The Challenge: Food pantries are key components of the local food environment for tens of thousands of individuals in Wisconsin. Reliance on pantries has increased 56 percent in Wisconsin since the onset of the recession in 2007. Despite this growing need and use, food pantry inventories have never been systematically evaluated for food safety and nutritional quality, nor has a systematic effort been made to engage and educate pantries as active partners in improving the safety and nutritional quality of distributed food.

Project Goal: The objective of this grant was to develop and implement a food pantry self-assessment toolkit. Six food pantries and three Community Action Programs participated in the piloting and development of the toolkit that allows food pantry staff to:

- self-evaluate the quantity, nutritional quality and safety of current inventory
- develop strategies to align food procurement and distribution with food safety/dietary guidelines
- implement food distribution policies that ensure clients receive healthy food packages
- implement strategies to reinforce healthy food messages to clients in conjunction with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) in an effort to improve client food choice

Results: The project successfully created a 74-page toolkit for food pantries. Additionally, UW Extension developed an online version of the toolkit, which includes supplemental training and discussion opportunities at fyi.uwex.edu/safehealthypantries/. All participating food pantries identified specific action items to improve the nutritional quality and food safety at their pantries, and added plans to develop policy statements related to nutrition and food safety.

The project received additional funding for $8,520 from the Wisconsin Department of Public Health to print 600 color copies of the toolkit to disseminate to The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) outlets statewide, TEFAP coordinating organizations and county extension staff. A presentation in July 2015 to the statewide TEFAP Advisory Council introduced the toolkit and explored ways it can be used. Also in July, 45 UW-Extension Family Living and Nutrition Education program educators were trained to use the toolkit.