

Addressing Food Insecurity Through Partnerships: Creating Partnerships with Food Pantries

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Introduction

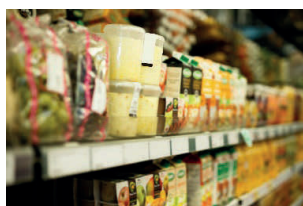
Food pantries and food banks work in partnership to combat food insecurity by distributing food to community members. Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, food pantries and food banks are different organizations.

Food banks are warehouses where foods are obtained, stored and distributed to their network of food pantries. Food banks do not usually distribute foods directly to consumers (Feeding America, 2021).



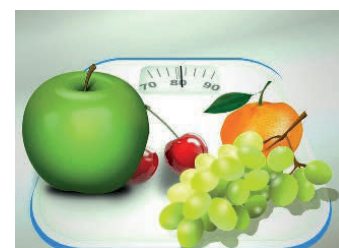
Food pantries are community organizations that distribute foods to individuals and families. Food pantries might be associated with faith-based organizations, schools or may operate independently. The services offered by food pantries vary across locations. Some food pantries provide pre-filled food boxes to clients while some food pantries allow clients to choose their own foods, similar to shopping in a grocery store. Some food pantries may also operate a mobile food pantry, which brings food closer to the people in need of nutritious food (Feeding America, 2021).

Food Insecurity



Food insecurity negatively affects the health and wellbeing of adults and children and increases the risk of obesity and chronic conditions like type 2 diabetes and heart disease. Households that receive support from a food pantry may have at least one household member with an existing chronic condition. It is estimated that about one-third of households within the Feeding America Network have a household member with high blood pressure and about half of households have a household member with diabetes.

Ensuring that people experiencing food insecurity have access to healthful, nutritious food is important. A healthy diet can reduce the risk for developing chronic conditions and help people with chronic conditions, like type 2 diabetes, manage their conditions. For households with children, receiving healthful and nutritious foods helps ensure that children have the nutrients their body needs for growth and development, and to prevent chronic conditions in childhood and later in life. For this reason, food banks and food pantries around the country are striving to distribute healthful, nutritious foods to their clientele (Feeding America, 2021).



Why Work with Food Pantries

For many years, UT Extension has provided nutrition education to a variety of audiences to inform wise food choices. It is important to work with food pantries, because food pantries are a main source of food for many individuals and families. It is estimated that 46.5 million people are served by the Feeding America network each year (Feeding America, 2014). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of people visiting food banks has significantly increased. Based on a report in 2021, food banks are serving 55 percent more people than before the pandemic (Feeding America, 2021). For families routinely utilizing food pantries as a primary source of food, the need for nutritious choices is important to health. The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) and UT SNAP-Ed: Tennessee Nutrition and Consumer Education Program (TNCEP) programming target limited-

resource individuals and families. The socioecological model acknowledges that choices are not made based solely on knowledge but are instead impacted by additional factors — including availability for healthy choices. For example, an educator may provide a lesson on the importance of drinking fewer sugar-sweetened beverages, but if the only drinks available in the setting are sugar-sweetened, the person has no choice if they need to quench thirst.

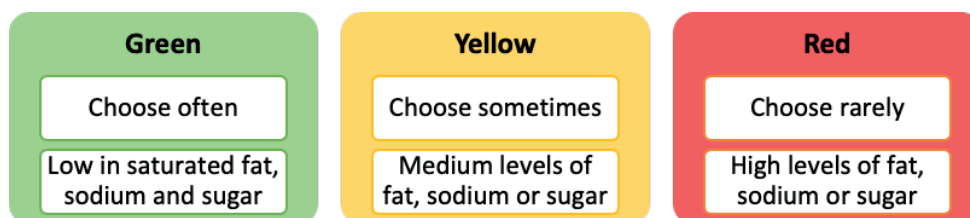
Getting Started

Assessments. UT Extension can begin working with food pantries by assessing local and regional food assistance resources. Online directories of hunger-fighting organizations, like Feeding America and Why Hunger, can serve as a starting point. However, social service organizations often have the most current information on local resources and their operating procedures.

Partnerships. Existing relationships with local organizations, their personnel and their volunteers facilitate determination of a food pantry’s readiness for going beyond nutrition education to implementing healthy food initiatives. The food pantry’s readiness can be assessed by the Conversation Tool for Assessing Food Pantry Readiness to Address Chronic Diseases. (Remley, 2017). If the pantry seems ready to make changes, the healthy food pantry assessment tool (Healthy Food Pantry Assessment Toolkit, 2019) can be used to consider capability to broaden food offerings. In situations where UT Extension does not have a relationship with the food pantry, offering nutrition workshops, recipes and food demonstrations may serve as an entry point to form relationships. After that, the pantry may be open to conversations on assessing readiness.

Healthy Food Initiatives in Food Pantries

Increase Healthy Options. Food pantries can use a color-coded system, based on nutrition recommendations, to increase supply and demand of healthy foods. Supporting Wellness at Pantries (SWAP) is a nutrition ranking system that uses color codes for food items based on current nutrition guidelines (SWAP, n.d.), including the Nutrition Guidelines for the Charitable Food System (Schwartz et al, 2020). The guidelines emphasize limiting three nutrients: saturated fat, sodium and added sugar. Accordingly, food items are categorized as green, yellow and red.



One important method to increase healthy options in food pantries is through accepting healthy donations. Food pantries can use the SWAP system as a guide for accepting healthy donations. In addition, food pantries can incorporate local fresh produce in their supply through strategies such as garden donations and gleaning.

Onsite Changes. Food pantries have started using onsite changes to prompt or nudge consumers to make healthy food selections. Rooted in behavioral economics principles, these onsite changes have been shown to be effective in encouraging healthy food choices (Rivera et al., 2016).

Highlighted below are three types of onsite changes. These changes require little cost and are generally not labor intensive. As such, they are perfect starting points for pantries wishing to create environments conducive to healthy food selection.

Cooking Demonstrations. For some food pantry clients, the selection of healthy foods hinges on their ability to prepare the food items in a manner that is both time efficient, cost-effective and appealing to members of their household. To reduce the hesitancy of food pantry clients trying healthy and perhaps new items, cooking demonstrations can be employed to showcase use of the food item, simplicity of recipe preparation or novel ways of preparation. When combined with sampling, cooking demonstrations offer clients the ability to taste test new foods with minimal risk and investment. For greatest efficacy, cooking demonstrations can be combined with other onsite changes.

Point-of-Decision Prompts. Point-of-decision prompts are messages such as signs, posters or shelf labels placed near healthy foods. Point-of-decision prompts can provide specific nutrition information, use symbols to rate or indicate healthy items, or promote selection of specific types of healthy foods.



Point-of-decision prompts can be effective tools in helping customers make healthy food choices. Current research suggests point-of-decision prompts help increase the selection of fruits and vegetables as well as other healthy foods (Sneed & Burney, 2018).

Placement. Something as simple as moving the location of an item can be effective in fostering healthy food choices. Research shows food pantry clients are less likely to take items if their shopping baskets are full. Therefore, it is important to place healthy food choices early in the shopping experience (Rivera, et al., 2016). Additionally, placing healthy food items at eye level or in places of prominence helps to draw the attention of food pantry clients to these items.



Enhancing Food Pantries Through Community Connections

By connecting with a variety of partners, food pantries can enhance their ability to distribute nutritious foods to their clientele.

Create a network of community partners. Bring together community partners who serve households experiencing food insecurity as part of a local health coalition or a newly formed coalition to discuss services provided, facilitate client referrals and discuss ideas for new projects.

Develop a resource directory. A resource directory of food pantries and other service providers that distribute nutritious foods to their clientele provides important information to community members.

Partner with gleaning organizations. Food pantries interested in distributing fresh produce may consider partnering with gleaning organizations, such as the Society of St. Andrew. Gleaning is the process by which local producers donate produce leftover at the end of the growing season so that it can be distributed to individuals and families in need of nutritious foods. Volunteers usually help pick excess produce from fields and producers receive tax benefits for their donations. To learn more about the Society of St. Andrew, visit endhunger.org.

Plant-a-Row for the Hungry. Through this initiative, community members are encouraged to plant an extra row of produce in their garden and donate the additional produce to a local food pantry or other feeding organizations.

Food pantries may also consider:

- Registering with AmpleHarvest.org as a location to receive fresh produce donated by home gardeners.
- Coordinating with home gardeners, Master Gardeners or community gardens to donate produce to a food pantry.
- Starting their own community garden as a source of fresh produce for donation and as a resource to teach clientele about gardening.

Help food pantries connect with a food bank. Food pantries who are not associated with a food bank may consider partnering with a food bank to receive nutritious foods for distribution. To find a Feeding America Food Bank your area, visit [/www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank](http://www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank).

Resources

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