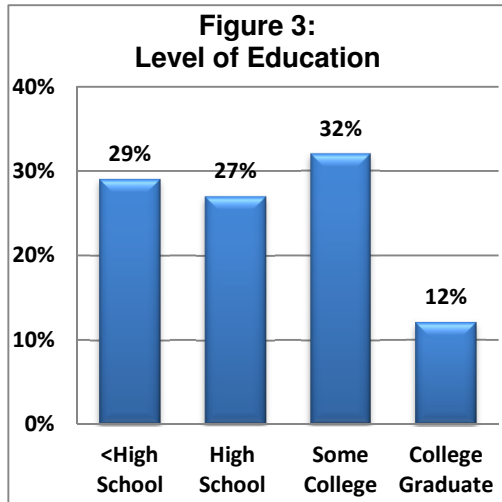
**Age:** The modal age category for participants was 55 and older, comprising of 29% of the respondents. (Refer to Figure 2; Respondents were asked for their age in a categorical framework to make them more comfortable with the question.) The category with the next highest frequency was 36 to 45 (26%). Intake data from the month of April does not show the ages of the clients who came into the pantry yet it does show the



categories of people served by the food supply, meaning the client and their household. According to their April report 430 minors were served, 693 between 19-59, and 96 individuals over the age of 60 (PU Monthly Report. April 2011).

**Education:** Clients who did not graduate from high school accounted for 29% of the sample, and high school graduates represented a slightly smaller proportion of the sample. (Refer to figure 3) Given the expectation that food pantry clients would be those at the bottom of the income hierarchy, it was interesting to note that a substantial proportion had educational attainment beyond high school. Those with some college experience made up 32% of the sample, and 12% had graduated from college. PU does not have any report on the educational attainment of clients. Focusing specifically on the college graduates we were able to determine that three out the four college

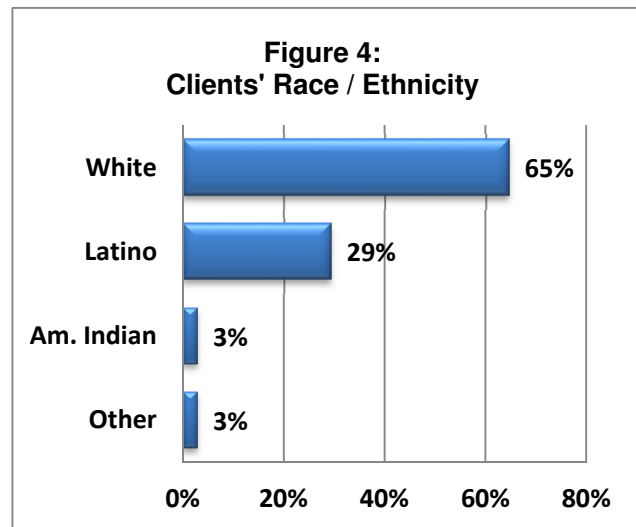




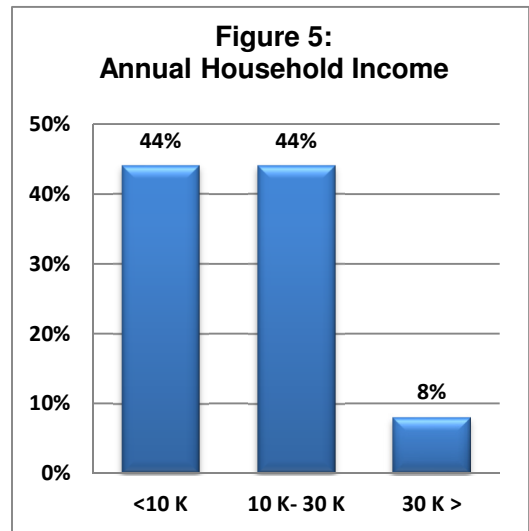
graduates that were interviewed used the pantry rarely and the fourth respondent that was a college graduate who used the pantry less than once a month.

**Race/Ethnicity:** Respondents were asked an open ended question about the way they identify themselves in terms of race or ethnicity. (Refer to Figure 4) A majority (65%) of respondents identified as Caucasian, 29% as Latino, 3% as American-Indian, and another 3%

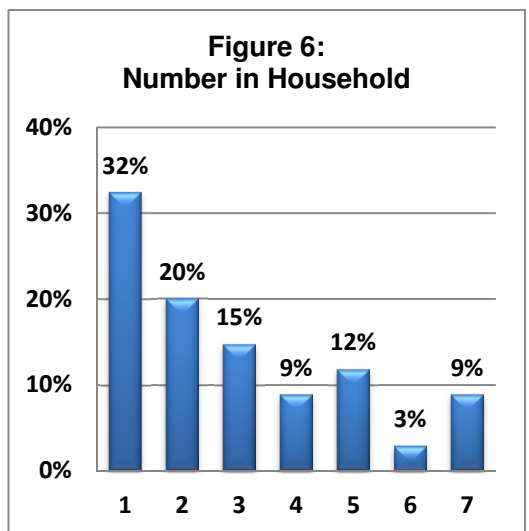
identified themselves as some “other” group. In the April pantry report Hispanics accounted for 53% of those served, indicating that our sample had a greater proportion of white/Caucasian than was served in the month of April. Spanish interviews were conducted by one of our bilingual investigators, and Spanish only clients were accommodated as well as we were able. There were some instances however, where the bilingual investigator was not on hand and some Spanish speaking clients were turned away from the interview. This could account for the discrepancy in race/ethnic categories between the the sample and the population.



**Income Level:** Every respondent was asked for their annual household income. (Refer to Figure 5) Some were not sure, others did not have an income, and only one person declined to respond. Most of them, however, either fell into the lowest income category (\$10,000 or less), or the next highest category (between \$10,000 and \$30,000). 46% of the respondents reported an income of \$10,000 or less, and another 46% reported between \$10,000 and \$30,000. Only 9% of participants reported an income of more than \$30,000.



**Number of People in Each Household:** When conducting the research, we found that most respondents were single householders (meaning that they live alone). 32% of the sample stated that they lived alone. According to the findings, it appears that few clients live in a relatively large household; only 12% reported having more than six people in their household. (Refer to Figure 6) 41% of the respondents have dependents under the age of 18 living in their household.



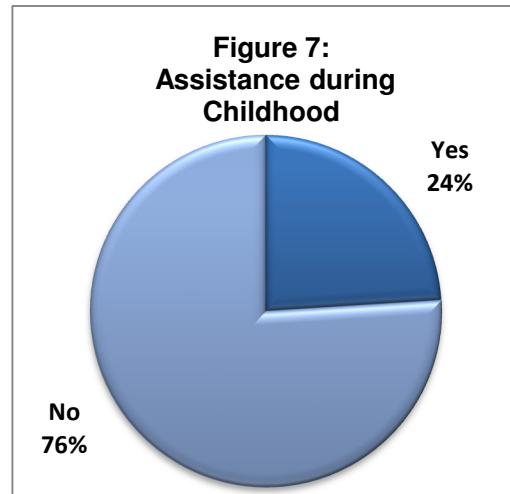
#### 4. Patterns of Public Assistance

One of the biggest issues that concern not only Project Understanding but other non-profits as well is ending dependency on charitable sources. In order to tackle the issue it is important to fully understand clients' reliance on public and private assistance, beginning with their childhood experience.

**Family Reliance on assistance during childhood:** To help shed light on this issue we asked respondents if during the childhood their family ever relied on any kind

of public and/or private assistance, and about the circumstances that led to the assistance. (Refer to Figure 7) 76% of the respondents (26 out of 34) did not rely on any type of public assistance and/or private assistance while growing up.

Of those who grew up in families that did rely on some form of assistance (8 out of 34), the kinds of assistance that they mentioned were public programs such as welfare, food stamps, and WIC, as well as other food pantries. It should be noted that these eight clients were people who could remember the forms of assistance their guardians used, it may be that more grew up using public/private assistance but just cannot remember, as some did state. For example, one woman who was interviewed happened to be accompanied by her mother. Her mother was able to help answer the question about assistance during childhood.



*Interviewer:* "When growing up, did your family ever rely on any kind of assistance?"

*Respondent* (daughter): "Yea, I think...like food pantries and welfare."

*Respondent* (mother): "When they (her children) were really little I was on welfare in between jobs, and then the only time we used anything was the food pantry during the summer because I was a school bus driver and I was off during the summer. Other than that, that was about it." (R #29).

Another respondent stated that she can remember using a few different types of assistance,

*Respondent:* Yes, my parents were farm workers, so we used to get donated cheese and others. We used to go to several pantries in our neighborhood. The migrant program used to help a lot.

*Interviewer:* "I've never heard of the migrant program before."

*Respondent:* "It's a program for people who had family that were migrant workers and they used to help and come to the school and work on our teeth. (R#28)

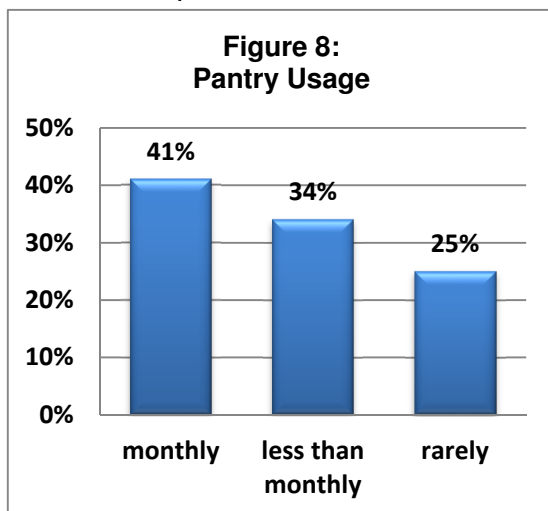
As stated before, these accounts are only pulled from eight clients who could recall using assistance, though it is very possible that more may have relied on public or private forms of assistance while growing up.

**Current patterns of pantry usage:** 36% of respondents indicated that they have been using the food pantry at Project Understanding between one and five years. Clients who have been using the food pantry for more than five years accounted for another 36% of the sample. One respondent in particular stated that he had been coming to the pantry almost since it had opened, “I started coming 20-30 years ago.” (R#2) In total there were about six people who stated that they had been using Project Understanding for over ten years. 28% of respondents had been using the food pantry for less than one year – a percentage which is inclusive of a few first time clients.

In terms of frequency of usage, 41% of respondents reported using the pantry monthly, followed by 34% who reported using it every other month or two, and another 25% who reported using its services rarely. (Refer to Figure 8) One of the respondents who reported rare usage commented that the reason why he does not use the pantry as much is because of its location to his home:

I would say 3-5 times (I use the pantry), maybe more. I really don't live in this area so I don't use it as much. (R# 24)

Another respondent had different reasons for rarely using the pantry:



The first time I came, I came only once. Last year I only came because I needed to. I was embarrassed to come ask and I didn't come again. So far, I've been here twice. (R# 17)

This particular response was difficult to hear. This client could possibly really need the help of the pantry but is too embarrassed that they have to resort to such assistance. Another interesting factor is that this respondent was a

Spanish speaker and most likely an immigrant from Mexico. This testimony is surprising because there was an expectation among the investigators that the Mexican immigrants

and Spanish speakers would be among the group of pantry clients that come to the pantry on a monthly basis. This response went against our assumption.

## **5. Circumstances that led current patrons to use pantry services**

One of the most crucial pieces of information for Project Understanding's Executive Director was to determine what could be done to get people to a place where they no longer need to depend on pantry services. An important foundational element to this question was to find out what led people to the pantry (in addition to how long clients have been using the pantry, which was addressed in the previous section). The information presented in this section will help to paint a clearer picture of why people are forced to use the emergency pantry, and if the circumstance was a temporary crisis (such as unemployment), or long lasting issues such as homelessness.

In response to the question about the circumstances led to the first use of the pantry, clients cited four reoccurring answers: homelessness, unemployment, limited income, and referral by a friend. The category of "referral by a friend" was chosen to hold responses where clients said they heard about Project Understanding from a friend. There may have been other issues as to why a friend would give a referral such as knowledge about limited income or a friend being new in town, but being referred by a friend was a common response (amongst six clients). In several situations referral by a friend was accompanied by another factor such as limited income.

**Limited Income:** Not surprisingly, the most frequent response (cited by 29.4%, or 10 of the respondents) was limited income. 38.9% of the 18 female patrons interviewed claimed a limited income is what brought them to use Project Understanding's food pantry. These women come from both single and multiple person households. With the current economic situation, where budget cuts and layoffs are frequent, it was common to hear that was a frequent precipitating factor to pantry use. For example, as one woman stated, "I've been coming for two years now, and you know how bad the economy has been, and I don't work." (R #22) Another woman's limited income proved to be too hard for her to survive on once she became a mother and had to support a child. Asshe commented:

What led me here is I've always been a single mom, and I had my son, and it was just really hard because I wasn't on any kind of assistance at the time. So it helped so much just that they were right here and able to help." (R #10)

Three men answered that a limited income had brought them to use the pantry. One of the men came from a single household, where the other two came from two person households. The respondent who came from a single household mentioned that another charitable source had actually led him to Project Understanding:

Because of my low income I had previously used charities and sources of food, and clothing. The first couple of years that I was here in Ventura I did not, for years in Hawaii prior I did not, and a year in Germany I did not, but after a couple of years here my budget was so strained, and I wasn't eating well enough so I said I had to do this, I had to go back to the charities. And then I heard about this one through Catholic Charities. Catholic Charities was the first I discovered, and then when I went there they gave me a list of other charities which included this one." (R #31)

**Homelessness:** Homelessness was the next most common response. Of the nine who answered homelessness, seven were men. The respondents' personal experiences with homelessness consisted of a variety of situations. There were some who lived on the streets and utilized the pantry along with Project Understanding's SARAH Center for services such as showers. As the respondent explains, "it was a good place for me to come and clean up and kill some time," (R #34). There were also some respondents who lived in hotels, as this female respondent suggests: "I think it was 03, 2003 (when I started), I was homeless and living in hotels." (R #32) Additionally, there were those respondents who lived out of their car. For example:

But when I started was when I was homeless, and in my car sleeping down at the fairgrounds, and my landlord said you get your car fixed and I want you up at the house, so that's when I came into Casitas Springs, and that's where I've been living. (R #36)

**Unemployment:** Following homelessness in numbers of responses was unemployment, with 25% of the males and 16.7% of the women. Stories of unemployment came from both people who had been laid off, and those who couldn't find work. One male respondent who said he began to use the pantry about ten years ago stated, "it was after I lost my job, and I became financially strapped." (R #27) A

female respondent also began to use the pantry due to unemployment and being unable to work because of injury:

Yeah, it was after I lost my job and I got in an accident and I got injured. I've been waiting and I'm waiting for unemployment and disability. (R #24)

There were three additional respondents who specifically said that layoffs brought them to start using the pantry. As one man explained, "Hmm, it had to be about the first of this year, and that's because on December 31<sup>st</sup> the company I was working for closed shop and I lost my job." (R #35)

**Referral by friend:** Finally, 17.6% (6) of the respondents said referral by a friend brought them to the food pantry. As noted previously, there may have been an underlying cause as to why a friend would refer another friend to pantry services (such as knowledge of low income), but there were also some clients who used the service simply because of the free access. One of the Spanish-speaking clients attests to this last factor of free access with her response:

*Respondent:* "My friend told me about it."

*Interviewer:* "For what reasons did you start coming?"

*Respondent:* "Because they give out a lot of things." (R #33)

As this next respondent explains, he began coming because someone told him about the services during his family's hard times,

It was by word on the street, when we were having a hard time struggling. People started saying you can go to these food banks, and there was one down the road here, Project Understanding. We came and found out and filled out paperwork, and I use it when I need it. But when I don't, I don't you know." (R #9).

## **6. Sharing of Food:**

Another interest of Project Understanding was whether clients shared the food they received from the pantry, and why that sharing occurred. Did sharing occur because there was a need? Or did it happen because the food products were not something desired? Responses indicated that 18 of the 34 clients interviewed did, in fact, share their food.

There were only three clients who suggested that the reason why they share their food is because there are products that they do not use. One respondent who does not use all of the food stated, “The stuff that I don’t use, I will give it to people who do need it or want it.” (R #9) Another man who lives in the Ventura Marina also commented that “any food stuffs that aren’t among my favorite I do share with others.” (R# 31) Though these examples were not the common response given by clients, the majority did share because they saw a need. For instance, one of the homeless individuals that we interviewed said that the reason why he shares his food is because he won’t eat in front of the other homeless without sharing: “Well I know homeless people down there, and if they see me over there eating and if they come over and tell me they’re hungry and don’t have anything, I’ll share it with them.” (R #12) Another homeless man cited a different reason for sharing; he shares in exchange for a place to keep his food:

Yes, the person that allows me to cook there (a friend’s house) and eat there, I share with that person, and if somebody needs something and I have it, I would share with just about anybody.” (R # 11)

In contrast, with regards to clients who do not share their food, one of the reasons was on account of their food insecurity:

I don’t want to stress out about not having enough food so I don’t like to share my food very often, unless I have some food left over and I know that I don’t need it. Then I will share my food.” (R # 5) Initially we had believed that sharing might be occurring because there were foods from the pantry that clients were not finding useful, but our responses indicate otherwise. Clients shared because they would see homeless sifting through trash, family members outside of the household did not have enough for the month, and because friends were hungry. Only a small number of clients (3 out of 18) shared because of their food preferences.

## **7. Food Sources and Its Importance**

A key question to Project Understanding staff was to find out if clients used other pantries in the area – and if so, which ones. It was also important to find out what impact the pantry food supply had on clients’ monthly budgets. To answer these questions, we started off by asking respondents how important they would say their



purchases were to their overall supply of food for the month. 19 of the 33 respondents who answered this question said that purchases supplied the majority of their food supply. That might come as a surprise because we initially believed that if one uses a food pantry it is because they cannot afford food. Though 57.6% (19) of clients supply their food supply primarily with purchases, they use charitable and public sources to fill in the gaps. One of the men we interviewed explained his food supply situation, and agreed that a majority of his food comes from grocery stores:

It supplies the majority of the food, and stuff I get here (Project Understanding) I can use to end up making a complete meal. It fills in.” (R #9)

Another woman talked about her purchases made with food stamps, and discussed how she uses different sources for different components of her diet in order to piece together a relatively balanced diet. In the following quote, she begins by addressing what she secures with food stamps and then addresses how the food pantry complements that:

Oh they're essential. A lot of the purchases I make with my food stamps card are high proteins like the nuts and the eggs, and the lean proteins. And then I rely on the food pantry to subsidize, like with the fresh vegetables. (R #13)

For the clients, purchases are not always made at the grocery stores. One of the homeless respondents commented that his food generally comes from purchases made at fast food locations:

I mostly buy my food cooked. Places like Berger King or the dollar menu, and I buy drinks and bread at the supermarket, but mostly I buy my drinks at Vons and my food off the dollar menu.” (R #16)

On the other side, one of the clients talked about living with different friends and sharing his food stamps with them when they gave him a place to sleep for the night. He went on to mention that he does not depend on his own money for his food supply:“I use just food stamps generally, I really don't purchase food.” (R #30) As shown by these narratives the majority of clients rely on purchases more than other sources of food, yet 80.1% of clients (25 out of 31) also rely on charitable or public sources besides Project Understanding. The most frequently cited charitable and public sources that clients used (besides Project Understanding) were religious organizations. Among those

mentioned were Catholic Charities, Salvation Army, Harbor Community Church, Community Presbyterian and South Coast Fellowship. Nine respondents also mentioned that they use food stamps and/or WIC.

## **8. Food Preferences**

Project Understanding is increasingly focused on the level of health and nutrition in the food that they distribute to their clients. As with all food pantries, they rely on external sources to provide them with (free) food to distribute, and much of that food is of limited nutritional value; the majority of their food is canned, packaged, and processed. With obesity rates rising (particularly among the socio-economic classes relying on pantries), and an increasing prevalence of dietary restrictions, nutrition is a focal point for the future of the pantry. In order to understand how clients feel about those issues, we inquired with clients about the kinds of foods that they prefer, and those that they do not, and the extent to which nutrition fits into those preferences.

### ***Foods found to be less useful***

To address clients' preferences regarding the food they receive from the pantry, we asked if they found any foods that they receive to be less useful or something not wanted – and, if so, why. Seventeen respondents indicated that they found certain foods to be less useful. Among those, the most frequent responses grouped into four categories: issues related to limited cooking facilities, expired food, unfamiliar foods, and canned vegetables.

*Not familiar with certain foods:* Four patrons cited they were unfamiliar with certain foods; all four were female Spanish speaking patrons. A response from one of the women was not only that she was unfamiliar, but also that she did not know how to cook the food. “Well, sometimes there are veggies I don’t like and I wouldn’t be able to tell you what they are because I don’t know the names of them, and I don’t know how to cook them.” (R # 6) There were also a couple of responses that showcased the cultural food gaps that were experienced by some of the patrons, one woman described a product that we assumed to be Spam:

*Respondent:* “It’s like meat...I think it’s more for Americans.”

*Interviewer:* Have you tried it?

*Respondent:* Yes, it is something very strange.” (R #33)

*Limited cooking facilities:* Three patrons discussed their lack of access to cooking facilities as a reason why they did not find certain foods useful. All of the respondents who mentioned their lack of cooking facilities were male, and some also mentioned that they were homeless. A first time pantry user shared that he was homeless, and why he recently decided to begin using the pantry: “I have a friend who has a place where I can cook, and store food at once in a while, so I figured it would be a good idea.” (R #11) The lack of facilities for storing and cooking food has a crucial impact on food preferences. As one other male respondent reported:

“I don’t like fresh meat because I don’t have a way to refrigerate it or cook it. But anything in a can, I can use that stuff.” (R #12)

Additionally, some patrons who rent a room may also have challenges associated with certain foods. As one respondent remarked: “I don’t cook, I just use the microwave.” (R #21) Another man who lives on a boat also found some food to be less useful:

. . . mainly because of limited cooking facilities. I mean I have basically normal [cooking facilities], but the fuel that I use for cooking is very expensive so things that require long cooking I typically don’t use -- like pinto beans, dried beans and things like that -- which is unfortunate because it’s very good nutrition. I would like to be using it but it really doesn’t work out.” (R # 31)

*Expired foods:* Expired food was also cited by three patrons as something they had to be mindful of with food from the pantry. This includes both expired canned goods and spoiled fruits and vegetables. One respondent shared her concerns about some of the food she receives,

One thing I do have to say is that there have been times when I’ve had to throw out spoiled vegetables and expired labels on cans. Some of these things are like seven years old. (R #25)

It should be noted, that only three respondents mentioned this issue out of the 34 who were interviewed. Expired food was not a prominent issue, yet one that several patrons mentioned.

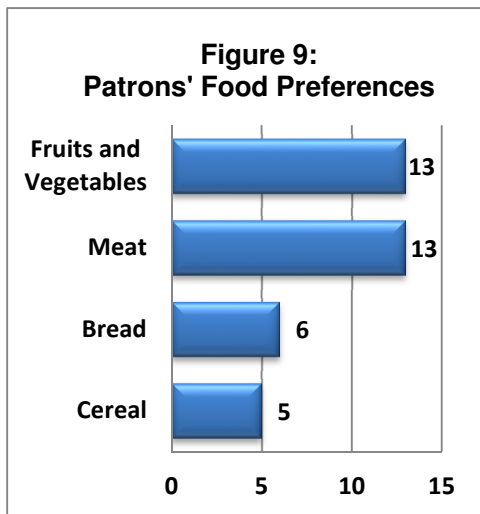
*Canned vegetables and other items:* Finally, canned vegetables were mentioned by three patrons as not being as useful as other canned items. One of the men who said he found canned vegetables less useful said he didn't particularly like them because "canned vegetables don't work for me, I don't eat them." (R #34) Another woman did not care for them because of her dietary restrictions and preference for fresh vegetables rather than canned. When asked the same question about which foods she found to be less useful she responded:

The canned foods, and I think they give you a can of mixed vegetables every time, but I don't use those. And then like canned beans, we don't ever use those – not unless there is really no food, and that's the only food. I'm diabetic so I try and eat as much fresh vegetables as I can. (R #13)

Canned vegetables were not an overwhelmingly disliked food. For the most part it seemed like clients did not have an issue with the canned foods they were receiving so long as they were not expired. This category may have only arisen in this sample on account of a small handful of people who had specific preferences and needs.

***Foods that are Client Favorites***

Twenty-five patrons commented on foods that they particularly liked receiving



from the pantry. The most frequently cited foods were fresh fruits and vegetables, meats, breads, and cereal. (Refer to Figure 9) Of the ten people asked about the role nutrition played in their food preferences, eight patrons said nutrition was an important factor in their decisions.

Fruits and vegetables, which were cited by thirteen respondents as one of their favorites from the pantry, proved to be favorites for various reasons. For one woman, it was because of her children's preference for them: "The fruit, you know, the fruit is always good, my kids eat it" (R #28). For another, it was because she only likes "things I can cook...like the rice, beans, the veggies." (R #18) Generally, of the twenty-five respondents who answered this question, most cited more than one food as being something that they were happy

to receive. When asked about the foods preferred and the impact of nutrition on his choices, one respondent responded with the following,

*Respondent:* "Oh, everything that we haven't mentioned before. But of course meats which are expensive. Fresh vegetables always; that is such a bonus. Boxed cereal which is somewhat scarce -- especially the better ones -- is particularly helpful.

*Interviewer:* Okay, now speaking about the foods that you particularly like, do you feel that nutrition plays a role in why you like them?

*Respondent:* Oh yes, very much so. I like the whole grain flakes, the good low-fat meats like lean beef, yes, nutrition is a huge consideration for me." (R #31)

Another respondent agreed that nutrition played a role in the foods that he liked:

*Respondent:* "I like when they give meats, and munchie bars. I have sugar diabetes and it helps out. Of course it isn't as bad to where I need to take insulin, I just take the pills. I like the munchies, and then of course the fruits and vegetables, and they do a good job giving us bread. They help out."

*Interviewer:* "Is nutrition a factor in which foods you do like?"

*Respondent:* "Yes, yeah definitely." (R #36)

## **9. Impact on Clients and Community**

One of the main purposes of the research project, and greatest concern for the Executive Director of Project Understanding, was to investigate the level of dependency among food pantry clients and their interests in becoming more self-sufficient and independent. By doing so, PU might be able to implement new changes in their program in order to better assist and serve the best interests of their clients.

In our efforts to identify the dependency level of each client, we asked all participants what kind of impact it would have on them and their family if PU closed. Only 26 out of the 34 participants responded to the question. Eleven of those respondents said that it would have a *major* impact if PU closed. As one of the respondents said,

That would have a very significant impact because I'm getting a very good package here, and I'm getting it only once a month, but still that is a very substantial package. I think that package is worth 30 or 40, maybe even

50 dollars, I think it averages about 40, so that's, on my small income, that's a big impact.. (R #31).

That respondent made it clear that even though PU provides only a small portion of their food income, it still has a significant impact on their monthly food supply and budget.

A few respondents stated that if PU closed, it would not only have an impact on the individuals personally but on the entire community as a whole. One participant said,

That would be horrible, not just for my family but for everybody. the community really uses this because it's such a helpful resource and so convenient, and so close. We benefit and the community benefits. (R #29).

Some who stated that they would not be personally affected if the pantry closed, nevertheless expressed concern for those who depend on other services that PU offers – such as the SARAH Center where the homeless are provided with a mailing address, hot showers, and a laundry facility. It is those who greatly depend on the services provided by PU such as the emergency food pantry and SARAH Center that would be most affected if the programs closed down.

Only 9 out of the 26 respondents mentioned that if PU closed, it would have an *average* impact in their lives. One of the reasons why some individuals do not see a major impact if PU closed is because they do not rely on PU for their food supply. As one woman stated,

I try not to come very often so I'm not depending on it. But, yeah when I need it, it's good to have it here." (R #23).

Regardless of the level of impact, respondents stated that it is extremely helpful to have the assistance from PU when needed to fill in the gaps for that monthly food supply. One Spanish speaking woman stated that even though she and her family would be somewhat affected, she would have to search for a job in order to assist her husband with the household expenses. The woman said,

Well I don't know because it will affect us because it does help us out and well, I don't know...I guess I'll have to work myself [besides my husband]" (R #22).

While others said they would not know how to deal with the situation, some said they would look for other food sources such as other food pantries in the area. A respondent mentioned,

On me, it depends, if this one closed...I don't think it will be that big of an impact but sometimes it would [be] because I am here today I mean, it would be hard to say. I'm sure it would. I would probably go some place else. (R #24)

Overall, only 6 out of the 26 respondents mentioned that they would not be affected if PU closed. One of the reasons why they would not be affected is because they do not depend on the services regularly and only rely on them on rare occasions, like once or twice every other year. One of the participants stated that it was his first time at the food pantry and if it were to close, he would keep on doing what he had been doing as a way to survive, he said, "Since this is my first time here, I would be doing what I've been doing right now... I'd be going around to the different local churches and looking for the hot meals...sitting around the park [where] hopefully someone brings some food over" (R #11). Another client specified that he would not be affected at all because he would simply "go look for another [food] pantry" (R# 14). As we can see, those who believe that they would not be affected if PU closed are those who rarely depend on the food pantry or who are more willing to seek out replacement sources.

Another important aspect of identifying the dependency level of each client is to discover their level of interest in gaining independence through learning how to become more self-sufficient. All participants were asked if they were willing to participate in a budgeting class offered by a local bank and only 29 out the 34 participants answered to the question. 59% (17) said they would be more than willing to participate in a budgeting class while 41% (12) of them said they had no interest in participating. One of the clients who expressed an interest in participating said, "Well, yeah it would be good to be able to make more use of our money" (R #6). Another respondent replied, "Oh yeah, that would be kind of cool because I've always had a hard time budgeting my money" (R #29). Both above mentioned clients, made a point to show a great interest in participating in a budgeting class.

On the other hand, 12 out of the 29 who reported no interest in participating said they either had no problem with budgeting or that they did not currently have any income to budget. One of the clients said,

Myself personally no, because I budget my money as best as I can, and I do well with what I got. So for myself personally no, but I can see it for other people yes. (R #27)

The few who mentioned that they had no income to budget were either unemployed or homeless. Those who mentioned they were willing to participate in a budgeting class were not necessarily employed, but some received income from social security or unemployment.

***Final comments:***

At the end of each interview, all participants were asked if they had any other suggestions on how PU could better serve the needs of its clients. Only 26 participants responded and seven of them had interesting suggestions. One of the respondents stated, “No this is actually pretty good, they cover everything pretty well.” (R #35) Another client responded, “No, they are very helpful with all their services.” (R #10). Overall, 19 out of the 26 respondents were satisfied with PU’s current services and performance.

A few did have additional suggestion and one of them was for PU “only to provide more fresh fruits, veggies, bread and milk” (R #5). Another client suggested it would be nice if PU provided “recipes to help their pantry clients to stretch out their food supply to last longer.” (R #9). Some participants stated their interest in receiving assistance to pay for their rent or bills. Each of the following quotes address that issue in one way or another. One woman specified,

Sometimes you run short to pay your bills, so I go through a church and they do it, but sometimes they run out of funds. If Project Understanding could do like a kitty type thing, say if you need a bill paid, say like your car insurance, okay, and sometimes you won’t have enough to pay car insurance, and I would have to call the church and they would do it. I don’t take advantage of it as far as that goes, but if they could set a certain amount aside and if people need help financially; I’m not saying you know 1,000 dollars but something to help out. (R #36).

Another woman said,



I know they did help me with my rent last year and that was great. It happened at a perfect time, and it was very resourceful. I can always call here and get help” (R #28)

Another client reiterated the point: “Maybe with like help with people’s bills and stuff, or something like that” (R #29). That client continued on to talk about how beneficial it would be for PU to provide help with people’s rent..

One other client mentioned his interest in bus tokens or fares, he said, “I feel that the people would benefit from assistance with bus fares” (R #5). Only one particular respondent stated that she would prefer to have another location closer to Midtown Ventura.

A few others suggested that it would be useful to provide clients with skills or training that would help them to become more self-sufficient in the future, such as job training skills or programs designed to help them finish school.

Most clients, however, were satisfied with the services provided by PU and believed no major changes must be implemented. The few suggestions were only ideas delivered by the participants who thought of ways to improve the program.

## **APPENDIX:**

### ***Interview Guide***

#### **Patterns of Food Pantry Use**

We would like to start by first asking a few questions about yourself.

1. How old are you?
  - a. 18-25
  - b. 26-35
  - c. 36-45
  - d. 46-55
  - e. Older than 55
  
2. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
  
3. What is your marital status?
  
4. How do you identify in terms of race/ethnicity?
  
5. Can you tell me how many people currently live in your household, and how many are over 18 and under 18?
  
6. What is your household income?
  - a. Under 10,000
  - b. 10,000-19,999
  - c. 20,000-29,999
  - d. 30,000-39,999
  - e. 40,000-49,999
  - f. 50,000-59,999
  - g. 60,000 or more

Now we would like to continue by asking a few question about the kinds of assistance that you have received in the past- going back to the family that you grew up in, and moving toward the current time.

7. When you were growing up, did your family ever rely on any kind of public assistance?

**If yes:** Can you tell us about what services your family used?

We would like to continue with some questions about how you first came to use the Project Understanding pantry, and your current patterns of usage.

8. Can you tell me when you first started using the pantry, and about the circumstances that led you to begin coming to the pantry?
9. Over the past year, approximately how frequently have you visited the pantry – say, every month, or less? (if vague, prompt. . . .)

One of our interests is finding out about the full range of people who are being helped by the food pantry. We'd like to start by asking about the people in your household with whom you share your food.

10. Do all of the people in your household share in some part of the food that you receive from the pantry?
11. Do you share the food that you receive from the food pantry with individuals outside of your household? With other families or individuals?

### **Food Preferences & Satisfaction:**

Now we'd like to ask you a few questions about the food that you receive from the pantry. We'd like you to give us your honest feelings concerning your preferences about the types of food that you receive

12. Are there any kinds of food that you get from the pantry that you don't like, or that you find less useful for your family for whatever reason? (If yes, what is the reason?)
13. What are examples of the kinds of food that you receive that you are particularly happy to receive – and why? (*prompt:* How important is it that the food is something that you like to eat, or something that is nutritious?)

### **Food Sources: Relative Contributions and Alternatives**

In these next few questions we'd like you to try to identify all of the food sources that you rely on. First, let's talk about the food that you purchase – say, at the market or other places.

14. About how important would you say your purchases are to your overall supply of food for the month? In other words, do your purchases supply the majority for your household, or less?
15. Next, let's talk about charitable or public sources – like the food pantry. Can you tell me the other forms of assistance that you use as a source of food – including Project Understanding? These can include programs like food stamps, WIC programs, churches, and other pantries.

A. How long does that food usually last you?

B. Do you get any food from friends or family (outside of your immediate household) that is given to you?

C. Are there any other sources that you use to obtain food for your family that we haven't mentioned yet?

I have a couple of more questions to ask you. These last questions pertain to the current and future impact of Project Understanding on your household food supply.

16. If Project Understanding were unable to sustain its food pantry and had to close, what kind of an impact would it have on your family -- and how would you deal with that impact?

17. If Project Understanding were to establish some programs designed to help their clients to become more self-sufficient in their food supply, how interested would you be in participating in programs like that? (*prompt*: What are some of the characteristics of that kind of program that you would find particularly attractive – or unattractive?)

a. **If interested** ask: Would you be interested participating in a budgeting class offered by a local bank?

b. **Ask all**: Finally can you think of any other ways that Project Understanding might help you and your family to become self-sufficient with your food supply?