Community food drives provide an important source of food for families trying to make ends meet. They also give communities the chance to help their neighbors. While food pantries and the people they serve are grateful for any and all donations, food drive sponsors have the chance to solicit an assortment of healthy foods to help families who use food pantries have better diets.

Why Healthy Foods
In the United States today, health conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and obesity are common. Unfortunately, the prevalence of these conditions is often higher among people who use food pantries, as seen in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Health Conditions of Food Pantry Customers</th>
<th>Pantry Clients¹</th>
<th>Missouri State Average²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Blood Pressure</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Cholesterol</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI in Obesity Range</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹Foulkes et al., 2011 ²The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System 2009 Survey Data.

Poor health and the high prevalence of chronic disease create multiple barriers and hardships for food pantry customers, their families, and the programs that assist them. For example…

- Approximately one-fourth of people living with a chronic illness are significantly limited in their daily activities (CDC, 2009). Coupled with the stress of being hungry or the threat of being hungry, pantry customers and their families can miss educational and employment opportunities.
- This in turn creates a downward spiral for food pantry customers given that health is determined in part by one’s social environment, including how much education a person has, one’s ability to get and keep a job, one’s occupation, and how much money a person earns (CDC, 2011). Seventy-three percent of food pantry households live at or below the poverty level (Foulkes, 2011).
- More broadly, the hunger-related costs of increased illness, poor educational outcomes, lost lifetime earnings, and charitable contributions to help address hunger in Missouri are $3.6 billion (The Center for American Progress, 2011).

Addressing the issue of poor health within a population that is largely food insecure and living below the poverty level is a challenging yet important issue to address if communities hope to create opportunities for all people to lead healthy and productive lives.
How You Can Help
The good news is that many health conditions can in part be controlled by the foods we eat. Eating fruits and vegetables, beans, whole grains, lean proteins, and foods that are lower in salt and sugar can go a long way toward improving health.

The following list contains common food drive foods, with a healthy twist.

- Canned vegetables *without added salt*
- *Low sodium* canned soup
- Canned fruit *in juice or light syrup*
- Canned tuna and chicken *in water*
- Peanut butter
- Canned or dried beans
- Unsweetened cereal
- Oatmeal
- 100% juice

Making It Happen
- When announcing and publicizing the food drive, emphasize the point that the food drive is a bit different – donations of healthy food will be requested to help improve the health of families in the community. Include this information, including a list of healthy foods, in newsletter articles, fliers, emails, press releases, and radio and television interviews.
- Challenge donors to really put the healthy in the food drive. It’s one thing to grab food from the back of the cupboard. It’s another thing to carefully select or purchase food that will help people have healthy, balanced diets.
- Sort the food. As the food comes in, track how much food matches the food on the list. Keep track of this and use it to compare the results of future healthy food drives.
- Offer awards or prizes for groups or individuals who donate the most healthy food, not just the most food.
- Take pictures of the food and publicize its success. Let the rest of the community know how the food drive went and how it will make an impact in the lives of families in your community.


