

A Guide to Offering More Than Food in Pantries

Join us on the journey for long-term food security

Katie S. Martin, Ph.D. & Jessica Sanderson, Ph.D., LMFT

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Questions regarding this guide can be directed to:

Katie Martin, Ph.D.
More Than Food Consulting LLC
www.ittakesmorethanfood.org
kmartin@morethanfoodconsulting.com

Jessica Sanderson, Ph.D., LMFT
Urban Alliance, Inc.
www.urbanalliance.com
jessica.sanderson@urbanalliance.com



Introduction

If you've ever wondered how you can provide more long-term support for people visiting food pantries, you've come to the right place. If you've ever thought, there must be more we can do beyond providing short-term supplies of food, you're not alone. Congratulations and thank you for your interest in a new approach!

We encourage you to think of this not as a sprint, but as a journey that involves many small steps, including some bumps along the road and important milestones, that will lead to a more holistic approach to hunger.

This Guide provides an overview of the More Than Food framework and offers a road map with practical steps for food pantries to provide a welcoming culture, offer healthy choice with dignity, and foster connections with guests and community resources to help build stability and financial wellbeing.

We know it takes more than food to end hunger.

The world's first food bank was St. Mary's Food Bank, founded in 1967 by John van Hengel in Phoenix, Arizona. Van Hengel used a \$3,000 loan to secure space in an abandoned warehouse and found innovative ways to take advantage of food surplus which otherwise would go to waste. St. Mary's developed partnerships with grocery stores, food producers, and social welfare organizations throughout Phoenix, and by serving as a clearinghouse for these partner organizations, St. Mary's distributed over 250,000 pounds of food to families in its first year.

Ever since, food pantries use a similar model. They secure food from their local food bank, grocery stores or donations and alleviate hunger by distributing food into the community. This model is effective in addressing the emergency or crisis of hunger; however, pantries utilizing this traditional approach often find the same people need food support month after month. To help reduce the need for food, we need to look at the issue of hunger systemically and address the underlying challenges in a person's life, and the systemic inequities that make it difficult for individuals to purchase their own food.

Many food banks and pantries have been serving their community for decades. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, they had to adjust their services and try new approaches to provide charitable food. The pandemic has also illuminated the deep inequities in our communities. Now is the perfect time to think differently about how we tackle hunger. We hear from many food banks and food pantries around the country who are seeking new solutions to the chronic, yet preventable, problem of food insecurity.

We look forward to partnering with you on this journey.

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How we got here - More Than Food history

The More Than Food framework has its history in the design and evaluation of the Freshplace food pantry in Hartford, Connecticut. Freshplace was established in 2010 as a holistic food pantry program and was a collaboration between Chrysalis Center, Foodshare and the Junior League of Hartford, with evaluation conducted by the University of Connecticut. People who visited were called members and had appointments, to eliminate any need to wait in line. Members shopped for food in a client choice pantry similar to how they would in a grocery store and were supported by volunteers who served as co-shoppers. Freshplace offered case management services where members met with a coach over 12-18 months to work on goals. Freshplace provided referrals to community resources and offered some classes on site to provide wrap-around services.

The program was rigorously evaluated from 2010 to 2013. Results showed that people who participated in Freshplace had significant improvements in their food security, self-sufficiency, self-efficacy and diet quality over 12 months compared to people attending other local traditional food pantries.

Katie writes about the history of the More Than Food framework in her book [Reinventing Food Banks and Pantries: New Tools to End Hunger](#). If you haven't read it, this can be a great way to understand the background for offering more than food and to get started on your journey.

Food pantries in Connecticut, Texas and Rhode Island followed this model to convert to choice pantry models and hire coaches to help participants set and reach goals using motivational interviewing skills. Despite the diverse settings, results were significant and consistent with the original Freshplace results. More Than Food Consulting and Urban Alliance have created standard coaching materials to set expectations and to replicate the program with more agencies.

Evaluation

Too often, in food banks and food pantries, we measure our success simply by outputs of the number of pounds we distribute, or the number of people we serve each month. The More Than Food framework relies on research and evaluation with quantitative outcomes and also strong qualitative data to inform the work we do.

Recent results in 2023 from the coaching program called upLift in Lebanon County, PA which uses the More Than Food framework showed significant improvements in food security and economic well-being for graduates. We continue to adapt the program based on new learnings.



More Than Food Values – Our North Star

If you're reading this, then you are probably interested in getting started with offering more than food. But it's first important to reflect on your organization's values to support this work.

Values are fundamental beliefs that guide or motivate attitudes and actions. **You can think of values as the “north star” that guides you on your journey.** The More Than Food framework is guided by three core values: empathy, dignity, and equity. These values inform our approach to addressing the issue of hunger in communities as well as policies, procedures, and relationships at food pantries. They create a lens that is applied to all areas of your organization.

A first step in the process of implementing More Than Food is examining the values currently held by leaders, staff, and volunteers at your organization and comparing them to the values that are inherent in the More Than Food framework. If the values align, your organization can begin taking steps to implement More Than Food. If they do not, the first step is working as a team to shift the values of the entire system. You may need to make some organizational changes before moving forward with More Than Food initiatives. Assessing these core values is the first step of building buy-in across your organization – from staff to Board members to volunteers.

Empathy

Empathy refers to a ‘way of being’ with another. It is a person's ability to understand and enter into another person's experience. It involves being in a relationship, listening to understand, and allowing oneself to be influenced by another's experience. In the context of direct service programming, relationships are a key mechanism for building confidence, positive identity, and hope for the future. Policies and procedures are carried out in a way that is dignifying and respectful, creating a positive experience for all involved.



Dignity

Dignity refers to respectful treatment that honors the value and worth of another. Pantries that embody this value strive to offer strength-based services where the strengths and potential of each guest are acknowledged and celebrated. Staff strive to embody professionalism and are intentional about being kind and respectful in interactions. Further, they strive to create a positive customer service experience for each guest as a way of showing honor and respect.

Equity

Systemic inequities – including the intersections of racism, classism, and sexism – perpetuate poverty and oppression. You can show your commitment to equity by including individuals with lived experience with food insecurity in the organization's strategy, program development and policies. It is important that staff embody a posture of cultural humility by being curious to learn about others' cultural background, and openness to cultural identity. In addition to self-reflection and learning, cultural humility moves past stereotypes and bias to incorporate policies, protocols, and processes that are responsive to the racial, ethnic, and cultural needs of guests. Advocating for systemic changes in one's community, and not just change among individuals, is important for advancing equity.

Applying the values of empathy, dignity and equity helps us to remember that the people we serve are at the heart of what we do.

Yield and Reflect on your Pantry's Values

Applying values does not involve checking off a list of action items. Rather, values reflect a set of attitudes and beliefs that inform programming at all levels. It is a lens that should be applied to various aspects of programming.

Before making changes, we encourage organizations to discuss and consider the following ways in which empathy, dignity and equity are currently expressed at your pantry. Consider the following questions and consider where your organization is strong and where your organization could make improvements.

Throughout this work, we use the term “pantry” to refer to organizations or programs that distribute food directly to neighbors and guests. We recognize that many agencies are changing their names to reduce the stigma of receiving charitable food at a “pantry” but for clarity and ease of writing, we continue to use the term pantry unless referring to a specific program that uses another term (i.e. “Family Market” or “Food Hub”).

To what degree does your pantry:



Use language and messaging that reflects empathy, dignity and equity? Underlying beliefs about people and programming are often reflected in language. The words and tone used during interactions, and the language included in program materials, websites, policies and procedures can either discourage or encourage people to use your pantry. Reflect on the language used by staff and volunteers when they talk about the people receiving services from the pantry. Is it respectful and dignifying? Does it acknowledge each person's potential? You'll notice in this Guide we tend to use the term “guest” for those who receive food at a pantry to help reinforce customer service.



Use policies and procedures that reflect the values of empathy, dignity and equity? Underlying beliefs about people and social issues inform how a program chooses to operate and the policies it adopts. Consider why your pantry has the policies and procedures that are currently in place. Think about your hours of operation, intake process and how services are provided. What do they tell you about beliefs and values? For example, does your organization believe that everyone deserves to receive free food, or do you have procedures in place to determine whether people are “deserving”? Does your organization trust guests to select their food or do you have procedures in place for only volunteers to handle the food?



Incorporate empathy, dignity and equity in interactions between staff, volunteers and guests? Interactions inform program culture and reflect what is important to an organization. What do you notice about these interactions? Are there power differentials? How are conflicts worked out? What values are demonstrated? How much do the staff and volunteers reflect the racial and ethnic makeup of guests? What structures and feedback mechanisms are in place for community members with lived experience to guide the priorities and programs of the organization? Do the relationships stem from white privilege and reinforce power dynamics or do they promote diversity, equity and inclusion?



Staff and volunteers value continuous learning and growth? Strong organizations recognize the need for continuous change to strengthen programming. To what degree are staff and volunteers open to new ideas? Does your pantry collect feedback from guests? Do you use the feedback to improve programming? Have you updated your pantry's mission statement recently and does it reflect your current services and core values?

Road to Success – Building Buy-In for Change

The previous section on core values can help you determine your organizational readiness for offering more than food. In the next section we provide examples for how to put these values into action in your pantry. It is helpful to share the philosophy, history and evidence behind the More Than Food framework with your leadership team to build buy-in and support for making changes within your food pantry. Many of these changes may be a paradigm shift for how you have offered services in the past.

1. Take time to discuss the types of changes you want to make and how these changes will impact your staff and volunteers.
2. Get feedback from various stakeholders, including leadership and food pantry guests.
3. Develop a time frame for phasing in changes over time.

One strategy for building organizational readiness is holding a retreat with staff, board members and key volunteers. Assign some pre-readings and discuss how ready each person is for incorporating the core values of empathy, dignity and equity in your agency and also changes in culture, choice and connection. Discuss concerns about change and identify some possible strategies for overcoming obstacles. After the retreat you can meet with the various stakeholders to seek feedback and gain buy-in.

Be clear about the vision and outcomes you want to achieve with your programming, beyond simply providing food, and discuss steps you can take to achieve those outcomes. In the next sections we provide examples to help you on this journey.

The following are additional strategies for building organizational buy-in at various levels:

- Spell out the new vision on board meeting agendas
- During monthly staff meetings, include ways to share the vision in action
- Create space for questions such as a town hall meeting
- Offer trainings for specific staff and volunteers involved with new initiatives
- Conduct focus groups with guests to gather feedback about changes
- Suggest piloting a new change which can seem less intimidating to some.

“If you want to go fast, go alone.

If you want to go far, go together.”

African Proverb

Caution: Road bump ahead!

One common challenge in food pantries is frequent staff turnover. When a pantry decides to make changes or offer a new program, it is important to involve a few key staff members and volunteers with the training, planning and implementation. If you have one champion staff member who is leading a new program and that person decides to leave the organization (or has to take a medical leave or goes on an extended vacation), the whole program can dissolve overnight. To ensure sustainability, make sure you take a team approach and have several knowledgeable people who can support the program.



Three Pillars of More Than Food

More Than Food is a holistic approach to operating a food pantry that incorporates all three components (Cs) of a welcoming culture, healthy choice and connection to community resources through warm referrals and trained coaches. But any food pantry can start from where they are to take steps to create a better pantry.

Culture

More Than Food uses the term “culture” as creating a welcoming, trauma-informed, strength-based environment that respects the dignity of each guest. It is not what happens at the pantry, as much as how it happens. It is very similar to the concept of customer service. Culture is a reflection of how it feels when you visit the pantry.

Consider a time when you engaged with a service provider and received excellent customer service. What made it a positive experience? Perhaps it was a positive tone, kind words, a comfortable setting, attentiveness to your situation, efficient and helpful service, an organized process or well-kept facilities? Now consider the opposite, bring to mind a time when you had a negative experience with a service provider. Consider what made it a negative experience. Was it a rude or unkind tone, distracted demeanor, an unkempt environment, long wait times, poor or inefficient service? Imagine having someone speak rudely to you when you are already stressed about not having enough food. These are all examples of factors that impact a program’s culture.

Positive Program Culture:

- Builds strong relationships at all levels and makes guests feel valued, respected and supported
- Creates a welcoming environment that is well maintained, comfortable, safe and secure, and includes positive messages
- Prioritizes customer service at each point of contact, from entering the building to exiting, and incorporates trauma informed practices



Include strength-based, empowering messaging

Review the language on your website, newsletters, fundraising appeals and other materials. Use person-centered and strength-based language to describe your work. Similarly, you may want to use words like guest, member or neighbor rather than client to describe the people who participate in your program. The term client can feel clinical and sometimes be alienating for those who have had a bad experience with a governmental agency. Be intentional about the words used to describe the programming and support offered by the pantry.



Reduce wait times and improve wait experience

Often guests arrive early to pantries and wait to ensure they have the best food selection. However, long wait times result in stress, agitation and an experience of poor customer service. There are many practical steps pantries can take to both reduce wait times and improve wait experience.

- **Schedule pantry appointments:** Pantries can schedule guest appointments like a doctor’s office. They can allow guests to shop individually or in small groups. Scheduling appointments typically requires that a pantry be open several days per week to eliminate wait times.
- **Improve wait experience:** Provide a sheltered seating area and provide numbers to allow guests to wait more comfortably. While this strategy may not reduce wait time, it improves wait experience. Pantries can play music, offer refreshments, provide information about community resources, have volunteers present to greet guests, and offer activities or other programming while guests wait.

- Adjust hours of operation. In some cases, it is important to adjust hours of operation to create a more positive guest experience. If a pantry schedules appointments, they may need to expand hours to accommodate various appointment times. It is also important to consider the times that work best for guests. For example, to accommodate working families, the pantry may have evening or weekend hours.



Focus on radical hospitality

Living in poverty can be isolating, traumatizing and expensive. The idea of radical hospitality, or fundamentally changing the way we treat guests and visitors, allows us to show neighbors they belong, exactly as they are. When we focus on radical hospitality, we put the needs of guests first and foremost.

- Welcome neighbors and help them feel seen, and heard.
- Be intentional about providing a service that will make guests want to return again.



Offer trauma-informed programming

The traumatic impacts of food insecurity are starting to be understood by researchers. Trauma-informed care involves adjusting the way services are offered to meet the unique needs of those impacted by crisis and trauma, and more holistically supporting their healing process. Trauma-informed care requires a commitment to prioritizing feelings of safety, trustworthiness, and transparency. Peer support, collaboration, mutuality, and valuing diverse voices are critical to implementing a trauma-informed approach. Additionally, it is important for programs to recognize the impacts of culture, race, gender and other identities on individual's experience of your program. We encourage pantries to enroll in a training on trauma-informed care as they begin this journey.



Create a welcoming physical environment

Consider how it looks and feels when a guest enters the pantry. What colors do they see, is it well maintained, is the temperature comfortable, what sounds do people hear, are there positive messages included in the décor? Since environments elicit an emotional, mental and physical response, consider the impact of the environment on your guests. Creating a welcoming environment also involves considering the pantry set-up, flow of traffic, procedures for selecting food, and overall organization. It is best to set-up the pantry in a way that minimizes large crowds, allows guest's choice, and creates an overall positive customer service experience.





Provide clear communication and expectations

It is important that the pantry procedures, rules, and expectations are clearly communicated to guests in a kind and respectful manner. Are the signs and procedures presented in a punitive or friendly manner? Try to make sure that signage is clear, simple and easy to read; avoid having many flyers and signs that are overwhelming and distracting. Engage with your guests to create Community Agreements for your pantry. Expectations that come from the community itself and are agreed upon can be empowering and reduce power dynamics. It can be helpful to include a “What to Expect” section on your website to let guests know about your policies and procedures before they visit. There will be times when a guest may be upset due to pantry policies or unexpected changes. It is important to use trauma-informed de-escalation strategies when a person is upset, always speak in a respectful tone, listen to the person’s perspective and work as collaboratively as possible to find a solution.



Use volunteers to build relationships, support, and make guests feel welcome

Volunteers are a tremendous asset to any pantry. There are a number of creative ways pantries can engage volunteers to enhance program culture. First, you can designate volunteers as greeters. When guests are warmly greeted by a volunteer, they feel welcomed. It is a powerful experience when one person tells another they are happy to see them, and pantries can offer that to each guest. Further, regular volunteers build relationships and trust with guests as they get to know their life situations. Volunteers can also help seniors or disabled guests carry food items as they are selected, handout information about community resources, or offer activities or programming to guests who are waiting. It is best to intentionally engage volunteers that speak the same language and share ethnic backgrounds as guests whenever possible. Allowing guests to serve as volunteers can help reduce power dynamics between those giving services and those receiving help. A simple and inexpensive strategy is to have volunteer name tags. You may also invite guests to wear name tags to build relationship.

Contact us for [additional technical assistance](#) to build a welcoming culture.

Proceed with Caution!

An important component of trauma-informed care is balancing power dynamics. Often, staff and volunteers are not aware of power dynamics that are influencing their interactions with each other and with guests. Think about the demographic make-up (i.e. ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and ability) and the way these factors influence person-to-person interactions. Inviting guests to serve as volunteers can help reduce power dynamics.





Give voice and ownership to guests

Each person at the pantry (staff, volunteers, and guests) has something important to contribute. Each person has a valuable perspective that can be used to improve programming and strengthen relationships. Programs can learn about guests' experiences by simply asking or conducting interviews, focus groups or through surveys. Pantries can also include guests on advisory councils or other permanent committees. These give meaningful opportunities for guests to shape programming by sharing their perspective.



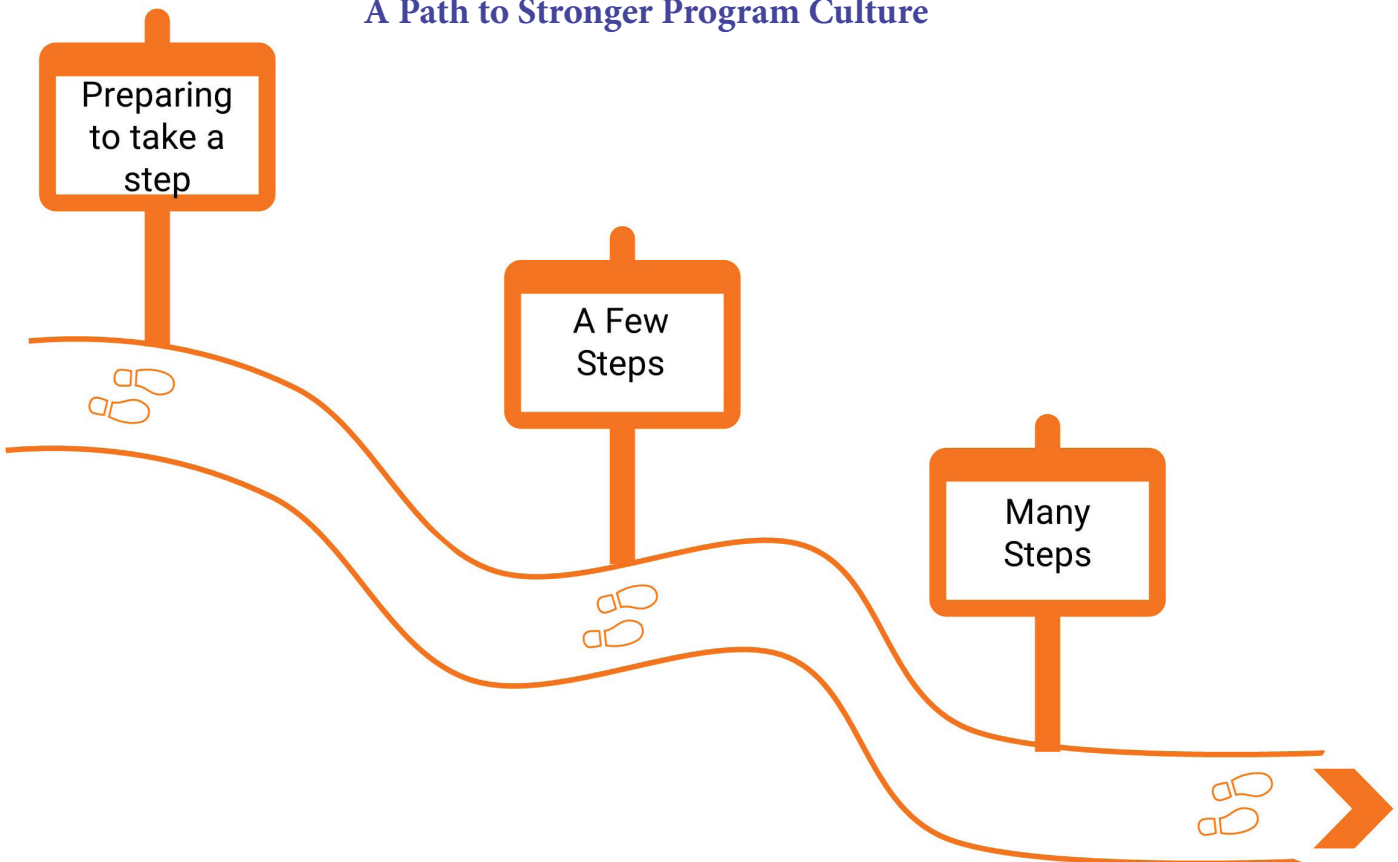
Invite guests to volunteer

It is best to intentionally engage volunteers that speak the same language and share ethnic backgrounds as guests whenever possible. Providing opportunities for guests to serve as volunteers can help reduce power dynamics between those giving services and those receiving help. If you involve guests to serve as volunteers, make sure the expectations are clear that they should not receive preferential treatment or receive more food than other guests.

[Sign up for our newsletter](#) to receive more examples of better practices.

Inviting guests to serve as volunteers can help reduce power dynamics between those giving services and those receiving help.

A Path to Stronger Program Culture



Case Study: Creating a Strength-based Program Culture Franklin Food Bank, Somerset, New Jersey



Keeping your team engaged and focused on the mission can be hard on a day-to-day basis. Have you noticed the ebbs and flows of morale on your team? Have you seen how your guests' experience and that of your team directly relate? The Franklin Food Bank has taken time to develop their culture and therefore their community. It started with conversations and is blossoming into an on-going dialogue with everyone involved.

Entering the choice market, you might hear music playing and feel uplifted by the clean, colorful and cheerful atmosphere. Within the hustle and bustle of pantry services, there is camaraderie among staff, volunteers and guests. The leaders of the organization are dedicated to creating a welcoming culture by breaking the stigma of needing food assistance. Neighbors needing help with groceries are not just welcome here, they are celebrated. Neighbors shop for food in an environment that promotes equity, health, and inclusion. The Franklin Food Bank has evening and weekend hours to help accommodate families and neighbors who work during the day.

Colorfully describing their approach, Derek Smith shares how “We’re jazz players, not an orchestra. The more flexible we can stay, the more resilient we will be. We celebrate our individual rhythm, flowing with innovation and creativity, while always marching to the drumbeat of gratitude and compassion. Voices of neighbors, volunteers, and partners are elevated in a harmony of dignity and respect. Joy and laughter lighten the load, accountability and empathy fortify the mission. We listen, we learn, we act. Rinse and repeat. Outcomes are the North Star lighting the path.”

Derek recognizes the importance of continuous learning for his staff and volunteers to promote the spirit of radical hospitality. They use external partnerships whenever they can, especially with workshops on sensitive topics to make sure they have both expertise and a range of perspectives in the room. Most, if not all workshops are offered to all staff, volunteers and board members. They provide workshops covering Trauma-Informed care, Diversity Equity & Inclusion, Change Management and Hospitality. In 2023, Derek led the staff in monthly book club discussions of Katie Martin’s book *Reinventing Food Banks and Pantries* to challenge the status quo and imagine the future of their food bank together.



More Than Food uses the term “choice” as designing food pantries where guests can choose items they prefer with dignity and where a variety of healthy options are available and promoted.. Historically, most food pantries were designed and operated so that volunteers prepare identical bags of food for each guest. While this may seem efficient for the role of volunteers, it does not embody the core values of More Than Food, and research shows it is not as effective.

Designing Pantries so Guests Can Choose their Food:

- Reduces the shame and humiliation that may be felt when in need of charitable food
- Improves satisfaction and interactions for guests and volunteers
- Reduces food waste because guests only select what they want and need based on household preferences
- Breaks down power dynamics between guests and volunteers

Reflect on your Pantry’s Level of Choice

It is important to first understand the different ways that choice can be offered in food pantries and discuss how you can increase the amount of choice offered.

Different Levels of Choice within Food Pantries:

1. **No Choice-** Every guest gets the same, predetermined items. Volunteers handle the food and prepare bags or boxes for each guest.
2. **Limited Choice-** Guests have a choice of a few prepackaged boxes, or a combination of prepackaged boxes and some choice from a selection of certain food items from a table or shelf. Guests have very little handling of food items.
3. **Modified Choice-** Guests select items from a menu or point to food that volunteers then select for them. Guests tell volunteers what food items they want, either from a menu or by pointing, and volunteers then pack in a bag or box for the guest. The menu items are often broad such as soup or cereal.
4. **Full Choice-** Guests can shop for their food and freely handle and select food at their discretion. The pantry may set limits on the amount of food items per food group or based on family size. Guests can see food options and can select what they want. Guests pack their food in a bag or box much like a typical grocery shopping experience. Full choice may also include on-line shopping where guests can select specific items on-line and then pick up their food at a designated time and place. Guests select specific food items such as chicken noodle soup or Cheerios.

Steps for Offering Choice



Reduce barriers for offering more choice

Any food pantry can be designed to offer choice. Common perceived barriers to offering choice include lack of space, time and volunteers and the concern that guests will take too much food. To increase the amount of choice, you may need to change the layout of the pantry, the role of volunteers, and possibly the hours of operation. Strong leadership within food pantries recognize the need for trying new things and placing the benefits of their guests before the convenience of their volunteers.

Assess the pantry layout

Think about the space you currently use to store food and prepare bags of food for guests. You can design the space with shelving so that guests can choose their own food rather than having volunteers select the food. Think about customer service and the flow of how guests enter the pantry. You may need to rearrange shelves and layout to better accommodate guests to select their food. Can you design one part of your pantry, or certain food groups to allow guests to choose? You can start small and expand choice over time.



Reconsider the role of volunteers

The time spent by volunteers to pack bags can be converted to time when guests shop for food. You will still need volunteers to help stock the shelves, but more of their time can be spent building relationships with guests and interacting with guests rather than preparing bags of food. Part of the paradigm shift of offering More Than Food is recognizing that our goal is not simply providing food as quickly as possible. Rather, supporting guests to select their food as they would in a grocery store can build trust, relationships, and dignity. It can help reduce the shame and humiliation that often accompanies asking for help and receiving charitable food. Allowing guests to say no to a food item also helps to reduce food waste.



Gather feedback from guests about their food and non-food preferences

By offering choice in a pantry, you can determine which food items are most popular and which are not preferred. When you offer choice, it also creates opportunities to gather feedback from guests about their food preferences so you can intentionally stock your pantry to reflect the demand. Simple examples for gathering feedback include:

- Hang a bulletin board and ask people to stick post-it notes with food items they would like to see in the pantry
- Conduct a brief survey asking guests to select the food items they prefer
- Ask people informally as they shop about their food likes and dislikes





Hybrid models of choice

During COVID-19, most food pantries converted to drive-through distributions and pre-bagging food for public health precautions. Some pantries have heard from guests that they prefer the convenience of being able to pick up food like a drive-through. This too is a choice. Consider ways that you can offer different options for guests based on their preferences while still offering choice. For example, can you create an online order form or phone ordering system for people to select the items they want and then pick up with drive-through options?



Provide healthy choices

As you design a pantry to offer more choice like a grocery store, another step is to consider the nutritional quality of the food you provide. Choice pantries are ideal settings for promoting healthy food, providing nutrition education, and supporting guests to select healthy options. Food banks and pantries can use the Healthy Eating Research Nutrition Guidelines to rank food nutritionally and promote healthy food donations from donors.

[Contact us](#) for additional technical assistance to offer choice with dignity.

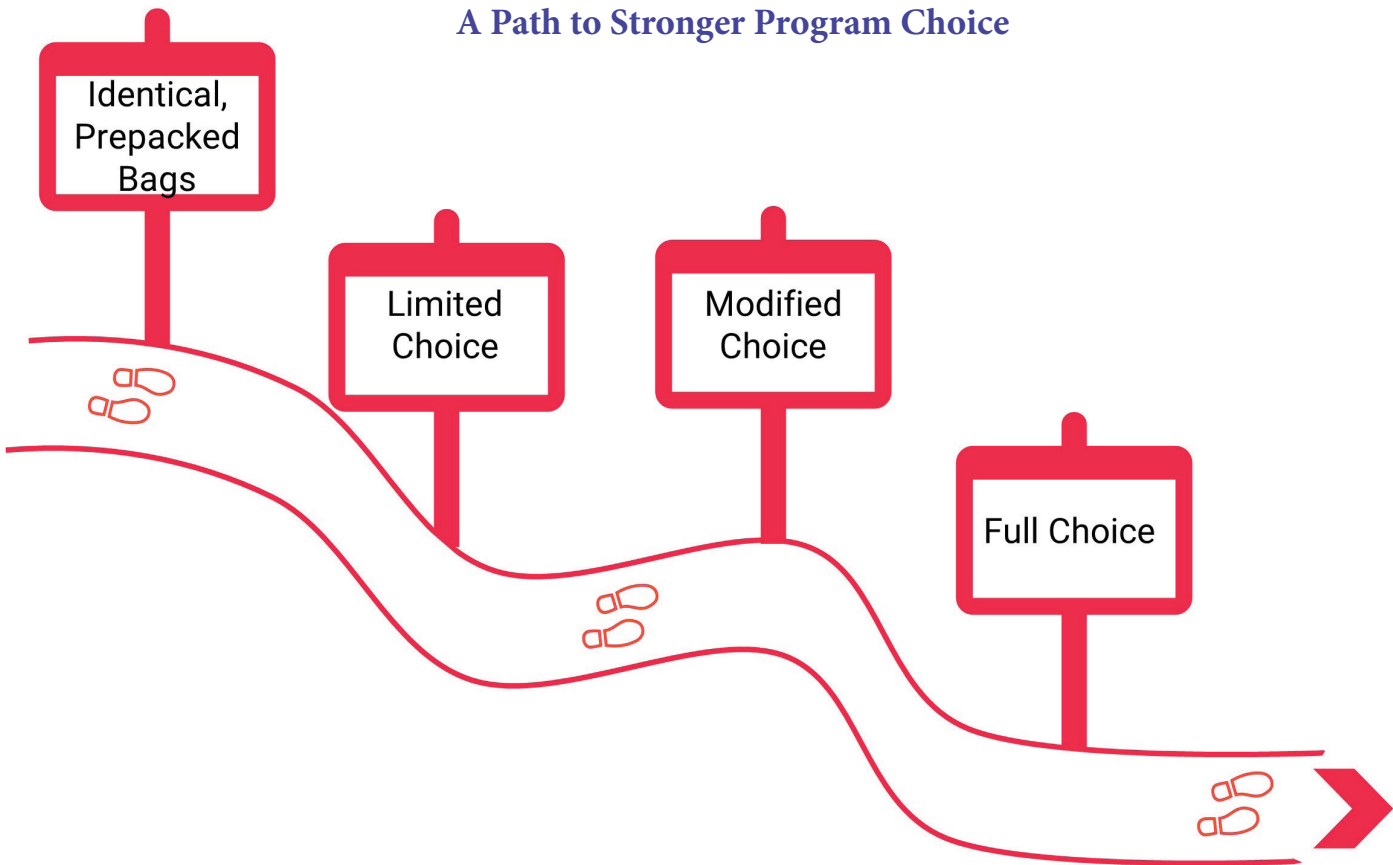
Road Tested!

Research in 2022 with 90 food pantries showed that any type of pantry (i.e. various sizes, number of volunteers, distribution method) can offer full choice.

When food pantries offer more choice volunteers express greater satisfaction and perceived benefits for guests.



A Path to Stronger Program Choice



Case Study: Enhancing Dignity through Choice

The Neighbor's Place: Wausau, WI



Opportunities to make changes can come in unexpected ways. Have you had to pivot programming at a moment's notice? Have you had to step back and rethink your approach? During the three years of distributing food to guests outdoors because of the COVID pandemic, the staff at The Neighbor's Place dreamed of a market space where neighbors felt welcomed and could shop for their food like at a grocery store. They had an ambitious vision and worked together to realize it.

In early 2023, the organization moved to a new space and opened a choice market. While the organization had been operating a food pantry for over 20 years, the response to the COVID pandemic shed new light on their operations and space. Reflecting on the changes from a prepacked, outdoor food distribution model to the indoor, full choice model, Executive Director Donna Ambrose highlighted being better at meeting neighbors' food needs:

“We had a very well-curated box with a lot of variety and that was wonderful. However, it was a lot of food and for a senior citizen, a family of two, for example, it was too much food and really heavy. When we moved, we served a lot of new families.”

Families were drawn by the ability to choose their food and select the amount of food that they needed for their household size. Serving more families is a measure of success for the market as it indicates people are willing to enter the space and find the support they need.

The Neighbor's Place worked with their partner food bank to design their market and train the team on better practices for food storage, display and sourcing. Donna embraces the mindset of abundance in her approach to setting up the market and creating a dignified environment for guests, “When you have beautiful spaces, people are more inclined to use it...You need to invest in your space to make people feel welcome, make people feel respected and dignified.”

The organization is continuing to grow and expand. One benefit of their new space is co-locating services like Wausau Mobile Meals, a free clinic and rental assistance. They are working with More Than Food Consulting to build on this connection to community services and offer a coaching program.



Connection

More Than Food defines the term “connection” as supporting guests to connect to community resources and programs by offering referrals, wrap-around services, one-stop shopping experience, and co-locating services with other organizations. These connections can help guests to connect with and navigate resources in a community that helps build stability and financial wellbeing. The causes of hunger are complex and to holistically address an individual’s needs, a pantry must be equipped to understand and address both crisis and development needs.

Crisis needs are those needs on the foundational levels of Maslow’s Hierarchy, such as food, shelter, health insurance, medical care, and mental health services. While it is important to meet crisis needs, it is equally important to meet development needs. These reflect areas of potential growth in a person’s life that change their life situation in a sustainable way. Examples of meeting development needs include increased educational attainment, employment assistance, building financial literacy skills, and strengthening social support networks.

By understanding a person’s needs holistically and supporting both crisis and development needs, food pantries are able to have a deeper impact.

Strong Connection in a food pantry:

- Creates avenues for guests to learn about and engage with community programs
- Offers ongoing support that helps guests set and achieve goals to increase life stability
- Builds partnerships that lead to on-site programming that target the felt needs of guests
- Addresses barriers to accessing community programming
- Increases guest utilization of programs in the community such as SNAP, GED, employment assistance etc.

Different Levels of Connection to Community Resources

There are various ways to connect guests with community resources. Review the different levels of connection below and discuss steps you can take to offer additional resources.

Connection to Community Resources

1. No information is available to guests about community resources at the pantry/food program.
2. Passive referrals: Information is available to guests with limited engagement between staff and guests about resources. Examples include a bulletin board or table of brochures about community resources or flyers sent home in bags.
3. Warm referrals: Pantry gathers information about community resources and connects guests with them directly, often including only one to two follow ups. Examples include hosting community agencies on-site to help guests enroll in programs, such as SNAP, staffed resource center where guests can complete job applications, single meeting with staff and guests where a referral is offered.
4. Ongoing, onsite services: trained staff/volunteers work with guests and community organizations to offer ongoing, on-site programming, on-site outreach with warm referrals, and/or one-on-one coaching. For example, a multi-session budgeting course, on-going coaching, GED prep or ESL class.

Proceed with Caution!

Start with a small number of community partnerships that you have relationship with. Often less is more. Providing detailed specific information about a small number of community resources can be more effective than more generic information on many programs.



Steps for building connection



Learn about the goals of your guests

Pantry staff and volunteers can take steps to learn about the life situations and goals of guests. This can be accomplished through informal conversations, focus groups, or surveys. A great question to ask guests is “What brings you here today?” Use a strength-based approach to ask about guests’ goals and hopes for the future and what would be helpful for accomplishing these goals. You can use this information to identify available programs and resources to address the most common goals.



Learn about the resources in the community

Staff can use census data, state and local statistics, as well as reports and assessments published by universities and local nonprofits such as the United Way to identify which factors contribute most to food insecurity in your community. Then staff can conduct asset mapping to learn about state and local programs that provide social services. It is helpful if designated staff or volunteers can call the organizations, check out their websites and become knowledgeable about the services offered so they can provide a warm referral. You may decide to compile these programs into a resource guide that can be made available to staff, volunteers, and guests and included at the resource center.



Make information about programs available to guests and offer warm referrals

There are many ways to make information about community programs available to guests. Printed materials and brochures provide tangible information that can be taken home, web links and PDFs can be sent via email or text message, and signs or scrolling TV screens can be used to communicate information. It is important that guests are provided information in their native language. Also, make sure to include information about eligibility, services, and the intake process.



Warm referrals are those made to a specific staff person at an organization and are tailored to guests’ needs. Rather than simply handing out a brochure or phone number, a staff member or volunteer connects a food pantry guest with an individual at a community program, makes a phone call to set up an appointment, or actively helps the guest enroll in services. Warm referrals are more likely to result in enrollment for services.



Create a resource center

Offer a resource center with printed materials, a computer, and a volunteer to answer questions. It is recommended to include information about programs such as SNAP, utility assistance, housing support, transportation, mental health, job training, and childcare assistance. Make sure to include information about eligibility, services offered, and the intake process. Further, when a computer is available, guests can search for resources, jobs, or complete applications for entitlement benefits, such as SNAP. Trained staff or volunteers can be stationed at the resource center to answer questions and ensure guests receive the information they need.

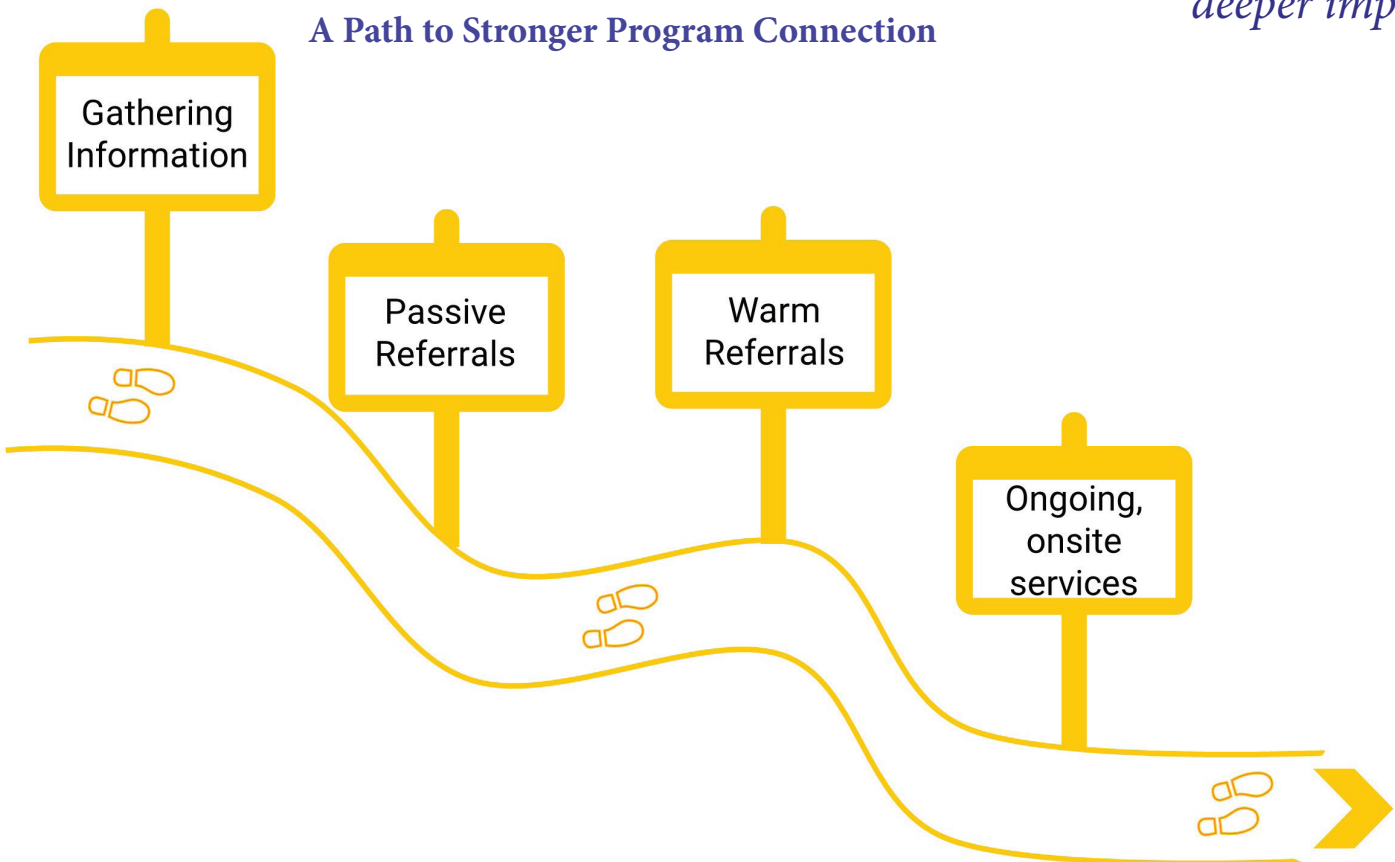
Offer follow-up for successful referrals
When a pantry has capacity, they can train staff and volunteers to follow-up with guests once they make a referral. This involves collecting guests' contact information and reaching out via phone, email, or text to see if the guest was able to engage with the program. When engagement is successful, they can celebrate together. When the guest encounters a challenge, they can brainstorm next steps together and offer support.

Invite community partners to provide onsite services
Pantries can invite community agencies and programs to provide on-site classes, workshops and program enrollment support. This makes it more convenient for guests to take advantage of community resources. Agencies can describe their services and help enroll guests in their programs, or can offer workshops or classes at the pantry. These additional services will provide a one-stop-shopping experience and make it more likely that guests will enroll in community resources.

Choose a program name that communicates the goal of longer-term food security
As you offer more connections beyond food, we encourage pantries to create a name to describe their referral and coaching program. Some examples are Freshplace, Fresh Start, Prosper Pantry, Thrive Program. The name you choose can help reinforce the values and intended goals of your program to build stability and longer term food security. Get creative to choose a name that will inspire and excite your staff and participants.

By understanding a person's needs holistically and supporting both crisis and development needs, food pantries are able to have a deeper impact.

A Path to Stronger Program Connection



Case Study: Connection with Wrap-around Services

Lebanon County Christian Ministries, Lebanon, PA

Sometimes it can be tough to decide where to focus when people in our community need help with more than just food. Do we aim for big numbers and a broad approach or do we focus on more intensive programming with fewer people? Lebanon County Christian Ministries (LCCM) started small by realizing that some of their young mothers were really looking for connection and on-going support. This led to a larger program to lift up community members and connect to community resources.

In January 2023, LCCM officially launched their new coaching program called upLIFT where members work with a coach over 9 months. upLIFT is designed to build the confidence, economic wellbeing, and overall life stability of those that participate. The program combines coaching with motivational interviewing to empower members to take ownership of their goals and create a sustainable plan for achieving them.

In the first year of the program, upLIFT celebrated the success of five graduates who have collectively improved their food security status and significantly increased their financial wellbeing. One of the upLIFT graduates mentioned that they had initially heard about the program from their sibling and decided to meet with a coach to learn more about becoming a member. Upon realizing they were a good fit to join the program, they had the opportunity to work alongside a coach to set goals surrounding financial education so that they could learn more about budgeting, paying off debt, and saving for an upcoming wedding celebration.

“Life today is so much different than when I first started the upLIFT program...I am so grateful for the gifts this program has given us to better our lives that will help us to continue to succeed and improve our future” – upLIFT graduate

LCCM’s commitment to investing in people and improving lives extends beyond the upLIFT program. In addition to offering utility assistance, shelter, and coaching services, LCCM recently renovated their space to include a full choice food pantry where neighbors can shop and select their own food.



Going the Distance - Implementing a Coaching Program

If you are ready to dig deeper in connection, you can consider hiring and training a coach who can work closely with guests over several months to set goals and provide follow-up support. Typically, a small number of guests from a food pantry are recruited and invited to participate in a program where they will meet individually with trained coaches to set goals and enroll in additional community resources. The goal is building long-term food security and financial well-being so participants won't need to continue visiting the food pantry over time. Coaching at pantries has been linked to several positive outcomes including increased food security, self-efficacy, and self-sufficiency.

Our More Than Food framework uses Stages of Change and Motivational Interviewing to guide the coaching process. The Stages of Change model suggests that behavior change happens in five stages, not all at once. The Stages of Change model helps determine how ready a guest is to set goals and make changes in their life and is helpful with recruitment. Motivational Interviewing is a strength-based approach that offers a set of techniques that coaches can use to encourage action towards goals. Combined, these models offer a paradigm to understand change and practical tools to support guests' actions toward setting and achieving goals.

When selecting a coach, it is important to identify a person with strong interpersonal skills, with strengths of being detail oriented, organized, able to request information and people's stories, reliable, flexible, self-aware and reflective and with experience in social work or another direct service field. A coach's responsibilities include meeting at regular intervals for typically 3 - 9 months, creating action plans detailing goal areas, offering warm referrals to help participants engage with programs, and documenting progress with participants. It is ideal for a coach to be hired as a staff member rather than serving as a volunteer. This allows for greater accountability to coaching responsibilities, professionalism, and adherence to the coaching protocols.

In May 2023, More Than Food Consulting and Urban Alliance launched Change Talk in collaboration with Leah's Pantry. Change Talk is a strengths-based training program with two self-paced, interactive courses for food pantry and food bank staff to build skills around Motivational Interviewing (MI) to support positive changes in people's lives. Change Talk goes beyond offering warm referrals to other community resources by using MI as a tool to enhance case management skills and inspire individuals to set and accomplish personal goals.



“This course is very well done - I can think of a lot of opportunities to use the material.” – Food Bank Staff

More Than Food Consulting and Urban Alliance have additional and more in-depth trainings on coaching, Stages of Change theory, and Motivational Interviewing for organizations that are interested in offering this more intensive type of programming. Visit: www.ittakesmorethanfood.org to request more information.

Click this link to sign up for [Change Talk courses](#)

Charting your Course: Gathering Feedback & Data

Many pantries are seeking to show the impact of their work beyond simply number of pounds or people served. Alleviating the immediate need of hunger is a very important goal; however, food pantries can have an even greater effect and help guests develop knowledge and skills that create life stability in the long-term. A first step is to answer the question: What impact do you want your pantry to have on the guests who visit your pantry?

Gathering Feedback From Guests

Asking those with food insecurity for their opinions can improve the guest experience and encourage food pantry guests to become advocates. There are several ways to engage, include, and gather feedback from guests. You can conduct brief surveys, conduct interviews, and host listening sessions. For longer-term engagement, you can invite people to join a community advisory group to provide more consistent feedback. Better practices include: compensate people for their time, hear from a diverse group of guests, use languages spoken by guests, and share back what you heard with guests and key supporters.

Program Evaluation

Program evaluation is a process for collecting feedback to ensure the pantry is achieving its desired goals. Some key questions to consider are:

1. What do you want to learn about your program or services?
2. How will you measure it?
3. Compared to what?

[Contact us](#) for consulting services to design a program evaluation.

Food pantries can have an even greater effect and help guests develop knowledge and skills that create life stability in the long-term.

Caution: Road bump ahead!

Many people in vulnerable communities are over-surveyed and do not see action based on their feedback. When you design an evaluation, tailor your research questions based on what you have the capacity to act on. Once you have feedback make sure to share it with participants.



Logic Model

A logic model can help you think through the first steps to evaluate your work. A logic model is a graphic depiction, or road map, that presents the resources, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact for a program. It shows the relationship between a program's activities and its intended impacts. The process of developing a logic model creates an opportunity for leaders to cast a vision for the pantry, become united around the desired impact, and ensure pantry goals, programming, and resources are aligned to achieve the desired outcomes. The process of developing a logic model also creates a road map for program evaluation.



Measuring Milestones - Process Evaluation

Process evaluation provides early feedback about whether the pantry is offering programming as intended, to learn about guests' experiences receiving services from the pantry, guests' satisfaction with the program, barriers that have been encountered, and changes or improvements that are needed. To know whether your program is effective starts with knowing the process of how the program was delivered. Process evaluations gather different types of outputs.



(Process data can include surveys, interviews, focus groups, or tracking services offered)

Examples of process data (measuring what happened and the experiences of those receiving services):

- Types of programs offered (e.g., referrals, classes, coaching sessions)
- Satisfaction with programming among staff, volunteers and guests
- Barriers to engaging with programming
- Number of guests receiving coaching, referrals made, people engaged in classes
- Number of guests participating in supportive programming (SNAP, mental health, health insurance, financial literacy classes, education)
- Challenges with offering services as planned (such as staff turnover, funding, space)

Generally, it is best to collect process data before engaging in a full program evaluation including outcome data. Literature on direct service programming suggests that programs where people have low levels of satisfaction, weak or negative relationships with staff and volunteers, or programs that are not offering services as intended are less likely to achieve their desired outcomes. Therefore, it is recommended that a pantry begins by ensuring that the pantry is offering services as intended, guests are satisfied with services, and have strong and positive relationships with staff and volunteers.

Outcome Evaluation

An outcome evaluation determines whether the pantry is having its intended impact. It shows changes in knowledge, attitudes, behavior, or desired outcomes as a result of participation in a pantry's programs. This type of evaluation is needed to demonstrate that a pantry is having its desired impact on guests served. Often a survey or standardized assessment tool is required to collect information to demonstrate statistically significant change.

Examples of outcome data (measuring changes because of pantry engagement):

- Increased satisfaction with pantry services
- Decreased food waste (when offering full choice)
- Increased food security
- Increased self-efficacy
- Increased social support
- Increased knowledge and skills (life skills, nutrition, healthy meal preparation, financial literacy)
- Improved overall life stability or self-sufficiency
- Improved financial stability or wellbeing

Continuous Improvement from Feedback

It is important to think of data collection as a continuous process that allows pantries to learn about guests' experiences and impact. The landscape of programming is shaped by many factors including political, economic, and broader contextual variables, changes in pantry leadership and staff, community events, pantry finances, and changes in the demographics of guests served. These variables are continuously shifting, which inevitably impacts programming. It is a best practice to incorporate regular process evaluation into the pantry's annual calendar and outcome evaluation every few years once the pantry is having its desired impact. What's most important is that program leaders adopt a process of continuous learning, and that feedback is valued and used to improve programming over time.

It is a best practice to incorporate regular process evaluation into the pantry's annual calendar and outcome evaluation every few years once the pantry is having its desired impact.



Summary

Offering more than food is a paradigm shift toward more long-term solutions to food insecurity. An important step in the journey to offering more than food is to examine a food pantry's mission and see how it aligns with the core values of empathy, dignity and equity that are outlined in this guide. These core values should influence the operations, programming and overall strategic direction of a food pantry.

The More Than Food framework highlights tangible examples of how food pantries can provide a welcoming culture, offer healthy choice, and provide connections to additional community resources. We encourage pantry staff and volunteers to take a good assessment of their existing services, the layout and design of their pantry, and their overall readiness to offer an improved culture, more choice, and additional connections. Feel proud of areas where you are already strong, and identify areas for growth. We encourage you to take one step toward offering a welcoming culture, healthy choice and connections, and then add additional components over time.

Plus, as food pantries offer more than food, they are well positioned to **raise the voices of those who are marginalized to advocate for larger policy changes.**

The COVID-19 pandemic forced most food pantries to transition back to emergency food relief that is largely transactional, to help address immediate food needs. The pandemic helped us realize how innovative and resilient we can be in the face of a crisis. As food pantries are transitioning from outside drive-through distributions back to inside services, many pantries are seizing the opportunity to reimagine what their food pantries can look like and how their services can be more holistic and collaborative.

We hope you take this opportunity to chart a new course in the way you provide services. We look forward to working with you on the journey toward long-term food security.

Visit www.ittakesmorethanfood.org to request more information.

