



SOUTHERN RURAL DEVELOPMENT CENTER

Number 7, October 2003

Knowledge of Charitable Choice Among Food Pantry Directors in the Deep South

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In an effort to level the playing field between faith-based and secular service providers, the “charitable choice” provision of the 1996 Welfare Reform Law forbids states from discriminating against religious organizations in the competitive bidding process [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 11, 12]. Following the passage of the 1996 Welfare Reform Law, government funding of faith-based initiatives was slated for expansion at the federal level through the White House’s Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives as well as its sponsorship of the Charitable Choice Act of 2001 and the CARE Act of 2003 [4]. However, congressional opposition to the federal-level Charitable Choice Act of 2001 and the CARE Act of 2003 did not permit broad implementation of federal funding for faith-based and community groups as had been initially proposed by the Bush administration. Even at the state level, charitable choice has met with a modest reception. Four years after welfare reform, a charitable choice tracking

study reported extensive implementation of this policy initiative in only 14 states [10].

Of course, a policy change this monumental should be expected to take some time to be incorporated into the states’ administration of welfare. Consequently, ongoing efforts are being made to gauge the diffusion and expansion of charitable choice by the Rockefeller Institute’s Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy. At this point, debates over charitable choice and community-based solutions to poverty continue. Many commentators worry that community agencies in rural areas might be especially hard-pressed to address local needs in this “post-welfare era” [3, 6]. These debates notwithstanding, all signs point to the increased expansion of charitable choice in the years ahead.

Charitable choice was intended to introduce new funding opportunities — namely, public monies — for a host of services delivered by faith-based providers. It changed the rules governing

This special food assistance policy series has been funded in part by the Economic Research Service and the Farm Foundation, in partnership with the Southern Rural Development Center.



the relationship between faith-based organizations and the state. The latitude given to states under the block grant system provides a new resource pool to private social service agencies, including faith-based food pantries. In many communities, the most visible and widespread anti-poverty effort undertaken by religious groups is the operation of a food pantry. In these pantries, faith-based benevolence workers are “frontline soldiers” in America’s battle against food insecurity.

Because local service provision agencies cannot take advantage of new policies of which their directors are unaware, this study is primarily concerned with assessing food agency directors’ knowledge about charitable choice. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of research focused on the challenges of welfare reform implementation in the Deep South in general, and in Mississippi and Alabama in particular [3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 13]. Alabama and Mississippi comprise the buckle of the “Bible Belt,” and thus would appear to be states where faith-based solutions to poverty would arouse great interest. In addition, both states have sizable rural populations and high levels of poverty. These two states thus make an excellent case in which to examine the issues set forth in this study.

What is a Food Pantry?

Food pantries are agencies that distribute food for clients to take away and cook at home. Most food pantries are associated with a regional food bank, a centralized organization through which foodstuffs can be collected and disseminated. Food

banks are stocked primarily with privately donated foodstuffs, supplemented with commodities provided by the federal government. Privately

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donated foods may come from growers, manufacturers, wholesalers, distributors or individuals. Food banks then distribute these goods to member agencies — such as food pantries, meal programs and shelters — all of whom, in turn, provide it to the poor in a state’s local communities on a regular basis. Before the 1980s, private sources of food assistance in the United States were usually limited to soup kitchens in inner cities. In the last few decades, however, food pantries have become increasingly important resources for low-income, food-needy people.

Director Survey

This study draws on survey data collected from food pantry directors. A list of food bank organizations within Alabama and Mississippi was compiled. From this list, 250 food pantries were randomly selected from each state, yielding 500 agencies overall. A survey was designed to discover the characteristics of food pantries and their directors and to assess the directors’ knowledge of charitable choice. This survey was mailed to all of the 500 selected

pantries. Return envelopes were provided and coded to decrease follow-up mailing attempts. Overall, three mailings were completed. Fifty surveys were undeliverable. Of the 450 delivered surveys, 235 were completed and returned, for an overall return rate of just over 50 percent.

Profiles of Food Agencies and Pantry Directors

Two of our most striking findings concern the type of organizations affiliated with food banks in the Alabama-Mississippi area and the people served by these agencies. Nearly three-quarters of the agencies (72 percent) reported that they are run by or affiliated with faith-based organizations. Small and mid-sized congregations form the backbone of faith-based private food assistance in these states. Small congregations account for approximately 42 percent of faith-based food pantries, and mid-sized congregations account for 38 percent of the efforts. Taken together, congregations of less than 500 members are responsible for sponsoring or running at least 57 percent of all food pantries in our sample — religious and secular combined. Our survey results suggest that nearly a third of all food pantries in these two states are staffed by congregations with less than 100 members.

Among the organizations surveyed, the primary area of service was more rural than urban. About 70 percent of those responding to this question identified themselves as serving primarily a nonmetropolitan area (rural area, small town, or city of under 49,999), while only around 30 percent of respondents indicated that



they generally served a metropolitan population. Just over 60 percent of all food pantry directors in our survey are female. The majority of these directors (57 percent) self-identify as white, with almost all of the remaining respondents self-identifying as African American (34 percent).

A majority of food agency directors are highly religious. Almost 85 percent indicated that they attend religious worship services at least once per week, while only 2 percent indicated not doing so at all. Tenure among directors ranged widely, from new at their position (i.e., one month of experience) to 40 years. Overall, directors have served in their current position an average of 5.7 years. Directors are generally well educated, with most reporting at least some college. Most directors (61 percent) reported annual household incomes below \$50,000. About 15 percent reported household incomes over \$75,000 per year.

Food Agency Directors' Knowledge of Charitable Choice

To assess agency directors' knowledge of charitable choice, the survey presented them with statements designed to test their knowledge of key provisions. The statements in our fifteen-item "charitable choice quiz" touched on three general areas of knowledge about charitable choice:

- ♦ the overall thrust or general objectives of the policy;
- ♦ specific legal provisions (i.e., the rights and obligations of faith-based and community organizations under the new law); and
- ♦ the extent to which this new policy has been implemented.

Table 1. Distribution of Pantry Directors' Overall Scores on Charitable Choice Knowledge Test.

Overall Score (Total Number of Correct Responses)	Number of Directors with Overall Score	Percentage of Directors in Sample
0 - 4	106	45.1
5 - 9	92	39.1
10 - 14	37	15.7
15	0	0
Total	n=235	100

Participants were asked to respond to each statement by checking one of the following: "definitely true," "maybe true," "not sure," "maybe false," "definitely false." Individuals were considered to have a correct answer if they selected either "definitely" or "maybe" to the correct response (true or false, depending on the statement). For example, if individuals indicated "maybe true" or "definitely true" to the question, "Charitable choice refers to a provision found in 1996 welfare reform law," then they were given credit for a correct response.

So, how did food pantry directors perform on the charitable choice quiz? Taken as a group, directors demonstrated little knowledge of charitable choice. Table 1 provides an overview of surveyed directors' "scores" on the charitable choice quiz. About 16 percent of the directors achieved overall scores situated in the 10-14 correct-response category. By contrast, about 45 percent of the respondents had four or fewer responses correct. About 39 percent of the directors had 5 to 9 answers correct.

Despite the fact that most directors did not score well on the charitable

choice quiz, they are better understood as uninformed rather than misinformed. Fifty-eight of the 235 directors either did not answer any of the charitable choice knowledge statements or marked all answers as "unsure." Further, when examining responses to each statement across subjects, it quickly became apparent that the most frequently marked response was "unsure."

Table 2 provides a list of the knowledge questions included in the survey and the responses of the directors. For 10 of the 15 questions, "unsure" is the most frequent response. Further, many of the returned surveys contained qualitative comments written in by respondents. Through these comments, respondents expressed questions and a lack of understanding about charitable choice. Several survey respondents requested information about charitable choice from the research team when returning their survey forms through the mail.

It is reassuring that pantry directors seem to be somewhat aware of the legal responsibilities that their organizations would face if they secured public funding. Yet, they are less aware of the new freedoms and



Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Correct, Incorrect and Unsure Answers to Statements about Charitable Choice.

Knowledge Statement (correct response featured in capital letters)	Correct	Incorrect	Unsure/NA
General Policy Contours			
1. Charitable choice refers to a provision found in the 1996 Welfare Reform Law. [TRUE]	12%	3%	84%
2. Under charitable choice, public funds are to be disbursed through a competitive bidding process in which nonprofit groups submit funding proposals. [TRUE]	18%	7%	75%
3. If religious organizations receive funds from charitable choice in a local area, clients in that area must be given the option of receiving services from a secular provider as well. [TRUE]	23%	8%	69%
4. Charitable choice legislation is so named because it gives states the choice of not complying with its provisions. [FALSE]	11%	15%	74%
Specific Legal Provisions			
5. Charitable choice prohibits government discrimination against faith-based providers on the basis of religion. [TRUE]	46%	6%	48%
6. Faith-based organizations that receive public money under charitable choice can display religious icons and symbols in locations where they provide services to clients. [TRUE]	26%	13%	61%
7. Religious organizations and other nonprofits that wish to participate in charitable choice can be legally recognized as private service providers by becoming incorporated with 501(c)(3) status. [TRUE]	32%	3%	65%
8. Charitable choice requires participating nonprofits to comply with government non-discrimination statutes in hiring staff for their programs. [TRUE]	43%	3%	53%
9. If a religiously-based agency receives funds under charitable choice, the agency is allowed to screen out and withhold services from clients who do not believe in God. [FALSE]	57%	2%	41%
10. Faith-based organizations that receive funds through charitable choice can legally require that clients attend religious events such as prayer meetings, worship and scripture study to receive social services. [FALSE]	50%	7%	43%
11. Faith-based providers funded under charitable choice can withhold services from clients who refuse to join their religious group. [FALSE]	55%	2%	43%
12. Private nonprofits that accept public funds under charitable choice can be audited by the government. [TRUE]	51%	2%	48%
13. If an agency receives funding under charitable choice, the agency must comply with government non-discrimination statutes in providing services to clients. [TRUE]	58%	2%	40%
Implementation Status			
14. Charitable choice is currently used in all 50 states of the United States. [FALSE]	5%	17%	79%
15. Because of legislation currently stalled before Congress, religious organizations can no longer seek funds from state governments that contract out their social services to secular nonprofit providers. [FALSE]	7%	8%	85%



opportunities guaranteed to their organizations under charitable choice. A comparison of the responses within these three broad areas reveals that pantry directors have the most familiarity with the specific legal provisions of charitable choice (statements 5 through 13). The group of statements pertaining to legal provisions is the only category in which any of the questions received more correct than “unsure” responses. Within this area of charitable choice knowledge, the percentages of directors selecting correct responses ranged from 26 percent to 58 percent.

General policy knowledge of charitable choice (items 1-4) was quite meager among directors, with items 1-4 eliciting few correct responses (from 11 percent to 23 percent). Most respondents were unsure of the answers to any of these questions. Statements designed to test directors’ knowledge of the policy’s implementation status (items 14 and 15) elicited the lowest number of correct responses. Contrary to statement 14, charitable choice had been formally implemented in only 14 states at the time of our survey. Three times more directors (16 percent) answered this item incorrectly than those who answered correctly (5 percent). Here again, a large portion (79 percent) of all respondents was unsure about the answer to this statement. The second statement concerned with implementation status inquired about the effect that a lack of congressional approval for federal-level charitable choice has on state-level charitable choice programs. As noted above, charitable choice programs implemented by these two levels of government are distinct. State-level charitable choice

was passed as part of welfare reform law and remains in effect under the block grant system. However, the federal-level Charitable Choice Act of 2001 did not permit broad implementation of federal funding for

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faith-based and community groups because of congressional opposition. Facing similar resistance from Congress, the CARE Act of 2003 suffered largely the same fate. On this front, correct and incorrect responses were both low (7 percent and 8 percent, respectively). Again, the vast majority of directors (85 percent) were unsure of the relationship between state-level programs and federal-level legislation.

To assess whether agency directors in rural areas exhibited considerably less knowledge of charitable choice than their urban counterparts, two subsets of the sample were compared: those directors who self-identified as residing in a rural area (population less than 10,000) and those who self-identified as urban (metro area with 100,000 or more population). Seventy-seven directors self-identified as rural, and 43 self-identified as urban. Overall, the urban group showed more knowledge of charitable choice, scoring at least 3 percentage points higher in correct

responses on 9 of the 14 measures. On only one item (statement 8) did the rural directors outscore the urban directors by that margin. The largest knowledge gap occurred on question 2, which asked respondents about the role of the competitive bidding process in the awarding of charitable choice funds. On this measure, the urban directors answered correctly 33 percent of the time, compared to 9 percent correct responses for the rural directors. The gap on this question is important because agency directors unfamiliar with the competitive bidding process may be wholly unaware that they need to submit formal proposals to be considered for charitable choice funding. Although the urban group outperformed the rural group on many measures, even directors in urban areas achieved correct response rates greater than 50 percent on only 5 of the 14 measures in the charitable choice quiz. Thus, the vast majority of directors are largely uninformed about charitable choice; however, rural directors are particularly lacking in charitable choice knowledge.

In short, Alabama and Mississippi food pantry directors, a group whose organizations are supposed to benefit from the new freedoms ushered in under charitable choice, are generally uninformed about this policy. Quite consistently, pantry directors were unsure how to evaluate knowledge statements about the general purpose of charitable choice policy, the specific legal provisions that accompany it, or the status of programs implemented under it. Relatively speaking, pantry directors in our sample are best aware of the legal obligations that would be required of them under the policy.



Conclusion

In 1996, charitable choice surfaced as a key provision in welfare reform law. Charitable choice dramatically expanded the opportunity for public-private service provision partnerships and forbade states from discriminating against faith-based providers in awarding government contracts.

Drawing on primary survey data collected by mail from a random sample of Alabama-Mississippi food agency directors, we found that a sizable majority (75 percent) of the food agencies in our survey are faith-based organizations. Given this finding, it seems safe to assume that religious organizations account for the bulk of private food assistance conducted in these two states. Moreover, nearly eight in 10 of these faith-based food agencies are affiliated with small and moderately-sized congregations. This finding is surprising because larger congregations are typically viewed as having a more robust base of human capital and material resources. Among all the food agencies surveyed (secular and faith-based), services are offered predominantly to rural residents. Over two thirds of the agencies surveyed identify rural communities as their primary area of service. In our Alabama-Mississippi sample, agency directors are predominantly white and female. Most of them are well educated but report fairly modest personal incomes, thereby situating them in the middle class.

The primary goal of our study entailed assessing food agency directors' knowledge of charitable choice policy. The knowledge quiz that we administered to food pantry directors through our survey revealed that food

agency directors are largely uninformed about the general policy contours, key legal provisions, and implementation status of charitable choice. Food agency directors were most knowledgeable (but still only

“. . . it is clear that food directors in Alabama and Mississippi have not been well informed about charitable choice.”

vaguely aware) of the specific legal provisions of charitable choice. They were least aware of the implementation status of this policy.

If food directors are undereducated about charitable choice, the blame for this lack of information should not be laid at the feet of the “students” (i.e., the directors themselves). Rather, the burden of education lies with the “teacher.” In the case of charitable choice education, teachers come in many forms — government officials, policymakers and community representatives.

There are two clear implications, then, that emerge from our study. First, there is a stark contradiction between the overwhelmingly religious character of food assistance in the Alabama-Mississippi area and the lack of initiative that both states have demonstrated toward charitable choice. Alabama has not even emerged on the radar of those who track nationwide charitable choice efforts and Mississippi has only done so recently. Although Mississippi had implemented church-state collabora-

tion, Mississippi Faith & Families, that was a forerunner of charitable choice [3, 4], the initiative is no longer active.

Finally, it is clear that food directors in Alabama and Mississippi have not been well informed about charitable choice. In this regard, food assistance in the Deep South seems far removed from the beltway of American politics. And yet, we cannot be sure that food directors in Alabama and Mississippi are any less informed than their counterparts in other parts of the country. It is possible that food directors are less informed about charitable choice than leaders in other sectors of the welfare provision network (e.g., directors of child care centers, substance abuse counselors). If leaders in some sectors of civil society are more knowledgeable about charitable choice, efforts should be made to provide information to all parties who are supposed to benefit from this policy.

On the other hand, there may be regional gaps in charitable choice knowledge, and these will likely mirror the actual implementation and opportunities for implementation of charitable choice programs. Consequently, future work is needed to determine if food agency directors in the South are actually less informed about charitable choice than their counterparts in other regions of the country. From our study alone, we cannot determine how Alabama-Mississippi pantry directors compare with food agency supervisors in other parts of the country. Our study does demonstrate, however, that at least in Alabama and Mississippi, there is much to be done



before charitable choice can be said to have effectively lived up to its name.

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Published by
Southern Rural Development Center
Box 9656
Mississippi State, MS 39762
(662) 325-3207
Fax: (662) 325-8915
<http://srdc.msstate.edu>

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