

Starting a Food Pantry

What is a Food Pantry

An agency that distributes food for home use directly to individuals and families that meet established eligibility requirements.

The following will help give you an idea of what may be needed to start a Food Pantry in your community. It is not all-inclusive but is intended help answer some questions you may have.

Agency Eligibility. Agencies must show proof of 501(C)(3) status or meet the IRS requirements for classification as a church.

Collaboration

Think about creating a collaborative effort with other non-profit or faith based organization to improve access to food for the ill, needy and infant (minor child). Create a sustainable food pantry by working together and sharing resources. Become a partner with the New Mexico Association of Food Banks and America's Second Harvest to improve the quantity and quality of food /product available to families and individuals experiencing food insecurity (hunger).

Organizing a Successful Pantry

A. Who do we help?

1. Widows
2. Single Parents
3. Senior Adults on limited fixed incomes
4. Unemployed
5. Working poor
6. People experiencing a crisis

B. How do I find them?

1. Look inside the church family
2. Ask church members for referrals
3. Ask nearby smaller churches in low income areas
4. Ask nearby community and local government agencies

C. How often do I help them?

Depends on the needs of the community

D. Where do I get the food?

1. A local church food drive
2. Local Food Bank
3. Local grocery stores and food distribution centers
4. Government Commodities through the local food Bank

E. How to Organize a Successful Local Food Drive

1. **LIMIT THE DATES OF YOUR FOOD DRIVE.** Ten days to two weeks will hit most people's pay periods.
2. **ANNOUNCE YOUR PLANS** to conduct the Food Drive no more than one week in advance. Interest wanes if too much time lapses between announcement and collection. Explain the **NEED** for the Food Drive, i.e., this year the food pantry or church may experience a food shortage because much of the food usually available to us from distributors will be needed in other relief efforts. **YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE!** Have a direct impact on the lives of the homeless and poor this Holiday Season by contributing your canned or boxed food items, etc., etc.
3. **NARROW THE COLLECTION TO SPECIFIC CATEGORIES**, if at all possible. This eliminates waste and helps bring focus into the Food Drive.
4. **GENERATE HEALTHY COMPETITION** between groups in your community or church.
5. **DESIGNATE PERSONS** for pickup and delivery of food to the drop off point. Consider storage needs.
6. **KNOW YOUR SCHEDULED DELIVERY** date and time. Be sure to deliver your food as scheduled so that it can be used at the time of need.

Many communities have food banks where food may be obtained on a per pound basis, usually around \$.14 per pound. The advantage to obtaining food from a food bank is that your church can purchase more food for less money and have a greater variety of food to offer. For example, a box of cereal may cost a member \$3.00 at a store. If they would donate that money to purchase cereal from a Food bank you could purchase as many as 25 boxes for the same three dollars. That's an extra 24 boxes that could be distributed without any additional cost. Below are the telephone numbers of your nearest food bank.

A Successful Pantry

No food box program will ever duplicate another exactly. Successful pantries represent a community's unique response to the problem of hunger as it is felt locally. Whether a pantry serves customers who are predominantly senior citizens or young families, or whether it accepts walk-in, self-referrals or sends volunteers out to visit homes, the following seven components are crucial to success:

1. A steering committee or organizing committee
2. Paid or volunteer staff
3. A site, materials, and transportation
4. Food
5. Customers and referrals
6. Funds
7. Community outreach or public relations

1. THE STEERING COMMITTEE

Though one person's energy and commitment usually gets the ball rolling, community efforts require broad-based community involvement and support. Not only is there a great deal of work to be done, but there are also a great number of decisions to be made. Involving several churches and/or civic clubs in sponsoring one pantry has the added advantage of greater cost effectiveness.

Including representatives from various public and private social service agencies will link your pantry with other members of the assistance network. Think, too, of the kinds of expertise the pantry may need to draw on and try to include people who will bring that knowledge or experience.

The basic functions of a steering committee are planning/policy making and resource raising. Sometimes those tasks are best accomplished by dividing into smaller working groups. Among other things, the steering committee will need to:

1. Conduct a needs assessment to determine who is hungry
2. Determine what other agencies offer food assistance
3. Decide where the pantry should be located
4. Mobilize the resources to find a location
5. Recruit volunteers
6. Raise seed monies
7. Stock shelves and
8. Spread the word
9. Set policies and operating procedures
10. Determine the hours of operation and
11. Draft a budget
12. Decide whether the pantry will operate under the sponsorship of a church or existing agency or whether it should incorporate and seek its own 501(c) (3) non-profit status.

2. STAFF/VOLUNTEERS

Committed volunteers hold the key to any pantry's success. Even those box programs which can afford to hire a pantry manager or coordinator rely heavily on the regular assistance of dependable volunteers to shop and pick-up food, stock and maintain the pantry, prepare food boxes, assist with food and fund drives, and when applicable, do client intake and referral.

Onsite volunteers staff the pantry during regular hours. Home-based volunteers are on call during assigned hours and are prepared to go to the pantry or pay a needy family a visit. Youth groups, civic organizations, churches and senior citizen's organizations are good sources of volunteers.

Whether a pantry hires for the position or chooses to remain a totally volunteer effort, having a coordinator is essential. Someone must take responsibility for day-to-day operations, scheduling, training and supervising volunteers, acting as liaison with the community, bookkeeping, compiling monthly reports, and maintaining inventory control. The coordinator should be comfortable dealing with people directly and with speaking before large groups. Organizing talents are invaluable, as are contacts within the local civic and church communities.

3. SITE, MATERIALS AND TRANSPORTATION

Most pantries are located in a low-traffic area of a church or neighborhood community center where the rent and utilities are donated. Refrigeration is recommended but not essential; the room(s) must be safe, sanitary and secure. Regular pest and rodent control is necessary, as is shelving to keep the food 6" off the floor. When searching for a location, consider its accessibility to the customer or referring agencies the pantry will serve. Consider the need for a vehicle to transport food. Aside from office supplies, the materials most frequently used by pantries are grocery bags and small cardboard boxes. Asking stores, your congregation and families to save these items can keep a pantry well-supplied.

4. FOOD

Having a food bank located in your area can be invaluable to a pantry, but in order to stock and distribute a variety of well-balanced foods, pantries must also run occasional food drives and purchase foods as well. When several congregations support a single pantry, they frequently take turns passing the collection plate and putting out a receptacle for food donations.

Other food drive ideas include: raffles, hunger walks, bake sales, or poor man's suppers. Some pantries report that for food purchases they watch the local supermarket sales. Content guides for food boxes should be posted in the pantry so that the boxes can be tailored to fit a family's size and needs (i.e. infant formula for a baby), and pre-sorting the foods as they are stocked will save time later. A simple inventory system which adds food as it goes on the shelves and subtracts it as it goes into emergency boxes will provide a check on the system and ensure that the food is going to those who need it.

For safety's sake, store food off the floor and away from the walls so pests won't have a place to hide and to protect the food from moisture. Segregate edible foodstuffs from non-food items. Check cans for leaks, bulges, rust and big dents, and when in doubt, discard suspicious items.

Contact the local food bank for training in food handling and safety.

Contact the local Food Bank for information about distributing government commodities through your agency.

5. CUSTOMERS AND REFERRALS

Pantries that are dependent on volunteer staff may want to have other agencies or churches to do all initial intake and referral work. In this instance, the pantry needs only to obtain basic information about the customers and their food needs for record keeping and statistical purposes. Referring agencies should be kept up to date on the pantry's procedures and hours of operations.

In some communities, the lack of referring agencies may necessitate a pantry's accepting self-referrals, walk-in clients, and/or further screening referrals from other kinds of agencies. In that case, the pantry must develop an intake procedure and determine who will be eligible, under what circumstances, and how frequently individuals can return for food.

It also becomes essential for the pantry to seek training for its volunteers in interviewing techniques, the use of intake forms and making referrals to other assistance agencies. (Because the goal of most pantries is to provide needy families with food for a short period of time, it is important that provisions be made to refer clients to other agencies for more permanent solutions to their needs.) The issue of personal safety should also be addressed in volunteer training sessions.

However it serves its clients, every pantry should keep records of who, why and how many it serves. These figures will document the causes and extent of the local hunger problem and will be invaluable in gathering support. Coordinating with other pantries will minimize abuse by repeat users.

6. FUNDS

Even an all-volunteer pantry housed in a church will have a few bills to pay. Food is expensive, and neither telephone nor utility companies have been known to donate their services to anyone. Many other businesses will donate their services however, and many pantries never have to buy office supplies and equipment or pay for printing. The key to both raising money and getting donated services is simple: ASK! Talk up the pantry. Prepare a brief presentation that describes the people involved with the pantry (steering committee members, volunteers and clients). Enthusiasm is infectious; tell people about the pantry and ask for their help. Today's "no" could be tomorrow's "yes", so don't give up.

Special events can be good money-raisers as long as they don't take more in the planning, staffing and staging than they add to the cash box. Pantries have made money holding bake sales, auctions, pot-luck dinners and much more.

As ongoing sources of support, however, churches have no equal. A \$6,000 annual budget breaks down to \$500 per month. Five churches taking monthly collections of \$100 each could support a pantry.

7. COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Public relations might best be described as an organized and systematic way of keeping a community informed. Before people will volunteer or give money to any program, they have to know about it. Here are a few tips:

- Use statistics and anecdotes to bring the problem of hunger to life. Print brochures. Provide supporting churches and civic clubs with brief updates for their Sunday bulletins and/or newsletters.
- Cultivate the local media. Send regular public service announcements to the radio stations and local newspapers or when a special activity is planned. Start a mailing list of the names of supporters, volunteers, donors and contacts.
- Publish (type and copy) a monthly newsletter - nothing fancy or lengthy, just interesting and informative.
- Unless they prefer anonymity, thank everyone publicly for anything they do. This can be done in the newsletter or in some special cases, through the local press.
- Take pictures and put a slide show together.

Agency Requirements

Most Food Banks have requirements that must be met in order for your agency or church to successfully gain access to their product. The following is a list of requirements and helpful "Food Language Tips" for your group to follow:

- I. Be an "established" food center. Most food banks require that all agencies applying for membership be active in food distribution. If you have been distributing food on holidays or on a monthly basis you qualify as "established." Even if you have only been distributing food during the holidays or as special needs arise you are considered an established pantry. When describing your food outreach program make sure you state what you've done in the past and what you plan to do in the future.
- II. Be "self-supporting" and able to provide your own food, money and staff:
- III. Food - You will probably need other sources of food besides your local Food Bank. Keep outside donations of food items coming in. Normally your food site will be inspected before admittance into the food bank. Have your shelves filled when representatives visit your facility. There are several ways to gain food donations.
 1. Local food drives - Hand flyers out in your community asking for donations which will be picked up on a set date.
 2. Ask your local food store manager for donations and for permission to set up a donation box in his store.
 3. Ask other churches, clubs, organization, or places of employment to sponsor food drives for your center.

- IV. Money - The food from the food bank is not free, so those in charge will want to know how you plan to pay for your product. One acceptable way of paying for the food is by including it in the church budget and collecting donations. Many times the food bank will also have a program where volunteer hours by your church members or other groups can be applied to paying for up to half of the product you receive.
- V. Staffing - The food bank will want to know who is going to run the program. The pastor or a member can be the coordinator and your members can volunteer their time transporting and sorting food. It can easily take a couple of hours a week to sort and stack your product.
- VII. Distribute food to the community "at large" - Most food banks require that service be given regardless of race, ethnic origin, religion, sex, age, or any group membership. That does not mean that a church is restricted in sharing the gospel, prayer or special religious counseling with clients. You will need to establish guidelines for those whom you serve. (Example: certain part of town.)
- VIII. Have "established" day(s) and hour(s) you are open to the community (Example: Monday 10:00 a.m. until noon.) You need to have established hours of operation for your center. You may distribute food at other times of the week by referrals from members or on an emergency basis.
- IX. Have "written" guidelines for accepting or refusing recipients. This is the time to determine which of the poor in your community will be helped. Set up a screening system with which you can live. Remember there are always people looking to take advantage of the system.
- Income** - Remember you are trying to help the needy, not people trying to stretch their paychecks. It is all right to help a middle income family on an emergency basis, but a large percentage of the people you help should be low income. Months with five weekends are especially hard on families on food stamps and the elderly on fixed incomes.
- X. Have a separate "locked" storage facility with "refrigerator and freezer" space. You need to have a designated dry-food room with off the floor storage. Metal shelving units or wall lockers work very well. You need to have a separate refrigerator/freezer unit from the one your church kitchen uses. Thermometers need to be placed in the unit to monitor the temperature.
- XI. Keep accurate records - Most food banks are partially funded by government programs or grants which require them to report records, such as number of people served. You may also want these figures available to show what you are doing in your community. You need to record how many people you serve and their ages.

Selecting Food for the Pantry

Malnutrition and hunger go hand in hand. Encourage the collection of wholesome foods as opposed to highly processed, expensive foods. Also encourage the collection of foods low in sugar or salt and high in nutrients or vitamins.

The following suggestions for stocking a food pantry may be useful as a guide for preparing emergency food boxes. Most pantries post this type of information for the benefit of their volunteers.

Packaging sizes and styles should be specific to the client population. Would you need to stock pop-top or tab-top cans? Are most clients single elderly persons, families, or transients with no cooking facilities? Consider, too, that some non-food items are necessary but expensive to your clients.

How to Determine What Groceries to Distribute

The questions you ask the person requesting help will be a good source of information for determining his or her food needs.

Size and composition of family: How many people are in the household? Teenagers eat more than small children.

Special dietary needs: Diabetics should not have sugar-laden food. Elderly people may need some soft foods. Infants may need formula or baby food.

Living situation of person needing help: Is refrigeration available? Are cooking facilities working? Is the person intellectually challenged and only capable of preparing very simple meals?

Logistics: Will the person be walking, traveling by bus or by car? How much can he or she carry?

The kinds and amounts of food that you distribute will vary with your food supply. Make an effort to provide for well-balanced meals. Some groups include an information sheet suggesting recipes and menus that could be made from certain food items. For instance, creamed soup, rice and tuna together with a can of green beans could make a nice casserole.

Foods that are good sources of protein are important to have on hand. These include not only meat, eggs and fish (which generally are perishable), but also dried beans, peas and lentils. You can get a protein value equivalent to that of meat by combining grain products with peas, beans and lentils.

The best guideline is your own knowledge of meal planning and grocery shopping. Use your good common sense!

Suggested Foods to Stock in Food Pantries

The following is a suggested guideline for the types of food to keep on hand in a food pantry:

Baby foods & infant formula
Canned meats or stews
Cereals, oats or grits
Milk (dry or evaporated)
Coffee & tea
Pancake mix
Cooking oils or solid shortening
Pasta (macaroni, spaghetti, etc.)
Cornmeal or cornbread mix
Peanut butter
Crackers Potatoes (fresh or instant)
Diet foods (low in sugar or salt)
Pork & beans
Dried beans, peas or lentils
Rice
Flour Salt & sugar
Fruits (canned or dehydrated)
Soups (canned or dehydrated)
Honey, syrup or jelly
Spaghetti sauce or tomato sauce
Juices (canned or dehydrated)
Tuna or canned chicken
Mayonnaise, mustard or catsup
Canned vegetables

If refrigeration or freezer space is available, you can add:

Bread	Fresh fruits
Cheese	Fresh vegetables
Eggs	Frozen juices
Margarine	Meats, poultry or fish

Suggested Non-foods to Stock in Food Pantries:

Soap & Shampoo
Diapers & sanitary napkins
Toothpaste & denture cleanser
Detergent & cleaning supplies
Toilet paper
Foil or film wrap

Have plenty of grocery bags on hand and some boxes. Bags with handles are better for people who will need to carry them for a distance.

Preparing Emergency Food Boxes

The following is a suggested guideline for the amount of food to distribute from one person up to four people for a need of three days, using different food choices to show the variety of foods it is possible to use. Also, you should consider each family's specific needs such as baby foods, diapers, special diet foods, etc.

ONE PERSON TWO PEOPLE

- 1 Loaf bread
- 1 Jar peanut butter
- 1 Jar jelly
- 1 Can tuna or chicken
- 4 Cans soup
- 1 Can pork & beans
- 4 Cans vegetables
- 1 Can stew
- 2 Cans meat or stew
- 1 Can ravioli
- 1 Can chicken & dumplings
- 1 Box macaroni & cheese
- 1 Lb. spaghetti
- 1 Box cereal
- 1 Jar spaghetti sauce
- 1 Can juice
- 4 Cans fruit
- 1 Box cereal or oats
- 1 Lb. cheese
- 1 Can evaporated milk

THREE PEOPLE FOUR PEOPLE

- 2 Loaves bread
- 1 Jar peanut butter
- 1 Jar jelly
- 6 Cans soup
- 6 Cans fruit
- 1 Can juice
- 2 Boxes cereal or oats
- 6 Cans vegetables
- 1 Lb. pasta or rice
- 1 Lb. pasta (macaroni or spaghetti)
- 1 Box crackers
- 1 Lb. cheese
- 1 Box crackers
- 1 Box tea
- 2 Cans pork & beans
- 1 Lb. margarine
- 1 Lb. dry milk
- 1 Can stewed tomatoes
- 1 Jar spaghetti sauce
- 4 Cans meat, chicken or stew

- 1 Box pancake mix
- 1 Bottle cooking oil
- 1 Bottle pancake syrup
- 5 Lbs. potatoes
- 1 Dozen eggs
- 1 Lb. flour
- 1 Lb. sugar
- 1 Lb. dried beans

Menu Suggestions: The USDA recommends the following guidelines for a well balanced meal:

MEAT OR MEAT ALTERNATE - Two servings per day of one of the following or a combination of any of these items to give an equivalent in quantity to:

- 2 oz. lean meat, poultry or fish 2 oz. cheese
- 2 large eggs 8 oz. cooked dry beans or peas
- 4 tablespoons peanut butter

VEGETABLE AND/OR FRUIT - Four servings per day of vegetables or fruits or both to equal a per serving total of: 4 oz. vegetables, fruits or fruit juices.

BREAD OR BREAD ALTERNATE - Four servings per day of bread or bread alternate, or four servings of each of the following:

- 1 slice whole grain or enriched bread
- ½ hamburger bun, hot dog bun or english muffin
- 4 oz. cooked rice
- 4 oz. cooked macaroni, spaghetti or noodles
- 4 oz. breakfast cereal, oats or grits

MILK - Four servings per day of milk or milk alternate:

- 8 oz. milk
- 8 oz. pudding or custard
- 16 oz. cottage cheese
- 8 oz. yogurt

Basic suggested menus using this guideline are as follows:

BREAKFAST

- 2 eggs pancakes w/syrup cereal w/milk
- fruit juice sliced fruit or
- 2 slices toast w/milk

LUNCH

- 1 can vegetable soup 1 Apple, 1 orange
- peanut butter sandwich milk
- tuna salad sandwich crackers
- 2 slices cheese

DINNER

- 1 canned stew or spaghetti w/meat sauce, cooked beans w/rice Mixed Fruit
- tossed salad, cooked carrots or green beans Tea or Coffee
- 1 slice bread or toast

Menu for Christmas and Thanksgiving Baskets

Food Item	Quantity
Turkey	1 10-12 lb.
Green vegetables	2 cans
Yellow/Red vegetables	2 cans
Soup	2 cans
Fruit	2 cans
Cranberry sauce	1 can
Pork and beans	2 cans
Bread	1 pkg.
Dessert	1 pkg.
Crackers	1 box
Cereal	1 box
Instant Potatoes	1 pkg.
Dressing	1 pkg.
Pasta/Rice	1 pkg. 6-C

PROPERTY SAFETY:

1. Have a permanent sign on the pantry door indicating exact hours and days the pantry will give out food.
2. Have a wide-angle viewer installed in the door to the pantry. Before opening the door, be sure there aren't more people than you expected.
3. Have a dead bolt and chain on the main entrance of the pantry.
4. Have all windows bolted or nailed to prevent entrance by intruders.

PERSONAL SAFETY:

1. Have one or two other people at the pantry during indicated hours the pantry gives out food. If alone, arrange the pick-up times when someone else will be with you at the pantry.
2. Never invite referrals or "walk-ins" to accompany you into the pantry. You do not want to be in an isolated place with an unknown person.
3. When speaking on the phone to those needing help, be cautious about telling them you are alone, or when you will be leaving the pantry. Give no indication of your routine arrival and departure times, or information about your home address, phone number, etc.
4. Call the police at the slightest infringement of your rights as a person. Give the police accurate information as to what is happening in order that they may respond rapidly. This is another good reason to work in pairs.
5. Whether you are at work or at home always let someone know where you are going. Even if you live alone, leave a note, so that in case of an emergency, someone will know where to find you.

6. NO MATTER HOW NICE OR INNOCENT A PERSON MAY APPEAR TO BE, NEVER TAKE ANY CHANCES WITH YOUR PERSONAL SAFETY!

Keeping Pantry Records

Record keeping is important so that you can document how many people you are serving, who they are, how often they need help, and the reasons for hunger in your area.

SCREENING RECIPIENT CLIENTS

Screening potential recipients is also an important part of your work. Unfortunately, you may run across an unscrupulous person occasionally. You should be ready to effectively deal with the problem and not be discouraged in your work.

Ask people for the following basic information:

- Name, address, phone number
- Number and ages of people in household.
- Usual source of income.
- Unusual circumstances (i.e. broken stove or refrigerator)
- If anyone in the household is physically challenged or disabled.
- Public assistance programs from which they receive help.
- If special dietary needs are required by any family member.
- The reason they are without food resources.
- If they have been helped previously.
- When their next financial assistance arrives.
- The source of their referral to you.

This information can be taken over the phone or in person. If you have criteria limiting eligibility, it is better if you tell people they are ineligible before they come in to pick up food. Check their identification to verify walk-in people

PERMANENT CARD FILES

Basic permanent information can be recorded on an index card and arranged alphabetically in a file box. Record on the card the assistance provided and the date. Although documenting your program is important, names of people and specific information about their lives and problems should be confidential and accessible only to appropriate individuals.

INVENTORY RECORDS

It is also important that you keep a simple inventory record so that you can keep up with monies spent in supplying your pantry as well as pounds distributed to the needy: Documenting your history will give you a foundation and guideline for future efforts.

SAMPLE CLIENT PERMANENT RECORD CARD

NAME _____
NO. IN FAMILY _____
ADDRESS _____
PHONE _____
CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP CODE _____

Sample Inventory Tracking Record

Date Assisted _____ Days Helped _____ Pounds Distributed _____

The food distribution program is open to everyone in need of assistance with food.

How often a family may be served - Some people will put you on their list and visit as often as possible. Helping once every month is a good policy.

Identification requirements - Know who you are serving.

Need - It's very unlikely for a person who receives food stamps each month to need food early in the month. Try to identify why the person is in need so you can better assist them. Not all people are getting the government assistance to which they are entitled. Sometimes you may need to refer them to a government agency. Keep a list of other agencies available for referral.

FOOD MUST NOT BE SOLD

- A. You may not charge, solicit dues, fees or donations from recipients of food.
- B. You can ask your community for donations through a mail appeal or other drives.

By implementing these guidelines into your program you will be well on your way to successfully gaining a valuable resource.

Other Decisions You Will Need To Make

1. The geographical area your pantry will serve: Where is the local need?
How far away are other pantries?
2. The number of families you will help monthly: What is realistic in terms of your resources? How much time do committee members have to volunteer?

3. Your referral policy: Can you accept referrals from other hunger related groups? How many each month? What are other referral sources? Will you have enough food?
4. The criteria that will be used to determine whom you serve: How often can someone receive assistance? Will you only help in emergencies or can you assist those with more chronic needs?
5. The method of distributing food: Will you distribute as need occurs or have regular distribution days? Do you want people to come to the pantry? Will you deliver to everyone or only to those without transportation?
6. Your hours of operations: Will there be certain times (for example, three mornings each week, or every afternoon) that someone in your group can be reached with requests to relay to those who distribute food? Will you have a designated distribution day?
7. The types of food you will provide: Will you only distribute dry and canned goods or can you include fresh and/or frozen items or non-foods? What do your facilities and budget allow?
8. If other local organizations will be encouraged to participate in your work: Can you benefit from more hands, more resources? Can you establish workable channels of communication? Can you focus on the work and not on differences?
9. By what means will the pantry be maintained: Are food drives enough? Is there an existing fund or will one be established?