FOOD BANK of ALASKA

1 The Basics of Distributing Food in Your Community

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FOOD BANK OF ALASKA
IMPORTANT CONTACTS LIST

Jim Baldwin, Chief Executive Officer
Email: jbaldwin@foodbankofalaska.org
Work: 907.222.3111

Barb Seibel, Chief Financial Officer
Email: bseibel@foodbankofalaska.org
Work: 907.222.3110

Mike Reusser, Chief Operating Officer
Email: mreusser@foodbankofalaska.org
Work: 907.222.3108

Cara Durr, Chief of Advocacy and Public Policy
Email: cdurr@foodbankofalaska.org
Work: 907.222.3113

Jenny Di Grappa, Chief of Philanthropy and Community Relations
Email: jdigrappa@foodbankofalaska.org
Work: 907.222.3102

Anthony Reinert, Director of Food Programs
Email: areinert@foodbankofalaska.org
Work: 907.222.3104

Rusty DuMont, Warehouse Manager
Email: rdumont@foodbankofalaska.org
Work: 907.222.3190

Rebecca Guyer, Program and Agency Relations Lead
Email: rguyer@foodbankofalaska.org
Work: 907.222.3100

Mark Redmon, Food Donation Coordinator
Email: mredmon@foodbankofalaska.org
Work: 907.222.3115

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A food pantry is a community-based program that collects and stores food to distribute free of charge to low-income families and individuals. Food pantries provide a nutritionally balanced supply of food to families and individuals in need, typically for approximately three to seven days. Food pantries offer communities an effective pre-planned approach of handling emergency food assistance to those in need. Although most food pantries provide temporary food assistance more are choosing to also provide resources and referrals for SNAP/food stamps, vocational opportunities, medical assistance, housing, and other informational services that address the underlying causes of hunger and offer a comprehensive approach to helping community members in need.

As you read this manual, you will find that there are many challenges to starting an emergency food program. With hard work and dedication, you will begin a successful program. Food pantrying is a crucial part of providing social services to your community. Emergency distribution centers, food pantries and meal programs have the ability to not only provide food to families and individuals, but they also have the capacity to reach out and provide those in need with sustainable and long-term solutions to poverty and hunger. Starting your program right is essential to the overall effectiveness you will have in your community. Please use the information in this manual to establish a strong foundation for your organization. We at the Food Pantry of Alaska are excited that you are partnering with us in our vision for a strong emergency food system and will be here to support you as you begin this charitable endeavor. Good luck!

To develop a successful food program, begin by asking yourself the following the questions: Whom do we help? How do we notify those in need of our new program? How often can we help those individuals and families? Where do we get the food? What sources of funding and food do we want to tap?

No emergency food program will ever duplicate another exactly. Successful food pantries represent a community's unique response to the problem of hunger as it is felt locally. Whether a program serves participants who are predominantly senior citizens or young families, or whether it accepts walk-in, self-referrals or sends volunteers out to visit homes, the following components are crucial to success:

Evaluate the needs in your community and the population your food pantries will serve.

✓ Communicate with existing resources and services within your community and surrounding areas.

✓ When speaking with other local food pantries, discuss their hours of operation, structure of their program and their clientele to determine which days of the week, month and best times of day fit the needs of low-income and working poor families in your area. Careful coordination with local organizations is a key to your success. Ensure that your hours compliment those of nearby food pantries and your donor efforts aren't creating competition or oversaturating the area.

✓Cultivate community support and a reliable means of advertisement. Be certain to discuss your ideas for gaining support with other local and surrounding food programs to ensure the reduction of negative competition and encourage healthy relationships with other non-profit organizations in your community. Word of mouth, as well as flyers or other creative ideas can help to generate awareness of the new food pantry, as well as encourage volunteers. Keep in mind the variety of opportunities for everyone in the community to take part in the creation of a food pantry. Be sure to vocalize them so everyone knows there is an available role (e.g., working and/or volunteering at the site, financial bookkeeping and maintaining records, writings letters and grants for funding and food resources.)

Create a Steering Committee and Board of Directors

Though one person's energy and commitment usually can get the ball rolling, community efforts require broad-based community involvement and support. Not only is there a great deal of work to be done, but there are also a great number of decisions to be made. Involving several civic clubs, churches, businesses, etc. in sponsoring one food pantry has the added advantage of great cost effectiveness.

Including representatives from various public and private social service agencies will link your food pantry with other members of the assistance network. Think, too, of the kinds of expertise the food pantry may need to draw on and try to include people who will bring that knowledge or experience. This could include an attorney, an accountant, someone from the food industry such as a grocery store owner or local farmer.

The basic functions of a steering committee are planning/policy making and resource raising. Sometimes those tasks are best accomplished by dividing into smaller working groups. Among other things, the steering committee will need to:

1. Conduct a Needs Assessment to determine who is hungry

2. Determine what other agencies offer food assistance

3. Decide where the food pantry should be located

4. Mobilize resources to find a location

5. Recruit volunteers

6. Raise seed monies

7. Stock shelves

8. Spread the word

9. Set policies and operating procedures

10. Determine the hours of operation

11. Draft a budget

12. Decide whether the food pantry will operate under sponsorship of a church or existing agency or whether it should form its own agency, incorporate, and perhaps seek its own 501(c)(3) non-profit status.

13. Establish a Board of Directors

The Board of Directors

Develop a Board of Directors that includes volunteers from public and private agencies who are willing to commit time and ideas to planning, policymaking and fundraising for the new food pantry.

Creating a Board of Directors is an important task for a new non-profit organization. You will no doubt be tempted to place friends and family on your board. Though there is nothing wrong with that in a private organization, you will want to consider branching out past your inner circle to bring people with

expertise who are willing to challenge you. By achieving the right mix of individuals on your board, your organization can grow exponentially. Active boards engage in oversight of the organization to ensure it is operating ethically and performing tasks for the right reasons.

Composition of the Board

- The Chairperson of the Board is responsible for overseeing board meetings and is closely involved with the management of the organization. This person can be someone independent of the CEO or Executive Director.
- The Vice-Chair is responsible for the Chairperson's duties when the Chairperson is not present.
- The Treasurer is responsible for board finances and overseeing the organization's finances.
- The Secretary keeps minutes of board meetings and the board calendar as well as coordinating communications
- Board Members attend meetings and perform tasks assigned by the board.

Purpose of the Board of Directors

- To provide oversight and fiscal accountability.
- To assist in creating a mission, vision, and long-term goals for the organization.
- To select and appoint an Executive Director or manager of the emergency food program.
- To account to the public for the organization's finances, products, and services.
- To protect donor values.
- To actively work on fundraising for the organization (Note: this may not be true for larger sized organizations).
- Develop Articles of Incorporation and By-Laws.

Setting up your Board of Directors

- Decide how many members you want on your Board of Directors (odd numbers of members are recommended), their length of term (i.e., 1 year, 2 years or other) and term limits.
- Decide if you are going to be the Chairperson or find a different Chair.
- Contact potential candidates and interview them to gauge their interest and the value they will bring to your organization.
- Set the structure and dates of your meetings.

Create a Basic Business Plan

Each new food program should have a basic business plan. Food pantries have the same needs as basically any other small business. This plan should include:

✓ A Mission Statement: An agency must have a written, clearly defined mission statement. The statement should explain your intentions and it should support the need for a food program in your community. Here is an example of a basic mission statement:

"Our mission is to reduce hunger in Willow by providing wholesome foods to those in need."

✓ Food Program Budget: Given that there are food costs, staffing costs, rent etc., programs must have a current budget for their food program. This initial budget should include expenses such as: facility,

utilities, maintenance, office and cleaning supplies, insurance, transportation, storage, pest control, food, supplies, equipment, paid staff (if applicable), outreach efforts, etc. Contact the Food Pantry of Alaska Director of Food Programs for technical assistance for writing an effective budget.

✓ Criteria for Client Eligibility: Your food program should have written guidelines for food program participation which state your requirements for participation, as well as guidelines for refusing service to clients. An agency must practice a non-discriminatory policy. Agencies that serve specific populations (such as people living with HIV or AIDS, Seniors, Youth, etc.) are exempt from this requirement.

✓ Insurance Considerations: Insurance for the food pantry should be investigated early to protect volunteers, protect against product loss, and ensure that your agency can qualify for some funds.

✓ Please understand that no matter what type of food program you establish, you should always serve individuals without regard to their race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, ancestry, creed, religion, sexual orientation, physical appearance, disability status, age, pregnancy, or any group membership.

Food Program Hours of Operation

Using information gathered from your needs assessment; determine the days and hours of operation for your food program. It is essential to consider the population you are serving (e.g., young, old, working, all of the above), the time of day most suitable to those individuals and compliment the hours of operation for any other established food programs in your area. Most food pantries have clients that do work, so you should try to have at least one time a week where you are open in the evening or on Saturday.

Securing a Location and Basic Storage Guidelines

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The facility should be a safe, sanitary, and secure place to store food. The pantry should be in a low traffic area and easily accessible by clients. Try to establish a consistent and stable place to distribute from. If working in conjunction with a church or temple, perhaps you could use their basement for the food distribution. The pantry should include storage areas for dry, frozen, and refrigerated food products. Cold and frozen storage is highly recommended. Choosing a location with access to sinks and/or effective plumbing is required for handwashing, and close proximity to food working areas is ideal. Be sure to comply with all applicable state and local fire safety, food storage/handling requirements and health codes. You will want to contact your local Health Department for this. Regular pest and rodent control is necessary, and should be done by a professional.

When searching for a location, consider its accessibility to the customer or referring agencies the food pantry will serve. Consider the need for a vehicle to transport food. Look into local public transportation, parking availability and handicap accessibility. If possible, use separate doors for food intake outside of where clients come in. Aside from office supplies, the materials most frequently used by food pantries are grocery bags and small cardboard boxes. Asking stores, businesses, churches, and families to save and donate these items can keep a food pantry well supplied.

Please review the following Basic Storage Guidelines:

Agencies cannot operate the food program out of a home or garage.

- A food pantry should be in a room with adequate heating and cooling systems.
- All food must be stored at least 6 inches above the ground and 6 inches away from the walls and certain types of food products need to be separate and labeled. You should not store non-food

items in close proximity of food products, so therefore consider your shelving/containment options carefully.
- Any windows in the room need to be properly covered to protect food from direct sunlight.
- All food storage areas must have a working thermometer that monitors the temperature of the room.
- All areas must have fire extinguishers that are inspected and updated yearly.
- The storage space must be secure.
- Check with local grocery stores, hardware stores, schools, food processors, restaurants, public transportation districts etc. and ask if they have any shelving, vehicles, coolers, and freezers to donate to your new food program.

Equipment Requirements

- A cold storage thermometer must be located in each compartment of refrigeration and freezer storage units. Temperatures must be maintained between 35 and 40 degrees for refrigerators and between -10 and 0 degrees for freezers.
- The program must keep daily temperature logs of all cold units used to store food for the food pantry.
- The program should have enough containers with tight fitting lids, called pest-proof containers. These containers are used to aid in the prevention of pest infestations for items such as beans, rice, grains, etc. You may use any food-grade closed container, such as a large plastic garbage can or a metal cabinet. Be sure that the containers are food grade and if not that the food is put into food grade plastic bags before they are put in the containers.

An agency must have a pest control plan. It is recommended that your program have a current contract with a licensed professional exterminator and an extermination logbook. The extermination logbook will hold your extermination contract and receipts for each visit.

Please refer to Appendix A for a Sanitation Self-Evaluation Checklist.

Property and Personal Safety

- Have a permanent sign outside the food pantry indicating exact hours and days the food pantry will give out food.
- Have a wide-angle viewer installed in the door to the food pantry. Before opening the door, be sure there aren't more people than you expected.
- Have a dead bolt and chain on the main entrance.
- Have one or two other people at the food pantry during indicated hours the food pantry gives out food. If alone, arrange the pick-up times during hours when someone else can be at the food pantry with you.
- Never invite referrals or "walk-ins" to accompany you into the food pantry. You do not want to be in an isolated place with an unknown person.
- Call the police at the slightest infringement of your rights as a person. Give no indication of your routine arrival and departure times, or information about your home address, phone number, etc.
- Whether you are at work or at home always let someone know where you are going. Even if you live alone, leave a note, so that in case of an emergency, someone will know where to find you.

Develop a Food Pantry Model

There are two primary models for a food pantry: Client Choice and Food Box Program.

Client Choice

Client Choice programs allow clients to "choose" their own food during their visit. All food pantries that use this model establish a system unique to the program's size, square footage, number of staff or volunteer support and the amount of food and storage in the facility. Client Choice pantries require pre-planning. Some programs use a "menu" set-up in which a written menu is given to each client and then the client checks off the products he or she desires. Others use a point system determined by family (household) size. For example, a family of 2 may receive 20 points whereas a family of 5 would receive 50. Using the allotted points, individuals can decide which products they can take home. The point system would be determined by the type and number of products in the food pantry. The point system can allow your clients to move through your food pantry (space allowing) and select certain items off the shelf. Each shelf would be stocked with items that are a certain number of points. For example, a can of soup may be 1 point, cereal may be 3 points, and frozen meat could be 4 points.

Point values can be assigned and adjusted based on your supply of food as well as options for incentivizing healthful choices. As a result, your clients would move through your food pantry selecting items that they want in a similar fashion to a grocery store.

Client Choice pantries help to reduce the waste of emergency food and empower your clients to make choices for themselves.

The Food Bank of Alaska and the Alaska Food Coalition promotes this model as a best practice for food pantries, as it reduces waste and increases dignity for the clients.

Food Box

Food Box programs involve developing a nutritional menu for your clients and then pre-packing boxes with a multi-day supply of food for families of different sizes. Pre-packed food boxes or bags are well rounded and nutritionally adequate and distributed to eligible clients on the day of distribution. Food box programs are very common for programs that lack large amounts of space and volunteer help. Consider ways to accommodate culturally diverse and special dietary needs clients when putting together food boxes.

Community Outreach

Public relations might best be described as an organized and systematic way of keeping a community informed. Before people will volunteer or give money to any program, they must know about it. Here are a few tips:

- Use statistics and anecdotes to bring the problem of hunger to life. Print brochures.
- Provide supporting civic clubs and churches with brief updates for their newsletters and /or bulletins.
- Cultivate the local media.
- Start a mailing list of the names of supporters, volunteers, donors, and contacts.

- Publish (type and copy) a monthly newsletter – nothing fancy or lengthy, just interesting, and informative.
- Unless they prefer anonymity, thank everyone publicly for anything they do. This can be done in the newsletter or in some special cases, through the local press.
- Take pictures and put a slide show together but remember to always obtain releases from clients before using their photographs.

Use social media as a low to no-cost way to spread the word on the work you are doing. Start with a Facebook page, a blog, or a Twitter account. Finding a local student to get this started as a volunteer project makes this very easy to do. Alaska Food Coalition is a good resource to help link you to volunteer resources.

Communicating Hours & Requirements

It is important to let your community know eligibility requirements for receiving food from the very beginning. You need to tell your community who you are serving and why. The Food Bank of Alaska requires our partners to distribute food to the community "at large". This means that service be given regardless of race, ethnic origin, religion, sex, age, or any group membership.

You also need to indicate any restrictions your program will have in relations to service area, income levels, etc. Also indicate whether clients will be able to receive food on an emergency basis if they cannot come during regular hours of operation.

Communicating your program's guidelines from the beginning will help substantially in the long run.

The program should visibly publicize its presence and days and hours of operation in the community by distributing flyers or by listing its location, telephone number and days and hours of operation in a local newspaper or library, schools, churches, and other human service agencies. The organization should also register with the 211 system as many people are now using that to find services. Agencies do not necessarily have to use all these methods, and there may also be other ways to publicize.

In addition, the program should post a sign that indicates both the presence of the food program and the days and hours of operation at the facility. The sign should also include any notification of eligibility requirements and should be clearly visible to the general public. It may be part of a church marquee, or the days and hours of operation may be written on a poster board. A sign could also be placed on the outside door that clients use to access the food pantry, so they know which entrance to use.

Client Intake Procedures

As you begin to design a standard in-take procedure for your food pantry, consider the following questions before committing to a format.

- How often can a family receive assistance? Food pantries help clients anywhere from a daily basis to once a month depending on their food supply, staffing and storage capacity. If there are certain items you tend to have a surplus of, you may allow clients to return for additional 'partial' visits where they can pick up more of these items.

- How many families can your program help monthly? What is realistic in terms of your resources? How much time do committee/board members, volunteers and staff must manage the food pantry?
- How will you identify your clients? Decide how you want to verify identity but keep in mind that some individuals might want to hide their identity due to a domestic violence situation, pride, or embarrassment.
- What, if any, outreach efforts will your program make to assist clientele? Try to identify why the person is in need so you can better assist them. Not all people are getting the government assistance for which they are eligible. Sometimes you may need to refer them to a government agency or provide them with information. Keep a list of other agencies' names, phone numbers and addresses that offer other services available for referring clients.
- What geographical area will your program serve? Where is the local need? How far away are other food pantries?
- Can you accept referrals from other hunger related groups? How many each month?
- REMEMBER: Food Must Not Be Sold! You may not charge, solicit dues, fees, or donations from recipients of food.
- Decide what information you would like to gather from your client as they enter your facility.

Unfortunately, you may run across a difficult individual occasionally. You should be ready to effectively deal with the problem and not be discouraged in your work. Draft a screening process that fits reporting requirements you may have from funders or other agencies. Collecting information is important, but also consider making the process as simple and dignifying as possible for the client. Be considerate in not collecting information unless it is required by a funder or useful to your program's client services.

Here are some ideas on what you might ask:

- Name, address, phone number
- Number of people in the household and their birth dates. Always ask for birthdates instead of ages so that you know when ages change.
- Income level
- Unusual circumstances (e.g., homeless, lack of cooking facilities, disability, etc.)
- Special dietary needs (e.g., diabetic, vegetarian, hypoglycemic, lactose and wheat/gluten intolerance, low fat, or salt diets, etc.)
- The reason they are without food resources (e.g., What is the main reason that you are seeking help today?)
- The source of their referral to your program (e.g., How did you hear about the food pantry?)

Forms

Your program will want to have appropriate forms on file for all clients:

- Application: Clients will complete this comprehensive application during their first visit to the food pantry.
- Permanent Record Card or Electronic Database: Basic permanent information can be recorded on an index card and arranged alphabetically in a file box. Record on the card the assistance provided and the date. Although documenting your program is important, names of people and specific information about their lives and problems is confidential and should be accessible only

to the food pantry staff. *Client records should not leave the facility at any time for any purpose and should be locked up or, if the information is in a database, only key people have passwords to get into the database.*

Many programs take the information on the record card and input it into a computer database or input information directly into a database. Food Pantry of Alaska recommends this as a best practice. Contact us to learn about options for software programs.

NAME

IN FAMILY

ADDRESS

PHONE

CITY STATE ZIP CODE

Intake Form or Access Cards: Clients will complete and sign this form each time they receive food from the food program. For programs with computerized database systems, there may be options available to provide clients with access cards or provide signature pads for clients to sign in on.

Client Resources and Referrals

Meeting the needs of low-income and hungry people is a joint effort. Providing emergency food is an essential first step. There are also many other public and private programs designed to give individuals and families a "hand up" out of poverty. The Food Bank of Alaska recommends that you provide referrals to clients about other available programs and services. Some food pantries also offer one-on-one application assistance, which is the most effective form of outreach. The Food Bank of Alaska has a team dedicated to SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) outreach. Please contact the SNAP Outreach Manager for more information.

The more individualized your approach, the better – it's up to you to determine how much staff or volunteer time you can allocate to outreach.

The best time to determine which services a client may need is during intake. Talk with your clients – find out which costs they are struggling with and which programs they are currently participating in. The sample intake form lists some questions about program participation, and you can add more.

The following lists some of the most important programs that your clients should know about:

◊ SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program): Formerly the Food Stamp Program Provides a monthly stipend for food on a debit or EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) card. SNAP is designed to supplement clients' food budgets and ensure that they can access the nutrition needed to stay healthy. SNAP covers clients' fundamental need for food so they can better focus on staying in their homes, getting medical treatment, finding a job, etc.

◊ WIC (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants and Children): Provides healthy foods, nutrition information and referrals to health and social services to pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age five.

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◊ CSFP (Commodity Supplemental Food Program): Provides a monthly food package and assistance to participants 60 years of age and older and children from 5 to 6 years old not receiving WIC whose families qualify.

◊ School Meals (Breakfast and Lunch): Most Washington schools provide nutritious breakfasts and almost all provide lunch for students. Low-income students qualify for free or reduced-price school lunch. SNAP participants automatically qualify for free school meals.

◊ Summer Meal Program: Provides meals for children over the summer vacation. Sites are located across the state, but many areas remain underserved. Food pantries can sponsor a summer meal site in their area or assist in efforts to create awareness of existing programs.

Food is often not the only thing your clients are struggling with. Here are some other programs that can help:

◊ LIHEAP (Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program): Pays part of winter energy bills for low-income renters and homeowners.

◊ Medicaid: Pays for medical care for some low-income and medically needy people.

◊ Denali KidCare: Provides health insurance plan that provides coverage for eligible Alaskan children up to age 18 that meet income guidelines.

◊ TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families): Provides temporary cash assistance to needy families with minor dependent children.

◊ Federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC): A tax credit refund for low-income, working taxpayers. The amount of the credit is based on income, filing status and number of qualifying children, if any.

◊ Child Care Assistance: The State of Alaska pays for childcare subsidies to eligible households with parents who are working or are participating in a DHSS approved work activity and whose children meet citizenship requirements.

The emergency food box or meal that a client receives from your agency is a critical part of getting them through each day. However, to ensure that all clients are receiving all the public benefits they are eligible for is another way that you can help them meet all their needs, which will improve the overall status of their lives.

Sourcing Funds and Food

The key to both raising money and getting donated services is simple: ASK! Talk up the food pantry. Prepare a brief presentation that describes the people involved with the food pantry (steering committee members, volunteers, and clients). Be sure to tell a couple of compelling anecdotal stories about some of your clients. Enthusiasm is infectious; tell people about the food pantry and ask for their help. Today's "no" could be tomorrow's "yes", so don't give up.

Special Events can be good money-raisers as long as they don't take more in the planning, staffing and staging than they add to the cash box. Food pantries have made money holding bake sales, auctions, potluck dinners and much more.

One cannot always depend on donations. Try to visit local businesses to see if they would be interested in "funding" the food pantry (e.g., monthly monetary donations.) Explain to the business owner how this would not only benefit the community but would also draw positive attention to their business as well. It is a great idea to present these potential donors with a summary of your program's Basic Business Plan.

Monetary grants from private donors, service groups, business associations and foundations are some of the best financial resources a food program can use. Successful grant writing requires an effective grant writer. If your program needs help grant writing, or if you would like to improve your grant writing skills, visit http://www.grantwriters.org for more information. In addition, many food programs participate in various fundraising events to supplement their food program budgets. The types of fundraisers that a food program may organize include car washes, bake sales, potluck dinners, arts & crafts fairs, hunger walks, direct mail, and food drives.

Schools will often have food drives for food pantries. If more than one grammar school, middle school, or high school in your city, have a competition among them. Include instructions that you will accept money too, with one dollar counting as two food items.

Ask to have collection boxes at school sports events or concerts, community events and church events where attendees can bring food donations. See if the organizers will agree to give a price break to those who bring 4 (pick your number) or more food items for the food pantry.

If you are a new food pantry or even an existing food pantry, consider applying for USDA commodities food, The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).

Here are some helpful hints to keep outside donations of food and funds coming into your food pantry:

- Local food drives – Hand flyers out in your community asking for donations which will be picked up on a set date.
- Ask other clubs, organizations, churches, or places of employment to sponsor food drives for your center.

Selecting Food for the Food Pantry

Malnutrition and hunger go hand in hand. Encourage the collection of wholesome foods as opposed to highly processed, expensive foods. Also encourage the collection of foods low in sugar or salt and high in nutrients or vitamins.

The following suggestions for stocking a food pantry may be useful as a guide for preparing menus for Client Choice pantries and emergency food boxes. Most pantries post this type of information for the benefit of their volunteers.

Packaging sizes and styles should be specific to client population. Would you need to stock pop-top or tab-top cans for homeless clients? Are most of your clients single elderly persons, families, or transients with no cooking facilities? Consider also stocking some non-food items such as diapers, shampoo, bath soap, toothpaste and dish soap that are necessary but expensive for your clients.

How to Determine What Groceries to Distribute

The questions you ask the person requesting help will be a good source of information for determining his or her food needs.

- Size and composition of family: How many people are in the household? Teenagers eat more than small children.
- Special dietary needs: Diabetics should not have starchy, fatty or sugar-laden food. Elderly people may need some soft foods. Infants may need formula or baby food. You may also need to consider severe food allergies (i.e., products containing peanuts can cause extreme reactions for some clients).
- Living situation of person needing help: Is refrigeration available? Are cooking facilities in working order? Is the person capable of independently preparing simple meals?
- Logistics: Will the person be walking, riding the bus, or driving a car? How much can he or she carry?

The kinds and amounts of food that you distribute will vary with your food supply. Try to provide for well-balanced meals. Some groups include an information sheet suggesting recipes and menus that could be made from certain food items. For instance, creamed soup, rice, and tuna together with a can of green beans could make a nice casserole. Always consider ethnic diversity when offering recipes.

Foods that are good sources of protein are important to have on hand. These include not only meat, eggs, and fish (which generally are perishable), but also dried beans, peas and lentils. You can get a protein value equivalent to that of meat by combining grain products with peas, beans, and lentils.

The best guideline is your own knowledge of meal planning and grocery shopping. Use your good common sense!

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Proper Use of Food

Transporting food, storing food, handling food and re-packaging food products are everyday occurrences within a food pantry program. It is essential for all emergency food programs that staff and volunteers are well-versed in food safety procedures.

The Food Bank of Alaska offers a manual on Food Safety and recommends that key staff and volunteers have a food worker card. You can earn this card through an online course at https://www.muni.org/Departments/health/Admin/environment/FSS/Pages/AlternateFoodWorkerTesting.aspx

You may not distribute baby food with passed expiration dates. Never accept home canned goods.

When in doubt, throw it out!

Staff/Volunteer Responsibilities

Committed volunteers hold the key to any food pantry's success. Even those programs that can afford to hire a manager or coordinator rely heavily on the regular assistance of dependable volunteers to shop and pick-up food, stock and maintain the food pantry, prepare food boxes, assist with food, and fund drives, and when applicable, do client intake and referral. A solid staff is vital to operating a good food program.

Onsite volunteers can staff the food pantry during regular hours. Home-based volunteers are on call during assigned hours and are prepared to go to the food pantry, pay a needy family a visit, pick-up food or meet a delivery truck. Youth groups, civic organizations, schools, churches, and senior citizen's organizations are good sources of volunteers.

Whether a food pantry hires for the position or chooses to remain a totally volunteer effort, having a coordinator is essential. Someone must take responsibility for day-to-day operations, scheduling, training, and supervising volunteers, acting as liaison with the community, bookkeeping, compiling monthly reports, and maintaining inventory control. The coordinator/director/CEO should be comfortable dealing with people directly and with speaking before large groups. Organizing talents are invaluable, as are contacts within local community groups.

The list that follows describes the duties involved with food program administration. Many programs may not have a different person to fulfill each responsibility, but the Food Bank of Alaska recommends that each agency have at least two people to manage the food program.

- Food Program Management: The person who manages the food program serves as the liaison between the agency and the rest of the world. This person is the primary contact for the food program.
- Financial Management and Accounting: There are many costs associated with operating a food program. A food program must be financially responsible. All food programs should keep written budgets to account for purchases, donations, services, and other expenses. Accurate budget keeping enables agencies to make more cost-effective decisions about food resources and related purchases. Ensure that your financial management incorporate transparency you're your practices.
- Record Keeping: Record keeping is a very important part of operating a food program. It will help your program manage clientele, donations and the amount of food that goes out the door. Your program will need to keep records of client intake forms, inventory, donations, volunteer hours and finances. Record keeping is important so that you can document how many people you are serving, who they are, how often they need help, and the reasons for hunger in your area. It is also important that you keep a simple inventory record so that you can keep up with monies spent in supplying your food pantry as well as pounds distributed to the needy. Documenting your history will give you a foundation and guideline for future efforts. The Food Pantry of Alaska recommends completing a Monthly Activity Report recording the number of clients, households, employed, poundage and meals. All programs should keep copies of their invoices and packing slips for at least one year, all client intake forms for three years, and records of volunteer hours. If you receive state funding, you must keep client and financial records for six years. If you receive USDA food, you must keep records for 3 years. Develop an ethical and confidential way to store these records.
- Fund Raising: Even the smallest food pantry will need to raise money to cover operating expenses and to purchase food for distribution. Decide what portions of the budget will be raised through private donations, fundraising events, and grants.
- Food Resource Management: Managing the food that a program distributes or prepares for clients is a big task! The person who manages food resources should always know how much and what kind of food the program needs. This includes securing as many food resources for the program as possible and ensuring that food is picked up and arrives at the food program. It is a great idea to talk with your local supermarkets, restaurants, and hotels about reducing waste by giving excess food to the program.
- Food Drive Organization: Many agencies have food drives to supplement food inventory.
- Transportation Management: This person coordinates transportation of food donated to the food program. The Transportation Manager will be the main contact for all deliveries and pick-ups for the food program.

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- Facility Management: The building or space that a food program occupies needs to be safe, secure, clean and pest free. The person who oversees facility management ensures this by conducting thorough and regular maintenance checks.
- Pest Control Management: Pests tend to find food wherever it is stored. The person in charge of pest control management ensures that a licensed Pest Control company inspects the premises where the food program is located.
- Client Services Coordination: To be effective and efficient, each program needs to establish policies for operating a food program. The person who coordinates client services works with clients and the community to determine how the food pantry should more effectively address client concerns and improve its services. This person should also evaluate the hours of operations of the food pantry. Is there a need for evening and weekend hours? If clients have other needs that are not directly related to food, then the Client Service Coordinator should do his/her best to refer them to the appropriate resource.
- Intake Coordinator: Many clients are intimidated by or uncomfortable with the thought of going to food programs for assistance. The person who coordinates the intake process for the food program greets new clients and explains how the food pantry works. The Intake Coordinator also records client information such as name, address, and the number of individuals in the household and makes sure that the client information is stored to insure confidentiality.

Developing a Volunteer Program

Volunteer Recruitment and Management

Almost every food program is operated by volunteers from the community. The person in charge of volunteer recruitment finds volunteers to assist the food program with tasks such as unloading from food trucks, stocking shelves with food, preparing and distributing bags/boxes to clients. The person who manages the volunteers keeps their contact information on file and schedules them for specific shifts and tasks. The volunteer manager also logs volunteer hours and accomplishments so that the food program remains aware of volunteer contributions.

It is also important to plan volunteer appreciation events to encourage volunteer commitment for a longer period of time. The following are suggestions on how to maintain a healthy volunteer-based organization.

Volunteers are motivated by a belief in a meaningful cause and a desire to help. These volunteers will come to your nonprofit organization to lend a hand, and it is important they you have the tools to properly lay out a work plan for them and manage them. Creating a volunteer program can prove to be challenging, but if the appropriate steps are taken, you can be guaranteed the program will be a success. To successfully implement a volunteer program, you'll need to start with a good plan, develop policies and procedures, effectively recruit individuals, properly supervise these individuals, and finally keep these individuals motivated and feeling appreciated so they come back time after time.

Planning. A thorough planning process should be the first step to developing your volunteer program, and should answer the following questions: Why does the volunteer program exist? What does the future of the program look like? What needs will the program address? What will be the impact of the program? Is there a budget? How will you prepare paid staff to work with the volunteers? What will the

volunteers do? Once these questions have been answered, you can properly recruit individuals to your volunteer program.

Policies & Procedures. It is extremely important to outline policies and procedures for all volunteers, including details about what each class of volunteer does and how. First and foremost, policies and procedures connect the volunteer program to the larger organization and its mission. But policies and procedures also provide structure for management and ensure continuity over time. Types of written policies that should be developed are statements of belief/position/ value of organization, mechanisms for managing risk (e.g., insurance coverage, background checks), rules to specify expectations, regulations, and guides to action (e.g., confidentiality, time and training commitments, customer service) and additional materials to program effectiveness (e.g., personnel policies) that are modified for the volunteer program.

Recruitment. The process of recruitment means enrolling an individual to become involved with your organization. Depending what type of individual, you are seeking you may have multiple recruitment "messages" – but all messages should include the following: the specific need of the clients and/or organization, how the volunteer can alleviate the need, and the benefits to the volunteer. Next, once individuals have been recruited, a brief screening and interview should be conducted to determine a proper match between the individual and the organization. Find out what skills and experience the volunteer has, what his/her interests and passions are to best determine which tasks to assign to him/her. It also may be appropriate to perform a background check on volunteers in certain situations. Screening processes may be different depending what type of position you are recruiting for. Last, be sure to provide orientation and training to all volunteers, enabling them to perform the assigned tasks both efficiently and effectively. Volunteers who understand what is expected from them do a better job and feel satisfied by serving your organization. Developing a code of conduct for volunteers will allow them to understand the expectations of their service as well as provide accountability for appropriate behavior.

Supervision. The supervisor's role is to ensure the volunteer's success in the work they perform for the organization. Volunteers should always have a supervisor available to answer questions, lend guidance and provide support and feedback. The supervisor is responsible for providing materials, training, and direction to enable the volunteer to perform assigned tasks to the best of their ability. Supervisors will evaluate the effectiveness of the volunteers and their role in meeting the objectives of the volunteer program and the organization.

Retention. Understanding volunteers' motivations and remaining sensitive to their needs are essential to retaining volunteers. Always be consistent and sincere in your expectations. Remember to address a volunteer by his or her first name. Be receptive to new ideas and ways of doing things. Take every opportunity to applaud competence, punctuality and all the other things you value. Be sure and say "thank you" or "good job" – it costs nothing but goes a long way. At least once a year, go out of your way to recognize volunteers by holding some type of luncheon or appreciation event. As much as possible, make things fun! Turn on some background music, let volunteers work together, serve refreshments. Remember that volunteers are helping your organization on their own time and that a volunteer deserves as much courtesy and consideration as a regular employee does.

Involvement in Planning. Seek out volunteers' ideas about how to do things differently and how to expand services. Many likely have some great ideas and have been involved in strategic planning in their previous lives. Volunteers will feel much more connected with your organization if they can be an active player in making changes. If you are unable to follow all the aforementioned steps, at the very least always remember to show appreciation. A warm smile and a "thank you" can mean a lot. Volunteers are the individuals who are making a difference one day a time, one community at a time, one person at a

time. "What volunteers bring is the human touch, the individual, caring approach that no government program, however well-meaning and well-executed, can deliver." – Anonymous

Legal Protection for Food Pantries & the Good Samaritan Act

Good Samaritan laws in the United States are laws or acts protecting from liability those who choose to aid others who are injured or ill. They are intended to reduce bystanders' hesitation to assist, for fear of being sued or prosecuted for unintentional injury or wrongful death. Its purpose is to keep people from being reluctant to help a stranger in need for fear of legal repercussions if they were to make some mistake in treatment. Good Samaritan laws vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, as will their interactions with various other legal principles, such as consent, parental rights, and the right to refuse treatment. Such laws extend protection to individuals when they are acting in a volunteer capacity or donating food.

Where to Go from Here

The appendices following this manual will give you some practical specific tools to further your program development.

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Sanitation Self-Evaluation Inspection Checklist

This tool is intended to facilitate documented self-inspections as part of your sanitation program. Aim to be capable of answering "Yes" to all questions in this checklist.

We recommend that you conduct regular management level self-inspections as part of your sanitation program. Although this form is lengthy, compliance with its content assures compliance with local and federal regulations.

**Please note: this evaluation is written to accommodate all programs. Some of the information contained may not be applicable to your program.

A. OUTSIDE GROUNDS

1. Are the weeds and grass cut and kept at least two feet away from the edge of the building?

2. Is the area free from any exposed trash, broken pallets, etc.?

3. Are trash containers closed tightly, cleaned regularly, and picked up when full?

4. Is area free of standing water?

5. Do the gutters and drains work?

6. Are the building exterior and foundations free of any cracks or crevices that could allow rodent or insect entry?

7. Is the exterior free of any evidence of rodent burrows, insect nests, or webs?

8. Are the roads, yards, and packing areas of such condition so as to prevent the generation of large quantities of dust that could contaminate exposed foods in the building?

9. Is the building free of any bird roosts?

10. Are the outside bait stations (if needed?)

a. Closed

b. Locked

c. Tamper Proof

11. Is the dock area clean (look under dock plates and elevators)?

12. Are docks "flashed" around perimeter to protect against rodent entry?

13. Is the distribution center location sufficiently distant from any source of industrial pollution that could potentially contaminate food products?

B. MAINTENANCE OF WAREHOUSE

1. Are the walls, ceilings, windowsills, and pipe chases free of any cracks or openings?

2. Are there screens on all windows, doors, or vents used for ventilation?

3. Are dock doors closed when not in use OR screened when open?

4. Are the floor and foundation free of any cracks that could harbor insects?

5. Is the building free of any exposed pipes leaking or dripping condensation on products?

6. Is the roof free of leaks?

7. Do doors and windows seal tightly?

8. Is there a heating system to prevent warehouse products from freezing?

9. Is there an adequate ventilation system to keep warehoused products cool in the summer?

10. Are warehouse temperatures checked and recorded at noon each day?

11. Are there "No Smoking, Eating, or Drinking" signs in the warehouse?

12. Are there signs in appropriate places (e.g., bathrooms, salvage areas, lunch, locker rooms, and food handling areas) that remind employees to wash hands before returning to work?

13. Is no smoking in the warehouse enforced?

14. Is lighting in food processing areas safely shielded?

15. Is lighting in all work areas adequate?

16. Power

a. Has the local power company done a PCB inspection?

b. Has equipment containing PCB been labeled and inventoried?

C. HOUSEKEEPING PRACTICES

1. Is there a written daily, weekly, and monthly, cleaning schedule?

2. Are product spills cleaned up when they occur?

3. Are ripped bags taped; leaking, and other contaminated products removed and dumped?

4. Do executive personnel inspect the warehouse regularly? (We recommend weekly)

5. Are freezer and refrigeration equipment cleaned on a regularly scheduled basis? (Monthly or more frequently if needed)

6. Are coils and condensers checked and cleaned on a scheduled basis?

7. Are compressors outside vented?

8. Are door seals cleaned regularly?

9. Are there drains for condensation?

10. Are drains cleaned regularly?

11. Are the freezers and coolers free from any rips, tears, holes in the walls that allow for leaks or might lead to contamination of products from insulation materials?

D. STORAGE PRACTICES

General Storage:

1. Are all products off the floor on pallets or shelves?

2. Are aisles wide enough to prevent unintentional contamination or accidental damage?

3. Are pallets spaced to allow visual inspection and taping if damage should occur?

4. Are all pallets at least 18" away from wall? (We suggest a white strip be painted around inside perimeter)

5. Are products stacked a way from heaters, fans, vents, leaking pipes, stairways, or leaking skylights?

6. Are non-food items stored away from food items?

7. Are products stacked to facilitate First In, First Out system?

8. Are pallets marked by date of receipt and "use by" date?

9. Are "use by" dates recorded and tracked?

10. Are toxics stored separate from any food or personal use items?

11. Are all animal products stored on separate pallets away from all edible food?

12. Is stored product free of any evidence of compression damage or sag in lower stacks caused by overloading?

13. Are unclean or contaminated pallets stored separately from clean ones?

14. Are broken pallets disposed of or repaired promptly?

15. Are all unused pallets stored away from food?

16. Are unused pallets fogged for insects regularly?

17. Are unused pallets stacked flat?

18. Is there a procedure for cleaning pallets before reuse? Freezer/Refrigeration:

19. Does freezer hold products at zero degrees or less?

20. Does the cooler hold products at 40 degrees?

21. Are there thermometers in the freezer and cooler?

22. Are calibrated thermometers available to check freezer and cooler thermometers for accuracy?

23. Are temperatures checked and logged at least twice daily?

24. Are freezers and refrigerators free of dripping or leaking ceilings or pipes?

25. Is product stacked to allow adequate circulation around edges or sides?

E. SAFETY RULES AND PRACTICES

1. Are emergency numbers for fire, ambulance, police, poison control center, etc., posted?

2. Are directions to nearest emergency room and insurance data readily available in case of emergency?

3. Are lists of poisons, pesticides, etc., available?

4. Are all fire exits clearly marked?

5. Are there maps showing fire exits (if needed)?

6. Are there an adequate number of fire extinguishers?

7. Are the fire extinguishers:

a. Fully charged?

b. Checked regularly?

8. Are there semi-annual fire drills?

9. Is there a fully stocked first aid kit available?

10. Are at least 2 staff persons trained in first aid?

11. Are persons operating machinery or equipment adequately trained?

12. Are there eye wash stations where battery chargers are in use?

13. Are OSHA regulations available and posted?

F. MAINTENANCE OF SANITARY

1. Are the restrooms clean?

2. Are there paper towels or a working hot air-drying system?

3. Is water at suitable temperature to sanitize hands?

4. Is soap provided in dispensers?

5. Are there "Wash Hands Before Returning to Work" signs in the restrooms?

6. Do restroom doors close automatically? ☐ ☐

7. Are there covered waste bins in the restrooms?

8. Are all employees trained in necessary warehouse practices required for maintenance of acceptable sanitary and safe operations?

9. Is appropriate signage employed to aid employees in maintaining sanitary and safe practices (such as "No Smoking, Eating, or Drinking", "Wash Hands", etc.)?

G. PEST CONTROL

1. Is a professional pest control service used? Is it effective?

2. Is the warehouse free of evidence of infestation?

3. Are pest infestations promptly isolated? Is evidence promptly cleaned up?

4. Are any pesticides or rodenticides:

a. Approved for use in the warehouse?

b. Properly stored?

5. Are lists of pesticides and rodenticides readily available with labels or material safety data sheets (MSDS)?

6. Are personnel who apply pesticides or rodenticides appropriately trained and licensed if required?

7. Are daily warehouse inspections made by distribution center staff?

8. Is a pest control log kept?

9. Are bags of grain and animal food inspected regularly for signs of infestation?

H. GOOD RECEIVING PRACTICES

1. a. Are incoming shipments checked for evidence of spoilage, odors, damaged containers, insects, rodents, excessive heat, freeze damage, water damage, and mold or product leakage?

b. Is incoming freight inspection checklist used?

c. Is it initialed?

2. a. Are refrigerated or frozen shipments checked for temperature?

b. Are these temperatures noted on receipt and

c. Are thermometer probes cleaned after each test?

3. Are products like produce and bakery goods (potentially hazardous foods) evaluated and properly stored upon receipt?

4. Are contaminated, infested, or molded products dumped immediately?

5. Are damaged products isolated in a designated holding area until they can be evaluated? Are such products labeled "Hold for Evaluation"?

c. Are those evaluating these products appropriately trained?

6. Is frozen or refrigerated product moved from the dock to cold storage within 30 minutes?

7. Are pallets inspected upon receipt for evidence of infestation?

I. GOOD SHIPPING PRACTICES

1. Are trucks kept clean?

2. Are frozen and refrigerated products transported at appropriate temperatures? (Maximum of 0 degrees and 40 degrees respectively)

3. Does this distribution center have access to refrigerated or freezer trucks?

a. If not, do they have cold storage boxes for transporting refrigerated or frozen goods?

b. Is cold storage equipment kept clean?

c. Are thermometers used during transportation of frozen or refrigerated products?

4. Are vehicles loaded to minimize the possibility of damage due to load shifting?

J. COMPLIANCE WITH GOVERNMENTAL REGULATIONS

1. Have the responsible local or state regulatory agencies reviewed this distribution center?

2. Have deficiencies identified in the inspection reports of such agencies been corrected?

3. Is distribution center staff knowledgeable about federal, state, and local regulations which relate to food warehouse operations?

K. SALVAGE HANDLING

1. Are incoming salvage goods isolated by a partition, screens, or other effective means until evaluated?

2. Is salvage sorted in a separate room or isolated area?

3. Are unsorted salvage goods stored away from salvage sorting area?

4. Is each pallet of unsorted salvage marked "Hold-Unsorted Salvage. Do Not Distribute"?

5. Are floors and walls in salvage sorting areas surfaced to allow easy cleaning?

6. Are all tables, sorting, and food contact surfaces covered with an impervious surface and easily cleaned?

7. Is there a separate hand-washing sink adjacent to sorting areas? (recommended)

8. Are there signs prohibiting eating, drinking, or smoking in salvage area?

9. Are salvage sorters adequately trained?

10. Are guides for evaluating product posted?

11. Are salvage handlers appropriately attired (e.g., no loose jewelry, garments)?

12. Is salvage area adequately vented to prevent contamination from fumes, odors, vapors, or steam?

13. Is trash refuse stored in covered, rodent proof containers and removed as needed?

14. Are trash containers cleaned prior to use?

15. Are all products separated by category, i.e., pet foods, laundry and cleaning products, toxics, personal care, paper products, and food items?

16. Are empty boxes contaminated with spills, rodent droppings, etc., disposed of promptly and not reused for packing sorted product?

17. Are product spills cleaned up immediately?

18. Is salvage sorting area cleaned up after each shift, and at least twice daily?

19. Are there signs reminding food handlers to wash hands after smoking, eating, drinking, using the restroom, or handling toxic products, moldy products, or cleaning products?

20. Are contaminated products stored in covered containers and disposed of promptly?

21. Are extraordinary pest control measures used in the salvage area? (recommended)

22. Does the distribution center adhere to the ban on salvaging baby food products?

23. Is an effective quality control program in place?

24. Are quality control scoresheets kept in a file?

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Client Choice Food Pantries: Models for Now and the Future

Most of us take for granted the choices we make when we go to the grocery store. We stroll down the aisles and pick from a wide variety of foods, some very nutritious and some empty calories; but the point is we are in control of what goes into the basket. This same concept can carry over into our food pantries with a little bit of planning. During the 1980's food pantries were springing up around the United States through a network of churches and community organizations. Food supplies were tight, donor networks were not in place, and USDA commodities were in short supply. The focus for food pantries was on rules and restrictions and limiting the amount of food distributed. As a result, many food pantries fell into the practice of pre-bagging groceries1 for clients from a posted list. The old models don't fit the lifestyles of clients today and as a result, new ways of doing business have to be found.

Here are a few examples of some problems resulting from running a no choice food pantry:

A young mom is given a box of powdered milk that she doesn't need or want. *No one asked her if she is on WIC*

A widowed man is given a sack of flour that he promptly tosses into the alley behind the food pantry. Is he ungrateful? *No, he simply does not know how to cook or use the flour and he was never given a choice about what went into his food bag. A family could have used two bags of flour, but they were never asked and received the standard one bag per family.*

A woman from another country is given flavored gelatin that she has never seen before; her children eat the powder. *She would have preferred a bag of rice, but no one asked.*

An illiterate man could not read the word "corn" on a generic label. *There was no picture on the label, so he threw the can away.*

An older woman with high blood pressure, diabetes and no dentures are given a bag with canned vegetables, heavy syrup fruit and snacks she cannot chew. *Most of her food bag went to a neighbor.*

No matter what the income levels, people need to be able to select their own foods and have control over what they eat. For two decades food pantry administrators selected food they thought their clients needed in a healthy and balanced diet. Here are some of the main issues associated with the pre-bagging method:

- Often pre-bagged food is not the food most available from the distribution center that supplies the food pantries.
- Greater numbers of empty calorie foods such as sugared drinks and chips or other snack items are left unused at the distribution center, unavailable to food pantry clients and eventually as part of a land fill.
- This practice adds to the operational cost of the distribution center and is a detriment to the environment.
- Food pantries are spending valuable resources to purchase foods that clients may not want or need, given a choice.
- Food pantry bags that are done in advance tend to be very much the same. All the bags usually contain canned tuna fish, peanut butter, powdered milk, a pound of pasta, one can of vegetables,

and one can of fruit. No two families have the same food needs or desires, so why should their bags be identical?

Let's take a tour of our local food pantries and see what the client sees:

Susan is a single mother with four children. She works a full-time job where she earns minimum wage. After rent and childcare, there isn't much money left. Susan must visit the local food pantry once a month out of necessity, not because of mismanaging her money.

The food pantry Susan visits is very traditional and only opens one afternoon a week. Since she works during the day, coming to the food pantry requires her to leave work a half-hour early once a month to wait in line and receive food. This food pantry allows clients to come only once a month and every time Susan visits the food pantry, she is required to bring a social security card, proof of income, proof of residence, children's birth certificates and rental expenses.

When Susan arrives at the food pantry, she must be cleared at the check-in desk, and then quickly is shuttled into a line where she is handed two bags of groceries for her family. After waiting in a 20-minute line, she is inside the food pantry for about 3 minutes and her interaction with the food pantry volunteers is nearly non-existent. When she gets home, she finds the traditional items in her bag:

◊ 1 box of cereal

◊ 1 carton of dry milk

◊ 1 bag of rice

◊ 1 box of pasta

◊ 1 jar of spaghetti sauce

◊ 3 cans of tuna

◊ 1 can of peaches

◊ 1 jar of peanut butter

Susan is happy to receive some foods, but at the same time she wonders how these two bags of groceries are supposed to feed her family for the month. She also knows her children will not eat the tuna because they don't like the taste of the oil packed brand, she receives each month. Perhaps she can trade the cans with her neighbor for something else her family likes.

Barbara is another single mother with several children and a low-paying job. Barbara's story is very much like Susan's except Barbara has the advantage of traveling to a "Client Choice" food pantry. At Barbara's food pantry, she can come as often as she needs food. Some months she comes 2-3 times, other months she won't come at all, and since the food pantry is open a variety of days and hours, she never has to worry that she can't get to the food pantry. As a TEFAP choice food pantry, Barbara is only required to sign her name and self-declare her income eligibility. She indicates the number in the household when she visits the food pantry, so workers know how much food she needs. After a quick check-in, she is then given a couple of empty bags and escorted by a volunteer through the aisles of food. Her options include tomato products, condiments, soups, ice cream, bread, pastries, cake mixes, hair products, and cleaning supplies. While choosing the food items, Barbara shares the children's school pictures, as well as recipes, with the food pantry volunteers.

When Barbara comes home, she realizes she wasn't expecting to come home with shampoo and salad dressing, but now she knows she will be able to afford milk for the children's cereal. Barbara has come to view her food pantry and the wonderful volunteers almost as an extension of her family.

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After reading the two women's stories, you might wonder why all food pantries don't switch over to client choice.

Next, we will examine some of the barriers (real or perceived) to becoming a client choice food pantry. After reading some positive stories about making various changes, perhaps your food pantry will be able to use some of the ideas for improvement. Or your food pantry may consider forming a partnership with smaller food pantries to strengthen your community in its fight against hunger.

What are the related issues connected with changing to a client choice food pantry?

- Will this change the hours of our food pantry operation?
- How will the food pantry volunteer's role change?
- How will choice effect the nutrition quality of our food bags?
- Our food pantry only has limited space, how can choice work for us?
- Why should we offer any choice for clients? Shouldn't they be grateful to receive anything?
- How long will it take to process clients using choice?
- How does choice work when you also give away USDA commodities?
- How does choice help the client?
- How does choice help our food pantry operation?
- What if we are giving away too much food too fast? We may run out and not have enough food for later clients.
- Is there anything special we can do for seniors using choice?

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Hours of Operation

In the early 80's when many food pantries were just getting started, hours of operations tended to revolve around the availability of volunteers. Many workers volunteering today are retired and want to work very limited hours during the day. There may be limited days of the week and no weekend or evening hours of operation for some food pantries. These hours may not meet the needs of today's clients.

Today, most food pantries are serving more families or single working mothers. The hours of operation become very important to the families using the food pantry because they may have to choose between coming to the food pantry or losing income by taking off work to come during traditional hours of operation.

Posting hours on the building is a requirement for food pantries using TEFAP items. This posting is usually accomplished, but more could be done to make the surrounding community aware of the hours of operation, such as publishing hours in the newspaper or as a free public announcement on the radio. Even if food pantries are only able to be open limited hours or days, perhaps looking at late afternoon or early evening hours can help clients out of the dilemma of losing food or income.

The Role of the Volunteer

As a food pantry changes to client choice, the role of the volunteer is sure to evolve as well. Many food pantries operating under a more traditional system use almost "invisible" volunteers, meaning they have little-to-no-contact with the food pantry clients.

There may be a special "bagging day" when the food pantry is not open, but the volunteers work to make up as many identical bags as possible.

There are the trips for other volunteers to the grocery store to buy needed items for the identical bags and lots of food handling and sore backs at the end of the day. Much of this type of food handling work is unnecessary using "client choice" because the items don't have to be pre-bagged.

Volunteers can take on a much more personal role toward clients and spend their time with such activities as helping someone with a physical disability through the food pantry or helping someone who can't read to choose the foods they want. The main volunteer role changes from packing food bags to host or hostess and the friendly atmosphere of the food pantry is more welcoming to the client.

Trips to a food pantry are painful experiences for most people. The feeling that you are shopping rather than receiving a handout is not lost on the client and choice helps ease their embarrassment of coming to a food pantry.

The types of training offered to volunteers may change, as their roles become more client centered. One suggestion offered by several food pantries is for volunteers to go through some type of sensitivity training or a "real life" exercise looking at living on minimum wage in today's world.

Building a varied volunteer base is important to any successful food pantry operation. If volunteers don't come to you, look for them! Here are some ideas for building your volunteer base:

- Many big companies have programs that allow employees to volunteer a day or two a year at company expense. This may give you a year around supply of one-day volunteers, although your training needs would be very different.
- Student groups often are looking for places to earn "service hours" they need for school credit.
- The court system is another place to enlist people seeking a location to serve community service sentences.
- Another idea is to offer clients a chance to give back to the food pantry by volunteering a day every month. This may give you enough additional volunteers to allow the food pantry to be open an extra evening or weekend day.

How Long Will It Take to Serve Clients Using Choice?

Time seems to be one of the big drawbacks on the mind of people thinking about switching to choose. Coordinator's picture long lines of slow people taking hours to choose a few items. The amount of people that can be served at one time does depend on space and the way the operation is streamlined. Small food pantries may only be able to let 3 people shop at one time. They may be able to help about 25 people in the usual two-hour time frame they are open. In larger areas, 300 people can be helped in two hours.

At many client choice food pantries, clients are issued tickets based on family size for use in the food pantry. The tickets are for different food items. Tickets are redeemed at the cashier stand.

The real saving of time is achieved when you consider the time usually spent in preparing 25 identical bags. This process, including shopping, may take volunteers 3-4 hours of behind-the-scenes time that could be used to open the food pantry another day to provide choice. Most food pantries find the food pantry atmosphere to be much more relaxed when they use their prep or bag time as open-door choice time. The bonus is more time for friendly interaction with clients rather than hurrying to just hand out bags and move to the next person.

Nutrition Concerns

"How will client choice affect the nutrient quality of our food bags?"

This issue may be the single hardest change for most food pantries. Almost since the inception of food pantries, coordinators, and volunteers both like the concept of a nutritionally balanced food bag. The idea is if someone's resources are limited, shouldn't they only be receiving the most nutrient dense items available? Shouldn't every bag contain dried beans, and powdered milk? Shouldn't every person learn to make biscuit mix from commodity flour to save money?

Very few families of any income level choose only nutrient dense foods with each meal. Watching the checkout line at any grocery store for only a few minutes will reveal how many highly processed, high fat, high sugar, high sodium items go into the average American cart. It would seem very unlikely that the client coming to a food pantry would select only nutrient dense foods if they were given a choice.

Not all these items top the list for high nutrition, but families of all income levels should be able to choose them as part of a nutritious diet. The Position Paper of The American Dietetic Association says it best, "It is the position of the American Dietetic

Association that all foods can fit into a healthful eating style. The ADA strives to communicate healthful eating messages to the public that emphasize the total diet, or overall pattern of food eaten, rather than any one food or meal."

Giving a choice means developing a trust that the clients will choose a wide variety of foods that are right for their families from all sections of the MyPlate guidelines. It may be hard at first to see sugared drinks and fatty snack items go into a food bag, but the paradox is, these foods may help the family's overall nutrition by freeing up other resources such as food stamps for more nutrient dense items at the grocery store. Typically, snack and drink items are some of the highest dollar items in retail, so getting these items at little to no cost from the food pantry will boost the family's buying power with the resources available.

Focus your efforts on sourcing nutrient-dense foods to stock your food pantry however possible so that clients can make nutritious choices. This may be done through donor education as well as strategic purchasing.

Picking up discarded items like the cans of waxed beans or sacks of flour from the alley behind the food pantry after distribution day should remove any doubt that good nutrition cannot be forced upon a client.

Space Concerns

"Our food pantry only has limited space, how can choice work for us?"

Space can be an issue for many food pantries. At first glance, a client choice food pantry might appear to need bountiful space, but, the space you currently use to store, and pre-bag food can easily be used for client choice.

How Do We Offer Choice to Clients?

Choice does not mean the food pantry doors are swung open and anyone can take whatever they want. There is still the same limitation of volunteer time and the amount of food that can be gathered for use in the food pantry.

How to set up the food pantry and get going with choice is a roadblock to many food pantries. It is often thought that choice will be much more work, more expensive, and just too much trouble to make the switch. Once observed in action, however opinions change in a hurry. Here are some nuts-and-bolts examples of how to switch to choose.

THE POINT SYSTEM

The Point System is based on what the items would cost if you had to buy them at the local grocery store. Items are colored coded for the determined point value using inexpensive dot stickers in three different colors. The point values are listed below

◊ $.50 - $1.00 1 point Red sticker

◊ $1.05 - $2.00 2 points Blue sticker

◊ $2.05 - $3.00 3 points Yellow sticker

Then a total dollar amount for each family is determined by pricing a regular pyramid food box in amounts that would have been bagged for that size family. If a regular box of bagged food had a value of $40.00, then the family would be able to spend 40 points in the food pantry.

The Point System can also be adjusted so that foods of higher nutritious value and/or higher availability are lower or no points, whereas highly processed food or food in scarce supply is labeled with higher points. It can be widely customized based on the priorities and supplies of your food pantry.

THE POUND SYSTEM

The pound system is very similar to the point method, but instead of price, food is distributed by calculating the pounds in each food group category.

For example, a family of four would be allowed:

- 2 pounds of meat of either fresh or canned, as available.
- 1 pound of meat alternates such as peanut butter or eggs or beans.
- 5 pounds of veggies and fruits (fresh, frozen, or canned).
- 4 pounds of bread group items such as cereal, rice, macaroni, or pasta.
- 2 pounds from the fats, oils, and sweets group such as cooking oil, sugar, snack items, sweet drinks, or baking extras such as chocolate chips.
- 2 pounds of dairy products such as powdered milk, canned milk, or yogurt (if available).
- Items that easily spoil such as refrigerated meat, produce, or bread are given away without counting toward total pounds allowed. This helps to reduce spoilage and keep dumpster costs down for the food pantry.
- The family is allowed their choice of three non-food items such as personal grooming items, diapers, or over-the- counter medicines. These items do not count toward the total pounds allowed to the family.

This method allows for seasonal changes in food supply. If for example, meats are in short supply, determine what each family receives by dividing what you have on hand by the average number of families you serve. Scale back when necessary. The meat allotment for this example might drop down to 1/2 pound per family instead of two pounds. But, since every family will choose different things, you do not have to worry about having 200 containers of peanut butter because you serve 200 families. It is highly unlikely that every family will want peanut butter.

THE TOTAL NUMBER OF ITEMS METHOD

This is a very easy method for food pantries to use when they are first switching over to choose. Each family is given a total number of items to choose. There are no constraints except for the available amount of food. For instance, shelf tags may read "No more than 3 meat items per family" to keep enough stock available for the average number of families served by the food pantry.

Here are some average item numbers offered by food pantries using the total number of items method

- 35 items to small family
- 50 items to a medium family
- 75 items to a large family

This method is uncomplicated for volunteers because they only have to count the total number of items for the client to bag.

Although clients have complete freedom to choose the foods they want, this setting is ideal for volunteers to provide nutrition education through gentle suggestions of food selection.

Often foods are not chosen because they are not familiar to the client, or they do not know how to prepare them in a way their family will like. Samples of prepared foods for tasting along with the recipes are great ways to get people to try new foods. Most people really enjoy discussing recipes and food preparation. New volunteers may find this is a great icebreaker or a way to get to know clients better. Some clients may bring in family favorite recipes to copy and share at the food pantry. Those recipes can showcase both the volunteer and the product by using samples or taste testing or naming the recipe after the volunteer, i.e., "Jenny's green beans".

If a volunteer prepares food for demonstration, be sure to contact your local health department for help with food safety issues and regulations.

CHOICE ON PAPER

The last method (and least preferred) method for moving to choose is to give clients a list of items and let them choose on paper.

The volunteer then pulls these items off the shelf and bags them for the client.

There are several disadvantages to this method, especially if the client has trouble reading or has English as a second language.

Choice is designed to help with a flow of many different kinds of food. If there is limited selection of items, the list will surely often be out of date. If the client circles green beans and there aren't any, then either the volunteer chooses an alternate for the client or extra time is taken to ask what else they would like. Most people prefer to physically touch and choose the foods they want rather than pick from a list.

"How does client choice work when you also give away USDA commodities?"

The management of TEFAP (The Emergency Food Assistance Program) has changed in many ways since these programs were started. Most senior citizens of any income level remember the great food give away down at the local fire station during the 1980's. The food used for this type of mass distribution has instead evolved into an important food supply for food pantries.

Commodity foods previously stood out with a trademark black and white USDA label. Now producers are using regular food labels on USDA products, making commodities identical to any other donated foods. The commodity foods may be stored separately for inventory purposes, but they should not be distributed separately. The only exception example is listed below:

The food pantry would regularly service people that would not qualify for TEFAP (this would include those that refuse to sign a self-declaration form) but would still be serviced by the food pantry.

Client choice will also help USDA foods go further in the food pantry setting. Many families will not choose the foods, leaving them for others who do want them. It is also helpful when very limited quantities of a particular item are available, but there is not enough to go around for all the families.

Many food pantries assign a point value to foods based on cost of the item. USDA foods are not given a point value and are given over and above the dollar amount given to a family when they shop in the food pantry. This makes the most of USDA items and helps them become a benefit to the client's choice of foods.

First and foremost, choice creates an atmosphere of dignity for the client. Whether the trip to the food pantry is a once a year or once a week occurrence, there are food supply issues in the family. This most basic of needs causes worry and embarrassment that can either be magnified or minimized depending on the style of food pantry operation.

Individuals visiting a food pantry generally have little choice in many areas of their life. Housing, transportation, clothing, and especially donated foods leave little to the imagination. Add to this situation public criticism about using food stamps to buy snack items or a birthday cake or the notion that everyone at a food pantry should be happy with a box of powdered milk for their children to drink. How easy it is to create a little joy and self-confidence in the ability to choose one's own foods by using a choice food pantry.

Choice food pantry shopping has the unique ability to create a practice shopping experience for the client. Many people of all income levels waste precious food dollars by not knowing how to comparison-shop. Even though the client is not using actual dollars, he is using points, pounds, or items, and must budget them in the same way as money. This allows the experience of choosing or putting back selected items on the shelf, because it does not fit in the shopping budget. This experience can translate to better use of money or food stamps in the grocery store.

Allowing free access to food through the food pantry gives the client another type of skill for choosing foods that complement those foods already at home. For example, given choice, the client may think, "I already have a jar of spaghetti sauce at home so I will pick a box of spaghetti to go with it." In a pre-prepared sack, the bread item may have been oatmeal or cereal that the client did not need nor want. The planning process to make the most of what you have at home does not happen when you are not given a choice.

Having a steady food supply may help to control binge eating. This type of behavior may take place when there are food insecurity problems in the household, leading to overweight and obesity. If a family doesn't know where and when their next meal will come, they may overeat when food is available. If families know that the food pantry is always available, it may help them curtail this survivor eating pattern.

Using a choice food pantry gives the client a chance to try new foods without worry of wasting money. They may not have tasted such foods as asparagus, pumpkin, wheat crackers or soymilk. Shoppers with

limited resources are reluctant to try these new foods for fear their family won't like them and feel they have thrown money away.

Concerns about Keeping the Food Pantry Shelves Stocked

"What if we are giving away too much food too fast? We may run out and not have enough food for all our clients."

Food pantry organizers love well-stocked shelves and constantly worry about having enough food to cover the days when the food pantry is open. If you are making the change to a choice food pantry, controlling the flow of the food supply is probably uppermost in your mind.

Free choice does not mean emptying out your shelves with every food basket day. In fact, most food pantry operators have found that choice does not affect their budget or food supply at all. That is because they do not have to worry about running to the grocery store and paying retail to buy those identical items for every person.

By tracking both the average number of clients and the average donated amount of a given food (for example, meat products), you can easily determine the amount each family can choose, e.g., a family of four can choose four meat or meat alternates of their choice.

Another decision is whether to open your doors on the days you would have normally had volunteers work to make up food bags. The additional day will help the client flow so there won't be a huge crush of people on any one day. It will also give the food pantry a more relaxed atmosphere where there is time for the clients to choose their foods without feeling rushed. More importantly, there will be time for the volunteers to interact with clients on a more personal level, establish relationships, and squeeze in a little nutrition education with casual conversation.

Seniors and Choice

"Is there anything special we can do for seniors using choice?"

If you ask the average person on the street "Who do you think uses food pantries?" the reply will most likely be "Welfare Moms who are not married with lots of children". On the contrary, seniors are now the most likely group to use food pantries. Most food pantries report over 30% of the users to be seniors (mainly older women who have become widowed) and this follows the most recent population counts that show seniors will soon be the largest demographic group in the nation.

Other seniors using food pantries are those assuming the financial responsibility for their grandchildren

Seniors may need some special consideration when planning a choice food pantry. A choice food pantry can be especially helpful to someone trying to plan a special diet around high blood pressure, cholesterol issues, or diabetes. In addition, extra thought may need to go into the physical space at the food pantry to make allowances for physical impairments brought about by aging. Here are some examples of typical problems:

Items are placed too high on shelves for someone with limited range of arm motion.

◊ Items are placed too low for someone with back problems or balance issues.

◊ Baskets or carts may be needed, or at least a table to set items on while choosing grocery selections.

◊ Special tools such as a grab claw may be useful for items placed high on shelves.

◊ Frozen items may be preferred over canned items due to high sodium content of canned items, and ease of opening the container. (Joint and hand problems due to arthritis may make using a can opener difficult.)

◊ Frozen items also allow less food waste for a person living alone as a single serving can be taken out of the package and the rest returned to the freezer.

◊ Seniors may need assistance to their car or just walking around the food pantry.

◊ Single serving containers are preferred whenever possible to help prevent food waste.

So many older Americans struggle monthly to make ends meet. Other considerations for seniors struggling with finances include:

◊ Offering personal care products at no additional points such as denture cleaner or hair-care products.

◊ Pet foods should be offered if possible since many seniors who live alone will sacrifice valuable food dollars at the grocery store to make sure a beloved pet receives the food it needs.

◊ Provide information to seniors at food pantry sites about hot meal sites for seniors, home delivered meals, and free or reduced priced prescription drug programs. Washington Food Coalition can connect you with Well Card, a prescription drug discount program, at no cost. These are all excellent opportunities for the food pantry volunteers to interact with the seniors visiting the food pantry and form lasting relationships with the clients while making a real difference in the quality of their lives.

◊ Volunteers who make deliveries can easily have an extra box or cooler along with alternate foods to quickly trade apple sauce for peaches, green beans for corn, or a different canned meat. These small changes can really boost the nutrition for an older person whose appetite is lagging, or certain foods do not taste good to them. It is best to carry along the extra foods rather than try a paper and pencil method. Seniors, like most of us, enjoy the ability to choose among actual foods.

Conclusion

After looking over all the issues connected with choice and reading about how other pantries have solved their problems, perhaps you have gained some insight on how to either make the change to choose or how to refine your existing operation to run more smoothly. With a little effort, your food pantry can be part of the solution of how to feed the hungry and at the same time restore dignity to the human condition.