

The Impact of a “No Soda and No Candy” Donation Policy

Executive Summary

BACKGROUND:

Food insecurity is a growing concern in the United States, particularly in view of the current economic recession and rising food prices. In households with very low food security, at least one household member over the course of a year has a reduced food intake and their normal eating patterns are disrupted due to a lack of resources. Food insecure individuals and households often maximize their monthly food dollars by supplementing food supplies through the Emergency Food Network (EFN).

The EFN is a sector of the food system that utilizes donations of food and money from corporations, government funding, private donations, and local and national distribution networks to serve over 25 million food insecure Americans every year. The network consists of over 200 food banks that glean, purchase, store, and distribute foods to their subsidiary emergency food programs (EFPs) such as food pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters. While food banks are the equivalent in the commercial food distribution system of wholesalers, EFPs are equivalent to food retailers in that they receive food from a variety of sources, including food banks, and distribute food items directly to clients.

During the past two decades, the food bank network has grown considerably, and now serves many individuals who suffer from chronic food insecurity. According to Feeding America (Cohen 2006), since 2001 the majority of pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters have seen an increase in the number of clients who come to their programs; and, those programs reported that the food bank network is their largest food supplier.

While food insecurity and the demand for emergency food continue to increase, the nation is simultaneously facing an obesity epidemic. Food insecurity is associated with poorer quality diets and obesity (Olsen 1999, Townsend 2001, and Adams 2003). Links between food insecurity and obesity are not well understood, but it appears that one contributor is the lower cost of energy-dense foods compared to their higher cost nutrient-dense counterparts (Drewnowski 2007). Those with low incomes that seek to minimize spending on food will aim to maximize calories for food dollars spent.

The role of food banks as major food suppliers to the chronically food insecure and nutritionally vulnerable necessitates consideration of the nutritional impact of their food donation and distribution policies and practices. On February 1, 2004, the Food Bank of Central New York (FBCNY) adopted a “No Soda and No Candy” Donation Policy—the first of its kind in the US—that banned all soda and candy donations into their warehouse, since soda and candy do not contribute any nutritional value and have been associated with increased body weight. The FBCNY determined that they would focus on the distribution of healthier foods such as fruits and vegetables—that are more difficult for recipients to access—rather than soda and candy.

Study Objective:

Evaluate the impact of the FBCNY’s “No Soda and No Candy” policy on the types of donated foods and beverages accepted and document the lessons learned while implementing an organizational policy.

Study Methods:

Study Design

This study employs a pre-post design that assesses the impact of the FBCNY's 'No Soda and No Candy Policy' on the donated product mix available through the FBCNY as measured during a one-year period prior to (February 1, 2003 to January 31, 2004) and a two-year period after (February 1, 2004 to January 31, 2006) the policy introduction. Additional donation data was reviewed post preliminary findings from the midyear report for soda and candy for years 2006-07 and 07-08; no soda and candy were distributed. Key informant interviews were conducted with the food donor solicitor, director of food sourcing and nutrition, finance director, and executive director to capture qualitative data regarding the implementation of the policy.

Results

- Data show that vegetables comprise a significant amount of donated product ranging from 18% to 24% of total pounds throughout all three years.

- There was a slight increase in the total vegetable donations in the year the policy was implemented but a substantial reduction was observed in year three. Whether these changes reflect usual year to year fluctuations or a change in practices in soliciting foods, or other factors is not clear.

- A notable reduction in snack foods was observed from 12% to only 4% of total pounds of donated food from one year before to two years after policy implementation.

- Data show a trend towards increasing amounts of donated beverages from 8% to 13% of total pounds of donated foods from one year prior to two years post implementation.

Figure 1: Trends in Selected Groups of Donated Food

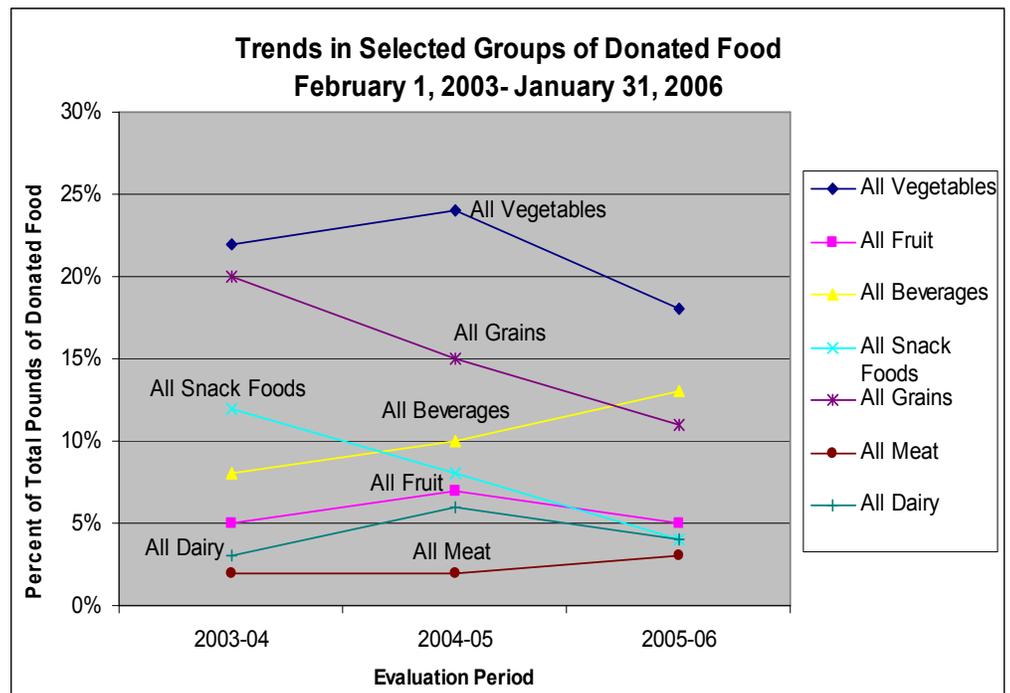
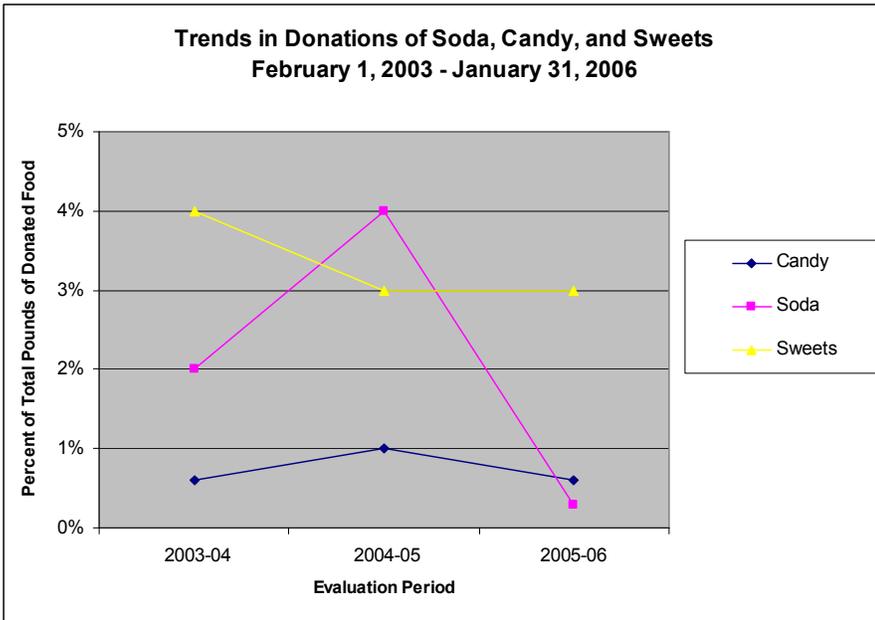


Figure 2: Trends in Donations of Soda, Candy, and Sweets



- Soda donations decreased to less than 1% of total pounds of donated foods (from 4%) between year 1 and year 3 of the study.
- Candy donations were relatively low as a percent of total weight donated, and although there was a decrease in the total pounds of candy donated from year 1 to year 3, the percent of total donations did not change (0.6%, 1.0% and 0.6%) between years 1 and 3.
- Although the “No Soda and No Candy” donation policy did not specifically target sweets, there was a decrease from 4% to 3% of total pounds of donated sweets (e.g. cookies, cakes, and donuts) from one year prior to two years post policy implementation.

Discussion:

Analysis of the Food Bank donations showed a substantial decrease in the amount of soda and a decrease in the pounds of candy accepted at the FBCNY two years after the implementation of the “No Soda and No Candy” policy. There are many potential benefits of these changes. Perhaps most importantly, the calories saved by reducing the soda donations by 65,000 pounds could have averted considerable weight gain among food pantry guests (3,000 pounds divided by the number of unduplicated guests).

It is notable that there was an increase in soda and candy donations (in absolute amounts and in the percentage of total weight of donations) in the year immediately following the introduction of the policy. This may simply reflect a delay effect in the implementation of the “No Soda and No Candy” policy, or possibly the year-to-year fluctuations. And yet, changes of this magnitude were not observed in other food groups. It may also be considered that the year 2 increases may reflect a delayed adjustment to the new policy on the part of some food bank staff. In fact, this is the likely explanation as suggested by the FBCNY staff interviews who indicated that it took some time to persuade the staff that the policy was in the organization’s and the guests’ best interests.

Inventory data provide powerful information about the implementation of food policy changes in organizations such as food banks. Policies that change fundamental and complex aspects of food procurement and operations are not easily introduced or fully implemented overnight. Often, many years are required to reach policy goals. In the case of FBCNY, elimination of both soda and candy donations took place three years post policy implementation.

Lessons Learned from FBCNY Staff:

Greatest challenges

- Finding the best way to educate Food Bank Staff and Emergency Food Programs to the benefits of this policy
- Getting past using pounds as the measurement of success
- Implementing a change in organizational policy
- Handling soda and candy donations that are dropped off in a mixed load of donated product

Areas for Improvement

- Time spent with managers to ensure buy-in from staff and clarify expectations
- Outcome and process evaluation of policy implementation
- Communication of financial implications
- Education regarding the potential adverse effects of distributing all foods available
- Time spent with programs prior to implementing the policy
- Key Stakeholder participation to discuss implications of policy change
- Communication with guests and vendors

Potential Reasons for an Increase in Soda and Candy Donations

- Time to articulate the new policy internally and externally
- Anticipated overproduction and influx of soda into the emergency food system
- Not educating donors enough prior to the donation
- Mixed load donations with soda and candy

Things that Worked Well

- Public responded well to the operational philosophy
- Employee wellness program was essential and successful, which helped create buy-in
- Succeeding without complaint or repercussion from internal or external stakeholders
- Successfully addressed the issue of handling soda and candy through mixed load donations

Areas of Opportunity for Other Organizations

- The role of the 'champion' is essential to implementing organizational change; someone is needed who is committed to seeing the change and navigate through the transition
- If behavior change is a desired outcome among EFP guests, providing the environment to enable that change is critical
- The implementation plan should include a strategy for handling unsolicited donations when they reach the warehouse