

FOODSHARE

Converting to a Client Choice Pantry

Most of us take for granted the ability to eat what we want. We go to a supermarket and buy what our family needs, challenged only by the overwhelming variety of products, brands, packaging, and the preferences within our household.

Yet for many who seek pantry assistance, this basic opportunity to choose what their family eats doesn't exist. Providing a choice in pantry product empowers and affirms the dignity of those you serve. Here are some points to consider when converting your pantry to the client choice model:

Reduced Waste – When clients have the ability to fill their own bags, they will likely only choose items they know they can and will use, supplementing what they already have at home. Product in pre-packed bags can be wasted when it's given to recipients with special dietary needs, to households unequipped with functional stoves or refrigerators, or to clients who do not know how to prepare the food.

Reduced Cost – Presupposing the needs of clients often means purchasing product not available at the local food bank. Acquiring and offering the full range of available food bank product with the understanding that your primary role is to reduce, not eliminate, the food needs of a family greatly reduces costs and will in turn increase product variety.

Engagement with Clients – Many choice pantries pair a "shopping assistant" with a client as they select product. This allows the volunteer to get to know the needs of clients and establishes a trusting relationship.

Offering Food Education – Use the time chaperoning clients to offer recipes for items they may be unfamiliar with or providing education around nutrition, labeling, or use of short-dated products.

Offering Other Services – As individual shopping takes longer than receiving product pre-bagged, choice pantries often have a waiting area where clients can be meet with a case

manager, be screened for SNAP eligibility, receive health screenings, browse literature on available services, or simply sit in comfort.

Evolving the Volunteer Experience – Instead of using volunteer resources on the repetitive task of pre-packing bags, volunteers are entrusted with interacting with clients and making customer experience as enjoyable and informative as possible. Such rewarding involvement generally attracts additional volunteers.

Increased Quality Time – You may need to serve fewer people per distribution and be open more frequently. The high-value time spent with clients is increased yet largely offset by savings in time spent packing bags. For better accessibility, consider weekend daytime hours and weekday evening hours.

Convert Storage Space to Shopping Space – Use shelving to both store and display product. Use top and bottom shelves for longer-term storage.

The Point System - Create point values for each item based on the product's retail cost (e.g., cereal costing \$3 would have a point value of 3). Clients are then allotted, based on household size, a certain number of total points to "spend" during their pantry visit. This system may help teach valuable shopping and budgeting skills.

The Number of Items System – For each item, set limits based on household size. This can be combined with allocating a maximum number of items per client visit based on household size.

Item List System – When it is impossible to reorganize space to accommodate shopping from shelves, clients can be given a list of items to choose from, which volunteers then package. This should be an intermediate step in converting your pantry to the full client-choice model.

Additional Resources:

- **Making the Switch to Client Choice**
- **Ending Hunger in America – John Arnold**
- **Client Choice Evaluation Survey**

For a list of Foodshare partner organizations operating client choice pantries, or for more information, contact Vinh Vuong (vvuong@foodshare.org | 860-286-9999 x112), Network Capacity Coordinator.