

Tips for Organizing and Operating a Food Pantry Program



Starting a food pantry program:

A food pantry program is a community-based program that collects and stores food and household products for free distribution to needy people.

Before you begin planning, look closely at your community. Is there a need for food assistance in your community? Contact Food Bank of the Rockies and local non-profit organizations to find out what programs already exist in your area that offer food assistance. You may be better able to help meet the need in your community by joining forces with an existing program than by duplicating services within the area. It is also a good idea to visit or volunteer at an existing agency to learn more about what is already being done.

If after evaluating the need and existing services in your area and you have determined a new food pantry program is necessary, it's time to get started. This guide can be used to help you generate ideas and develop your vision. Please call Food Bank of the Rockies' Agency Relations department with any questions at 303-371-9250.



Community Support and Organizing Committee:

Your program will need community support to operate. Also, you can benefit from the experience of others and the diversity of their insight, so talk with people you think will be interested. Tell them about your plans to start a food pantry program. Three good sources of interested people are:

People in need of food-no one can give you a better idea about what services are needed in the community.

Social service agencies-people working in social services have an awareness of the need and experience with working to meet those needs.

Community organizations-members of clubs, churches and fraternal organizations can act as volunteers, offer funding assistance, make referrals and share their insights and experiences.

Networking with members of the community from the start builds a vested interest in the program's success, and lays the groundwork for volunteer recruitment and information exchange. Connections with other organizations offering assistance and governmental programs like SNAP and WIC can prove very beneficial in allowing your pantry to better meet the clients' needs.

From this group of people, call together a meeting to form an organizing committee. You'll need a core group of about 4-15 people to plan your direction and accept responsibility for the primary committee positions of chairperson, vice chair, secretary, and treasurer. When you meet, make sure everyone agrees on the definition of a food pantry program. Discuss its basic function of immediate aid and consider related services, such as counseling and referrals to other organizations. This should be incorporated into your mission statement.

Mission Statement:

Your organizing committee should create a mission statement that everyone agrees on and reflects the spirit of the program. For example, if you're organizing committee agrees that food will be provided for emergency situations only to persons who are homebound; your mission statement might say "Our mission is to deliver nutritious food to persons who are homebound and experiencing an emergency food need." This mission will help with developing a service plan as well as guide your program's action in unexpected situations.

Developing a Service Plan:

Once you have formed your organizing committee and agree on your purpose and mission, it's time to determine the size and scope of your operation and other details. Some basic questions are:

What area will be served?

Who will be served?

Will there be any eligibility requirements?

Where will the pantry be located?

How often will assistance be provided?

Who will do the work?

When you are making these decisions, keep in mind the needs of your prospective clients and how your agency could best meet those needs. Every possible effort must be made to treat the food recipients with dignity and respect.

Set policies and procedures:

Establish eligibility guidelines based on your service plan and set hours of operation. Consider setting hours on evenings or weekend to accommodate all clients' needs. Decide whether you will accept walk-ins or require referrals or appointments. Determine how many times a client may come to you for food (i.e. as needed, weekly, serve each household only once a month, or a certain number of times per year.) Discuss the security of the food and the staff/volunteers' safety. Policies should be uniform and fair for all recipients. For example, it would be unfair to allow congregation members to get food every week, but restrict clients from outside the congregation to once a month. You may also consider posting these eligibility guidelines to make them easy to see and understand for all food recipients.



Establish record keeping practices:

Food Bank of the Rockies requires your agency to keep all receipts from FBR orders for 3 years. You must also gather the following information from the food recipients and keep these records in a safe place:

Name

Address

City, State, Zip Code

Phone number

Number in household

Number of adults

Number of children

This information is critical for contacting the food recipients in the event of a food recall of items distributed by your program. This information is required by the IRS but also offers evidence of your program's contribution to the community. The information is needed for planning, fund raising and general accountability. It can also be helpful in educating the public and elected officials about the hunger problem in your community.



Food Sources in your community:

In addition to utilizing Food Bank of the Rockies, you may also want to pursue donated products in your own community. These can be direct donations from retailers and restaurants as well as food drives.

Ask for donations from:

- Restaurants
- Bakeries
- Convenience Stores
- Grocery Stores
- Drug Stores



Many of these establishments throw away food each week that could be used by pantry clients. You may also be able to arrange discounts on large purchases of items that are generally difficult to come by, such as diapers or protein items.

Fund Drives:

A fund drive is another good way to secure money to acquire food from Food Bank of the Rockies. It is much more efficient to ask for donations of cash and use those funds at the food bank rather than having people purchase items at retail for your program. We don't charge for the food, but request a very small agency support fee (ASF) to help with transportation and storage costs. Asking supporters to contribute funds instead of food will stretch your donor's dollar and provide you with more resources from the food bank. We offer a wide variety of items for your program, so shop as often as you like. Look what \$10 buys at the store vs. a \$10 gift used for ASF at the food bank.



Churches, schools, business and other clubs and groups are often receptive to hosting and contributing to food drives on behalf of your organization. Inform these groups of the specific food items your pantry needs so their donations are the most effective.

Selecting food for your program:



When selecting food for your program's clients, think about the meals you prepare for yourself and your family and which ingredients you would need. If you are going to select pasta sauce, you'll need pasta to go with it.

Also, think about your program's mission. How many days worth of food do you want to give away for each household? One method to determine how much to give is to multiply 4 pounds by the number of people in the client's household by the number of day's worth of food you want to provide. According to the USDA one person should have 1.28 lbs of food per meal.

Example:

$4 \text{ lbs} \times 6 \text{ (people in household)} \times 7 \text{ (days)} = 168 \text{ Pounds Provided}$

We encourage you to let each individual choose what is needed and only limit items if you feel you might run out before the end of the distribution. Most clients will take only what they truly need. Asking for food assistance is a very humbling experience.

Try taking some of everything the food bank offers – you may be surprised what items are popular!

You should also consider ethnic, cultural or dietary needs or preferences your clients might have. For example, if you work with a large senior population, you may want to stock items that are low in sodium and sugar.

Designing a Distribution Method: Client Choice

Client Choice Pantries are completely centered around the client and their individual and/or family needs. Clients are not given a premade box of food items that frequently contains products they do not like, cannot eat due to health or religious reasons, or do not know how to prepare. Rather, in this method clients have the ability to choose which food items they want, much the same way as you decide what you would like to eat when you shop at the grocery store. It is more cost effective, prevents waste, treats clients with dignity and ensures they are receiving the items they need and will eat.

There are two ways of organizing a client choice pantry: the Shopping Method and the Ordering Method



Shopping Method: The client goes into the pantry; picks out what s/he needs, and fills his/her own bag/box.

Advantages: The client receives only items he/she wants. It does not require as many staff/volunteers as other methods. Items are not wasted. Ability to meet special dietary and allergy needs. Space needed is flexible. Clients can take fuller advantage of diverse inventory of the Food Bank of the Rockies (FBR).

Disadvantages: Most agencies will tell you there is no disadvantage to this method!

Ordering Method: The client receives a list of items available, or can view them from behind a table or counter; s/he will indicate which items s/he wants and how many. Staff/volunteers fill the boxes according to the order.

Advantages: The client receives only items he/she wants. Keeps pantry organized. Ability to meet special dietary and allergy needs. Items are not wasted. Space needed is flexible. Clients can take fuller advantage of diverse inventory of FBR.

Disadvantages: Takes extra time to make up the order form for each distribution. You may run out of some items on the order form and it takes more staff/volunteers and time than the Shopping Method.

*If you are interested in learning more about Client Choice and using this distribution method contact one of our Client Choice Pantry Mentors. Visit our website www.foodbankrockies.org and click on the agency tab to begin. *



Safe Food Storage:



Depending on the type of distribution you select for your food box program, you'll need different capacities for storage. For pre-boxed distribution, you'll need less storage space, but will need additional space to assemble the boxes/bags and to store them. For the shopping method, you'll need space for shelves to display all the options as well as enough space for 2-3 people or more to do their shopping at once. For the ordering and hybrid methods, you'll need a similar storage space as is needed for shopping, as well as a space to assemble the orders.

These guidelines are important for safe food storage for all food box programs:

- Choose a storage space with locking doors, preferably with no outside entrance.
- There should be no cracks in the walls, ceilings, or floor and no broken windows where pests could enter.
- Dry storage should be in a dry, clean, well-ventilated area and the temperature should be between 50* - 70* F as dry goods can become unsafe if they get too cold or too hot. This will also help prevent mold, and pest infestation and the air flow will help control temperatures.
- Use free-standing shelves with the lowest shelf at least 6 inches off the floor. Food should also be kept at least 2 inches from the walls.
- Whenever possible, remove individual items from the cardboard cases. This is a good opportunity to inspect the product as you store it to look for pests or bad items that have bulges or are leaking. Getting rid of the cardboard also eliminates hiding places for pests.
- Store all pet food, non-food items (including paper products, and cleaning supplies on separate shelving away from food storage.
- Ensure that older items are rotated out first by labeling items with the date received, and always using the "First In, First Out" rule.
- Use only non-toxic insect and rodent traps. Never spray chemicals or lay poison in a food storage area.
- Refrigerators and Freezers: refrigerator temperatures should be between 32* - 40* F degrees, and freezer should be 0* and -20* F. Thermometers should be in all freezers and refrigerators on the front of shelves where they are easily visible when you look in. This helps staff/volunteers to spot problems easily and quickly.
- When you bring food into the storage area, store it properly immediately. Never leave items on the floor, and place frozen and refrigerated items in coolers immediately.
- Daily logs should be kept to record cleaning, and to record the temperature of refrigerators and freezers. These logs will be provided to FBR members.
- Monthly pest inspections should be performed and recorded in a log. FBR members will be provided with this log.

Code Dating Terminology:

As you store products in your food pantry, you will encounter products with different code dates. A date that has past does not necessarily mean the item should be discarded and is no longer safe for consumption. The only product that must be discarded if not used by its expiration date is baby food and infant formula. Otherwise, please use the below definitions to guide your decisions to keep or discard food.

“Best if used by” – Manufacturers use this date to indicate the last date by which the highest quality of the particular product is guaranteed. After this date, the product is still safe to consume but may not be at its highest quality in terms of nutrition and taste. For example, a box of cold cereal with a “best if used by date 6/25/11” is still safe to eat for several months afterward. However, it may not taste as fresh and may be slightly stale.

“Sell By” – The date the manufacturer recommends the product to be sold with the assumption it will be stored in an individual’s home for several days after purchase. A “sell by” date is most commonly found on dairy items and other refrigerated foods.

“Expiration date” – This phrase is used with baby food and infant formula. After this date the nutritional quality of the food cannot be ensured. Because baby food and infant formula are the primary source of nutrition for infants, a food of lower nutritional quality is harmful to their growth and development. *Therefore all baby food and infant formula must be discarded on their expiration date.* According to the Health Department It is illegal to sell and distribute baby food items after the expiration date.

“Pack Date/Code Date” – Indicates the date the product was originally packaged but does not indicate the time by which the product should be consumed.



I’m ready to Get Started. What are the Next Steps?



Please visit our website, www.foodbankrockies.org and click the “Agencies” tab and then the “Becoming an Agency” link. Fill out and submit the application and required information to become a member of FBR. We’ll visit your organization, present your application to the Member Agency Committee and orient your authorized shoppers. After approval and orientation, you and your authorized shoppers will be able to place food orders and take advantage of all the resources we offer. We are here to help you through the application process and with any other questions you might have. You can reach the Agency

Relations department at 303-371-9250 or relations@foodbankrockies.com.

We greatly appreciate your interest in serving our neighbors in need.

With the effort and vision of our member agencies, together, we can strive to fight hunger and feed hope!