

The Community Impact Grant Program was part of Connecticut Foodshare's 2022–2025 Community Impact Plan. Year Three of the Grant Program represented another meaningful investment in the Connecticut Foodshare partner network. The 2025 funding opportunity focused on helping agency partners strengthen their programs by improving operations, expanding access to food, and enhancing the overall experience for neighbors.

Grants were distributed to agency partners in every county across Connecticut. In total, 56 partners—including food pantries, community kitchens, backpack programs, and emergency shelters—received \$266,900 in funding.

One major priority was expanding cold storage so agencies could store more fresh food. Many partners added glass-door or double-door units, allowing guests to see and select items themselves, similar to a grocery store. This helped increase both the quantity and variety of fresh and frozen foods available, made it easier to accept large donations, and reduced food waste.



A happy customer in Friendly Hands Food Bank's new full-choice food pantry

photo credit: Friendly Hands Food Bank

Across the network, programs continue to move toward offering more choice, with the majority of Connecticut Foodshare partner pantries offering full customer choice. Many programs have shifted to a grocery store model, where guests can select their own food. This approach reduces waste and creates a more dignified, familiar experience. Equipment like shelving, produce display tables, shopping carts, and glass-front refrigerators and freezers has supported this transition.

Programs also focused on improving the guest experience by making their spaces more comfortable, welcoming, and organized. Simple changes—like adding seating areas for guests while they wait—can reduce stress, support dignity, and create opportunities to share information about other services. Common purchases included waiting room chairs, items for children's play areas, and clear (often bilingual) signage to make programs more visible to community members.

Seymour Oxford Food Bank, Seymour

Seymour Oxford Food Bank (SOFB) wanted to make the transition to full choice and provide a more dignified shopping experience. In the past, guests relied on volunteers to take meat out of the freezer instead of choosing it themselves. SOFB added glass-door freezers and refrigerators so guests can see and choose their own food. This increases dignity, reduces volunteer/ staffing needs, and helps keep food safer and fresher. New produce displays replaced folding tables, providing for a more grocery store-like setting and maximizing space.



"You guys make it where going to a food pantry doesn't feel like going to a food pantry. Being able to pick your own things, shopping as if it's a store...I come once a month and you guys have made a big difference in my life. I can't wait to get on my feet so that I can return the favor to families in need." -SOFB guest

Shopping was also moved to a larger room, increasing the number of people who could shop at the same time. Under the direction of a new Executive Director, SOFB's number of families served increased from 230 to 703 from February 2025 through February 2026.

In addition to transitioning to a full-choice model, SOFB made the bold decision to remove limits on how many items guests can take.

"We went full client choice with no limits and it was a decision that caused lots of conversation and raised fear. In watching our numbers for 3 months, our pounds per person actually decreased by 12lbs".

- Kristina Walton, SOFB Executive Director

The Salvation Army, Waterbury

Waterbury Family Emergency Shelter provides housing to single women and families. Shelter guests are provided with comprehensive services, including emergency housing, nutritious meals, case management, and assistance with job searches. The staff work to help guests prepare to move to permanent housing.

The shelter's food assistance program is a cornerstone of its support for unhoused families. The staff serves nutritious meals three times a day to the 30 residents who are staying there.

In its goal to provide nutritious food to its residents, the shelter wanted to expand its cold storage capacity, so it applied for funds to purchase new fridges and freezers, providing more storage capacity to support program meals and allowing guests to have their own space in the fridge.

The extra cold storage allows clients to exercise personal agency by storing food that meets their specific dietary needs and medical requirements. This ensures that everyone, regardless of health restrictions, has consistent access to safe, appropriate nutrition.

By providing space for "kid-friendly" alternatives, the project ensures children have access to familiar, palatable foods on days when the main shelter meal may not suit their preferences. This significantly reduces mealtime stress for both parents and children.



“In a shelter environment, having a specific spot that “belongs” to a guest—where they know their child’s favorite snack or their own medical-grade diet items are safe—restores a sense of ownership and agency that is often stripped away in crisis.”

Campus Pantry, West Haven

The University of New Haven's student food pantry highlights how a simple change can have a powerful impact. Due to limited space and inadequate shelving, students had restricted access to items that were stored in the back room of the pantry. Using funds from Connecticut Foodshare, additional shelving allowed the pantry to fully utilize the front room, increasing the variety of food items students can easily access.

The staff felt that providing students with the ability to offer full choice was essential, especially given its diverse international student population. *"We want to ensure that no student feels pressured to take items they are not accustomed to eating."*

The university campus pantry is open to all students, Monday through Friday from 9 AM to 4 PM, and is staffed by graduate students and nutrition student interns. A new reception desk makes the pantry feel professional yet welcoming to the 300 students per month who use it.



PRO-TIP!!

"My recommendation would be to look for small improvements that make an impact. Looking for ways to make the space more welcoming or accessible for the people you are serving is important."

"The people we serve have been impacted because they can pick their own items...This allows students not to have to take things that they don't need or are unable to consume. We want students to feel as if they have control over their experience at the pantry, and these improvements have made it a more welcoming and accessible space."

Horace Bushnell Children's Food Pantry, Hartford

The Horace Bushnell Children's Food Pantry, an outreach program of the Liberty Christian Center on Albany Avenue in Hartford, was founded in 1972 to provide food to children in need. In addition to providing food to 500 families each month, the pantry also provides clothing, toys, books, holiday meals, gifts, and financial assistance when possible.

The pantry applied for a grant to purchase a commercial refrigerator and freezer to be able to offer fresh food to its guests. On a shopping day in April, guests were offered frozen chicken thighs in addition to shelf stable items.



Shelving units and painting supplies were also purchased to transform the pantry storage room. The improved layout makes it faster and easier to assist guests. The prior layout didn't have adequate shelving, so boxes were often piled on top of each other, making it difficult to track and access inventory.



BEFORE



AFTER

The pantry's other primary goal this year was to offer their neighbors full choice when shopping, which it did! Guests now shop for themselves, taking only what they want and need.

"After many conversations with our clients we know that giving them choices is in their best interest. When basic needs are met, individuals experience less anxiety and can create a more stable foundation for themselves and their families."

Hawk Helpers, Wethersfield

What started out two years ago with one bag of non-perishables for each of the ten participating families, Hawk Helpers is not your typical “backpack program.” The program, which now serves 32 families on a weekly basis, is more like a traveling pantry that offers door-to-door delivery to qualifying families at Charles Wright Elementary School, a Title I school in Wethersfield.



Using grant money from Connecticut Foodshare to purchase three refrigerator and freezer units, Hawk families can now receive items such as dairy, frozen meat, as well as perishables. According to a volunteer, the program is “able to now offer eggs every week.

In addition to using Connecticut Foodshare as a main resource for food, the program has also introduced an “Adopt-A-Shelf” program that helps keep their shelves full with high-demand items they cannot source from the food bank.

Bags are packed on Thursday and Fridays, and four to five volunteers deliver to families every Friday afternoon, using cooler bags—also purchased with the grant—to keep safe temperatures during the short trip. With its significant growth over the past two years, the program gives this advice to other programs: “pacing your growth as much as possible while growing your volunteer base is key.”

“The ability to buy and give perishable items completely changed our program for the better.”



“Connecticut Foodshare is amazing, because we can go and order...we know what we can expect every week. We get rice regularly. We get pasta and pasta sauce...and shelf stable milk.” Volunteer, Gail Spader

Neighbor to Neighbor, Greenwich

Neighbor to Neighbor in Greenwich serves over 700 families per month at its full-choice pantry. In addition to operating a regular food pantry, Neighbor to Neighbor offers a Summer Supplement Program. School-aged students whose families qualify for the Supplemental Food Program may receive additional breakfast and lunch grocery items during the summer months. With its strong focus on families, the pantry wanted to offer a space that was more welcoming to caregivers who visit the shopping area with children.

The relatively small amount of grant funds used towards furniture, a rug, books, and toys has made a significant impact on the pantry. The new Kid's Corner gives children the opportunity to engage in educational and fun activities while their parents shop. The addition of the space also makes the pantry more accessible for parents who may have difficulty finding someone to watch their children at home while they shop. An added benefit has been that, especially during the cold winter months, parents often stay to play with their kids, creating a family atmosphere and an opportunity for parents to connect with other parents.



“Coming to the pantry may be stressful for some of our clients, and because the Kid’s Corner makes the children more comfortable (and feel welcome, and allows them to have fun!), it could help reduce their parents’ stress.”