

Client Choice Manual

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 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 pantries was on rules and restrictions and limiting the amount of food distributed. As a result, many 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 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.²
- A widowed man is given a sack of flour that he promptly tosses into the alley behind the 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 is given a bag with canned vegetables, heavy syrup fruit and snacks she cannot chew. Most of her food bag went to a neighbor.

¹ Pre-bagging groceries is also referred to as prepackaging food packages.

² The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) administered by USDA-FNS provides eligible participants milk, as well as other foods.

No matter what the income level, people need to be able to select their own foods and have control over what they eat. For two decades 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 food bank that supplies the pantries.
- Greater numbers of empty calorie foods such as sugared drinks and chips or other snack items are left unused at the food bank, unavailable to pantry clients and eventually as part of a land fill.
- This practice adds to the operational cost of the food bank 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.
- 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 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 child care, there isn't much money left. Susan must visit the local pantry once a month out of necessity, not because of mis-budgeting her money.

The pantry Susan visits is very traditional and only opens one afternoon a week. Since she works during the day, coming to the pantry requires her to leave work a half-hour early once a month to wait in line and receive food. This pantry allows clients to come only once a month and every time Susan visits the 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 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 pantry for about 3 minutes and her interaction with the 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
- 1 box of donuts

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 pantry is open a variety of days and hours, she never has to worry that she can't get to the pantry. As a TEFAP choice pantry in Indiana, 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 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 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.

After reading the two women's stories, you might wonder why all pantries don't switch over to client choice. In Indiana, all pantries that participate in TEFAP are required to offer "Client Choice" pantries. Sadly, some pantries have chosen to discontinue use of TEFAP items rather than make the changes needed to become a choice pantry.

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

Overview of the Issues

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

- Will this change the hours of our pantry operation?
- How will the food pantry volunteer's role change?
- How will choice effect the nutrition quality of our food bags?
- Our 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 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?

Issues with Operations and Answers

Learning from other food pantry operations: the issues that have been raised and the solutions that have been found.

Hours Of Operation

In the early 80's when many 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 pantry because

they may have to choose between coming to the pantry or losing income by taking off work to come during traditional hours of operation.

Most pantries don't want to post hours of operation because it is such a struggle to maintain consistent hours. Posting hours on the building is a requirement for 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 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.

A review of operating times for pantries around Indiana reveals a disappointing disproportion of pantries open only during morning hours during the week. This strategy is fine for pantries working primarily with seniors, but not for working families. This is an area all pantries should strive to improve. Here are three pantries in the spotlight that have adjusted their hours to be "Family Friendly".

FORREST MANOR MULTI-SERVICE CENTER AND FOOD PANTRY

This food pantry located in Indianapolis is only able to open its pantry two days per week, but one day is family friendly 10 am-8 pm and the other day is primarily geared to seniors with morning am hours.

LA CASE DE AMSTED YOUTH COMMUNITY CENTER

This food pantry is located in South Bend and has very good hours to accommodate those who need to come in early afternoon hours or those who need later hours due to their work schedule. They are open two days per week from 1-6:30 pm.



THE BRADY LANE CHURCH OF CHRIST FOOD PANTRY

This food pantry is located in Lafayette and as shown by their clearly printed sign, they are open a morning and an evening each month.

Hours of operation are influenced more by availability of volunteers rather than using client choice. Since implementation of client choice has been shown to improve morale of volunteers, the opportunity for enhanced hours may become feasible.

The Role Of The Volunteer

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

The types of training offered to volunteers may change, as their roles become more client centered. One suggestion offered by several 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 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.
- Purdue Cooperative Extension workers may be available to work with their programs within the pantry setting. Workers in EFNEP (Expanded Food and Nutrition Program) are often able to come and talk with pantry clients, use pantry foods to prepare sample recipes and be available to answer food related questions and sign up clients for in home nutrition education.
- 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 pantry by volunteering a day every month. This may give you enough additional volunteers to allow the pantry to be open an extra evening or weekend day.

SPOTLIGHT ON AN AGENCY

St. Vincent de Paul Client Choice Pantry of Indianapolis does a good job preparing their volunteers for their client-centered role in the choice pantry.



Meet Jerry McKenan, volunteer St. Vincent de Paul Client Choice Pantry located on Spann Avenue in Indianapolis. Jerry has volunteered for several years and states the main reason he enjoys volunteering is because the operation runs smoothly and there is great volunteer training. Here Mr. McKenan helps a client with a shopping cart.

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 choice. Coordinators 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 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 the St. Vincent de Paul Client Choice Pantry of Indianapolis the check-in can be done quickly.



At this client choice pantry, clients are issued tickets based on family size for use in the 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 pantry another day to provide choice. Most pantries find the 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 particular issue may be the single hardest change for most 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?

In reality, 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 of 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 the food groups including the Fats, Oils, and Sweets group. 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 actually 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.

Cooking methods have changed dramatically over the past 10-15 years. More convenience items are the norm and should also be included as part of the foods selection whenever they are available.

Picking up discarded items like the cans of waxed beans or sacks of flour from the alley behind the pantry after distribution day should remove any doubt that good nutrition cannot be forced upon a client. Instead, lets look at what several pantries have done to encourage client choice plus some gentle nutrition education.

MOTHER HUBBARD'S CUPBOARD

Mother Hubbard's Cupboard in Bloomington, IN uses food label information right on product shelves to let clients know if a food is a good source of vitamin A or iron for example. They also point out items that are lower in sodium for those clients that have special diet concerns. Mother Hubbard's Cupboard also offers healthy recipes and sometimes samples of new or unusual items to encourage clients to taste and try healthy foods. Mother Hubbard's also has the advantage of nutrition students from the nearby university. These volunteers are eager to assist clients and answer their nutrition concerns.

Space Concerns

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

Space can be an issue for many pantries. At first glance, a client choice pantry might appear to need bountiful space, but in reality, the space you currently use to store and pre-bag food can easily be used for client choice. Here is an example of a pantry that made good use of small space.

Meet Judy Dixon, pantry coordinator for the Pike County Outreach Council of Churches, Inc, of Waverly, Ohio. Judy shares her experiences with managing a pantry space just 10 X 15 feet!

"Our space is really small, but we have managed to still make room for everything we need", says Judy. "About one third of the space is reserved for a reception area. Generally, the intake is done in this area."

In the actual pantry area along the back wall, we have floor to ceiling shelving units stocked with fruit and soup, beans, some odds and ends, and the commodities. In the middle of the floor space, we have a refrigerator and two freezers, loaves of bread, canned meat, and any fresh produce items. Along the front wall, we have more shelving units stocked with vegetables, pastas, sauces, drinks, and crackers, peanut butter and breakfast items.

Once the intake is completed, a volunteer escorts the client into the pantry area. Items that will not be counted in the family's monthly allotment are offered to the client first. This saves some last minute switching around. Then, the client can choose which (if any) foods they desire from each food group category. For instance, they are offered any 4 cans of vegetables or they may decide to only take one can this month, because they have plenty at home.

Judy states they have a basic number of items that everyone receives, the number of items increases depending on the number of people in the family.

"We have a small table in the middle of the pantry where chosen food is placed. The client is provided sacks to bag the groceries. Some older people bring in their own two wheeled grocery cart, and a volunteer can help them push it around the pantry to load up with chosen items." continues Judy.

"We do have a small storage area just off our pantry where we keep overflow items. The shelves are stocked from the storage area as needed."

The choice pantry allows families the dignity of choosing their own food. Since families choose what they like, they do not throw away good food. The clients do not take items if they already have them so Judy notes the pantry saves money, and it complements what the clients may have at home.



With just 10 X 15 feet of space, Judy Dixon, pantry coordinator for the Pike County Outreach Council of Churches, Inc., of Waverly, OH, describes their newly organized client choice pantry, "Space is tight, but we manage!"

How Do We Offer Choice To Clients?

Choice does not mean the 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 pantry.

How to set up the pantry and get going with choice is a roadblock to many 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 choice.

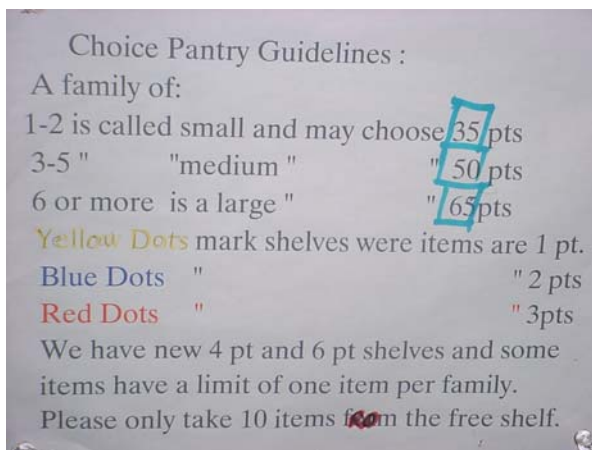
THE POINT SYSTEM

The Point System is based on what the items would cost if you actually 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 pantry.

The point values may vary a little on products such as over-the-counter medicines or personal care products that would be very expensive to buy. Some pantries label these product as 1 point items, but set a limit of three to make sure the bulk of points goes toward food.



Sample posting of a Point System from the Pike County Outreach Council of Churches, Inc, of Waverly, OH.

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 spoil easily 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 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 pantries to use when they are first switching over to choice. 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" in order to keep enough stock available for the average number of families served by the pantry.

Here are some average item numbers offered by 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 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".

Other sources for nutrition education include either FNP (Family Nutrition Program) or EFNEP (the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program). An educator from either program may be able to prepare food for demonstration and also sign clients up for in-home classes on shopping and budgeting.

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 choice 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.

SAMPLE LIST

Bread items
(Circle 3)

Crackers
Tortillas
Cereal
Rice
Macaroni and Cheese
Chips or Popcorn

Protein items
(Circle 3)

Spam
Chicken and noodles
Stew
Tuna
Peanut Butter
Eggs

Canned fruits/vegetables/juices
(Circle 4)

Green Beans
Orange juice
Grape juice
Tomato juice
Tomatoes
Beets
Peaches
Pears

Free items
(Circle 3)

Bread
Cold Medicine
Soap
Sweet or pastry
Snack items
(Diapers, if available)



Easy to read signs ensure that families are careful with limited items.

Client Choice and TEFAP

“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 in Indiana. 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 pantries serving Indiana's poorest families.

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 should not be stored separately. The only exception example is listed below:

- The 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 pantry.

Client choice will also help USDA foods go further in the 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 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.

How Does Choice Help The Client?

First and foremost, choice creates an atmosphere of dignity for the client. Whether the trip to the 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 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 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 pantry.

Choice 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 pantry is always available, it may help them curtail this survivor eating pattern.

Using a choice 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 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."

Generally speaking, pantry organizers love well-stocked shelves and constantly worry about having enough food to cover the days when the pantry is open. If you are making the change to a choice 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 pantry operators have found that choice does not effect 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.



The client choice pantry shelf above shows that client choice does not mean emptying out your shelves with every food basket day. Most pantry operators have found that choice does not negatively influence their budget or food supply. Much of this is due to not having to worry about running to the grocery store and paying retail to buy those identical items for every person's pre-bagged sack. As nice as full shelves look, remember that food on the shelves can not feed the hungry.

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 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 pantries. Most 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 pantries are those assuming the financial responsibility for their grandchildren. States one grandmother from Indianapolis, "***I make \$7.00 an hour, and with all my bills and my car payments and food and clothes and babysitter for my 2 young grandkids, and because I can't get food stamps, I go to the food pantry.***"

Seniors may need some special consideration when planning a choice pantry. A choice 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 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 pantry.
- Single serving containers are preferred whenever possible to help prevent food waste.

So many older Americans struggle monthly to make ends meet. States a woman over age 65 years from Lafayette, Indiana, "**Because we don't have the money... food prices have gone up and the food pantry food is nice**". 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 at all 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.
- Offering some over the counter medicines at one or no points to help conserve grocery dollars for food.
- Provide information to seniors at pantry sites about hot meal sites for seniors, home delivered meals, and free or reduced priced prescription drug programs. These are all excellent opportunities for the 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.



Offering personal care items and over-the-counter medicines at no points for seniors.

- 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 choice or how to refine your existing operation to run more smoothly. With a little effort, your pantry can be part of the solution of how to feed the hungry and at the same time restore dignity to the human condition.

Highlighted Agencies

1. St. Vincent de Paul Client Choice Pantry, Indianapolis, Indiana
2. Brady Lane Church of Christ Food Pantry, Lafayette, Indiana
3. Forrest Manor Multi-Service Center Food Pantry, Indianapolis, Indiana
4. La Casa de Amsted Youth Community Center, South Bend, Indiana
5. Mother Hubbard's Cupboard, Bloomington, Indiana
6. Pike County Outreach Council of Churches, Waverly, Ohio