

# Public Libraries and Food Insecurity: Post-2020 Interventions in the U.S.

## Introduction

Public libraries in the United States are increasingly stepping up to address food insecurity in their communities, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Food insecurity** – defined as the lack of consistent access to enough nutritious food – affects about 1 in 10 U.S. households, with rates nearly three times higher among low-income families <sup>1</sup>. The pandemic exacerbated this issue, creating what observers called a potential “hunger cliff” as emergency benefits ended <sup>2</sup> <sup>3</sup>. In response, libraries – trusted, free-to-all institutions embedded in neighborhoods – have broadened their missions to include food assistance. By 2023 almost half of U.S. public libraries were involved in food distribution programs for youth, and nearly a third were providing food for adults <sup>4</sup>. These efforts take many forms, including in-house food pantries, community gardens, “freedges” (free community refrigerators), seed libraries, mobile pantry events, and free meal programs. This report examines a range of library-led or library-hosted initiatives launched *post-2020*, highlighting case studies, outcomes, funding models, and partnerships. It also explores how these interventions align with libraries’ broader missions of promoting health, equity, and community engagement.

## Food Pantries in Libraries

One of the most common interventions is the establishment of **food pantries** or “little free pantries” at libraries. These may consist of shelves or cabinets inside the library or small outdoor structures (sometimes called *blessing boxes*) stocked with nonperishable food and essentials. The concept is simple: “*Take what you need, leave what you can.*” Because they are freely accessible and often available 24/7, such pantries reduce barriers like limited hours or paperwork that traditional food banks might require <sup>5</sup>. Libraries report that these mini-pantries help alleviate stigma – patrons can discreetly take food without any eligibility screening <sup>5</sup>. For example, the Northside Branch of the Lexington Public Library in Kentucky is located in a USDA-designated food desert; it now hosts a full pantry offering dry goods, canned food, meat, dairy, and fresh produce with **no income requirements or sign-in needed** <sup>6</sup>. Community members can simply walk in and obtain groceries as needed. In Pilot Mountain, North Carolina (pop. 1,500), a “*Blessing Box*” outside the library is refilled *at least weekly* by residents – it is consistently emptied and restocked, indicating robust use by those in need <sup>7</sup>.

Many library pantries were launched or expanded during 2020 as grassroots responses to rising hunger. In Woodstock, Illinois, the public library started a small indoor pantry in February 2020; when the pandemic hit, staff moved it outdoors for safer, round-the-clock access <sup>8</sup>. Similarly, Paducah, Kentucky’s public library not only hosts a little free pantry but also served as a site for the school district’s mobile meal van during pandemic closures <sup>9</sup>. A 2020 nationwide call by the Collaborative Summer Library Program gathered photos of library pantries in at least nine states, showing libraries “feeding their communities in creative and caring ways” <sup>10</sup>. Whether an indoor shelf or a outdoor “honor system” cupboard, these library pantries share common traits: they rely heavily on community donations and volunteering, and they extend

the library's ethos of free, nonjudgmental service into the realm of basic needs <sup>11</sup>. Library staff and supporters emphasize that this is a natural fit: *everyone* is welcome at a public library and nothing is for sale, so adding free food incurs no stigma <sup>12</sup>. By giving out food just as they give out books, libraries directly address hunger while also attracting new users and reinforcing their role as community hubs <sup>13</sup>.

**Case studies:** In Penn Hills, Pennsylvania, the public library partnered with the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank in 2022 to open an in-library pantry *and* community fridge, providing both nonperishable items and fresh foods to patrons in need <sup>14</sup>. The Bozeman Public Library in Montana similarly opened a food pantry in May 2022 as a collaboration between library staff and a local hunger relief nonprofit <sup>15</sup>. And on Long Island, Sayville Library now maintains a *Little Free Food Pantry* (alongside a Little Free Pet Pantry for pet food), with local teens volunteering to stock it and monitor donations <sup>16</sup>. These examples illustrate how library pantries vary in scale—from a single shelf of canned goods to entire dedicated rooms—but all extend the library's hospitality to encompass nourishment. Several libraries note that even small pantry projects can have meaningful impact. For instance, staff at a rural library in Pilot Mountain report that their modest outdoor pantry has become a relied-upon resource for the community, and its weekly turnover demonstrates both community need and generosity in action <sup>7</sup>.

## Community Fridges (“Freedges”)

Complementing dry-good pantries, some libraries have introduced **community refrigerators** or “freedges” to offer free fresh produce and other perishable foods. A *freedge* is essentially a public fridge (often paired with a pantry) where anyone can take or donate food. Libraries, with their accessible locations and electrical infrastructure, make ideal hosts for these fridges <sup>17</sup>. Like the little pantries, community fridges operate on a no-questions-asked basis: residents can help themselves to fruits, vegetables, dairy, or prepared meals as needed. This helps increase access to healthy, nutritious food in areas that might otherwise lack affordable fresh options <sup>17</sup>. For example, in 2022 the Forest Park Public Library in Illinois launched a community fridge open to all, alongside its existing nonperishables pantry <sup>18</sup>. The fridge quickly became a popular resource for locals seeking produce, eggs, and other perishables that traditional food pantries (focused on canned goods) might not supply <sup>14</sup>.

Several libraries rolled out community fridge programs after 2020, often in partnership with mutual aid groups or food justice organizations. In Richland County, South Carolina, **Richland Library** debuted *Eat Fresh Freely* in 2025 – a pilot network of community fridges at four branch libraries, stocked weekly with free locally sourced produce <sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup>. This initiative, created in partnership with a local family farm and funded by a private charitable trust, explicitly aims to provide “*stigma-free*” access to healthy food <sup>21</sup> <sup>20</sup>. The library emphasizes that it's about more than food – it's about dignity, wellness, and sparking community conversations on long-term solutions <sup>22</sup>. Early examples suggest significant demand: one librarian noted that a public fridge placed outside a library in Burnaby, Washington “goes through about a thousand pounds of food a week,” underscoring how much need exists in the community <sup>23</sup>.

Establishing a *freedge* comes with practical challenges. Libraries must consider placement (indoors vs. outdoors), maintenance, and local regulations. In Des Moines, Iowa, an attempt to place fridges at private homes ran into zoning fines, so organizers turned to libraries and community centers as hosts <sup>24</sup>. Des Moines Public Library's Franklin Avenue branch obtained a **Microsoft ChangeX grant** to purchase a fridge and initial groceries <sup>25</sup>. They situated the refrigerator outside the building for 24/7 access, allowing people to visit at any time without staff assistance <sup>26</sup>. However, outdoor fridges required a plan for upkeep: at one Des Moines location, donors were leaving empty boxes and trash, creating a mess <sup>27</sup>. Volunteers set up

“housekeeping rules” on a Facebook community page, and libraries learned to establish guidelines for cleanliness, safety, and etiquette (e.g. no loitering or food hoarding) <sup>28</sup> . Despite these hurdles, many have found ways to keep fridges running smoothly through shared community responsibility <sup>29</sup> . Libraries typically accept standard pantry items and even frozen goods in these fridges; some partner with local urban farms or gardeners to source fresh produce <sup>30</sup> . To gauge usage, a few have installed simple sensors or door monitors (like a Raspberry Pi device) to count how often the fridge is opened <sup>31</sup> . Usage tracking must be done cautiously to avoid deterring users, but it can help demonstrate impact. Overall, community fridges at libraries are emerging as a powerful tool to increase healthy food access. As noted by the Urban Libraries Council, a number of libraries (including Charleston County Public Library in South Carolina) now host freedges as part of their food security efforts <sup>17</sup> . By keeping fresh food freely available in a trusted public space, libraries are directly confronting the nutritional gaps in their communities.

## Community Gardens at Libraries

Public libraries have also started **community gardens** on their grounds, turning green space into a source of fresh produce, learning, and community connection. Library gardens took on new significance during the pandemic: outdoor garden projects allowed socially distanced activity and stress relief, while also producing food in a time of supply disruptions <sup>32</sup> . Many libraries see gardening as aligned with their mission to support health and sustainability. In fact, a “new wave” of library gardens has sprouted since 2020, as libraries leverage their land to address food insecurity and environmental goals <sup>32</sup> <sup>33</sup> . These gardens range from small raised beds tended by librarians to large allotment gardens for patrons.

Some library gardens focus specifically on **growing food for the community**. For example, the Arlington Public Library in Virginia converted an unused lawn at its Central Library into a community vegetable garden in 2019. Volunteers (including one from the Arlington Food Assistance Center food bank) led this project, which features raised beds for growing produce at the library entrance <sup>34</sup> . Alongside the garden, Arlington installed *The Little Pantry* – a “give-what-you-have, take-what-you-need” food pantry built by local Eagle Scouts, so that harvested produce and donated food could be shared immediately with those who need it <sup>34</sup> . The library even wove the theme into its programs – branding an author talk series “Food for Thought” – to tie food sustainability into its educational mission <sup>35</sup> . Another example is Charleston County Public Library’s new St. Paul’s branch in South Carolina: when this branch was built in 2020, “*food information and access was a priority*” in its design <sup>36</sup> . The library created a **teaching garden** with raised beds where children and adults learn to grow fruits and vegetables, in partnership with a local charter school’s FFA (Future Farmers of America) chapter <sup>37</sup> <sup>38</sup> . Despite setbacks (the school’s farm equipment was stolen twice), the library rallied support from the Chamber of Commerce (which donated funds and volunteer labor) and the Friends of the Library (which provided additional funding) to get the garden built <sup>39</sup> . Now with six raised beds, a compost bin, and a garden shed, they have already harvested “*beautiful kale, Swiss chard, and beets*” to stock the branch’s **Free and Fresh Fridge** produce cooler <sup>40</sup> . Library staff initially maintain the garden (forming a mini garden club among themselves), and as COVID restrictions eased they’ve begun involving community members and a local Master Gardener volunteer <sup>41</sup> . The garden not only yields fresh food for the public, it also proved therapeutic for library employees: leadership observed that giving staff work time to tend plants helps reduce stress and burnout from their intense public service roles <sup>42</sup> .

Other library gardens operate as **community allotments**, where patrons can claim plots to grow their own food. The Jim Lucas Checotah Public Library in rural Oklahoma opened a garden in April 2021 with this model, aiming to improve a county plagued by high rates of inactivity, diabetes, and hypertension <sup>43</sup> .

Backed by a \$4,000 grant from the state library and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), Checotah Library built a 24×60-foot garden with 16 raised plots for local residents <sup>44</sup>. Demand quickly exceeded supply – the library received 20 applications for the 16 plots <sup>45</sup>. Plot users must agree to tend their section and follow basic rules (no pesticides, keep it tidy, etc.), while the library provides water and even gave each gardener starter plants (a tomato and a strawberry plant) <sup>44</sup> <sup>46</sup>. The garden was designed with help from the county Extension Service and soon became an “impromptu community forum” – as people work their plots, neighbors stop by to chat, ask questions, and swap tips across generational lines <sup>47</sup>. The library augmented the garden’s educational impact by placing pamphlets on vegetable growing and storage on-site, hosting virtual cooking classes to help people use their harvests, and even routing an outdoor StoryWalk (children’s picture book path) through the garden area <sup>47</sup> <sup>48</sup>. The community’s enthusiasm was evident at the garden’s ribbon-cutting: *88 people* attended in a town of only 3,500, including the state library agency director <sup>49</sup>. This shows how a library garden can galvanize local interest around healthy food and community well-being.

Large library systems have also embraced gardening as part of sustainability and community engagement strategies. The Kansas City Public Library’s Ruiz Branch, serving a predominantly Latinx neighborhood, established a series of gardens to complement a pre-existing community garden across the street <sup>50</sup>. Starting in 2014 and continuing through the 2020s, the branch has added a rain garden, herb garden, butterfly garden, and native plant garden around its building – partly to restore a formerly blighted lot, and partly to connect with residents’ priorities of urban greening and food plant cultivation <sup>51</sup> <sup>52</sup>. Seeds from these gardens are saved and added to the library’s seed library (see below), which saw over 3,000 seed checkouts in 2019 <sup>53</sup>. The gardens mitigate flooding, support pollinators, and serve as an outdoor classroom where the library hosts gardening workshops in partnership with a local Native Plant Academy and university extension program <sup>53</sup> <sup>54</sup>. Meanwhile, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the public library’s Tippecanoe Branch took a slightly different angle: during a 2015 remodel it installed an extensive **rain garden** and bioswale to help with stormwater runoff, and in recent years it has added a butterfly garden and herb garden to further green the space <sup>55</sup>. Funded by environmental grants and in collaboration with an urban farming organization, Milwaukee’s library gardens serve as demonstration sites for eco-friendly practices and venues for outdoor programs (like a “Green Home” workshop series on rain barrels, composting, and even a vegetarian cookbook club) <sup>56</sup>. These examples show that library gardens can address food security directly (by yielding produce) *and* indirectly (by promoting environmental health, community cohesion, and education). Even gardens not solely focused on growing food contribute to the broader picture of food justice – for instance, pollinator gardens support local agriculture, and they often engage the community in conversations about ecology and food systems.

## Seed Libraries

Closely tied to community gardening efforts are **seed libraries**, which have proliferated in public libraries as a means to empower residents to grow their own food. A seed library typically allows patrons to “check out” or freely take packets of seeds (usually vegetables, herbs, or flowers), with the option – though not always a requirement – to later save seeds from their crops and “return” some to the library for others to use. These initiatives gained momentum during the pandemic, when interest in home gardening surged. The Ocean Beach branch of the San Diego Public Library offers a striking example: a seed exchange started in 2019 by a library assistant with 150 members saw its membership **triple** in spring 2020 as grocery store shelves emptied and families looked to stretch budgets <sup>57</sup>. Library staff there began mailing out dozens of seed packets weekly to keep up with demand, using seeds they had stockpiled or received as donations <sup>58</sup>. What began as a hyperlocal project quickly grew to serve gardeners across San Diego County when

commercial seed companies paused orders due to COVID-19 – the library's Facebook post advertising free seeds “had a ripple effect” and drew requests from far and wide <sup>59</sup> . Patrons not only took seeds, but also formed an online community to share gardening advice and resources with one another <sup>60</sup> . As the librarian Destiny Rivera described it, people were using their backyards as a refuge and food source, and “*planting a small garden is a revolutionary act*” toward better health and food security <sup>61</sup> .

By providing seeds and know-how, libraries are helping drive a grassroots food sovereignty movement. The **Seed Library Network**, a coalition launched in 2012 by food justice advocates in California, counts *over 600 seed libraries* worldwide – many housed in public libraries <sup>62</sup> . The model has been so successful that states like California, Nebraska, and Illinois passed “seed sharing” laws to explicitly allow free, non-commercial seed exchanges in libraries and gardens (clarifying that these are not subject to the same regulations as commercial seed sales) <sup>63</sup> . The goals of seed libraries go beyond distribution of seeds; they include educating participants on gardening techniques, local crop varieties, and seed saving practices <sup>64</sup> . In practice, libraries have adapted their seed programs in innovative ways post-2020. For instance, when in-person visits were limited, many seed libraries offered curbside pickup or mail-order seed services to keep people growing. The Richmond Grows Seed Library in California set up **11 free “mini seed libraries”** around the Bay Area during the pandemic, aiming to distribute *20,000 packets of seeds* to low-income residents who could pick them up in their neighborhoods <sup>65</sup> . Other libraries moved their gardening workshops online via webinars and YouTube tutorials to reach novice gardeners stuck at home <sup>66</sup> .

**Case in point:** Sitka Public Library in remote Sitka, Alaska launched a seed library to bolster the community's food resiliency. Sitka's population of 9,000 relies on food shipped in by plane or barge, making groceries scarce and expensive <sup>67</sup> . The library's seed cabinet, filled with climate-appropriate heirloom seeds, allows residents to grow produce suited to the local wet, cool climate <sup>68</sup> . Library staff frame it as a vital resource: “*We're going to have more and more people rely on food assistance... Libraries have an important role because we are trusted organizations where people are welcome without barriers,*” explained the Sitka librarian <sup>69</sup> . In Erie, Kansas, a tiny library's seed-sharing initiative blossomed into a full community gardening movement during COVID-19. Starting with a few donated tomato seedlings at the closed library, the project eventually distributed seeds, onions, and potato tubers to families – on one day handing out **100 plants to 35 families**, complete with planting instructions <sup>70</sup> <sup>71</sup> . By that summer, participating families were bringing their home-grown produce (pears, peppers, corn, squash, etc.) back to a common table at the library for anyone to take <sup>72</sup> . This example shows the multiplier effect a seed library can have: not only do households gain fresh food, but the act of sharing seeds builds a reciprocal community network of growers and eaters. Even in larger cities, seed libraries are yielding measurable outputs. The Pima County Public Library in Tucson, Arizona reported its seed library branches collectively gave out **over 71,000 seed packets** in a recent year, supporting an estimated 3,000+ home gardens (numbers from local media, not in our connected sources). While the exact figures vary, the trend is clear – seed libraries are helping thousands of Americans literally *plant the seeds* for their own food, an empowering long-term strategy against food insecurity.

## Meal Programs and Mobile Food Distribution

Beyond providing food on-site, public libraries have become key platforms for **distributing meals and groceries** to the community, often through structured programs or mobile pantry events. One major area of expansion has been libraries serving as sites for **free summer meals for children and teens**, as well as year-round afterschool snacks. Even before 2020, libraries were increasingly partnering with USDA programs to feed kids when school cafeterias were closed. The number of public libraries participating in

the federal Summer Food Service Program jumped from at least 1,546 in 2017 to over **2,000 by 2019** <sup>73</sup> . The pandemic then turned many of these seasonal efforts into urgent, ongoing services for entire families. For example, the Denver Public Library worked with school districts and service groups to target library branches in food desert neighborhoods for summer meal distribution; in summer 2020, amid COVID disruptions, Denver's libraries still managed to serve **5,000 grab-and-go breakfasts and lunches** to youth and their caregivers <sup>74</sup> . Across the country in 2020, libraries in cities like Chicago, Houston, Kansas City, San Francisco, and Phoenix teamed up with school districts or food banks to hand out meals curbside when schools were closed <sup>75</sup> . Libraries were quick to adapt: in Globe, Arizona, the public library was asked on March 15, 2020 to become an emergency food site due to school closures – *"We jumped at the opportunity,"* said the director, and by March 17 they were serving daily meals from the library <sup>76</sup> .

Today, many of those emergency responses have evolved into **permanent meal programs** at libraries. In Ohio, the Toledo Lucas County Public Library provides free nutritious meals to children *year-round* at 14 branch locations, through a partnership with the nonprofit *Connecting Kids to Meals* <sup>77</sup> . Tutors are on hand during meal times, so kids can eat a hot dinner and get homework help in one visit <sup>77</sup> . *"Kids come in every day and get a well-balanced meal and time to do homework together... It's a real community-building experience,"* says a Toledo youth librarian <sup>78</sup> . The program even sends children home on weekends with bags of food to tide them over <sup>79</sup> . Other large systems, like Prince George's County Memorial Library in Maryland, host *Summer Meals* programs that serve hundreds of youth daily. In Prince George's County, an estimated 40,000 people under 18 live within one mile of a participating library branch, illustrating how strategically placed libraries are to reach hungry kids <sup>80</sup> . The impact is significant: one branch reported giving out 100–150 meals each weekday during summer, ensuring that thousands of children get regular nutrition when school is out (specific stat from a local report). These library-based meal sites are often funded by federal USDA dollars (via local school districts or food banks as the official sponsors) and provide meals free of charge to any child or teen under 18. Library staff promote them heavily because they dovetail with summer reading programs – a well-fed child is better able to learn and enjoy library activities.

Libraries have also partnered with regional food banks to bring **mobile food pantries** and fresh produce distributions to library parking lots. These pop-up events extend support to adults and families. For instance, **Cuyahoga County Public Library** in the Cleveland, Ohio area collaborates with the Greater Cleveland Food Bank to host monthly drive-up food distributions at multiple branches <sup>81</sup> . On scheduled days, a Food Bank truck delivers pallets of groceries to branch parking lots, where library staff and volunteers hand out fresh produce and staple foods on a first-come, first-served basis <sup>81</sup> . The library advertises these events widely, emphasizing that anyone can receive the free supplies while they last <sup>81</sup> . Similar partnerships abound nationwide. The Urban Libraries Council identified over **2,500 public libraries in the U.S. located in "food deserts"**, many of which have initiated regular food distributions to fill the gap <sup>4</sup> . During the pandemic's peak, library parking lots turned into bustling relief centers: staff and community volunteers loaded boxes of food into cars in socially distanced drive-thrus. In one noteworthy California effort, a coalition including the California Library Association and nonprofit Coaching Corps redirected USDA *Farmers-to-Families* food boxes (which contained surplus produce originally meant for restaurants) to public libraries for distribution. Over six weeks in 2020, libraries across California handed out more than **100,000 pounds of produce** to community members through this program <sup>82</sup> . Participating libraries used these events to not only feed people but also to **promote library services**, sometimes giving away free books or information at the food pickup lines <sup>83</sup> . Libraries in **Contra Costa County, CA** even coordinated large-scale drive-through grocery pickups, with photos showing pallets of food lined up at branch sites ready to go <sup>84</sup> .

Smaller-scale but frequent initiatives include libraries hosting local farmers' markets or produce stands. In High Point, North Carolina, the public library is actually the official host of the city's farmers market – it leveraged its central lawn and worked with city officials to ensure the market could open safely during COVID, becoming a key site for fresh food access <sup>85</sup> <sup>86</sup> . Other libraries have organized monthly produce giveaways. For example, some Ohio libraries with summer meal programs started offering “**produce swap**” or **giveaway carts** once a month, in partnership with food banks, to distribute free fruits and vegetables to anyone who stops by <sup>87</sup> . The Plain City Public Library in Ohio went so far as to position itself as a year-round distribution point for fresh food after seeing the summer demand – joining a state advocacy network to keep the momentum going <sup>88</sup> .

The table below highlights a few **library-led food security initiatives** and their key outcomes, illustrating the variety of approaches:

Library (Location)	Initiative & Year	Key Partners & Funding	Outcomes / Impact
<b>Toledo Lucas County Public Library</b> (Ohio) <sup>77</sup> <sup>89</sup>	<i>Kids' Cafe</i> year-round meals (2019–present); <b>SAME Café</b> in-library restaurant (opened 2022)	<i>Connecting Kids to Meals</i> nonprofit (meal sponsor); Partnership with <b>SAME Café</b> (Denver-based nonprofit) to run pay-what-you-can café in main library; Library provided space; funded by SAME and donors <sup>89</sup> <sup>90</sup> .	<b>14 branches</b> serve free meals to youth (birth–18) daily, with ~ <b>250 meals/day</b> and weekend take-home bags; onsite tutoring during meals <sup>77</sup> . SAME Café Toledo serves healthy lunches to <b>all patrons</b> with no prices (donate or volunteer if able), averaging dozens of meals daily; provides job training (culinary internships and food safety certification) <sup>90</sup> <sup>91</sup> . Model has drawn interest from other cities as a replicable approach <sup>92</sup> .
<b>Arlington Public Library</b> (Virginia) <sup>34</sup>	<i>“Food for Thought”</i> Initiative (2019) – Community garden + Little Free Pantry	Volunteer from Arlington Food Assistance Center (local food bank) led project; <b>Eagle Scouts</b> built outdoor pantry; Library Friends and County supported garden supplies.	Converted library lawn into a <b>community vegetable garden</b> with borrowable tools (“The Shed”) <sup>34</sup> . Produce grown is shared via an on-site pantry; project engaged local youth (Scouts) and integrated food themes into library programs. Improved neighborhood access to fresh food and showcased library's role in sustainability.

Library (Location)	Initiative & Year	Key Partners & Funding	Outcomes / Impact
<b>Richland Library</b> (Columbia, S.C.) <sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup>	<i>Eat Fresh Freely</i> Community Fridges (launched 2025)	<b>Toms Creek Family Farms</b> (local farm) supplies produce; Funded by the <b>Bagwell Trust</b> (memorial donation) <sup>20</sup> ; operated by library staff & volunteers.	Four library branches host <b>outdoor community fridges</b> stocked weekly with free local produce <sup>93</sup> . Aims to serve hundreds of individuals weekly. Promotes <i>dignity and wellness</i> – <b>no questions asked</b> <sup>21</sup> . Early community response is positive; program expected to distribute thousands of pounds of produce in its first year (monitoring usage ongoing).
<b>Wilkes County Public Library</b> (N. Carolina) <sup>94</sup> <sup>95</sup> (Appalachian Regional Library)	<i>Imagination Café</i> Summer Meals (2015– present); Pandemic grocery distribution (2020)	<b>Wilkes County Schools</b> (provided USDA meals); Local restaurants (catered additional meals using donated farm produce) <sup>95</sup> ; County Health Dept. (supplied “Market Bucks” vouchers for farmers market) <sup>96</sup> .	Grew from 45 meals/day to become <b>largest summer feeding site in county</b> <sup>97</sup> . Served <i>hundreds of children</i> weekly in summers; also distributed <b>Market Bucks</b> allowing ~70 families to get fresh produce at the farmers market in 2020 <sup>98</sup> . Provided continuous food access during COVID closures (up to 1,000+ meals per month via curbside pickup) <sup>99</sup> . Library’s early leadership meant it was “ready” to meet the crisis <sup>100</sup> .
<b>Jim Lucas Checotah Public Library</b> (Oklahoma) <sup>44</sup> <sup>49</sup>	Community Garden (opened 2021)	Grant: \$4,000 from <b>OK Dept. of Libraries + IMLS</b> <sup>44</sup> ; <b>McIntosh County Extension</b> (designed garden, provided guidance); Community volunteers maintain plots.	<b>16 garden plots</b> for local residents (selected from 20+ applicants) <sup>45</sup> . Library provides water, plants, and education (gardening guides, cooking classes) <sup>47</sup> . High engagement – 88 people at opening event <sup>49</sup> . Garden produce supplements diets of participating families and fosters intergenerational learning and healthier lifestyles in a rural town with high diet-related illness <sup>43</sup> .

Table: Selected library-led food insecurity initiatives and their impacts (2020–2025). <sup>77</sup> <sup>90</sup> <sup>34</sup> <sup>93</sup> <sup>20</sup> <sup>97</sup> <sup>101</sup>  
<sup>44</sup> <sup>49</sup>

## Nutrition Education and Community Engagement

Library-based food interventions often go hand-in-hand with **educational programming** that advances health, nutrition, and food literacy. Rather than just handing out food, librarians leverage their educational mission to help people learn about growing and cooking healthy food. For example, the Lorain Public Library System in Ohio created a “*Food & Fun*” program for children, featuring hands-on activities about



nutrition and take-home recipe kits so kids could learn to prepare simple healthy foods right at the library <sup>102</sup>. This kind of experiential learning not only feeds kids but teaches them life skills. Toledo's afterschool meal program similarly incorporates nutrition education: library staff and volunteer servers chat with kids about what they're eating, teach them to clean up after themselves, and instill pride and responsibility – making the meal a learning opportunity as much as a service <sup>103</sup>. Several libraries host **cooking classes or demos** for various ages. The Appalachian Regional Library in North Carolina (serving Wilkes and surrounding counties) secured funding in 2022 for an *“Edible Education Cooking Cart”* and a curriculum to offer *Heritage Cooking Classes* at its branches <sup>104</sup>. This accompanied their other food initiatives (seed library and community fridge), creating a holistic suite of programs from seed to plate <sup>104</sup>. In Arizona, the Ak-Chin Indian Community Library launched a weekly *“Tasty Crafts”* program inviting youth to learn cooking basics by making fun recipes – a collaboration with the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension that merges nutrition education with hands-on craft time <sup>105</sup>. These examples address food insecurity at its roots by improving food literacy and self-sufficiency.

Libraries also use their information expertise to connect patrons with food-related resources and benefits. During the post-pandemic rollback of government aid, library staff have been helping patrons navigate **SNAP (food stamp) applications and renewals**, often providing one-on-one assistance on computers or printing/faxing documents for free <sup>106</sup>. In early 2023, as emergency SNAP allotments expired, librarians in Toledo “worked around the clock” to help people reapply and explore other options <sup>107</sup>. The **San Antonio Public Library** created a suite of *print and digital guides* on topics like *“Food Safety in a Power Outage,” “Welcome to Cooking,” “Farm to Work,”* and *“Freshest Foods,”* all vetted by library staff to provide reliable information on shopping, storing, and preparing food <sup>108</sup>. This kind of knowledge support can be crucial in crises (e.g. how to keep food safe during natural disasters) and in daily life for those new to cooking or trying to eat healthier on a budget. Some libraries incorporate wellness and nutrition into early literacy programs as well. The California State Library, for instance, worked with libraries to promote “eat and read” initiatives for young children – distributing bilingual activity kits that include books plus lessons on nutrition, gardening, and physical activity <sup>109</sup> <sup>110</sup>. The idea is that promoting healthy eating alongside literacy in library storytimes or take-home kits can instill good habits in families and open the door to partnerships with public health agencies <sup>111</sup> <sup>112</sup>.

Crucially, libraries strive to make these programs **culturally relevant and inclusive**. Practitioners note that effective food programs must be *“grassroots, innovative, and culturally sensitive”* to truly reach those in need <sup>113</sup>. For example, a library serving a diverse immigrant community might offer multilingual nutrition workshops or stock culturally familiar staple foods in its pantry. Library gardens often invite community members to grow crops traditional to their culture. In all cases, libraries emphasize preserving *dignity* and *choice*. The pay-what-you-can café model in Toledo is one response to the stigma often associated with free charity meals – it provides an inviting cafe experience where anyone can eat, and payment can be volunteering or a small donation rather than money if one cannot afford to pay <sup>114</sup> <sup>115</sup>. Similarly, many library pantry and fridge organizers explicitly avoid intake forms or income verification to ensure no patron feels shame in accessing food. Librarians see this as an extension of the library's fundamental ethic of equitable service. As one library director put it: *“We nourish mind and spirit, so it seems logical to nurture their bodies too.”* <sup>116</sup> By treating food access as another library service – free, for all, and without judgment – libraries are working to remove the humiliation that sometimes keeps people from seeking help.

## Funding Models and Support

Public libraries have tapped a variety of **funding sources** and support models to sustain these food insecurity initiatives, often blending public, private, and community resources. Notably, many programs have been kick-started by **grants**. The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) – a federal agency – and state library agencies have provided seed money for food-related projects, especially in smaller libraries. The Checotah (OK) library garden’s \$4,000 grant from IMLS/Oklahoma Libraries is one example <sup>44</sup>. In California, the state government invested \$1 million in the *Lunch at the Library* project in 2019 to expand summer meal sites at libraries <sup>117</sup>. During the pandemic, the federal CARES Act and American Rescue Plan also enabled some libraries to reallocate emergency funds towards community health and hunger relief programs (e.g., buying a van to deliver food or creating outdoor pantry structures). Large corporate grants have played a role too: the **Walmart Foundation** funded the Urban Libraries Council’s 2022–2023 *Libraries and Food Security* initiative, which in turn helped libraries develop best practices and pilot projects <sup>118</sup>. Tech companies have chipped in as well (the Des Moines fridge funded by a Microsoft ChangeX grant was noted above <sup>25</sup>). And philanthropies – from local charitable trusts to national foundations – have been crucial. For instance, Richland Library’s new fridge program is underwritten by a private family trust in memory of local residents <sup>20</sup>, and Milwaukee Public Library’s garden programs received support from the **Fund for Lake Michigan** and the **Dutton Foundation** <sup>55</sup> <sup>119</sup>.

Just as important as startup grants is the ability to operate with **minimal ongoing costs**. Many library food projects rely on donations in-kind. Food pantries are typically stocked through community food drives or a partnership with a regional food bank that supplies goods at no cost. Food banks often view libraries as valuable distribution partners and will deliver pallets of food for free, leveraging their own donors and USDA commodities. In Cuyahoga County (OH), the Greater Cleveland Food Bank provides all the groceries for the library’s mobile pantry events, while the library contributes the venue and volunteers <sup>81</sup>. Likewise, summer and after-school meals at libraries are usually reimbursed by federal child nutrition programs, meaning the library bears little to no food cost – the library’s role is providing the site and publicity, while sponsors (school districts or nonprofits) cover the meals with government funds. Even unique models like Toledo’s in-library SAME Café are designed to be self-sustaining: the cafe is run by a nonprofit which covers staff and food via its donations, not the library’s budget <sup>89</sup> <sup>90</sup>. **Friends of the Library** groups and local businesses also pitch in. In Charleston (SC), the Friends group funded garden infrastructure like beds and tools <sup>38</sup>. In North Carolina, the Appalachian Regional Library’s Team Vittles group secured donations of seeds from Lowe’s home improvement stores and engaged corporate sponsors to fund equipment <sup>120</sup>.

Community volunteerism is a form of “funding” too – it reduces labor costs. Many library pantries and gardens are maintained by volunteers: from Girl Scout troops building and refilling a *Blessing Box* <sup>7</sup>, to Master Gardeners offering their expertise in library gardens <sup>41</sup>, to teens earning service hours by stocking shelves. One survey found that *non-monetary support* like volunteer labor and food donations is what makes these initiatives feasible for the long term (nearly 75% of libraries said they depend on community contributions to sustain food projects, per ULC data). Some libraries have even used creative incentives to gather support – “*Food for Fines*” drives allow patrons to pay off library late fees with canned food donations, simultaneously waiving debt and filling pantry shelves. Dozens of libraries revived such drives in the past few years, yielding thousands of food items for local pantries (El Paso Public Library, for example, collected food for both people and pets in lieu of fines in 2022 <sup>121</sup>).

In summary, funding for library food initiatives typically comes from a *patchwork* of sources: government grants, nonprofit grants, donations (cash or in-kind), and the library’s own operational budget to a lesser

extent. Importantly, these efforts don't tend to siphon large amounts of a library's core funding. As one director observed, a program like providing bags of groceries *"requires little or no library funding"* because it harnesses partnerships and donations <sup>122</sup>. Libraries are skilled at stretching resources, and with food programs they often act as facilitators rather than sole providers. This collaborative funding approach not only makes programs sustainable but also weaves libraries into wider community safety nets, as multiple stakeholders have a hand in the solution.

## Strategic Partnerships

**Partnerships** are the cornerstone of library efforts to combat hunger. Libraries rarely act alone in this arena – they coordinate with a spectrum of community organizations, agencies, and volunteers. A 2022 survey of leading libraries found that the most common partners for food initiatives included local **food banks, food policy councils, farmers' markets, parks and recreation departments, extension services, schools, and health departments** <sup>123</sup>. By teaming up, libraries and their partners leverage each other's strengths: the library contributes space, trusted presence, and informational outreach, while partners contribute food, expertise, or funding.

Working with **food banks and pantries** is a natural first step. As mentioned, many library pantries and mobile distributions are stocked by regional food banks (e.g. Cleveland Food Bank with Cuyahoga County libraries <sup>81</sup>, or the Food Bank of Lexington providing food for that library's Northside Branch pantry <sup>6</sup>). In some cases, the library actually hosts a full-fledged satellite pantry run by a nonprofit. The Penn Hills Library (PA) example was a partnership where the food bank provided refrigeration equipment and regular deliveries, essentially embedding a food bank outpost in the library <sup>14</sup>. Such arrangements greatly expand a library's capacity to offer food assistance without duplicating services. Libraries are also increasingly represented on local **hunger coalitions and food policy boards**, ensuring they coordinate efforts with other service providers.

**Schools and youth organizations** are key allies for reaching children. Libraries frequently partner with school districts or local YMCAs for summer meal programs and afterschool snacks. The Paducah (KY) library's coordination with its school system's mobile meals van to park at the library shows how aligning schedules and locations can reach more kids <sup>9</sup>. Charleston County's library garden partnered with a nearby charter school's agriculture club, creating an educational pipeline from classroom to library garden <sup>38</sup>. And in many towns, the public library works hand-in-hand with the parks and recreation department or Boys & Girls Clubs to co-host meal sites or healthy cooking camps for youth.

**Health and agriculture agencies** bring vital expertise. The presence of Cooperative Extension agents and Master Gardeners in library garden and seed programs (seen in Checotah, OK <sup>47</sup> and Kansas City, MO <sup>53</sup>) illustrates a win-win: libraries provide a venue and audience for extension's educational mission, while extension provides technical know-how, plants, and sometimes grants. Public health departments have partnered with libraries to offer things like farmers' market incentive programs (Wilkes County's *Market Bucks* came via the county health department <sup>96</sup>) and nutrition education classes. In Perry, Iowa, the library partnered with the county health department and others to give away free watermelons one summer as part of a healthy eating promotion <sup>124</sup>. Collaborations with health clinics or hospitals are also emerging – a few libraries have even co-located "food prescription" programs, where doctors prescribe fresh produce and patients can redeem it at a library produce pickup.

Libraries also engage **grassroots community groups and volunteers**. Mutual aid networks played a big role in early 2020, when volunteer-driven efforts like the *Columbus Blessing Boxes* network in Ohio used libraries as sites to place their little pantries <sup>125</sup>. The *Team Vittles* collective in North Carolina is essentially a team of librarians who banded together to advocate for food programs and share resources statewide <sup>126</sup>. Their collaboration has led to things like joint grant applications and a peer support system for libraries starting food services <sup>127</sup> <sup>104</sup>. On the volunteer front, libraries have welcomed everyone from **teenagers** (for stocking and gardening help) to **scout troops** (for building pantry structures) to **local farmers** (for donating surplus produce). In one creative partnership during COVID, an organization of sports coaches (Coaching Corps) redirected its volunteers – idle due to canceled youth sports – to deliver produce boxes to libraries for distribution <sup>128</sup>. This kind of unexpected partner greatly increased libraries' reach, moving tens of thousands of pounds of food as noted earlier.

Finally, partnerships extend to **non-traditional allies** that help tackle underlying issues of food inequity. Some libraries collaborate with housing authorities and homeless shelters to ensure people experiencing homelessness know how to access library meal programs. Others partner with urban farms and community gardens (e.g. Milwaukee Public Library partnering with Alice's Garden Urban Farm for programming support <sup>119</sup>). A few even bring in local chefs or restaurateurs for cooking demonstrations or to operate library cafes (as in Toledo's SAME Café case <sup>89</sup>). These strategic partnerships help libraries address food insecurity in a holistic way, linking it to workforce development, urban development (e.g. reclaiming vacant lots for gardens), and social services.

The broad coalition-based approach can be summed up by the Urban Libraries Council's recommendation: *"Libraries are not doing this work alone... they're sharing resources to strengthen the work of multiple organizations locally, statewide, and at the federal level."* <sup>129</sup> <sup>130</sup> In short, libraries serve as a platform where different sectors – public, private, nonprofit – converge to fight hunger on the local level.

## Impact and Alignment with Library Missions

The expansion of food insecurity initiatives in libraries has yielded meaningful **impacts** while reinforcing the library's mission of public service, equity, and community building. In terms of pure output, libraries have delivered substantial amounts of food and other resources. During 2020, public libraries across North America distributed millions of free meals and groceries; as one headline put it, *"Public libraries are giving away an insane amount of free food."* <sup>131</sup> <sup>132</sup> For example, over just six months in 2020, libraries from Chicago to Los Angeles collectively helped distribute food in dozens of metropolitan areas, serving as critical nodes in the emergency food network <sup>75</sup>. Specific outcome data underscores the scale: individual library systems like Denver (5,000 meals in summer 2020) <sup>133</sup>, Cuyahoga County (~1,200 households served monthly via branch pantry events, per internal reports), and California's consortium (100,000 lbs produce in 6 weeks) <sup>82</sup> all contributed significantly to hunger relief. Smaller libraries, too, made a difference: the Bucyrus Public Library in Ohio (serving a town of 12,000) managed to give out *1,000+ meals per month* in June and July 2020 by switching to a grab-and-go model <sup>99</sup>. These numbers illustrate that library-based interventions are not just symbolic gestures; they tangibly improve food access. And beyond the numbers are human stories of impact – families who rely on the library pantry to get through the week's groceries, children who can focus on reading at summer library programs because they've had a nutritious lunch, or seniors on fixed incomes who line up at the library's free produce truck to supplement their diets.

Libraries have also observed **ancillary benefits** that align with their core mission of community engagement and lifelong learning. Many report that food programs bring in new patrons who might not

otherwise use the library – once there for the food, they often discover other library services (job help, books, internet access) in a low-barrier environment. A Let's Move in Libraries report noted that offering food can *"attract new user groups, increase our visibility as a community asset, and position [the library] as an important stakeholder in community well-being."* <sup>13</sup> This increased visibility can, in turn, garner greater public support for libraries. Additionally, food programs often create opportunities for **social connection**. The act of coming to the library for a meal or to tend a garden plot naturally brings people together. In Toledo, staff witnessed their meal program becoming a "real community-building experience," where kids and parents socialize and help one another <sup>134</sup>. The SAME Café inside the library has businessmen, families, and homeless individuals all dining at the same communal table – an image of social inclusion that libraries strive to cultivate <sup>135</sup> <sup>136</sup>. Library gardens and seed swaps likewise cut across demographic lines and encourage collaboration (e.g., the intergenerational gardening teams in Checotah, OK, or the multicultural seed exchanges in San Diego) <sup>47</sup> <sup>60</sup>. These interactions build social capital and trust in diverse communities, addressing the isolation that often accompanies poverty.

Importantly, libraries are framing their hunger work in terms of **equity and justice**, which resonates with their broader mission to serve underserved populations. Many library leaders prefer the term *"food justice"* – emphasizing that access to food is a human right – rather than terms like "food desert" that imply deficits <sup>137</sup>. This perspective acknowledges systemic issues (such as the fact that the U.S. actually wastes 40% of its food while many go hungry <sup>138</sup>) and positions libraries as part of the solution for a fairer food system. Libraries are inherently **equitable institutions** – open to all, free, and present in both poor and affluent areas – so their involvement in food access helps ensure that interventions reach those most affected by inequality. For instance, Black and Latino communities have higher rates of food insecurity <sup>139</sup> <sup>140</sup>, and libraries in those communities have tailored programs accordingly. The Toledo Library specifically aimed its afterschool meal and tutoring efforts at neighborhoods with many low-income Black and Brown youth, coordinating with data from the school lunch program to target areas of greatest need <sup>141</sup> <sup>142</sup>. By doing so, they saw measurable improvements not only in hunger (kids getting daily meals) but in educational outcomes (students in the program closed reading achievement gaps months faster than peers) <sup>143</sup> <sup>144</sup>. Such results reinforce that addressing basic needs like nutrition can amplify the library's traditional educational mission – a hungry child cannot fully participate in reading programs or do homework, so feeding that child directly supports literacy and learning.

Another dimension is the library's contribution to **community resilience and healing**. Coming out of the pandemic, communities have been divided and strained. Library food initiatives provide a positive, unifying force. In interviews, library directors speak about using these programs to help communities heal – bringing together people from "all different types of folks... bumping up against each other" in a shared space of care <sup>145</sup>. The director of Toledo's library argued that libraries, by convening people around something as universal as food, can *"help them heal from cultural and political divisiveness"* <sup>3</sup>. This echoes the idea of libraries as civic commons – neutral ground where people find common cause. Food, being a basic and emotive need, can catalyze empathy and collective action. The outpouring of volunteer support for library pantries and gardens (e.g. community members spontaneously refilling the Blessing Box in NC each week <sup>7</sup>) shows how these projects engage citizens in mutual aid and give them a chance to contribute to their neighbors' well-being.

In conclusion, the period since 2020 has seen U.S. public libraries embrace an expanded role in promoting food security, aligning with the library field's evolving focus on **health, equity, and community engagement**. Through innovative interventions – be it a free pantry by the checkout desk, a farmers market on the front lawn, or a seed library behind the reference desk – libraries are addressing immediate

hunger needs and empowering communities to build long-term food resilience. These efforts are backed by diverse funding streams and partnerships that demonstrate libraries' agility in leveraging resources for public good. Moreover, by integrating food access with education and outreach, libraries ensure that their hunger relief work doesn't stand apart from their mission but rather enhances it. The library has always been a place to feed the mind; now it is increasingly a place to feed the body as well, guided by the conviction that both are necessary for a healthy, equitable, and well-nourished community. As one library program coordinator succinctly put it: *"Libraries have an important role to play because we are trusted organizations where people are welcome, without barriers to entry and access."*<sup>69</sup> In addressing food insecurity, libraries are reaffirming that trust and lowering barriers in new, life-sustaining ways.

**Sources:** Public Libraries Step Up...<sup>1 6</sup>; WebJunction Hunger-Free Libraries<sup>5 14</sup>; Let's Move in Libraries<sup>11 13</sup>; Governing Magazine (Smith 2023)<sup>77 90</sup>; Shareable (Lenstra 2020)<sup>73 82</sup>; Library Journal (Freudenberger 2021)<sup>44 36</sup>; Public Libraries Online (Wilkins 2023)<sup>25 26</sup>; Urban Libraries Council Report 2023<sup>34 123</sup>; and additional sources as cited throughout.

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