Start A 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 information 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 to 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.  
Have your pantry become a partner with the Food Bank of Corpus Christi and America’s Second Harvest to improve the quantity and quality of food/product available to the pantry for the 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  
5. Referred by the local Food Bank

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. 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.  
On site 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. The Food Bank of Corpus Christi requires that agencies generally be in operation for 6 months before applying for membership.

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 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.

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.

VI.   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:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Peanut butter | Crackers |
| Baby foods & infant formula | Canned meats or stews |
| 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 katchup |
| Canned vegetables | 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 |
| Preparing Emergency Food Boxes |  |

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.\*\*

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.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Based on Availabilty |  | Family Size |  |
| Item | 1 OR 2 | 3 OR 4 | 5 OR MORE |
| Cans of Soup | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Cans Vegis or beans | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| Cans of Fruit | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| Loaf of Bread | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Box of Cereal | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Pasta | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Dried Beans or Rice | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Box of Macaroni & Cheese | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Cans of Chili,Stew,or spaghetti | 1 | 3 | 3 |
| Pkgs. of Cookies, snacks | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Meats, canned or frozen | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| If Available Cheese | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| If Available Produce | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Roll of T-Tissue | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Roll Paper Towels | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Milk | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| Personal Care | 2 | 4 | 5 |
| Household items | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Miscellaneous as available |  |  |  |

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. All recipients must sign a Texcap form from USDA.

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\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
VISITS:  
\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_    \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_    \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_    \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_    \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_    \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_    \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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?

Thanks to <http://www.foodbankcc.com/how-to-become-an-agency/> for this great information