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Private Food Assistance in the Deep South: Assessing Agency Directors' Knowledge of Charitable Choice

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In recent years, food banking has emerged as an important tool in America's fight against hunger and malnutrition. At the same time, the charitable choice provision of 1996 welfare reform law has significantly expanded the opportunity for public-private partnerships in the provision of social services. Given the new opportunities ushered in by this legislation, this study examines the knowledge that food pantry directors in Alabama and Mississippi possess about charitable choice. Our study reveals that food pantry directors are generally lacking in knowledge about key charitable choice provisions, thereby limiting the potential for this initiative to be utilized fully in this area. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings and specifying directions for future research.

Key words: *food insecurity, food pantries, faith-based, religion, charitable choice, government policy*

Introduction

In an effort to level the playing field between faith-based and secular service providers, the “charitable choice” provision of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) forbids states from discriminating against religious organizations in the competitive bidding process. The provision was intended to introduce new funding opportunities—namely, public monies—for a host of services delivered by faith-based providers and to change the rules governing 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. The food pantry model of relief, originally promoted as a temporary response to the economic recession and cuts in social welfare spending of the 1980s, has become an enduring and common feature of community life (Curtis 1997; Clancy, Bowering, & Poppendieck 1991). Unlike soup kitchens that provide hot meals, pantries distribute food for clients to take away and prepare at home. Most operate under the umbrella of a central food bank that collects, warehouses, and distributes food to its member agencies. Consistent with the trend toward public-private partnership in social welfare provision, food banks are stocked primarily with privately donated foodstuffs, supplemented with commodities provided by the federal government. Privately donated foods may come from growers, manufacturers, wholesalers, distributors, or individuals.

This study takes as its primary point of departure the convergence between the decades-long evolution of food banking and the recent rise of charitable choice. Our study is the first of which we are aware to connect these issues and study them in tandem. The primary objective of this research is to determine the level of knowledge held by food pantry directors of the charitable choice policy initiative. A high level of knowledge about charitable choice among pantry directors would be a positive sign for the likelihood of success for this initiative in local communities. By

contrast, if pantry directors show little awareness of this policy, it is unlikely that they or the organizations with which they work would be poised to take advantage of it.

To investigate this issue, we collected primary survey data from food pantry directors ($n=235$) in Alabama and Mississippi. Given the extensiveness of poverty and robust levels of faith-based civic engagement in this part of the Deep South, these two states provide an excellent opportunity for exploring the intersection between food provision and faith-based service delivery. The case of Mississippi is particularly striking. Recent data (1996–1998) reveal that 14 percent of all households in Mississippi are characterized by food insecurity—compared with a national rate of 9.7 percent food-insecure households (Bickel, Carlson, & Nord 1999; Nord, Jemison, & Bickel 1999; Rowley 2000). Alabama hovers around a common regional average for the South, with 11.3 percent of its households classified as food-insecure during this period. Given the dearth of basic data about food pantry operations in this region, our study also provides information on the basic characteristics of the pantries and the people who direct them.

The Role of Food Banking

The primary goal of food banking is the coordinated provision of emergency food to those who regularly suffer from hunger and malnutrition—now commonly called “food insecurity.” The local food agencies associated with the central food bank come in a variety of forms. Some are secular nongovernmental entities that provide meal sacks periodically to disadvantaged families and individuals. Others are either directly or indirectly connected to religious organizations. Among faith-based providers, food assistance programs are typically implemented by religious congregations or parachurch relief agencies (Bartkowski & Regis 2003). Other food agencies receive indirect forms of support from local religious organizations. Such is the case when congregants volunteer to serve as staff in local food assistance programs, or when food agencies that are not explicitly religious benefit from donations collected during the food drives of religious organizations.

Some previous work has cast a critical eye toward food banking (Poppendieck 1998; Hilton 1993), citing social distance between clients and inadequacy of relief provided, among other concerns. Empirical research on pantry clients has also raised some questions about the role of food banking. Although food banking is often promoted as a response to a short-term emergency, in reality, many pantries appear to be serving longer-term needs. In a study of food pantries in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, Daponte and colleagues found that the median length of use was two years (Daponte, Lewis, Sanders, & Taylor 1998). Food pantries in upstate New York face a similar situation, with a large number of clients having used local pantries for over three years (Clancy, Bowering, & Poppendieck 1991). Further, Biggerstaff, Morris, and Nichols-Casebolt (2002), who studied food pantry clients in Virginia, reported that the majority of users interviewed had characteristics that made it likely they would not be able to meet basic family needs in the long term without additional support. A large percentage of their research subjects had less than a high school education, and many were single parents. Similar findings surfaced in a study conducted by Duffy et al. (2002) for food pantry clients in East Alabama. Molnar et al. (2001), however, concluded that food banking, although limited in its potential to alleviate long-term hunger, can provide flexible and immediate service that fits into the structure of a local community, especially in rural areas.

Because food pantries are meeting chronic needs for many clients, and because of the recent downturn in the national economy and the subsequent rise in requests for social services of all kinds, accessing sufficient resources to meet community demands may become an increasing problem for many pantries. The opportunity to access government funds could thus be of great interest to cash-strapped, locally run, faith-based relief agencies.

Charitable Choice: Faith-Based Initiatives in the Post-Welfare Era

The charitable choice provision stemmed from the discretionary latitude associated with federal block grants to states under the 1996 welfare reform law (*A Guide to Charitable Choice*

1997; Bane, Coffin, & Thiemann 2000; Bartkowski & Regis 1999, 2003; Chaves 1999; Cnaan 1999; Griener 2000; Sherman 2000; Walsh 2001; Wineburg 2001). 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 and sponsorship of the Charitable Choice Act of 2001 (Bartkowski & Regis 2003). During his election campaign and throughout his presidency, George W. Bush made no secret of his support for faith-based solutions to a wide range of social problems, including poverty and hunger (Bush 2001). Apart from the momentum provided to charitable choice through the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, support for this policy in the Bush administration comes from other quarters. During the tenure of Wisconsin's then-governor Tommy Thompson, only Texas, led at the time by Bush, rivaled Wisconsin in implementation of faith-based welfare reform initiatives. Thompson now serves as Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. As a senator from Missouri, John Ashcroft, now the Bush administration's Attorney General, was a principle architect of the charitable choice provision during welfare reform debates.

Although the Charitable Choice Act of 2001 was eventually watered down because of concerns that it might permit discriminatory hiring among publicly funded faith-based providers, the expansion of charitable choice remains at the top of the president's domestic agenda (Bartkowski & Regis 2003). Indeed, the Bush administration has recently stated that it will forge ahead, implementing key portions of its "faith-based initiative" legislative agenda, with or without the approval of Congress (Allen 2002). And, of course, with Republicans having recently become a majority in both the Senate and House of Representatives after the 2002 mid-term elections, a bill expanding federal support for faith-based initiatives is likely to be more warmly received on Capitol Hill than it was previously.

The language of "choice" in this legislation is designed to underscore the new freedoms extended to faith-based organizations in competition for public purchase-of-service contracts (Bartkowski & Regis 1999, 2003). Secular nonprofit providers have long enjoyed the opportunity to procure government funds to

underwrite the services they provide to clients. Hence, one key aim of charitable choice has been to end practices that left faith-based and faith-affiliated nonprofits at a disadvantage in terms of funding sources. Charitable choice ensures that state governments cannot censor religious expression—i.e., religious symbols or practices—among faith-based organizations selected to provide publicly funded social services. Prior to the passage of charitable choice, select faith-based groups that partnered with the government (e.g., Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services) were required to secularize their service delivery procedures before securing public funds.

Yet, choice has a second meaning in the context of this policy initiative as well. Even as it protects the religious expression of faith-based organizations, charitable choice is intended to preserve the civil and religious liberties of welfare clients. The charitable choice provision mandates that states utilizing faith-based organizations as social service providers offer welfare clients the choice of receiving assistance from faith-based or secular organizations. Thus, client preferences for religious or secular providers must be respected. Moreover, faith-based providers of state-funded social services to the needy cannot legally force their clients to participate in religious practices (e.g., attend prayer groups or worship services). They also cannot require that clients join their religious organizations to receive services. In the end, then, charitable choice policy reflects an attempt to manage the tension between several potentially competing aims: (1) the state's obligation to provide poverty relief without fostering welfare dependency; and (2) the protection of civil liberties for both religious communities and welfare clients, such that religious organizations may be awarded government monies to provide publicly funded services along with guaranteed protections for the preferences of welfare clients.

Despite the lofty aspirations of the program's architects, the implementation of charitable choice among states has been uneven since the passage of welfare reform and subsequent passage of the Charitable Choice Act of 2001. This unanticipated development is noteworthy because state governments do not have a "choice" about implementing charitable choice if they are outsourcing public services. Any state government that contracts

out its services is legally prohibited from discriminating against faith-based providers in the competitive bidding process.

Where, then, does charitable choice implementation currently stand? At the time our survey was administered (2002), policy tracking reports of charitable choice implementation revealed that only fourteen states (28 percent) had formally taken advantage of charitable choice (Sherman 2002). And only about one-third of the states that implemented charitable choice had made any effort to monitor the evolving collaborations between themselves and faith-based providers. Careful monitoring and evaluation is thought to be evidence of a long-term commitment to state government collaborations with faith-based organizations.

Notably, the only Southern states to have implemented charitable choice programs in a consistent and carefully monitored fashion are Texas (approximately \$18.3 million dispersed via 19 contracts for 2002) and Virginia (\$2.3 million dispersed via 6 contracts for 2002) (Sherman 2002). Mississippi's now defunct Faith & Families initiative was considered a prototypical charitable choice program when it was begun in 1994 (Bartkowski & Regis 2003). However, Mississippi's Faith & Families was not initiated as a charitable choice program *per se*, but rather through a waiver obtained from the federal government prior to federal welfare reform in 1996. Subsequently, the state governments of Mississippi, Alabama, and many other Southern states have lagged behind their counterparts in sending out requests for proposals to prospective nonprofits (faith-based and secular) to initiate competitive bidding for the procurement of government of services. In short, charitable choice is poised for expansion—particularly if the economy becomes more robust. Yet, there remain a great many questions about the prospect of this policy fulfilling its objectives—the most noteworthy of which is the aim of creating a “level playing field.” According to this logic, charitable choice permits organizations that have previously been excluded from government contracting to be given an opportunity to vie for such funds.

Research Methods

This study draws on primary survey data collected from food pantry directors. A list of food bank organizations within

Alabama and Mississippi was compiled. From this master list of 1160 pantries in Mississippi and Alabama, 250 food pantries were selected randomly, with replacements, from each state. Thus, the total number of food pantries selected was 500.

A survey was designed to gauge the organizational attributes of food pantries and demographic characteristics of their directors, to ascertain the social welfare attitudes of pantry directors, and to tap the directors' knowledge of charitable choice. This survey (available by request from the Principal Investigator) was mailed to all of the 500 selected pantries. Return envelopes were provided and coded in order to decrease second-mailing attempts. Overall, there were three mailings completed. Fifty surveys were undeliverable, thereby leaving a possible 450 surveys. Envelopes returned as undeliverable were checked for forwarding addresses. If no forwarding address was on the envelope, follow-up phone calls were made to the agency based on the original list. We omitted any prospective respondent who indicated that he or she was not currently a food pantry director. In the end, 235 surveys were completed and returned. After undeliverable surveys were omitted from our sampling frame, the overall return rate was just over 50 percent.

Results

Our analysis proceeds in two phases. Phase one of the analysis yields a descriptive portrait of food pantries and their directors. Phase two of the study reviews pantry directors' responses to the index of questions about charitable choice. This index gauges directors' grasp of three domains of charitable choice knowledge—namely, the overall policy purpose, specific legal provisions, and implementation status of charitable choice.

Profiles of Food Agencies and Pantry Directors

Two of the most striking findings of our survey concern the type of organizations affiliated with food banks in the Alabama-Mississippi area and the clientele groups served by these agencies. Among the 235 surveys returned from agencies in our random sample, a sizable majority (72 percent, $n = 170$) of these are run by or affiliated with faith-based organizations (typically, a local congregation). Respondents were presented with closed-ended

categories for congregational sizes ranging from less than 100 members to over 500 members. Upon inspecting this distribution, it is surprising to find that small and mid-sized congregations form the backbone of faith-based food banking in these states. Small congregations account for approximately 42 percent of faith-based food banking and mid-sized congregations shoulder 38 percent of such efforts. Taken together, congregations of less than 500 members are responsible for at least 57 percent of all food banking—religious and secular efforts combined—reported by our sample. (Twenty-three respondents did not answer this question.) Our survey results suggest that nearly a third of all food banking efforts in these two states are undertaken by congregations with less than 100 members.

A second set of key findings about Alabama-Mississippi food banking concerns the primary client base of these agencies and their sources of funding. Among the organizations surveyed, the primary area of service was more rural than urban. To wit, about 70 percent ($n=158$) of those responding to this question identified themselves as serving primarily a non-metropolitan area (rural area, small town, or city of under 49,999) while only around 30 percent of respondents ($n=68$) indicated that they generally served a metropolitan population. Over two thirds (70 percent, $n=164$) indicated that they do not currently receive government funds, while 29 percent ($n=69$) currently underwrite their services with public money. Approximately half of the agencies surveyed (54 percent, $n=117$) indicated that they would apply for government funding in the future (or would continue to do so if currently receiving public monies). Only 15 percent of pantry directors ($n=35$) would not apply for such funds. The rest were unsure ($n=64$) or did not answer this question ($n=19$).

Given these organizational characteristics, what do we learn about the directors of such food agencies from our primary surveys? More than half of all food pantry directors in our survey are female (63 percent). The majority of these directors are white (57 percent, $n=135$), with almost all of the remaining respondents self-identifying as African American (34 percent, $n=79$). Twenty respondents did not answer this question, and one director identified as Asian or Pacific Islander. Consistent with the faith-based character of agencies in our sample, a majority of food agency

directors are highly religious. Almost 85 percent ($n=199$) indicated that they attend religious services once per week or more often while only a scant 2 percent ($n=4$) indicated not doing so at all. Tenure among directors ranges widely from those who are nearly brand new at their position (i.e., one month of experience) to tenures of about 40 years. Overall, directors have served in their current position an average of 5.7 years. Directors are generally well-educated, with the vast majority (77 percent, $n=182$) reporting at least some college. The majority of these directors report annual personal incomes below \$30,000 (55 percent of those answering this question, $n=104$), while only a handful of respondents had personal incomes of more than \$75,000 per year (2 percent of those answering, $n=4$). Household incomes for directors are more evenly distributed. The majority has household incomes below 50,000 (61.3 percent, $n=119$). However, over 15 percent ($n=30$) report household incomes of over \$75,000 ($n=30$) per year.

Food Agency Directors' Knowledge of Charitable Choice

The second phase of our study gauges agency directors' knowledge of charitable choice. Directors were presented with statements on the survey that, together, gauged their personal knowledge of charitable choice (see Table 1). Their familiarity with this policy is significant because directors of local voluntary organizations—both secular and faith-based—are at the forefront of America's fight against poverty and could expand their efforts through charitable choice. The statements in our fifteen-item "quiz" tapped three domains of knowledge about charitable choice:

- general policy parameters (i.e., the overall purpose and thrust of the policy);
- specific legal provisions (i.e., the rights and obligations of faith-based and community organizations under the new law); and
- implementation status (the extent to which programs have been initiated).

Participants were asked to score these questions on a five-point Likert-type scale (definitely true, maybe true, not sure, maybe false, definitely false). Although the questions themselves had definite true-false answers, we used a scale response so that

individuals who did have some knowledge of charitable choice, but did not feel completely certain of the exact provisions, would be more likely to score their impression of the statement. Individuals were considered to have a correct answer if they selected the appropriate definitely or maybe response. 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? Generally, the scores were not overwhelmingly positive. The scores on the charitable choice knowledge test for each respondent have a theoretical range of 0 (no correct responses) to 15 (all correct responses). The mean number of actual correct responses was 4.99. Taken as a group, directors demonstrated little knowledge of charitable choice. It is somewhat heartening that about 15% of the directors achieved overall scores situated in the 10–14 correct-response category. Nevertheless, even the distribution within this category is skewed toward the lower end. As a percentage grade in which 100 percent equals a perfect score, no single director scored higher than 90 percent on the charitable choice knowledge test. In fact, only 74 of the 235 directors in our sample had at least 50 percent of their responses graded as correct.

To extend the educational metaphor implicit in the administration of such a quiz, is it correct to assume that directors have overwhelmingly failed this test of charitable choice knowledge? We are hesitant to advance such a charge. To be sure, the scores on the test were low. And, at first blush, the data seem to indicate that pantry directors are misinformed about the policy. However, it is probably more accurate to say that directors are uninformed rather than misinformed. The drawing of such distinctions is not to split hairs. Fifty-eight of the 235 directors (24.5 percent) either did not answer any of the charitable choice knowledge statements ($n=12$) or marked all answers as unsure ($n=46$). Further, when examining responses to each statement across subjects, it quickly becomes apparent that the most frequently marked response was "unsure."

This pattern is clearly evidenced in Table 1. Respondents' lack of knowledge concerning charitable choice is further underscored by several patterns that are difficult to convey in quantitative

Table 1

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

<i>Knowledge Statement (correct response featured in capital letters)</i>	<i>Correct</i>	<i>Incorrect</i>	<i>Unsure/NA</i>
<i>General Policy Parameters</i>			
1. Charitable choice refers to a provision found in 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%
<i>Specific Legal Provisions</i>			
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%

<i>Knowledge Statement (correct response featured in capital letters)</i>	<i>Correct</i>	<i>Incorrect</i>	<i>Unsure/NA</i>
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%

(continued)

Table 1

(Continued)

<i>Knowledge Statement (correct response featured in capital letters)</i>	<i>Correct</i>	<i>Incorrect</i>	<i>Unsure/NA</i>
<i>Implementation Status</i>			
14. Charitable choice is currently used in all fifty states of the U.S. [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%

terms. Many of the returned surveys contained qualitative comments written in by respondents. Through these comments, subjects expressed questions and a lack of clarity about charitable choice. In addition, several survey respondents requested information about charitable choice from the research team when returning their survey forms through the mail.

Despite this overall state of unfamiliarity with charitable choice, do pantry directors know more about the policy's general parameters, its legal provisions, or the implementation status of charitable choice? A careful comparison of the responses within these three domains reveals that pantry directors have the most familiarity with the specific legal provisions of charitable choice (statements 5 through 13). Within this domain of charitable choice knowledge, the percentages of directors selecting correct responses ranged from 26 percent to 58 percent. While these scores are not passing grades, they exceed scores in the two other knowledge domains. The best scores in the specific legal provisions domain surface around an awareness of a funded organization's obligations (statements 8–13). The poorest scores in this particular domain concern an awareness of the rights and opportunities that charitable choice guarantees to funded organizations (statements 6–7). Thus, pantry directors seem to be somewhat aware—though

only vaguely so—of the legal responsibilities that their organizations would face if they secured public funding. They are less aware of the new freedoms and opportunities guaranteed to their organizations under charitable choice.

Turning to the other two knowledge domains concerning charitable choice, pantry directors are quite uninformed about the overall thrust of charitable choice policy. Statements 1 through 4 tap their knowledge of the policy's general parameters. These statements elicited correct responses from between 11 percent and 23 percent of directors. Startlingly high percentages of pantry directors, ranging from 69 percent to 84 percent, were unsure about the policy's general thrust.

We also sought to gauge directors' knowledge of the policy's implementation status (statements 14 and 15). By far, these items elicit the lowest number of correct responses from pantry directors. Contrary to statement 14, charitable choice had been formally implemented in only fourteen states at the time of our survey. Yet, three times more directors (17 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. In fact, charitable choice programs implemented by these two levels of government are relatively 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 faith-based and community groups because of congressional opposition. Here, 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.

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 parameters 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. However, with nearly half of respondents consistently uninformed about such obligations and even fewer informed of their rights, such awareness is wanting. Pantry directors are woefully uninformed about the general parameters of charitable choice policy and the status of implementation for this initiative.

Conclusion

This study has taken the intersection between food banking and charitable choice as its primary point of departure. In the early 1980s, food banks—umbrella agencies that collect food from various sources and then disseminate it to local pantries—emerged as a means of fighting hunger in the United States. Then, 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. This study sought to examine the structure of food banking in Alabama and Mississippi while exploring the viability of charitable choice for underwriting food provision in this two-state region of the Deep South.

Drawing on primary survey data collected by mail from a random sample of Alabama-Mississippi food agency directors ($n=235$), we first presented profiles of these organizations and their directors. We found that a sizable majority (73 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 food assistance conducted in these two states. Moreover, the vast majority (81 percent) 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 and material resources. Among all of the food agencies surveyed (secular and faith-based), services are offered predominantly to rural residents. Indeed, over two thirds of the agencies

surveyed identify rural communities as their primary area of service.

What did we learn about the directors of such agencies? Among 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.

A second goal of our study entailed gauging food agency directors' receptivity toward charitable choice and assessing their awareness of this policy. About two thirds of the food agencies in our survey do not currently receive government funds, yet over half are willing to apply for public funding in the future. 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 parameters, key legal provisions, and implementation status of charitable choice. If we were to evaluate the results of our charitable choice knowledge test by academic standards, most of our "students"—that is, pantry directors surveyed—would receive a failing grade. With most pantry directors selecting correct answers to only about one of three charitable choice knowledge statements, the "class average" on this examination would hover around 33 percent. However, there was some variation across knowledge domains. Food agency directors were most knowledgeable (but still only vaguely aware) about the specific legal provisions of charitable choice. They were least aware of the implementation status of this policy.

What conclusions can be drawn from food agency directors' performance on the charitable choice quiz? In our view, Alabama-Mississippi food directors' general failure on this "test" of their charitable choice knowledge should not be used to impugn them or to castigate food assistance provided in the trenches of the Deep South. 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 is always that of the "teacher." In the case of charitable choice education, teachers come in many forms—government officials, policymakers, and community representatives. It is most likely the lack of a coherent pedagogy and inadequate instruction that underlay the failure to disseminate

knowledge about such important policy changes to local social service providers.

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 glaring lack of initiative that both states have demonstrated toward charitable choice. Although Mississippi had implemented a church-state collaboration that was a forerunner of charitable choice (Mississippi Faith & Families) (see Bartkowski & Regis 2003), the initiative is no longer active. In fact, neither Alabama nor Mississippi has emerged on the radar of those who track the many charitable choice efforts that are being forged elsewhere after welfare reform. We are left to wonder about the motivations underlying government inaction or lack of coordination when a sizable network of religious providers is already in place to offer food assistance to food-insecure populations. Perhaps states whose congregations are already actively involved in such work do not feel a sense of urgency in forging charitable choice partnerships—at least in a way that can be clearly tracked by those monitoring implementation. Given the uneven implementation of charitable choice in the nation at large, and the apparent absence of such programs in the Deep South, a national study is needed to identify the structural factors that facilitate and hinder the forging of charitable choice partnerships.

Finally, it is plainly 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 pantry directors in Alabama and Mississippi are any less informed than their counterparts in other parts of the country. Thus, there is a need for more comprehensive data that only a broader, more comparative study would provide. This line of research could be attacked in a number of different ways. On the one hand, 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 some sectors of the social service delivery “industry” are more knowledgeable about charitable choice, efforts should be made to inform all parties who are supposed to benefit from this revolutionary policy about it.

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. If a broader comparative study were undertaken, care should be exercised to account for the fact that the South is comprised of more rural communities and fewer large cities than many other regions of the country. Hence, spatial variations in charitable choice policy knowledge and opportunity may be rooted in both regional differences (e.g., South, Northeast, Midwest) and distinctions that characterize different types of community locales (e.g., rural versus urban areas). Here again, scholarship is needed that aims to identify structural differences that create knowledge and opportunity gaps for those living in communities far removed from the centers of policymaking in America (state capitols, Washington, D.C.). It is only through such scholarship and corrective efforts that the “level playing field” proposed by advocates of charitable choice can even be reasonably considered.

For the time being, our study demonstrates that there is much to be done before charitable choice can be said to have effectively lived up to its name and before food banking can fulfill its mandate. The directors of food agencies and other organizations ostensibly empowered by charitable choice must be educated about this novel policy initiative. Such a conclusion is clearly supported by our study of food banking in Alabama and Mississippi. And, given the uneven implementation of charitable choice throughout the nation at this time (Ragan, Montiel, & Wright 2003), we suspect that this conclusion would be borne out in many other parts of the country as well. It is only through proactive and diligent education efforts that the presumed beneficiaries of charitable choice will be able to make reasoned choices about the new opportunities available to them in America’s post-welfare era.

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