

# ORGANIZING AND OPERATING A FOOD PANTRY



A Resource Provided by the Mississippi Food  
Network Agency Relations Department

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I. **GETTING STARTED**

**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 a good way to help provide them with food.

Before you decide to start your own pantry, call the Food Bank and other local organizations to see what services already exist in your community. Many of these organizations would benefit greatly 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 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 don't hesitate to call the MS Food Network Agency Relations Department at 601-973-7085 or 601-973-7090 with any further questions you may have.** 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 out 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. Seek out these people's insights, inputs, and ideas about how you would be able to help best! It may not be the answer you have thought of!
- **Social Service Agencies:** Individuals working in social services are often able to offer an awareness of particular community needs, concerns that make them willing to help, and experience to provide valuable input and guidance about services in demand in your particular community.
- **Community Organizations:** Members of community clubs or groups, churches and/or fraternal 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 (4-15 people) to share responsibilities for food pantry planning and accept responsibilities. 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:

- Determine who will accept responsibility for the primary positions of Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, Secretary, and Treasurer.
- Make sure that everybody agrees on what a food pantry is.
- Discuss the basic function of immediate aid. Determine other community agencies that may be able to offer related services, such as counseling, Food Stamp and WIC advocacy, and Health services. Maintain a list of agencies your food pantry can 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 your conception of what types of services may be necessities in immediate aid. A mission statement is a written policy that usually includes an equal opportunity statement such as: "It is our policy to provide equal assistance to all qualified persons without discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, gender, age, national origin, veteran's status, sexual orientation or disability."

Networking with agencies and people in community from the start will build the community's vested interest in the success of the 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?
- 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. For instance, while it may be intuitive to serve a large geographic area, many prospective clients do not have reliable transportation. Try to limit your geographic area to the most needy area, or keep it in a central location that is easy to access without a vehicle. Every possible effort should be made to treat food recipients with dignity and respect.

### **NON-PROFIT STATUS**

As soon as possible, attempt to secure 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 Food Bank membership.
- 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 501c(3).

**Note: Working under the sponsorship of an existing non-profit organization such as a church or social service organization, is another method of obtaining non-profit status. In this case, a sponsor letter with a copy of their 501c(3) designation is sufficient.**



## II. ACQUIRING FOOD

### FOOD SOURCES IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Where are you going to get an adequate and varied supply of food? In addition to utilizing the 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, ask for donations from:

- Restaurants
- Bakeries

- Convenience Stores
- Grocery Stores
- Drug Stores

## **FOOD STORAGE**

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



## **FOOD DRIVES**

Food Drives are another good 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 agency 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.

In order for your food drive to be successful, people need to know about it. The easiest way for a small agency to spread the word about an upcoming food drive is to distribute flyers. Your flyer should request specific items and include information about your agency so that people know where and when to donate. Distribution ideas or food drive flyers include:

- Community Schools: Many schools are more than willing to participate in service projects such as food drives. Sending flyers or calling a school to provide them information on your agency and current drive is an easy way of getting publicity and attention.



- Use as try liners in cafeterias and fast food restaurants.
- Hand out in shopping malls and street corners.
- Use as inserts in local publications or church bulletins.
- Post in the local library and have them place a box for donations.
- Supermarkets. Ask the store manager if you can place a box for donations near the front of the store. Make sure to post a bright-colored flyer on the box to attract attention!

Other creative food drives ideas:

- Choose an honorary chairperson/spokesperson for your food drive. Approach a local celebrity/political figure and have him/her publicly support your efforts by mentioning your agency at special events.
- Develop and adopt-a-month program where civic organizations can select a month where it is their responsibility to provide food to the pantry.
- Get the theater involved. Ask local movie and/or performance theaters to charge a certain amount of canned goods as admission for one night. Many well known musical groups also donate part of their profits to charities in the cities that they perform in.
- Create a name for your annual food drive. Names like “caring hands,” “fishes and loaves,” etc. increase community awareness of hunger issues and boost food donations.
- Publicize and educate. Create t-shirts

### **FOOD DRIVES VS. FUND DRIVES**

When your food pantry is able to purchase food at the Food Bank for \$0.16/pound, the cost effectiveness of fund drives over food drives becomes self-evident. Here is one example: the Food Bank has cases of cereal available that weigh approximately 10 pounds and contain 10 boxes of cereal in each.

Your agency would contribute a shared maintenance fee of \$1.60 for a case of cereal, which translates to \$0.19 per box. And individual person would pay \$3.20 for a single box at a grocery store to donate to your agency. As a cash donation, that \$3.20 would cover the handling fee for two cases (20 boxes) for your agency. Also, that \$3.20 could be recorded as a contribution and used as a tax deduction by the donor.

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

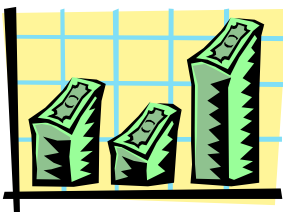


The following are basic guidelines for storing food and grocery items as recommended by the Department of Health.

- Chose a storage space with locking doors and not outside entrance.
- Store all grocery products away from walls and off the floor. Warehouse pallets are available from the Food Bank free of charge.
- 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.
- Mark the date received on all cases of food and start a first-in, first-out system.
- Inspect all items. Do Not use any that are bulging, contaminated, or leaking.
- Use non-toxic insect and rodent tapes and monitor them regularly.
- Use thermometers and regularly monitor the temperature of refrigerators (35-45 degrees F) and freezers (-10-0 degrees F).

### III. BUILDING A FINANCIAL BASE



#### 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 any 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 of these costs along with supplemental food purchases and equipment like a refrigerator, a freezer, shelves, and a desk.

#### 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). Most libraries have Foundation directories.
- 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, bake sales, raffles, car washes, 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 on an 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 any other kind of organization 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 come in to 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 written letter.**





#### IV. VOLUNTEERS



- A. Volunteers are a valuable resource for many organizations, large and small. It has been estimated that approximately 48% of all Americans volunteer. These 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 will become overwhelming. As such, you will need volunteers for many of the following activities:
  
- B. Clerical: Interview clients, complete forms, and maintain financial records.

## **PRE-PACKING**

- C. Referral: Make referrals to other services for client with more long-term needs.
- D. Organizational: Plan events, ask for donations of money and food, recruit and schedule volunteers.
- E. Physical: Load and unload food from trucks, clean and stock the storage area, and pack food into boxes or bags to be distributed to clients.
- F. Creative: Make flyers and posters to advertise pantry help with fund raising efforts.
- G. 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.

## **RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS**

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. Some ideas on how to recruit and manage volunteers include:

- H. Make publicity appeals in the community.
  - Provide flexible hours and offer short-term possibilities.
  - Get staff members, current volunteers, and others to enlist friends, family members, and colleagues.
  - Contact local colleges, many of which have community service requirements for graduation.
- I. Contact community organizations, such as church groups, fraternal organizations, women's clubs, etc. to see if they would be willing to donate their time.

## CLIENT CHOICE



It is important to have regular volunteer meetings in order to share success stories, voice concerns, and celebrate group efforts. This will keep volunteer morale high! Your primary goal is to ensure that everyone is working together happily and effectively. Also, a volunteer appreciation day or event helps to boost morale and remind volunteers that their hard work and dedication is a valuable asset to your agency.

## V. PANTRY OPERATIONS



## **SPREADING THE WORD**

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

In addition, flyers are a great tool to publicize your pantry. Make sure to include on your flyer:

- The pantry’s location.
- What resources you provide.
- When you are open.

One way to do this is by adding your mission statement. A mission statement is a written policy that outlines all of the above information and usually includes an equal opportunity statement such as, “It is our policy to provide equal assistance to all qualified persons without discrimination on the basis of race; color; religion; gender; age; national origin; sexual orientation; or disability.” Your mission statement should be posted at the pantry where everyone can read it. A copy should also be given to your volunteers or any social service agencies that may refer people to you.

Flyers can be posted in prominent places in the community such as social services offices, community centers, recreation centers, churches, schools, post offices, and supermarkets.



## INTAKE

One way to facilitate the record-keeping process is to create a client intake interview form. Intake forms should be **confidential** and kept on file at your agency. They should include the following information:

- Name
- Age of all household members
- Mailing Address and Telephone Number
- Client's Other Needs and Possible Referrals
- Client's Signature

Another good tool to have is a distribution log to keep track of every person who visits your pantry on any given day. A distribution log should include:

- Date
- Client's Name
- Number of Children in Household (0-17)
- Adults in Household (18-64)
- Elderly in Household (65+)
- Bag Size
- Whether or Not they are New at the Agency

You will be surprised how useful it is to simply record the number of visits a person makes and how many people are in his/her family.

Three months later you will be able to review your record to determine your service levels, the demographics of those in need in your community, and other information which will help you to determine how much food you will need to maintain your pantry's 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 the MS Food Network in order to keep track of the food distributed. These reports also help to generate hunger statistics for The State of Mississippi.

## INTERVIEWS AND REFERRALS



Once you have established a method of intake and record keeping, you will want to set up an interviewing process so that you can determine what each new client needs and how you can help them. Since your pantry may be the first place they have asked 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 interviewing a new client, you should find out if they have any immediate needs other than food. Start with issues like whether or not they are receiving Food Stamps or WIC and work toward other areas like:

- Domestic Violence Services
- Housing/Utilities Assistance
- Employment/Training Assistance
- Education/Literacy Needs
- Substance Abuse Counseling

There with a minimal amount of research, you'll be able to access County/City agencies to help with these issues.

**PLEASE NOTE:** 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 handed out to clients or placed in their bags/boxes.

## DISTRIBUTION OPTIONS

There are two primary methods of distributing food to clients, including pre-packing bags/boxes or having clients “shop” for it em they need. Each method has its pros and cons.



The “pre-packing method” is more practical on numerous levels. Primarily, it allows you to provide well -balanced and nutritious meals to those in need, by ensuring that they are given a variety of items containing protein, carbohydrates, fruits and vegetables, dairy, and fiber. Also, it will help ensure that there is enough available for each patron to receive what he or she wants and allow you to keep track of your inventory and determine what items you will need to keep your pantry stocked. To prevent food waste, request that clients redonate items that they won’t use. In addition, the pre-packing method allows you to best utilize minimal space in which most pantries are locked. Please not that the most popular option is the “three day bag.”



The “*shopping method*” or “*client choice method*” is beneficial because it allows for greater empowerment of clients; allows you to meet clients’ special needs, and avoids distribution of unwanted items. There are several different types of client choice models from which to choose. If you choose this method, opt for the one that works best for you.

1. **Balanced Menu Package** – The pantry attempts to stock a variety of foods from each of the five (5) 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.
2. **Client “shops” from list of available goods** – Pantry acquires the best and most food it can from the Food Bank and elsewhere and itemizes what is available on a list provided as they arrive to pick up food. Clients indicate on the list what of the available items they want, and pantry assembles their bag from that list.
3. **Fixed Menu Plus “Grab Bag”** – Pantry distributes its traditional fixed standardized food box, then also displays varieties of different items from the pantry permitting the client to take limited (one bag, six items, etc.) amounts of those goods or any odds and ends which find their way into the pantry.

