



**MID-SOUTH
FOOD
BANK**
FEEDING THE NEED

Starting a Food Pantry

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Starting a Food Pantry

Introduction

Food insecurity and hunger are real problems in the United States. Though the U.S. has long been among the richest nations in the world, our national poverty rate has never dropped below 10 percent. Of those individuals and families living above the poverty line, many can easily be plunged into a financial crisis by a lost job, a medical emergency, or other unexpected expense. According to the hunger study, *Map the Meal Gap*, one in six Americans is vulnerable to food insecurity or hunger. In the Mid-South, 20 percent of the population is either hungry or are unsure about their next meal. For many, acquiring sufficient food means having to shortchange other critical needs.

Hunger damages mental and physical health, lowers performance in school and at work and causes strain that can tear families apart. Hunger contributes to many social ills, from domestic violence to drug use to theft. Reducing the prevalence of hunger can cause a ripple of positive changes throughout a community.

Food pantries that provide non-governmental food aid to the needy play a critical role in our nation's fight against hunger and poverty. This guide is to help you in your work.

Finding Food

Charity food distribution programs are remarkably adaptable - some have buildings and paid staff, some have one but not the other, but most operate with borrowed locations, usually a church, and are operated by volunteers. The limits of a pantry's food supply often define the scope of its operations.

There are four primary sources of food for charity organizations:

Food Banks

Feeding America, the national association of food banks, deals primarily with food manufacturers and distributors, gleaning product in quantities that would overwhelm most individual pantries. Food banks then offer the rescued goods to local hunger related charities, charging only a small per-pound shared maintenance, or handling, fee. Mid-South Food Bank is the designated Feeding America food bank for 31 counties in west Tennessee, north Mississippi and east Arkansas.

From the perspective of a food pantry or other charities, using Mid-South Food Bank is a lot like shopping at a grocery store or wholesale warehouse, with the key differences being the Food Bank's inventory changes more quickly than that of a grocery store, and the shared maintenance fees are considerably less than purchasing food at a grocery store or wholesale outlet. Using Mid-South Food Bank allows charitable food programs to acquire five to ten times as much food as they could through other means.

Food Drives

Soliciting individual donations (often in the form of canned goods) is a traditional standby of charity food programs. Unfortunately, most items donated to food drives are purchased from a store at full retail price, placing the cost of securing enough food to meet the need well beyond the means of the charity. Food drives also tend to be a poor source of important perishable foods,

like fresh fruits and vegetables. However, food drives are primarily useful for procuring relatively small quantities of food, for acquiring very specific items (such as a peanut butter drive).

Food Rescue

Some charities build relationships with local businesses, like grocery stores, who donate their products. The charity should always follow proper safe food handling practices for receiving food donations. The USDA website has guidelines: www.fsis.usda.gov

Purchasing

Many charities raise money with which to purchase food. This has several advantages:

- Purchasing can lead to economies of scale, as buying in bulk is often less expensive.
- The charity's supporters, having made their donations in an easily documentable fashion, can receive tax benefits, which reduces the cost to the community.
- The charity has more control over what food it receives, and when.

However, even at bulk food prices, purchasing by itself will not usually yield enough food to meet the need in a community on a sustainable basis. A charitable feeding program that is a member of a local food bank can use their funds for the shared maintenance fees and stretch their dollars much farther.

Conclusion

To develop a food supply adequate to meet the need in their communities in a cost-effective manner, most charities should acquire at least 3/4 of their food through their local Food Bank, with the remainder coming from food drives and targeting of specific items frequently requested by clients which the Food Bank does not regularly offer.

Food Handling and Storage

Like any food related enterprise, your organization is responsible for storing food in a manner that will keep it safe for your clients to eat. The agency must have adequate on-site storage, refrigeration and freezer space to insure the integrity of the products until used. The pantry should be in a space with a lock to assure that the food only goes to screened individuals

- Dry Storage
 1. Store products 6-12 inches off the floor on clean surfaces such as shelves or pallets.
 2. Store all pesticides, cleaning products and detergents away from food supplies.
 3. Keep shelves and floor clean at all times.
 4. Rotate stock to maintain freshness.
- Refrigerated Storage
 1. Recommended temperature – below 40° F.
 2. Check foods regularly for spoilage.
- Frozen Storage
 1. Recommended temperature – not above 0° F.
 2. Check temperatures frequently.
 3. Double wrap frozen food.
 4. Rotate stock to assure the oldest stock moves out first. Tagging products with receiving dates to assure “first in, first out.”
 5. Keep freezer clean at all times.
 6. Defrost as necessary.

Spoilage is another area of concern, as some product received by food pantries will be either outdated or close to it. While you should examine all goods carefully before they are offered to clients, a product being past its code date does not necessarily mean that it is unsafe to eat.

Though evaluating odor and appearance will always be your most important tools, here are three useful terms used in food product coding to help you judge a product’s status:

- “Sell by” or “pull” date -Refers to the last date product should be sold (seen primarily on dairy and fresh bakery products). This date allows for a reasonable length of time to use at home in an unfrozen state.
- “Best if used by date” -Often used on canned foods, frozen foods, cereals, and fried snack foods, this coding indicates the approximate date after which the product will no longer be at the highest quality level. Most products can still be used for one year after this date.
- “Expiration” date -Last day an item should be used before it is likely to lose flavor or quality. Frequently appears on refrigerated dough products, yeast and eggs.

Mid-South Food Bank can provide you with additional guidelines and materials. Other good sources of food storage and handling information are the FDA Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (www.cfsan.fda.gov) and the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation’s ServSafe program (www.servsafe.com).

Clients and Hours and Intake

Asking for help is hard, especially when it is for something as basic and personal as feeding one's family. When they come to your pantry, your clients will almost certainly be frightened, frustrated and humiliated. The last thing you should do is make them feel even worse. Here are some things you can do to make sure your clients have a good experience.

Hours

Take your clients' lives into account when planning the hours to distribute food. Many of those in need of food assistance are employed; to serve them you will need to plan a distribution time outside of the normal workday. Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays may be the best times for your clients.

At The Door

- Make sure clients feel welcome. Have someone greeting people as they enter your pantry.
- Serve clients promptly, or if they have to wait, give them a reasonable reason why (“Hi. As you can see, we have a number of people in line ahead of you, but we will get to you as quickly as we can.”).
- If anyone has to wait, make sure they have a comfortable place to sit.

The Interview

Intake interviews can be tricky. You do not want it to be a humiliating reminder of the client's situation. Hold the interview in as private a place that you can manage, given your available space. Here are some things you can do to make the process as friendly and non-confrontational as possible:

- If possible, do not seat the client and your interviewer opposite each other in an adversarial positioning. Have the client seated at the side of the desk and make sure they can see everything that is being written down.
- Give the client a chair comparable to the one used by the interviewer. An inferior chair is a clear reminder of the client's status.
- Keep the tone of the interview positive ("I just need to get a couple of pieces of information from you...") rather than negative ("We have to weed out the liars and cheaters...").
- Pantries must provide the products to the needy, the ill, youth or infants without regard to race, religion, color, sex, national origin, disability or sexual preference. Ask your clients only for information you really need. To determine need, the client should provide
 - Proof of current participation in the SNAP (Food Stamp) Program, or
 - Proof of current participation in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or
 - Proof of current receipt of Supplemental Security Income (SSI), or
 - Unemployed and household income falls below 130% of the poverty level, or
 - Sixty (60) years of age or older and household income falls below 130% of the poverty level, or
 - Completion of a signed, self-declaration income statement showing that the total amount of household income is below 130% of the current income poverty guidelines, using the income Household Income Eligibility Scale (see attachment). **Do NOT share the Household Income Eligibility Scale with clients or others outside the pantry.** Have them sign a brief, simple declaration of need:

"I understand that the [name of pantry] exists to provide food assistance to people and families who really need that help. By accessing help from the pantry I affirm that my household genuinely needs food assistance due to lack of sufficient income at this time."

- If the client has an emergency situation, he or she must indicate the nature of the emergency situation.

Pertinent personal information to obtain:

- Name, address, phone number. (In case of product recalls.)
- Proof of residency in the county. Does not have to be a photo ID. Can be a driver's license, utility bill, SNAP (food stamps) card
- A count of how many people are in their household: how many adults, children, seniors

Never ask for a Social Security Number.

Distribution Models

While there are almost as many ways to distribute food as there are food pantries, nearly all of them are based on one of these two models:

The Standardized Food Box/Bag Pantry

As the name suggests, a standardized food box/bag pantry prepares standardized packages of food to give to clients. The main strengths of this model are its perceived fairness - every client receives more or less the same thing - and the pantry's ability to control the nutritional balance of the food package a client receives.

Unfortunately, clients and their families aren't standardized. Giving out a jar of peanut butter to go with a loaf of bread makes sense, unless the family in question contains someone with peanut allergies. Giving a family a can of pork-and-beans makes sense, unless they have a religious prohibition against eating pork. Between food allergies, religious and other dietary restrictions, special needs (as a result of diabetes, etc.), and certain people (young children particularly) loathing certain foods, much of the food distributed by a standardized food box/bag pantry may go to waste, effectively doubling how much food must be acquired and distributed to meet the need.

It is difficult to maintain a consistent, standardized food box/bag because Food Bank inventories and other donated food are diverse and constantly changing, so the food in the box/bag must also change. If a pantry wants to put the same thing in the box/bag every week, it requires purchasing food. Given the nature of the changing Food Bank offerings, what comes in through food drives and trying to avoid purchasing food as much as possible, a pantry should be flexible in what they put in their food boxes/bags.

The Client Choice Pantry

This model is built on the idea of allowing clients to choose their own food. Client choice pantries are set up like a small grocery store, with products on shelves and in coolers/freezers, from which clients can fill boxes or bags. Items may have quantity restrictions to ensure there is enough to serve all clients. Some pantries give clients a list of the food they have available, and then volunteers pick the items off the shelf, preparing individual packages based on clients' selections.

Many pantries and clients prefer the Client Choice model because choosing their own food gives clients a sense of control. Clients tend not to take food they won't use, so relatively little of what a client-choice food pantry distributes goes to waste.

Conclusion

The decision between client choice and standardized food box/bag is not all or nothing. Some organizations combine models such as a standard box/bag plus offering clients a "choice" section from which to pick food to supplement their standardized packages.

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