

Launched as a key part of Connecticut Foodshare's 2022-2025 Community Impact Plan, Year Two of the Community Impact Grant Program marked another significant level of investment in the Connecticut Foodshare partner network. This 2024 funding opportunity aimed to build the capacity of partner food pantries and community meal programs through projects that strengthened program operations, expanded food access, and improved the neighbor experience.

During the 2024 funding cycle, Connecticut Foodshare received over \$2.7 million in requests. This large volume demonstrates community need, and the great potential to strengthen and transform the charitable food system in Connecticut.

After an extensive review process, Connecticut Foodshare awarded a total of \$1.23 million in Community Impact Grant Funding across 115 partners in 2024. Funding reached every county in Connecticut, including urban, suburban, and rural communities. Statewide, grants were awarded to 15 community meal programs totaling \$191,500 and 100 food pantries totaling \$1,038,850. Awardees used grant funds to offer more choice, create more welcoming environments, make their spaces more accessible, upgrade facilities, add equipment to streamline and expand food distribution, increase access to complementary services, and create more visibility through improved signage.

Many of these grant awards were made possible thanks to funding from the USDA Reach and Resiliency Grant Program. This vital government support allowed Connecticut Foodshare to target grant funding to support agency partners that distribute federal TEFAP commodities.

Connecticut Foodshare takes pride in its grant process. Applying for a grant is easy and accessible to all its partners, including those programs that don't have access to a grant writer, are solely run by volunteers, and perhaps it's even their first time applying for a grant.



Guest with grant funded shopping cart at Jewish Family Services of Greater New Haven

If it hadn't been for the Connecticut Foodshare grant application process—how easy it was to navigate and complete for a first-time grant applicant—I wouldn't have had the confidence to apply for another grant from a community foundation that was a bit more onerous, but that we received!

-Community Food Bank, Barkhamstead

The Community Impact Grant program encouraged agency partners to dream big and consider transformations that would have a lasting impact.

Grantees used funds to accomplish everything from adding a freezer, to completely renovating their space over several months.

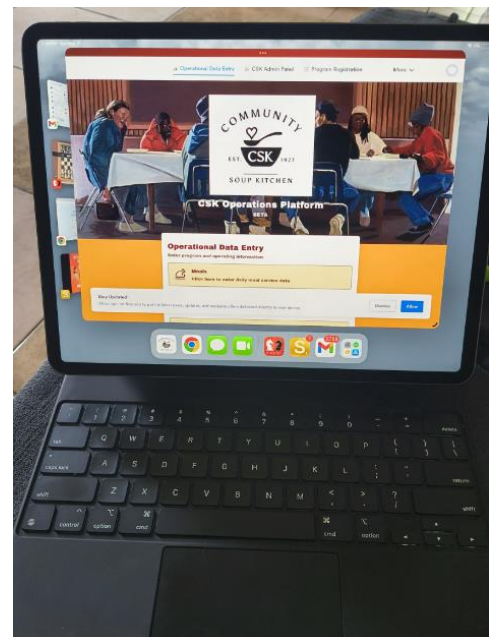
"Especially in the non-profit world where so much changes minute-to-minute, it is very easy to get caught up in putting out metaphorical fires right in front of you...you must have a vision for the long-term benefit, even if there are a few weeks of inconvenience, extra tasks, or workarounds. Imagine how you want this part to be operationally better in 5 years, or 10 years." - Reverend Sara Smith, nOURish Bridgeport

Partner Spotlight: Strengthening Access to Local Resources

Community Soup Kitchen (CSK) in New Haven serves over 500 meals per day to people who speak several different languages, making communicating with all guests a challenge. For example, some of the guests who visit the Hazel Street location needed the ability to translate American Sign Language, and the kitchen manager now uses a translation software to communicate with those guests.

The purchase of iPads and a smart TV for the dining room allows for interactive access to CSK's menu information, daily schedules and news of the day. The iPads are also equipped with a central registration platform that allows guests to register for other basic resources.

CSK delivers hot meals to multiple locations from its hub at 84 Broadway. Now, thanks to this technology, neighbors served at CSK satellite locations can use the network connected iPads to register for the many additional services CSK offers and promotes at its main location. Guests can view all available programs on a given day, with locations, times and registration links for public showers, clothing resources, and blood pressure screenings. They can also access employment support, contact housing advocates, and request medical attention.



Grant-funded iPad for guest use at
Community Soup Kitchen

Partner Spotlight: Transitioning to Full Choice

Faith-based partners are a critical part of the Connecticut Foodshare network. Park City Initiative Corp's **Bishop Jean Williams Food Pantry in Bridgeport** was serving 3,000 individuals each month using a drive-up model, where food was pre-packed and choice was limited. Using Community Impact Grant funds, the pantry was able to purchase wire shelves, produce stands, shopping carts, and a merchandiser refrigerator to transform their space into a grocery store shopping experience where guests have full-choice.

Thanks to the addition of restaurant beepers, shoppers no longer need to wait in line to shop. They drive up, receive the beeper, and wait in their car until their beeper goes off.

For Mary Green, Bishop Jean's President, "there's no greater joy than To see families freely walking through having the liberty to pick up their own items, bag them as they go along, and walk out feeling empowered, hopeful, and well-served". Shoppers have said they "love that I can pick my own groceries."



New grocery store layout at Bishop Jean Food Pantry

"I never wanted the black beans but now I can choose the pinto beans, and I don't feel like I am leaving having to put back food I wouldn't eat. Instead, I get more food, and it is the food I'll use".
- Guest at Bishop Jean Food Pantry

Tips for Pantries Transitioning to More Choice

1. Meet with volunteers to address why you are shifting to a new model.
2. Provide training with clear definition of new roles and changes.
3. Be open to changes that will improve the distribution, flow and character of the market.
4. Be ready to encounter challenges that were not accounted for in the initial plan.
5. Meet with volunteers after your first distribution with the new model to discuss what was experienced, if anything needs to be changed, and what can be improved.
6. If you need guidance or support as you make this change, reach out to Connecticut Foodshare and other full-choice pantries near you for inspiration.

Partner Spotlight: Creating a More Welcoming Space

The **Klingberg Family Pantry in New Britain** needed some TLC! The rooms comprising the pantry were poorly lit, and, according to staff, somewhat “dark and dingy”. The main impetus behind the renovation was to make the environment much more welcoming to people using the pantry, and to allow for proper food storage.

The mismatched flooring was replaced with contemporary hardwood grain vinyl planks (which if damaged can be easily replaced), walls were painted, and structural changes were made to maximize the space and allow for industrial shelving.

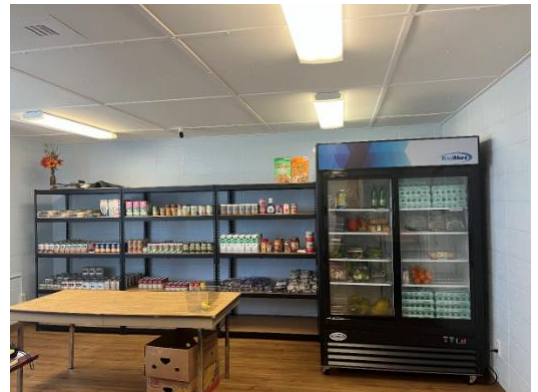
"Our hope is that the refreshed look and personalized service help to preserve the dignity of those we serve; and that they feel like they are asking for assistance at a place, and from an organization, that genuinely wants to help them." - Kara Preston, Klingberg Family Pantry

Funds were also used to purchase additional signage outside of the pantry and around the campus so that the pantry is easier to find. Klingberg has a large campus, so helping people navigate to the pantry was an important goal.

A key takeaway for Klingberg is the importance of collaboration: “Operating a food pantry can be difficult, and for those who have expressed an interest in opening one, we’ve been transparent in inviting them to visit us, learn more about the process, and consider collaborating to strengthen already existing pantries.”



Klingberg Family Pantry prior to renovation with pre-packed bags



Newly-renovated shopping area at Klingberg Family Pantry

Partner Spotlight: Expanding Access in Rural Areas

In addition to highlighting 2024 Community Impact Grant recipients, we wanted to take the opportunity to revisit the impact of a 2023 Impact Grant that achieved full operations in the past year.

Access Community Action Agency in Willimantic, serving Windham and Tolland counties, operates on-site food pantries at its Willimantic and Danielson locations. But rural communities face unique challenges, and lack of public transportation creates a barrier to people obtaining the resources they need, such as visiting a food pantry. In Connecticut, 21% of individuals without college degrees and 32% of adults earning less than \$30,000 experienced transportation insecurity (Greater Hartford Community Wellbeing Index 2023).

Access had a vision to create a mobile food pantry that could serve people for whom transportation poses a challenge, especially in the rural areas of Tolland and Windham counties. With Community Impact Grant funding, Access was able to purchase a farmers-market style truck. Not only does this new truck have twice the capacity of the van the program had been using, but the design also makes the experience feel more like shopping at a farmer's market. This sense of respect and care has made a big difference in how guests interact with the program. The increased capacity of the truck has allowed Access to add additional sites. The truck is currently visiting 13 unique sites on a monthly basis, reaching people at low-income senior housing complexes and other people who are housebound.



Access Mobile Food Pantry unveiling

"Our senior population should not have to wait in line, drive to a location and transport food back to their apartments."

Partner Spotlight: Dreaming Big to Transform Services

From 2023 to 2025, **Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen (DESK) in New Haven** embarked on an ambitious multi-million dollar renovation of its Drop-in & Resource Center building at 266 State Street in New Haven. With the support of Connecticut Foodshare through the 2023 Community Impact Grant, DESK built a new commercial kitchen and storage area that includes a new walk-in cooler and freezer.



New walk-in coolers at DESK

Here are some reflections that they shared:

"Consider the whole person. People in need of food assistance typically have other needs, as well. What are the resources your project can leverage or harness to connect people beyond food. Food will always bring people in the door, but as community providers, we have an obligation to take that opportunity to provide more services and resources.

Think big. Most direct food assistance providers (pantries, soup kitchens, etc.) see themselves – and are seen by others -- as small, community-based, grassroots organizations. Don't let such thinking stifle your impact. There's nothing wrong with being community-based and grassroots, so long as you and your supporters resist the urge to cite such a character as a reason to avoid expanding services, developing creative solutions, and investing in the future of your organization.

Don't go it alone. Build as big a tent as you can, and invite everyone inside: volunteers, community members, businesses, partners, local officials, schools, faith-based groups, and more. Band together with other food assistance to providers to share resources, coordinate activities, and ensure you're all meeting the need. And break down the silos of service provision by reaching out to basic needs providers who DON'T do what you do: shelters, housing services, employment services, FQHC's, mental health services, substance use providers, utility assistance, SNAP enrollment, etc. Contribute to the network of social services and help stitch your community back together."

"At DESK, we believe that food is more than just sustenance; it is an opportunity for connection... the fulfillment of someone's basic needs meets them where they are, builds trust, and creates a critical occasion for additional help. In this way, food that is provided at DESK is not simply saving an individual's life today; it is also building a foundation and opening a doorway for improving their wellbeing indefinitely."

Glory Chapel Food Pantry, Hartford



Woodbury Community Services Council, Woodbury



PRO TIP: “Start by asking yourself these questions: Is the space being used to its fullest potential? Can present and future needs be met? Can it accommodate a growth in the number of guests? Are the guests' asked what *THEY'D* like offered?”

–Jeff McKenna,
Woodbury Community
Services Council

Monroe Food Pantry

