

# POWER UP YOUR PANTRY

## SUPPORTING CLIENT CHOICE



What if the experience of picking up food at the food pantry was more like shopping at a grocery store? What impact would this have on the client's experience, volunteer management, and overall operations?

In the past, the common assumption was that clients would take too much, or only want premium items like meat. However, in recent years, a number of food pantries have switched to a client choice model of food distribution and found that these assumptions were largely unfounded. In fact, one of the challenges of the client choice is clients often do not take ENOUGH food!

The client choice model provides clients with an experience similar to using the grocery store, as opposed to a more traditional food pantry experience where food boxes are pre-packaged or where clients get to walk the aisles but are chaperoned by a volunteer. Client choice allows clients to select food on their own so they can customize based on their health needs and preferences. Some former skeptics have been surprised to find that the vast majority of clients can be trusted to follow the rules and not abuse food pantry resources.

### Why provide clients a choice?

By switching to client choice, the food pantry can:

- **Reduce food waste.** Clients will avoid taking foods they don't want or can't use and will be much less likely to throw food away or let it spoil. This helps the pantry save time and money and make better use of limited resources.
- **Promote the dignity of clients.** For some clients, needing to rely on a food pantry can make them feel ashamed. By trusting clients to follow rules and make their own food selections, pantries can help clients feel more respected and dignified.
- **Better meet client food needs.** It is a major challenge for food pantries to know or predict their clients' food needs. Over time, the pantry will have a better understanding of what clients need and can cater their food ordering accordingly.
- **Support health needs of clients.** Many clients are working to control, prevent or manage conditions like diabetes and heart disease, further elevating the importance of food selection.



### POWER UP YOUR PANTRY

*This series is intended for food pantries and other hunger relief groups looking for ways to enhance their current operations and better meet the needs of people who use their services.*

*The information provided is based on survey and other research conducted by the Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security at the University of Missouri.*

## How to implement client choice

Client choice will require some getting-used-to and training for clients and volunteers. For clients, a brief orientation on their first visit will help them navigate the new system. Some volunteers accustomed to having certain roles and doing things a certain way may be wary about the switch. Consider positive ways to introduce the idea where the benefits can be outlined. Get feedback from volunteers before, during, and after the transition to make them a part of the change.



## The role of volunteers

One of the benefits of client choice is a more efficient and effective use of volunteers. Volunteers no longer spend time packing food boxes, but instead focus on keeping shelves stocked (like at a grocery store), assisting clients with selecting foods if they have questions, and creating a more supportive atmosphere for food pantry clients in general. Efficiency improvements may allow pantries to extend hours of operation or begin offering related services such as cooking demonstrations, helping people sign up for SNAP, or assisting with a community garden.

## Space considerations

Most spaces can accommodate client choice in some capacity. The transition may require adjustments to sorting, shelving, and registration procedures. Pantries will likely need to convert some food storage and packing areas to shopping areas. Additional shelving, shopping carts, or baskets may need to be acquired.

## Types of client choice models

Switching to Client Choice will look different for each pantry based on available space, equipment, and resources. Below are a few different models to consider.

### Supermarket style

In this model, as the name implies, the arrangement resembles a supermarket. Food is set up on shelves or tables and clients are able to walk freely through the space with a cart or basket to select foods on their own. Volunteers do not escort or oversee clients through the food pantry.

### Walk-through

This model is similar to the Supermarket Style, though clients follow a defined route as they select their foods. This model may be more appropriate if space is limited. Volunteers do not escort or oversee clients through the food pantry.

### Shopping list

While related to a more traditional food pantry, this model gives clients the ability select foods from a list. The list is then passed to workers who fill the order and present it to the client when it is ready. This model is best for pantries that lack the space for other client choice models.

## Setting goals: Making food last. Helping people take enough food.

In a traditional food pantry, a formula is often used to determine a family's allotment of food. This can be based on the total number of items in stock for a given food item, divided by the total number of households expected to visit the pantry, with some consideration given to family size. This information is then made available to volunteers who pack food boxes accordingly.

With client choice, the same type of system can be used. Pantries can set quantity goals for each food item or the total amount of foods selected.

- **Setting goals for each food item:** In this case, the goal is posted on the shelf next to the food item. For example, a sign might read "Canned Soup: 1 can for family of 1; 2 cans for families of 2-4; 3 cans for families with 5 or more."
- **Setting goals for the total amount of food selected:** In this example, the client is made aware of the total number items or pounds of food they are entitled to. The amount is written on a slip of a paper and given to them before they begin shopping.
- **Some pantries have even developed a pricing system.** Food items are given a "price" and clients have a certain amount of "bucks" to spend.

Regardless of the details, pantries will often employ some type of check-out process, though it is often with the goal making sure clients have generally met the posted goals, rather than doing an item for item accounting.

Pantries have options if they are unable to fully make the switch to client choice but still want to give it a try. A **Swap Table** can be used to give clients the chance to exchange products they don't want or can't use for anything another client has left on the table. Another idea, the **Standard Box "Plus"**, provides clients with a pre-selected box of food but also lets them select a few items from the food pantry inventory. Taking these small steps will hopefully lead pantries to explore options for offering greater choice in the future.

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Some evidence suggests that goals are needed so that food pantry clients take enough food. Given the option to shop freely, without goals, many will take less food than they need, often because they believe that other clients need the food more than they do.

## Final Thoughts

Experience is a great teacher. Next to that, learning from others is good. Contact your regional food bank to find a client choice pantry in your area. Take a tour and visit with the director to learn more.

Some of the ideas in this publication are adapted from *Feeding America of Western Michigan, Charity Food Programs that Can End Hunger, Chapter 9*. For more information, go to [bit.ly/charityfoodprograms](http://bit.ly/charityfoodprograms).



## SPOTLIGHT: CENTRAL PANTRY COLUMBIA, MO



Sean Ross

In the experience of Sean Ross, director of the Central Pantry in Columbia, MO, “giving up control and getting over mistrust” are the most challenging parts of using the client choice system for distributing food.

He admits that the system itself is rather simple and provides a number of benefits to the pantry. It requires fewer volunteers since clients pack their own boxes. In addition, complaints from clients are minimized since they are able to avoid foods they don't like or can't eat because of health concerns. This also results in less food waste and reports of people throwing food away.

According to Ross, client choice is successful because “most people follow most of the rules most of the time.” So called rule-breakers are a small minority of the total client population. When people do take more than the suggested amount, they may have a

good reason for doing so. Part of the training Ross provides staff and volunteers includes helping them “think outside of themselves” and avoid assuming they know the motivations of people. Staff are instructed to intervene if they observe people clearly abusing the system.

The Central Pantry has neat, organized shelves that Ross tries to keep stocked. In his experience, even though clear signage indicates how many items people can take, if an item starts to run low, people will often take less than the suggested amount. They perceive there is not enough to go around and that others may have greater need for the food.

Ross says that clients do notice that the Central Pantry is different than other food pantries. Their experience is more like shopping for food, as opposed to receiving food, and helps them feel more invested and in control. This results in a greater sense of dignity among clients and helps them feel less shame about needing to rely on the pantry for help.

When asked about advice for pantries wanting to switch to client choice, Ross, half joking, says “take a skydiving class and learn to let go.” His point centers on the idea that changing the way we think about food pantry clients is more important than logistics.



*Central Pantry client choice model*

For more information:  
[foodsecurity.missouri.edu](http://foodsecurity.missouri.edu)