

CLIENT-CHOICE FOOD PANTRY GUIDE



While food pantries share the common goal of addressing food insecurity in communities, they can vary widely in terms of operation, food and services provided, and clientele. Among the tens of thousands of food pantries that exist in the United States, client-choice models have become increasingly popular as a way to promote food security and nutrition while also preserving clients' dignity and autonomy.

WHAT IS A CLIENT-CHOICE PANTRY?

In a traditional food pantry, clients are offered a bag or box of preselected items with limited opportunity to exchange or select items. Client-choice models, however, allow clients to select their own items.

BENEFITS OF THE CLIENT-CHOICE PANTRY MODEL

Promotes dignity, respect and self-efficacy

Allowing clients to choose their own foods provides a more dignified shopping experience, respects the fact that clients have unique preferences and needs and empowers clients to make decisions for themselves.

Reduces waste

When preselected items are offered to clients, food is often wasted or bartered because clients do not know how to prepare it, do not need it or do not prefer it. Client-choice pantries allow clients to choose food items based on their needs and personal and cultural preferences.

Can lead to positive nutrition-related outcomes

Client-choice pantry interventions have been found to improve clients' nutrition knowledge, cooking skills, food security status and fresh produce intake.

Provides social benefits to clients

Interaction and engagement with pantry staff or volunteers that assist with food choices can provide pantry clients with numerous social benefits, such as a more personalized pantry experience, social support and interaction, encouragement, and opportunities to share ideas and learn about other available resources.

Offers healthier items than traditional food pantries

Client-choice pantries have been shown to offer more healthy food choices that align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans produced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.



TYPES OF CLIENT-CHOICE PANTRY MODELS

A variety of client-choice pantry models exists. Consider your pantry's capacity and your clients' needs when choosing your client-choice layout and organizational system.

Supermarket model

Food is arranged on shelves. Clients walk through the space like a supermarket and take food off shelves according to pantry guidelines. The pantry's entire stock is available for clients. Pantry size determines how many clients can shop at a time.

Considerations: Adequate space/equipment needed to display food and allow clients to walk through; food does not have to be moved on days the pantry is open.

Table model

Food is set out on tables. Clients walk by each table and choose and pack their food. This model can be used if there is not enough space or equipment for a supermarket model.

Considerations: Model is space-efficient; can accommodate many clients at one time; tables must be set up and restocked regularly on days the pantry is open.

Window model

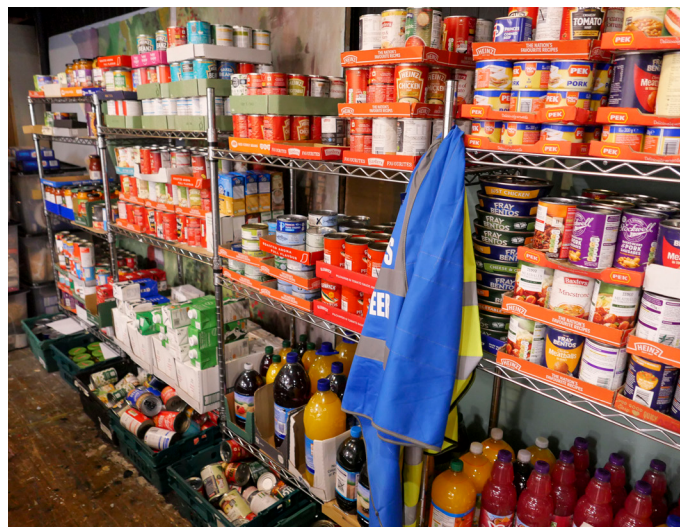
Food is set up on shelves. Clients choose the food that they want by pointing to foods displayed on the shelves. Pantry staff or volunteers pack food bags or boxes according to the clients' choices.

Considerations: Model works well when space is limited; only a small number of clients can be served at a time.

Inventory list model

A list of available food is posted or given to clients. Clients choose their food from the list, then pantry staff or volunteers assemble the food bags or boxes according to the clients' choices.

Considerations: Model works well when space is limited; facilitative to clients with limited mobility.



ORGANIZATIONAL/DISTRIBUTION SYSTEMS

Points system

Every item in the pantry is assigned a point value. Points often relate to the item's cost (as it would in a grocery store) but can also be based on an item's nutritional value. Clients are allotted points based on factors such as household size and are allowed to choose items that fall within their point allotment.

Considerations: Point values can encourage clients to choose healthier options; every pantry item must be labeled; can feel restrictive to clients.

Pounds or weight system

Food pantry items are valued based on their weight. Clients are allotted a number of pounds based on factors such as household size and allowed to choose their own items that fall within their pound allotment.

Considerations: On its own, this system does not necessarily distinguish between healthy and unhealthy foods, but it can be combined with other interventions to encourage healthier choices; every pantry item must be labeled.



MyPlate system

Foods are grouped into MyPlate categories (fruits, vegetables, proteins, grains and dairy). Clients are allotted a number of points or pounds per MyPlate category and allowed to choose their own items. This system is often combined with a points system.

Considerations: Encourages selection of a balanced variety of food items; every pantry item must be labeled; flexibility may be needed to accommodate client needs and food preferences.

Number of items system

Clients are allotted a number of pantry items based on factors such as household size and allowed to choose their own items.

Considerations: Simple to understand and implement; can be combined with other systems to encourage healthier choices.

Item list/checkbox system

Clients are given a list of items available in the pantry and can choose the items and quantity that they want.

Considerations: Accommodates clients with limited mobility; potential language and literacy barriers; can erode some of the respect and self-sufficiency that the client-choice pantry model can provide.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADOPTING A CLIENT-CHOICE MODEL

Volunteer-client interactions

Volunteers should be trained in pantry operations, how to discuss clients' needs and how to approach and discuss sensitive topics. They should also be aware of the cultural diversity that may exist among pantry clients.

Client ability

Client ability, such as if clients are visually impaired or have physical disabilities, must be considered when choosing the layout and organization of your pantry. A client-choice pantry should function appropriately for the populations it serves.

Cultural appropriateness

Signs, labels and other supporting materials should be simple and easily understood by all pantry clients. Materials must be adapted appropriately for the culture of the clients. Language barriers may hinder the effectiveness of your program if unaddressed.



Volunteer and staff engagement

Pantry volunteers and staff are the gatekeepers who can facilitate or inhibit the effectiveness of pantry efforts. Volunteers and staff should be involved prior to implementing changes to ensure the program is a success.

Collaboration with partners

Consider partnering with other services, such as health education and community programs, like SNAP-Ed or EFNEP, to make your program more effective or to offer additional services to pantry clients.

Time considerations

Staff and volunteer training may be time-consuming. It is important to communicate with volunteers, staff and clients about why changes are taking place and why they are important. Client-choice models that use nutritional ranking or a similar system may also require more time to stock shelves.

Contingency plans

Pantries may face many challenges, such as limited personnel, lack of funding or food scarcity. Contingency plans should be developed to ensure the sustainability of the program.



ADDITIONAL MEASURES TO ENHANCE YOUR CLIENT-CHOICE PANTRY

In addition to adopting a client-choice pantry model, pantries can offer other support to clients to encourage them to make healthier choices and to better impact their long-term food security.

Hold food demonstrations

Conduct food demonstrations regularly to teach clients food preparation skills and show them how to incorporate the items they receive from the pantry into healthy meals.

Provide recipe cards

Offer clients recipe cards that utilize food pantry items as ingredients to show them how to create healthy meals from items they receive from the pantry.

Offer recipe kits

Create ingredient bundles for the recipes demonstrated on-site. Clients are more likely to choose healthier options when they have had the chance to try it and are presented with the ingredients that they need to prepare the dish.

Provide nutrition and health information

Provide nutrition and health education lessons and resources to clients to help improve their knowledge of nutrition and how to prevent diet-related diseases.

Implement “nudge” interventions

Nudge interventions are a set of strategies designed to influence consumers’ decisions about selecting foods. Making subtle changes to a food pantry environment, such as displaying healthy foods in a more attractive way or adding signage to explain the health benefits of different foods, can encourage pantry clientele to make healthier food choices and complement other nutrition education efforts.

Share resources

Share resources about other programs and services available to clients to help them identify other sources of support in their community. You may consider having a list of local agencies available to give to clients or set up one-on-one meetings with clients to learn more about their unique needs and offer individualized assistance. The following programs and services may be available to clients you serve:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP)
- Special Supplemental Assistance for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)
- Commodity Food Service Program (CFSP)
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)
- Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP)
- National School Lunch Program (NSLP)
- National School Breakfast Program (NSBP)
- Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)
- Cooperative Extension Service (LSU AgCenter or SU Ag Center)
- Council on Aging
- St. Vincent de Paul
- United Way

Gather feedback from clients

Distribute client surveys regularly to gather feedback about the food items and services offered at the pantry. This will allow pantry staff to better meet the needs and preferences of pantry clientele.



RESOURCES

Akron-Canton Regional Food Bank Client Choice Pantry Handbook

<https://bit.ly/3klNoCe>

Houston Food Bank Client Choice Handbook

<https://bit.ly/3kpcwb7>

The Power of Nudges: Making the Healthy Choice the Easy Choice in Food Pantries

<http://bit.ly/3dLARXn>

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