



STARTING A FOOD PANTRY

Introduction

Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee opened its doors in 1978 with commitment from several community leaders. The purpose of the organization was to provide a central distribution center for companies, groups and individuals who wished to help provide food for food insecure people in Middle Tennessee. Second Harvest's mission today is to provide food to people facing hunger and work to advance hunger solutions.

Modeled after the first food bank established in Phoenix in the mid-1970s, Second Harvest was designed to collect food that would otherwise be wasted, inspect, and sort this food, and distribute it to pantries, meal sites, and shelters serving food insecure individuals in the community. During the first year, this process resulted in a total distribution of 160,000 pounds of food to 75 partner agencies.

Today, Second Harvest distributes tens of millions of pounds each year and counts food pantries, meal sites, senior centers, youth programs, and shelters among its Partner Agencies receiving food and working to end hunger. Second Harvest is one of the largest and most comprehensive of over 200 food banks in the Feeding America network. We partner with more than 450 Partner Agencies throughout our 46-county service area in Middle and West Tennessee.

secondharvestmidtn.org

Martin Distribution Center
331 Great Circle Road
Nashville, TN 37228
Phone: 615-329-3491

Nacarato Distribution Center
1958 Almaville Road
Smyrna, TN 37167

Ray Smith Family Distribution Center
69 Benton Industrial Road
Camden, TN 38320

WHAT IS A FOOD PANTRY?

A food pantry is a community-based program that collects and safely stores food and household products for free distribution to low-income and needy members of the community.

DOES YOUR COMMUNITY NEED A FOOD PANTRY?

Look closely at the particular needs and current resources in your community. Are there residents lacking the resources to provide enough food for their households? If so, organizing a pantry may be an effective way to help provide them with food.

Before you decide to start your own pantry, call Second Harvest and other local organizations, such as churches, schools, civic groups, the United Way, etc. to see what services already exist in your community. Many of these organizations would benefit by joining volunteer forces and resources rather than duplicating services of a new agency in the community. It is also a good idea to visit or volunteer at an existing agency in order to learn more about what is already being done.

If, after evaluating the need and existing services in your community, you have determined that a establishing a food pantry is a service in demand, it's time to get started! This handbook can be used as a basic guide to help you generate ideas and develop your vision. Please do not hesitate to call Second Harvest's Community Impact Department at 615-329-3491 with questions. We are always willing to assist and support any agency that shares our commitment to end hunger.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The first thing you will need to start a food pantry is the support of people in your community. It is impossible to build a food pantry alone. You will need the experience of others, their diversity of ideas, volunteer support, financial resources, and referrals in order to successfully serve those in need in your community. In particular, seek input and assistance from:

- **People In Need Of Food:** No one can give you a better idea of the particular services needed in your community than those that need it most. All too often we think we know what clients need and we in turn provide duplicate or inadequate services. Seek out their insights and ideas about how you would be able to best help! It may not be the answer you have thought.
- **Social Service Agencies:** Individuals working in social services are often able to offer an awareness of particular community needs, concerns, and experience to provide valuable guidance about services in demand in your particular community. Contacting the local SNAP office can give some insight into local food needs.
- **Community Organizations:** Members of community clubs or groups, business, churches and/or community organizations are great resources for volunteers. Remember, without a stable volunteer base, it is extremely difficult to keep your pantry in operation!

From this group of people, call together a meeting to form an organizing committee. You need a core group of people to share responsibilities for food pantry planning. During your first meeting, make sure the following topics are discussed. This will help determine your direction, make sure people know their responsibilities, and ensure all committee members are on the same page:

- Make sure everybody agrees on how the food pantry should look and operate.
- Discuss the basic function of the food pantry. Determine other community agencies that may be able to offer related services, such as counseling, SNAP and WIC advocacy and health services. Maintain a list of agencies your food pantry will work with and exchange referrals to and from.
- Build a mission statement that incorporates your vision of the pantry's purpose, your commitment to those you serve and what types of services will be provided.

Contact the Center for Non-Profit Management in Nashville for additional resources on starting and operating a not-for-profit organization.

Networking with agencies and people in your community from the start will build a vested interest in the success of the food pantry. This will help in laying the groundwork for future volunteer recruitment and exchange of information and resources with other agencies.

DEVELOPING A SERVICE PLAN

Once you have formed an organizing committee and agree on your purpose, it is time to determine the scope of the operation and other support details. Some of the basic questions you should consider are:

- What geographic area will be served?
- Who will be served?
- Where will the pantry be located? Is it easily accessible without vehicle?
- How often will assistance be provided?
- Who will do the work?
- What types of food do we want to provide?
- How will we acquire products/resources to keep the food pantry open?

When you are making these decisions, keep in mind the particular needs of your prospective clients and how your agency could best meet those needs. Many food pantries limit their services to a specific geographic area: zip codes, neighborhoods, counties, etc. Others decide to offer food to anyone who asks, but limit to a specific number of requests filled per month/year.

NON-PROFIT STATUS

As soon as possible, attempt to secure 501©3/non-profit status for your agency. The benefits of being a non-profit agency include:

- Increased donor incentive with tax deduction opportunities.
- Sales tax exemption when purchasing equipment and supplies.
- Eligibility for various grants and other support.

You may contact the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) at 1-800-TAX-FORM to request an “Application for Recognition of Exemption” under Section 501(c)3. Note: If your church is interested in operating a food pantry, you may already have 501(c)3 status. Please check with Second Harvest’s Agency & Program Services to confirm your status. Churches without a 501(c)3, who are only interested in operating a food pantry, may not be required to obtain 501(c)3 status.

“EMERGENCY” vs. SUPPLEMENTAL PANTRY

Food pantries vary greatly in the type of clients they serve and the situation/frequency in which an individual/family can receive assistance. Oftentimes, food pantries are referred to as “emergency food pantries,” implying that an individual/family would only need assistance as a result of a short-term hardship (fire in home, temporary job loss, etc.) However, more and more individuals/families need supplemental food assistance: on-going assistance to help them stretch their grocery dollars. Such a situation is an elderly person who only receives \$10 per month in food stamps and \$200 per month in social security benefits. This individual’s income is never going to increase; they will continue to need the support of the food pantry.

Likewise, many families are considered “working poor.” In spite of working multiple jobs, they still have difficulty making ends meet. If a food pantry can provide extra groceries, then the money saved can be spent on other necessities of life. Remember, not having access to safe, edible food is ALWAYS an emergency, regardless of the duration of the need. What is most important is meeting clients’ needs as generously as your budget allows. Try to offer people the best solution you can; being sure to provide consistent support to all clients.

FOOD SOURCES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Where are you going to get an adequate and varied supply of food? In addition to utilizing Second Harvest Food Bank, you may also want to pursue donated products in your own community. Meet with storeowners and managers to let them know who you are and ask for their assistance. In particular, establish relationships with grocery stores, restaurants, bakeries, convenience store, drug store and more.

Many of these establishments throw away hundreds of pounds of damaged or day-old products each week that could be utilized by pantry clients. You may also be able to arrange discounts on large purchases of items that are difficult to come by, such as diapers or protein.

FOOD DRIVES

Food drives are another way to secure a variety of items for your pantry while simultaneously cultivating community awareness. Food drives give everyone in the community an opportunity to learn about your pantry and feel good about helping to feed the hungry. It is also an opportunity for you to request certain difficult-to-acquire items such as protein-rich foods and personal hygiene products.

Although food drives are not as cost effective as monetary fundraising, they do serve as a tool for raising awareness and building community support. The best practice for pantries would be to gradually combine community fund drives with community food drives by informing the public of their donation options.

In order for your food drive to be successful, people need to know about it. Request specific items and include information about your agency so people know where and when to donate. Ways to get the word out include:

- Distributing flyers or posters about the food/fund drive at schools, churches, local businesses/shops, library, bank, post office, etc.
- Create a Facebook page to let the community know about your pantry,
- Develop an “adopt-a-month” program. This allows civic organizations/churches/businesses to select a month where it is their responsibility to provide food to the pantry.
- Ask local movie and/or performance theaters to charge a certain amount of canned goods as admission for one night.
- Create a name for your annual food drive. It can increase community awareness of hunger issues and boost food donations.
- Have an annual “Trick or Can” event where community groups “Trick or Treat” for canned goods during Halloween.

FOOD STORAGE

When setting up your pantry, it’s important to keep food safety in mind.

- Chose a storage space with locking doors and no outside entrance.
- Store all grocery products away from walls and at least 6 inches off the floor.
- Use freestanding shelves or leave space between items and the wall.
- Protect products from moisture by selecting a dry, well-ventilated area.
- Store non-food items on separate shelving units from food.
- Make sure all cans have a label from the manufacturer. Discard all cans that do not have a label, even if you think you know what is in them.
- Mark the date received on all cases of food and start a first-expired, first-out system.
- Inspect all items. Do NOT use any that are bulging, contaminated, or leaking.
- Self-spray for pests or hire a professional service.
- Use thermometers and regularly monitor the temperature of refrigerators (40°F or lower) and freezers (0°F or lower).

BUDGETING

Along with the need for a facility and food comes the obvious need for money. But before you start looking for sources of funding, you should develop a budget to know your expenses and approximately how much you need.

First, consider basic operating expenses. Do you have paid staff or are they mainly volunteers? And what about telephone, utilities, transportation, or contracted services such as printing and bookkeeping? Your budget should take into account these costs along with supplemental food purchases and equipment like a refrigerator, freezer, shelves, desk, computer, etc.

FUNDRAISING

Even the smallest pantry can raise money to cover operating expenses and purchase additional food for distribution. Some ideas include:

- Applying for grants (state, federal and private foundation).
- Applying for a United Way allocation.
- Sponsoring fundraising events: The possibilities of fundraising events are limited only by your imagination and energy. Some examples include organizing community suppers, yard sales, bakes sales, raffles, care washes, “penny wars” and auctions.
- One-Time or One-Item Contributions: This involves getting an individual, organization or business to fund a single item for your agency either on a one-time basis (e.g., renovations, equipment, computers) or ongoing basis (e.g., monthly phone or utility bill). You may be amazed at what your agency could get donated if you make yourselves known in your community and ask for what you need!
- Monthly Contributions: This tactic involves getting businesses, churches, clubs, or organizations to pledge a certain amount on a monthly basis. For example, an office might sponsor a casual day once a month where employees are able to “dress down” for a five-dollar donation that would then be contributed to your agency. Donations can also be in-kind, wherein a group may volunteer to stock shelves or sponsor a food drive once a month.

It is extremely important to remember that all donations or contributions, no matter how small must always be acknowledged either by a phone call or thank you letter.

SPREADING THE WORD

Generally speaking, word of mouth is the best for of advertisement. When your pantry treats people with respect, provides them with a variety of food and non-food items and shares information about other services available, others will soon find out.

In all of your communication to potential clients, be sure to include:

- Address and phone number
- Resources you provide

- Hours of operation
- Required paperwork to receive assistance

Outreach can include social services offices, community centers, recreation centers, churches, schools, post office, library, and supermarkets.

INTAKE

One way to facilitate the record-keeping process is to create a client in-take interview form. Depending on the services an agency provides, they may have different types of information they request from clients. Some agencies that are only food pantries have a simple sign in sheet with the person's name and other basic details. Some pantries that are also thrift stores, community centers, etc. may have more detailed forms in conjunction with the services they provide. It's important to find a balance between keeping accurate records and asking a client for too much personal information. Regardless, all intake forms should be kept confidential and on file at your agency.

With this information you will be able to determine frequency of service, demographics of those in need and other information which will help you determine how to maintain and improve your services.

Statistics of this sort can also be used in a report or newsletter to draw support from your community. Statistics document the needs and move people to act. Additionally, monthly statistical reports are also a requirement of Second Harvest in order to keep track of the food distributed. These reports also help to generate hunger statistics for Middle and West Tennessee.

INTERVIEWS AND REFERRALS

Once you have established a method of intake and record keeping, you can set up an interviewing process to determine what each new client needs and how you can help them. Since your pantry may be the first place they have ask for help, you want to be thoughtful as well as thorough. Ensure your patrons that all information is kept confidential and make sure you treat each individual with the dignity and respect they deserve.

When you are talking with a new client, you can assess if they have any immediate needs other than food. Start with issues areas like:

- SNAP benefits
- WIC benefits
- Housing and utilities assistance
- Employment and job training assistance
- Education and literacy needs
- Domestic violence services
- Substance abuse counseling

With a minimal amount of research, you'll be able to access social service agencies to help with these issues. A simple way to inform clients about services without feeling intrusive is to create a fact sheet of local agencies that provide assistance in the above-mentioned areas. These can be placed in every bag/box.

DISTRIBUTION OPTIONS

There are a variety of options for distributing food to clients. Each option involves a certain level of client autonomy. It is the philosophy of Second Harvest that clients be given the opportunity to choose their food as much as is possible. We recognize that each food pantry is responsible for operating in a manner that accommodates both their capacity to serve and the needs of clients.

Pre-packing

The “pre-packing method” is a convenient way of distributing food. Clients are given bags/boxes of food that are already assembled based on the number of people in the household. Pre-packing is convenient because it decreases the amount of time spent serving each client. Additionally, pre-packing allows you to keep track of your inventory and determine what items you need to keep your pantry stocked. Finally, pre-packing allows you to utilize minimal pantry space and can be used when volunteers are limited.

This method, however, allows no opportunity for clients to select the kind of food that best meets their needs. Therefore, clients may receive food they cannot consume for health reasons or simply do not like. If not consumed, the food and money spent to obtain it are wasted. The food pantry has not accomplished its mission if food is not consumed.

Pack as you go

Many food pantries distribute food boxes in a “pack as you go” manner. Boxes are made by staff/volunteers as clients come in and staff/volunteers can accommodate any special needs at that time.

CLIENT CHOICE

What is client choice?

Client choice allows clients to participate in selecting what food they are given. Most pantries will have a set number of items within each food group/category, depending on household size. Clients stay within these parameters but are free to choose specific foods within each category based on availability (e.g.: green beans instead of corn in the vegetable category). Some pantries may even allow clients to select how much of each category they need.

Why client choice?

- **Less food and money wasted:** Pantries can save food and money by allowing clients to select their own food. A pre-packed food box may not contain items a client can or likes to eat. And food cannot be nutritious if it is not consumed. The food is wasted and so is the money and effort taken to acquire it. By allowing clients to select the kind of food they consume, the food pantry becomes a more efficient steward of resources.
- **Greater food options for pantries:** All too often, food pantries refuse food because they think clients will not want it. However, these decisions are often made without any input from the client. Food pantries limit the kinds of food they will provide to “the basics” and assume items not fitting the pre-determined

categories are undesirable. We all have unique tastes! A food pantry director once shared that a volunteer refused to take any pudding donations because he did not like it. He finally gave in and accepted pudding cup donations and on that same day, a lady came to the food bank specifically looking for pudding because of dental work she just had completed. Once we relinquish control on what a food pantry should contain, we open the doors for even greater service to be provided. By being more open-minded about food, a food pantry can accept more donations and decrease the amount of money spent purchasing the “right” foods.

- Respect of client: Clients who feel like other aspects of their lives are out of control can at least have some normalcy in making such an intimate decision as how to feed their family.

When given the opportunity to select the kind of food they need, clients often select less food for fear of taking from those who are in greater need. And if clients are provided the type of food they need and will consume, they are less likely to need to go to multiple pantries.

Client choice Distribution Models

There are various degrees to which a pantry can be client choice based on what works best for the food pantry. The following are options for running a client choice pantry.

- Standard Box Plus “Odds and Ends Table” -- Pantry distributes its traditional fixed food box, and also sets up a table of “odds and ends” that have come into the pantry. Clients are welcome to swap out some of the items from their box, or simply add odds and ends to their order.
- List of available goods -- Pantry acquires the best and most food it can from Second Harvest and donations and makes a list of available items. Clients indicate what, of the available items, they want, and pantry volunteers assemble their bag from that list.
- Balanced Menu Package – The pantry attempts to stock a variety of foods from each of the major food groups. Label and color-code each shelf with the proper food group. Post a chart that suggests how many items from each food group would create a balanced package and allow clients to select from each group.
- Open Distribution – Display all available groceries and permit clients to take as much as needed and as often as is needed. No limits. No restrictions. Only trust.

As pantry managers, staff, and volunteers, we sometimes have difficulty giving clients the control and trust they deserve. But giving clients the opportunity to make their own food choices can be an incredibly liberating experience for both the pantry and clients. Clients who come to the pantry feeling helpless and hopeless leave feeling encouraged from their small victory in being able to provide for their family on their own terms.

VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

Volunteers are a valuable resource for many organizations, large and small. Volunteers come from a variety of backgrounds – retirees, minorities, young adults, college students and even those who are actively employed. As the planning of your pantry progresses, the amount of work to be done may become overwhelming. As such, you will need volunteers for many of the following activities:

- Administrative / Intake: Interview clients; maintain financial & client records; answer phone calls & respond to email; general management
- Referral / Assistance: Make referrals to other services for clients with additional or long-term needs; maintain comprehensive list of referrals/social services

- Volunteer Management: Recruit, schedule and manage volunteers; recognize volunteer achievements; track volunteer hours
- Pantry Management: Load/unload food from trucks; pick-up food donations/orders; clean/stock pantry; pack food boxes/bags; assist clients with Client Choice
- Development: Conduct community outreach, manage social media/website, fundraise, cultivate donors, write thank you notes

These tasks easily break down into a dozen different jobs. The time commitment required of your volunteers will vary depending on how many people are available to share the work and how often your pantry distributes food. Hiring or electing a volunteer coordinator to organize the overall effort can make things run a little smoother.

It is important to provide volunteers with the opportunity for feedback and improving operations. Regular volunteer/staff meetings let key players share success stories, voice concerns, and celebrate group efforts. Your primary goal is to ensure that everyone is working together happily and effectively. Also, a volunteer appreciation day or event helps boost morale and remind volunteers that their hard work and dedication is a valuable asset.

If you do not already have a list of potential volunteers to rely on, your goal should be to recruit them as soon as possible. Sources for volunteers include churches, businesses, chamber of commerce, high schools, colleges/university, civic organizations, women's/men's clubs, mandated community service.