



Food Pantry Guidance

Structure

The decision to operate a food pantry involves many steps and planning. This is necessary to ensure that you are best able to assist the community that will benefit from your food pantry. When developing your food pantry, the following initial steps should be undertaken:

- Identify your target community. (E.g. area of residence or demographics)
- Develop your guidelines for service. What are your operating procedures? Will you have any intake requirements to assist your community? (E.g. proof of residence, will you ask general questions during intake?)
- Determine your hours and days of operation. Be consistent since your targeted community will depend on you.
- Have a volunteer management plan - who will do the work?

Food Sources

Once you have your food pantry plan in place and the volunteers to staff the food pantry, you will need to determine your source(s) of food to stock your shelves. Depending on your specific needs you may decide to partner with a larger food bank in your community where you shop for the food to fill your pantry, such as the National Capital Area Food Bank (www.capitalareafoodbank.org) or Fredericksburg Food Bank (www.fredfood.org).

You will also want to look to free sources of food such as local bakeries, restaurants, farmers markets, and butchers. If you can develop relationships with these locations, you may be able to secure a consistent flow of free food that these establishments would otherwise throw out.

Consider your ability to store and distribute shelf staple food and perishable or refrigerated/frozen food. You must have a refrigerator and/or freezer if you desire to

distribute perishable and frozen foods. If your pantry cannot accommodate the additional space required for a refrigerator/freezer, plan to distribute foods that do not require freezer or refrigerator storage.

Food Distribution

Now that the pantry is established and the food is in place, how will you distribute the food to your targeted community? You can follow a prepackaged model, a client choice model or a blended model.

In a prepackaged model, the food is already divided and bagged or boxed for your clients, they simply need to come to the food pantry and pick up their bag or box. This is a helpful model when space is limited in the pantry. However, clients may not be familiar with the foods that are predetermined or they may prefer other foods. In these instances, the prepackaged food may not be used and in fact go to waste.

An alternative method of distribution is client choice. Clients are offered a selection of different food with instructions on how much to take of each kind. It promotes dialogue between volunteers and the clients and prevents waste because clients are more likely to eat what they choose, vs. what is chosen for them by a third party. More space may be needed for a client choice model than a prepackaged model, but with some creativity even a small closet can be set up for client choice.

Finally, food pantries may decide that a blended model works best, a combination of prepackaged and client choice. Staples like canned vegetables and rice are prepackaged but other foods such as meat and dairy are available for clients to choose.

Client Intake

An initial step in beginning a food pantry is determining the client intake process. Will you ask questions regarding residency, number of household members, employment, or availability of other public assistance? If you are asking questions, have a reason why you are asking. Will the information you gather help identify a larger population needing your aid, will you need the information you gather to apply for grants? Let your clients know why you are asking the questions and be consistent. If you ask one client, you should ask all clients.

How will you store the information you obtain from clients, will it be on index cards, in an Excel spreadsheet or some other program?

Train your volunteers and staff in greeting and assisting clients. Clients may be anxious or nervous coming to a food pantry. Put them at ease, be polite and provide a friendly environment. Give your staff the tools they need to help diffuse a potentially heated situation. Who is the go to person when a client is upset?

Certain programs may require more frequent reporting. When deciding to partner with an agency, make sure you understand those requirements and that you can adhere to them.

Be familiar with other local food pantries and organizations that may offer clothing or job skills training, in the event your location is unable to assist a particular client.

Safe Environment

A critical component of running a food pantry is providing a clean facility and edible food. The [Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act of 1996](#) protects donors from liability when donating to a non-profit organization. It also protects the non-profit organization from liability when the organization gives out the food to the community. Even with this safeguard in place, food pantries should be diligent in cleaning and storage so that the reputation of the food pantry remains in tact.

- Food should be stored 6” or more from the floor and 12”-18” from walls to prevent creatures and water from damaging the food.
- Follow the first in, first out rule. Rotate the food so that older food is moved out of the pantry before newer food.
- Educate your clients on sell by, use by and expiration dates.
- Post [The Food Keeper brochure](#) in a visible location for volunteers and clients to see.
- Do not give out rusted and/or bloated cans. If the can have significant dents, do not give it out.
- If the contents of a package appear to have changed, do not give out the food.

Additional Resources

- **Christ House** (http://www.cdda.net/programs_christhouse.php) - Founded in 1973, Christ House provides food to the hungry, shelter to the homeless, and clothing to those in need. Christ House helps individuals recognize their abilities, develop self-sufficiency, and maintain their self-respect. It offers limited assistance to individuals needing help to pay their rent, utility bills, prescription bills, and other expenses. A resource for those looking to begin a food pantry.
- **Federation of Virginia Food Banks** (www.vafoodbanks.org) – Hunger relief network serving Virginia. Links to various Virginia food banks, many within the Catholic Diocese of Arlington.
- **211 Virginia** (www.211virginia.org) – Directory of community services within Virginia. Includes directory of food pantries.
- **The Partnership for Food Safety Education** (www.fightbac.org) – A public-private partnership to educate the public about safe food handling and preparation.
- **The Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act** (<http://www.usda.gov/news/pubs/gleaning/appc.htm>) – Signed into law in 1996 and designed to encourage the donation of food and grocery products to nonprofit organizations. Limits the liability of donors to instances of gross negligence or intentional misconduct.