



Harry Chapin Food Bank
OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

**Q&A – EXCLUSIVE TO THE NEWS-
PRESS/NAPLES DAILY NEWS**

Q&A – Food bank vs. Food pantry: What’s the difference?

Note to readers: With Southwest Florida’s hunger crisis soaring, Harry Chapin Food Bank recently started constructing a Hunger Action Center, a massive warehouse and distribution facility that will safeguard the community against hunger for generations to come. In addition to greater storage capacity, the Hunger Action Center will offer a food pantry where neighbors experiencing hunger can shop for fresh produce and groceries. Since that announcement, community members have asked what is the difference between a food bank and a food pantry. Richard LeBer, president and CEO of Harry Chapin Food Bank, joined us for a Q&A to explain the difference.

Q. What are the main differences between food banks and food pantries?

LeBer: “Food banks and food pantries share similarities in their missions – both support the greater community in the challenge to end hunger, but the execution of the mission is different. Food banks act as the greater food supplier to smaller, community-based food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters. There are economies of scale involved. Food banks source donated food by the truckload from grocery stores, farms and wholesalers. They also purchase food in bulk at discounted prices, so the price per item is significantly lower than consumers pay at the supermarket. Five dollars might get you a jar of peanut butter at the grocery store; we will get many more. Food banks then distribute that food to pantries throughout the region. Food pantries, on the other hand, act as the direct resource for neighbors experiencing food insecurity. Individuals can get food directly from the pantries and sometimes even go ‘shopping’ like they would at a grocery store.”

Q. How are operations different between food banks and pantries?

LeBer: “Food banks are much larger than food pantries, and one food bank will serve many pantries. Food banks supply food to organizations across large geographical areas, whereas food pantries usually serve a single community or neighborhood. Harry Chapin Food Bank serves the five counties of Southwest Florida: Charlotte, Collier, Glades, Hendry and Lee counties. We supply food to more than 150 pantries that serve a smaller geographical location, such as the Dunbar or Heights communities in Fort Myers or Golden Gate in Collier County. We also have mobile food pantries that take food from our warehouses and distribute it directly to the

public across the region. Because of the vast area of distribution, food banks have large warehouses with room-sized refrigerators and freezers. Food pantries are much smaller with limited capacity to store perishable foods.”

Q. Where does the food come from?

LeBer: “Food banks like Harry Chapin Food Bank get food from a few different sources, including donations from large corporations, grocery chains like Publix or Walmart wholesalers, food manufacturers, farms and federal nutrition programs. Food pantries typically get food from food banks or local donations.”

Q. Who is able to receive food?

LeBer: “If you are experiencing food insecurity, unemployed or have limited, low or fixed income, or if you are experiencing hardships, you may be able to receive help from a pantry, or one of the food bank’s public distributions. Food pantries often have eligibility guidelines for people receiving help. Most requirements are based on income, household size and proof of residency, and are used to ensure that the food goes to those who need it most.”

Q. What happens when someone walks into a food bank needing food?

LeBer: “When people walk into Harry Chapin Food Bank hungry and in need of help, they never walk away empty-handed. We have emergency food kits prepared for neighbors in need, and our receptionist connects them with the closest mobile food pantry to ensure they don’t go hungry. However, we prefer that they go directly to one of our agency partners’ food pantries or to one of our direct distributions, as they will be able to receive a more balanced and complete package that they can then take home to their families.”

Q. Do food banks and food pantries respond differently to emergencies?

LeBer: “Food banks respond quickly to natural disasters and economic emergencies by securing and distributing large amounts of food. Harry Chapin Food Bank is part of the nationwide Feeding America network and the statewide Feeding Florida network. We are also directly connected to local and regional government and charitable emergency response organizations. These connections provide us with access to a national network to source emergency supplies of food and water. We tapped into that network after Hurricane Ian and Hurricane Milton, and were able to get food into the hands of agency partners and neighbors experiencing hunger within 24 hours. Not all food pantries can transform into first responders after a hurricane, but our team works with any agency partner available to assist in disaster situations. Hunger doesn’t end if the power is out and stores are closed; hunger becomes an even bigger priority for our community.”

Q. Why is understanding the difference between food banks and food pantries important?

LeBer: “Understanding the difference streamlines service. If you’re hungry and in need of help, you should go to a food pantry or a direct distribution site. If you’re thinking about where to donate food or money, the distinction to me is more about focus of where you want your donation to go and what impact you want it to have. Our impact is large, highly leveraged and regionwide, focused 100% on hunger. The impact of pantries is local and more focused. Many encompass more than hunger, such as St. Matthew’s House that serves many needs in addition to hunger, such as homelessness or support for those in recovery.”

Q. How can readers help support Harry Chapin Food Bank?

LeBer: “We encourage all our neighbors, whether they can give help or need help, to visit our website – HarryChapinFoodBank.org. That’s the quickest way to learn about hunger in Southwest Florida. Our hope is to build a stronger, hunger-free future for generations, and that’s exactly what Harry Chapin Food Bank has been doing since 1983.”

Q. How can people that need food find assistance?

LeBer: Neighbors who need food can visit HarryChapinFoodBank.org and use our Food Locator tool to find the food pantry or mobile distribution closest to them by entering their address. For those who may need additional support or resources beyond food assistance, calling 211 is another easy way to connect with help in their community.