PANTRY BOXES 101: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO ADDRESS FOOD INSECURITY THROUGH COMMUNITY PANTRY BOXES

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Introduction

In the state of Tennessee, nearly 12 percent of the population experiences food insecurity (Gunderson, 2022), meaning they do not have regular access to enough healthy food to support an active, healthy lifestyle. Food insecurity is most often experienced by low-income households, the unemployed, women, people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, gender nonconforming individuals, and people living in areas where nutritious foods are unavailable and expensive. (Leitz, 2018; Russomanno et al., 2019). Many organizations and programs in the United States combatting food insecurity include food pantries, food banks and government programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women Infant and Children (WIC), and the Free and Reduced School Lunch Program.

Many communities build food pantry boxes to address food insecurity. Food pantry boxes are small, anonymous, self-serve outdoor food pantries that are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. A food pantry box also may be known as a blessing box, outdoor pantry, or micro pantry. Many food pantry boxes are built and maintained by local faith-based organizations, businesses, or individuals. Establishing a food pantry box should follow a sustainable, well thought out plan, beginning with understanding a community's needs. This publication provides practical step-by-step information to help you establish a food pantry box in your community.

Needs Assessment

Start planning for your food pantry box by conducting a needs assessment. A needs assessment helps you better understand who in your community is most affected by food insecurity, what their needs are, and how to address those needs. The information below can help you with your needs assessment:

- **Talk to community organizations and community members.**

  Meeting with organizations such as your local University of Tennessee/Tennessee State University Extension offices, health departments, health councils, food pantries, food banks, and commodity programs can help you understand your community's needs. Talk with community members of different ages, races, ethnic groups, genders, religious backgrounds, sexual orientations, and cultures. Including community members who face food insecurity will give you a clearer picture of needed resources and help with the planning and implementation process. Consider asking community organizations, community members, and users of the pantry box the following questions:

  - Do you have, or know of, an existing community needs assessment you could use?

  - Do you have, or know of a map or list of organizations, services, and resources that combat food insecurity?

  - Which populations of people are most in need in your community?

  - What neighborhoods in your community would benefit from resources addressing food insecurity?

  - What types of items (food and non-food) are most needed by community members?

  - Do you think a food pantry box would be beneficial for your community? Why or why not?

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Planning and Implementation

A detailed and carefully planned project is more likely to be successful. Answer the following questions to help you plan your food pantry box.

1. **What are your short-term and long-term goals?**

   Set short-term and long-term goals to ensure your food pantry box is successful and sustainable. Short term goals may include deciding who will lead the planning process, installment and building of the box and deciding on items that will be excepted for donation. Long-term goals should address ongoing maintenance and sustainability of the pantry box. Develop specific goals and choose a realistic due date for completion. Answering the questions within this guide will help you set goals and keep your project on-track.

2. **Who will lead the planning and implementation process?**

   Decide if an individual or a group will be responsible for leading the food pantry box project. They will need to coordinate with partners, and ensure all tasks are completed correctly by set deadlines.

3. **Will you need partners?**

   Decide if you will need additional partners to implement your food pantry box project. Potential partners might include your local Extension office, faith-based organizations, health departments, and other community health organizations. Local groups that address food insecurity, food retailers, law enforcement, and private business owners may also be good community collaborators. Reach out to possible partners to ask about their interest in working with you on this project.

4. **Where will the food pantry box be located?**

   Determining the location of a food pantry box is an important part of the planning process. Your food pantry box should be placed in an easily accessible, shaded, and well-lit location where it can safely be reached on foot or by car. (Dahlheim, 2021). Check with your county or city building codes office. Building permits may be needed for the area where the food pantry box will be placed.

5. **How will you build and install the food pantry box?**

   Decide if you will buy a pre-made food pantry box or if you will build one. Determine what supplies or equipment you will need to build and install your food pantry box. The information below can help you ensure your food pantry box is safe, clean, and accessible:

   • Food pantry boxes should be off the ground and are usually built on a post.

   • Use exterior and treated building materials that can withstand the weather and climate in your area.

   • Build the roof to allow for rain runoff.

   • Build the door of your food pantry box with see-through material and a secure latch.

   • Consider a solar light to help with visibility at night (Dahlheim, 2021).

   • Design your food pantry box to discourage pests. Pests are a safety hazard that can cause foodborne illness. Ensure that the food pantry box is completely sealed and there are no small cracks, holes, or other places where rats or mice can enter.

6. **What types of food items will you stock in the food pantry box?**

   Decide what types of items you will stock in your food pantry box. Data from your needs assessment may help you determine the types of foods and other household items that are most needed. The following information can help you make decisions about the types of donations you will or will not accept in your food pantry box.

   • All food donations should be unused and completely sealed.

   • Donated food should be shelf-stable or nonperishable. Examples include:

     - Canned or dried fruits and vegetables. *

     - Peanut butter

     - Canned chicken, fish, and other meats. *

     - Granola bars, trail mix, and other packaged items.

   • Encourage nutritious food donations that are low in saturated fat, added sugar, and sodium. Examples include:

     - Low-sodium, or no-salt-added canned vegetables*

     - Whole grains: brown rice, whole wheat bread and tortillas, whole grain corn tortillas, whole wheat crackers

Canned food should not be donated in below freezing temperatures or above 95 F. Cans that are dented, swollen, or rusted should not be donated because they may contain bacteria that could cause foodborne illness.

- Unsalted nuts

- Dried fruits without added sugar

• Food donations with pop tops or packaging that does not require a can opener are ideal for a food pantry box. Some food pantry box users may not be able to store or prepare food.

• Some food pantry boxes accept donations for hygiene and household items. Examples include:

- Baby necessities

- Shampoos

- Deodorants

- Soap

- Feminine hygiene products

- Laundry detergent

• Perishable foods **should NOT** be donated. Perishable items need to be refrigerated and will not remain safe to eat. Examples of perishable foods include:

- Fresh produce

- Dairy such as milk, cheese, or yogurt

- Fresh meat

- Home-cooked foods

• Foods that are past their "best if used by," "use-by," or "sell-by" date, especially baby food and baby formula, **should NOT** be donated.

• Home-canned foods **should NOT** be donated

7. **Will you distribute education materials to food pantry box users?**

Consider providing nutrition education materials and recipes to help food pantry box users learn to handle food safely, choose healthy foods, and prepare nutritious meals within their food budget. Contact your local Extension office and the SNAP-Ed (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education)/EFNEP (Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program) educators for these resources. You can find information about your local Tennessee Extension office at this website: https://utextension.tennessee.edu/office-locations-departments-centers/

8. **How will you announce the food pantry box project to the public and to donors?**

Develop a marketing strategy to let the public know about your food pantry box. Social media is a great way to share information about the new neighborhood service. Other methods of communication include TV, newspaper, radio, flyers, brochures, and word of mouth. Develop a communication plan that works best for your community and decide who will be responsible for executing the plan. Consider the following while developing your communication plan.

• **Communicate with community members.** Decide the best methods to notify community members that your food pantry box is available to them.

• **Communicate with potential donors.** Decide the best methods to share information with community members and community organizations that may want to donate to your food pantry box. Include information about the types of items that are appropriate for donation, most needed, how to donate, and who to contact with questions.

• **Communicate updates and important information.** Include strategies to announce important updates about your food pantry box with your community members, partners, and donors.

• **Develop a method for users to contact someone with issues and concerns.** Identify the best way for food pantry box users and other individuals to contact someone if they have questions or concerns. Food pantry box users or donors may notice damaged packaging, broken items, or damage to the structure that will need to be addressed immediately.

9. **How will you manage excess donations or lack of donations?**

Decide how the group will handle times when the food pantry box has more donations than it can hold or is low on donations. Is there space available to store extra donations that do not fit inside the food pantry box? When supplies are scarce how will you communicate with partners, donors, and the community to request donations?

10. **How much will your food pantry box project cost?**

Estimate the total cost for your project. Include the cost for building supplies and any costs associated with communication, maintenance, and sustainability of your food pantry box.

11. **How will the food pantry box be financially supported?**

Determine how you will pay for your food pantry box. Grants and donations from individuals, groups, businesses, corporate foundations, and faith-based organizations are all possible sources of funding.

12. **How will you evaluate your food pantry box?**

Develop an evaluation system to determine the success of your food pantry box. An evaluation system may also help you improve your project by identifying ways your food pantry box could better serve the community. Evaluation may be difficult with food pantry boxes since they are meant to be anonymous and mostly self-sufficient.

Surveys are a good choice to ask for feedback about your food pantry box. Surveys can help you better understand the number of people you are reaching and their needs. Include information explaining the purpose of the survey and how it can be accessed. Use the information below to help you develop a survey to evaluate your food pantry box:

- Choose a survey format. Choose the format that works best for you and your community. Electronic or paper surveys are good options.

  - Paper surveys: Place anonymous paper surveys and pens or pencils in or near your food pantry box. Include a secure place for completed surveys, such as a small lockable box. Provide instructions to help food pantry box users understand the survey's purpose, how to complete the questions, and how to submit the finished survey.

  - Electronic surveys: On or near your food pantry box place a flyer or poster with a QR code or website address for food pantry users to access your anonymous online survey

- Use the information below to help you develop survey questions to help you evaluate your food pantry box.

  - Ask questions about the food items that food pantry box users need and prefer.

  - Ask questions about dietary needs. Food insecure populations often face higher levels of chronic illness like heart disease and diabetes, which may affect their dietary needs (Gunderson, et al., 2015).

  - Ask questions about culture. Certain cultures have different dietary requirements and preferences for food preparation.

  - Create survey questions addressing the benefits of the pantry box. Ask how food donations have been used to supplement meals. If your box accepts hygiene items, ask how these items have been beneficial.

  - Consider asking questions to determine the food pantry box users' thoughts on the ease of use and the cleanliness of the food pantry box.

Maintenance and Sustainability

During the planning phase, decide if an individual or group will be responsible for maintenance and sustainability of the food pantry box. Faith-based organizations, community groups, and local businesses may collaborate to care for a food pantry box. Choose a maintenance and sustainability plan that works best for your community and your partners.

- **Inspect the food pantry box regularly.** Check the food pantry box often for damage to the structure. Frequent maintenance is the best way to prevent pest infestations and ensure your food pantry box remains safe for users in your community.

- **Clean the food pantry box often.** Regular cleaning ensures the food pantry box is safe and deters pests. Remove any food donations that are past their expiration date, are not shelf stable, or have damaged packaging.

- **Look for holes, gaps, leaks, and signs of infestation.** If you notice any of these, they need to be addressed immediately. Do not use pesticides near structures that contain food. (Hahn et al., 2018)

- **Make sure the door securely latches**. A door with a broken latch should be swiftly addressed.

- **Look for spills, trash, and broken items.** Make sure the area around the food pantry box is kept clean and clear. Spills, trash, and broken items should be quickly cleaned.

- **Maintain communication.**

  Regularly share updates and important information about your food pantry box with community members, partners, and donors. If you develop a system for submission of questions, comments, and suggestions, ensure this system is monitored regularly and all inquiries are addressed in a timely manner.

- **Meet with your project team**

  Regularly meet with your project team to share updates, discuss important issues, and implement your future plans.

Example – Volunteer Home Mortgage, Inc.

A food pantry box supported by Volunteer Home Mortgage, Inc. in Maryville, Tennessee, is an example of a successful food pantry box. Built in 2019, the box's caretaker uses networking with local businesses and citizens to help maintain the box. The food pantry box has a Facebook page called "Maryville Blessing Box" that lets people know when the box has been filled and when it needs to be replenished. Dedication and community engagement have made the Volunteer Home Mortgage, Inc. food pantry box sustainable and an asset to the Maryville community.

Conclusion

Many communities across Tennessee and the United States have used food pantry boxes to alleviate food insecurity in their communities. When well-planned and properly implemented, food pantry boxes are a sustainable and gratifying way to help combat food insecurity.

Learn More

To learn more about food and nutrition security and community programming read these online sources:

https://www.utextension.tennessee.edu

https://www.foodsafety.gov

https://www.nutrition.gov

https://www.ChooseMyPlate.gov

https://www.littlefreepantry.org

https://www.nochildgoeshungry.net/grants-in-motion/

https://www.fordfund.org

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