



Healthy Shelves

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*Promoting and enhancing
good nutrition in food pantries*



Interdisciplinary Center
for Food Security

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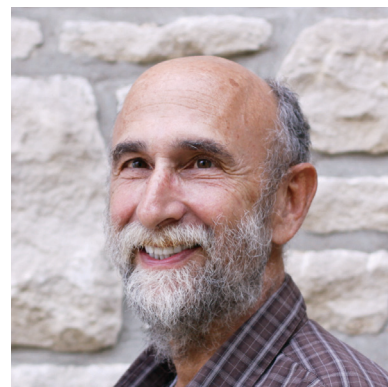
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From the director



How can we address issues of nutrition and chronic disease through local food pantry services? Are there ways to enhance fresh fruit and vegetable availability and access for those who use food pantries? Can food pantries be a hub for nutrition education, cooking demonstrations, and food gardening resources? What role can local partners play in making all of this happen?

Exploring these questions and others is the basis for this publication. Throughout, we offer ideas that can be adopted by food pantries and community partners to help improve the health and well-being of the people they serve. In our vision, local food pantries are a place where people not only receive food but are offered healthy, fresh food, along with resources to meet their unique health and wellness needs.

Now is the time to address hunger and the related health consequences of food insecurity. Both public and private programs must take this challenge seriously. Progress is being made, but we still have a long way to go to ensure that everyone has a chance to succeed and live a healthy life.

Please contact us any time and feel free to check out more of our resources at foodsecurity.missouri.edu. There you'll find research and news, along with information about Grow Well Missouri, our partnership with local food pantries working to develop programs and practices to improve the health of food pantry customers.

Sincerely,

Sandy Rikoon

Curators Professor of Rural Sociology
Director, Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security
University of Missouri
foodsecurity.missouri.edu



Web tip: Many resources exist on the web. Wherever you see a computer symbol in this guide, check the web reference list at the back for the exact URL to visit.



Food pantries and food insecurity

Across the United States, food pantries provide a safety net for millions of households.

Their primary role is to acquire food through various sources and distribute that food to community members who are generally considered food insecure – meaning that they face uncertainties about acquiring enough food, have to change their eating patterns, or have to reduce the amount of food they eat. Food pantries are community-based, often affiliated with a religious organization, and largely operated by volunteers.

Most food pantries get the bulk of their food from a regional food bank. Food banks may work on a statewide basis or serve multiple counties within a state. In turn, most food banks source the majority of their food through a national network of food donors coordinated by Feeding America, the nation's largest organization of emergency food providers. Both food banks and food pantries also source food through local and regional retailers, wholesalers and manufacturers, local food drives, and the USDA Emergency Food Assistance Program.

According to Feeding America's Hunger in America 2014 report¹, 46.5 million people are served through their affiliated hunger relief agencies every year. This includes 12 million children and seven million seniors. One in every five households includes a member who has served in the U.S. military. Food pantries make up 67% of the Feeding America partners. In total, there are nearly 40,000 food pantries in the Feeding America network. The number of food pantries in the network grew from approximately 33,500 in 2009², a 19 percent increase.

CONSIDERATIONS

The ability of food pantries and local communities to initiate one or more of the activities discussed in this guide will depend on a number of factors. Keep these things in mind as you move forward:

Pantry staffing

Does the pantry have paid staff or is everyone a volunteer? How will this affect the ability to initiate and maintain activities?

Pantry infrastructure

Does the food pantry have enough cold storage to accommodate additional fruits and vegetables? Are grants available to help with the purchase of a large cooler?

Community partners

Which agencies are available to assist? How much time and staffing do they have to contribute?

Culture and receptivity

How receptive is the community to new ideas? Are people looking for new ways to help and be involved?

Urban vs. Rural

How does your setting affect the types of programs offered? How will they be received by staff, volunteers, and customers?

There is also evidence that people, especially seniors, are using food pantries on a regular basis to help with their food budgets. Sixty-three percent of all households surveyed said they plan to visit a food pantry on a regular basis, compared to 76 percent of households with a senior.

Households also report using a number of strategies to make sure they have enough to eat. Nearly 23 percent report using gardens to grow food. Unfortunately, 79 percent report purchasing less expensive and unhealthy foods in order to have enough to eat¹.

Clearly, hunger and food insecurity remain a challenge for millions of U.S. households. According to recent data from the USDA³, 14.5 percent of households have “low food security,” as a result of reduced quality, variety, and desirability of their diet. Of those households, 5.7 percent have “very low food security” because of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake. National rates of food insecurity have remained high (between 14.5 and 14.9 percent) since the start of the Great Recession in late 2007. In the years leading up to 2007, food insecurity rates ranged between 10.5 and 11.9 percent.

With more people experiencing hunger and food insecurity, federal food assistance programs have also seen their numbers grow. For example, the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly the Food Stamp Program, provided benefits to 46.6 million people (or 15 percent of individuals in the U.S.) in an average month in 2012³. By comparison, this program provided benefits to 26.5 million people (approximately 9 percent of individuals) in an average month in 2007⁴.

46
MILLION

of people served
by Feeding America

Poor health and the cost of food insecurity

Compared to the general public, rates of many chronic diseases are higher among food pantry customers.

Research by the University of Missouri Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security examined the health status of food pantry customers at 37 food pantries in the 32 county service area of the Food Bank for Central and Northeast Missouri. In total, 1,273 in-person interviews were conducted in the summer of 2013. Findings from the research show that pantry customers are disproportionately affected by diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure, and are more likely to be obese, compared to the Missouri state average⁵.

Table 1. Health conditions of Missouri food pantry customers

	Pantry Customers ⁵	Missouri State Average ⁶
Diabetes	23.4%	9.6%
High blood pressure	50.5%	32.0%
High cholesterol	45.3%	38.8%
BMI in obesity range	51.1%	30.4%

Food pantry customers' health is a growing concern for many communities. Poor health and the high prevalence of chronic disease create multiple barriers and hardships for customers, their families, and the programs that assist them. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately one-fourth of people living with a chronic illness are significantly limited in their daily activities⁷. This in turn leads to missed educational and employment opportunities and creates a downward spiral for people, 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 earns⁸.

There are obvious financial costs associated with food insecurity and poor health. The Center for American Progress reports that the hunger-related costs of increased illness, poor educational outcomes, lost lifetime earnings, and charitable contributions to help address hunger in the U.S. are \$167.5 billion⁹. Obviously, this takes an immediate and long-term economic toll on communities and our country.

Addressing the issue of poor health among food pantry customers is a challenging yet important issue to confront if communities hope to help all people lead healthy and productive lives. We believe it is vital to engage a multitude of partners to build the capacity of local food pantries – to help them increase sources of healthy food and develop programs and policies to improve the health of the families they serve.

Approach

Given the combination of increasing demand for food pantry services, growing rates of food insecurity, and high rates of chronic disease among food pantry customers, the Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security set out to partner with a handful of food pantries to better understand how pantries can be a source of healthier food and a hub for health improvement activities.

The approach centered on three important considerations, aimed at increasing success and sustainability of the work.

Listening and Learning

Gaining a better understanding of the possibilities and roadblocks was an important first step. We sat down with food pantry directors, volunteers, and community partners to learn about the community and get a sense for what might make the most difference.

Focusing on the System

We took a food systems approach to our learning and activities. We focused on ways to enhance healthy food access and availability for both food pantries and the people they serve, improve the distribution of foods in food pantries, provide support for increasing the consumption of healthy food, and develop the overall capacity for change within the food pantry.

Building Community Support

Food pantries generally operate within very supportive communities. Faith-based organizations, schools, businesses, and many others help keep food pantries stocked and running. We wanted to learn more about these partners and networks to take advantage of existing community assets.

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI EXTENSION



Reaching Out with Healthy Recipes

Ava, Mo.

Deep in the Ozark Hills, Myrna Stark and Rebecca Smith, nutrition program associates with University of Missouri Extension's Family Nutrition Education Program, have quite the following at the Heart of the Hills Food Harvest in Ava, Missouri. Using recipes and curriculum from MU Extension, they set up monthly display boards, distribute recipes and nutrition information, and use lessons from *Eating Smart Being Active* to work with food customers. "People ask for the recipes now and tell us they regularly use them, as they're easy to make, and turn out very good," reports Stark.

Chicken Soup with Kale, Easy Broccoli Quiche, and Black Bean Tacos are just a few of the recipes shared. The local supermarket serves as another venue to reach the community. Food tastings are prepared and offered by Stark and Smith using the same monthly recipe provided at the food pantry.

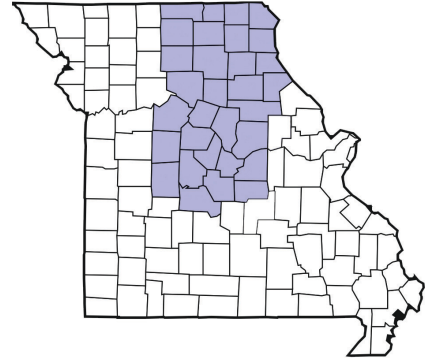
"One client stated that she didn't really cook before, but she makes our recipes and they always 'come out good' for her. In fact, when she first started making them, her husband asked if she had brought someone else over to cook!" said Stark.

Stark has a small office in the food pantry as part of an ongoing collaboration established by the University of Missouri Extension's Family Nutrition Education Program staff. She says that being on-site during distribution hours and providing a personal touch go a long way toward helping people be more confident in the kitchen and prepare healthy meals.

Setting

The eight food pantries included in the project represent the range of food pantries found in the service area of the Food Bank for Central and Northeast Missouri.

The service area is predominately rural with the exception of Columbia, Jefferson City, and a handful of small towns. The pantries vary in terms of their hours of operation and the number of people they serve. Of the food pantries included in the project, three distribute food once per month, two distribute food up to three times per month, and three distribute food up to four times per week. At the time of the project (between 2010 and 2012), the smaller food pantries were serving between 600 and 1,100 people per month. Two pantries were serving approximately 2,500 people per month. One pantry was serving approximately 4,300 people per month.



Food Bank for Central and Northeast Missouri region highlighted in purple .

WHAT IS HEALTHY FOOD?

Food pantries and local communities ultimately have to answer this question themselves. Our own position is that fruits and vegetables, beans, whole grains, lean proteins, and foods that are lower in sodium and sugar go a long way toward improving health. See our Healthy Food Drive tipsheet for more information at foodsecurity.missouri.edu.

Activities

The activities below encapsulate our best effort to organize and share the many ways that food pantries can be a source of healthier food and a hub for health improvement activities.

We include activities and approaches that were piloted in our partnering food pantries. We also include innovative activities that were already in place when we arrived and approaches gleaned from food pantries outside of our project.

Generally, the activities fall within the categories of **Food Availability and Access**, **Food Consumption**, and **Food Pantry Capacity and Development**. Effort was also made to explore options for enhancing **Food Acquisition and Distribution** at food pantries.

Food availability & access

These activities centered on increasing the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy foods in food pantries, as well as generally increasing food pantry customers' access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

Seek-out and Ask for Healthy

Healthful food donations can be hard to come by. However, food pantries can be successful at increasing the supply of healthy foods when directors, staff, volunteers, and partners make it a priority. In general, those pantries that were successful at acquiring healthy food excelled at the following:

Developing partnerships

A number of food pantries in our project had close ties with food retailers and manufacturers. These companies often donated large quantities of fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, and dairy products. In some cases, the companies also offered a discount to the pantries when they purchased in bulk.



Sweet potato transplants.

Communicating the need

When presenting in front of other organizations, being interviewed for the radio or newspaper, and coordinating with food drive sponsors, it is helpful to identify the specific types of foods desired in order to promote good health. For some pantries, this means focusing on healthy, non-perishable food items such as canned meats in water, low-sodium canned soups and vegetables, canned fruit in juice, and whole grain, unsweetened cereal. For others, this might include fresh fruits and vegetables. Social media and websites are other ways to get the word out along with including the pantry's most desired foods in all print publications.

Go local

The local food movement is alive and well in many communities. As a result, there are more opportunities to partner with local farmers, farmers' markets, gardeners, and outlets that handle local foods, especially those working with fresh fruits and vegetables. In practice, the partnerships can take a variety of forms:

Farmer Direct

In this example, farmers and food pantries work directly with each other to arrange food donations. In some cases, farmers make deliveries of unsold or unsalable produce that is culled from their sorting process. In other cases, food pantry staff or volunteers will pick up from the farm.




Left: Donation from a gardener. Right: Garden harvest.

TIPS FOR GROWERS AND FOOD PANTRIES

Information on Safely Harvesting and Handling Produce & Donating Produce from Farms and Gardens can be found at:

<http://foodsecurity.missouri.edu>.

Another option is to coordinate a **gleaning** event with willing farmers. Often, toward the end of the season, farmers will have crops in the field that are of good quality but not worth the time to harvest for market. This provides an opportunity for a group of volunteers to go to the farm, armed with packing boxes and plenty of fluids to keep hydrated, to harvest the remainder of the tomato or cantaloupe crop. The Society of St. Andrew  works across the country to organize gleaning activities. Additional opportunities exist to partner with your state's department of agriculture and vegetable growers association.

Farmers' Markets



Farmers' markets are ideal partners. They provide an aggregation point for donations from many farmers along with an opportunity to engage the wider community. Generally, the market manager will designate an area with a table and pop-up tent to serve as a **donation station**. This station can serve many purposes. Farmers can drop off their donations toward the end of the market day. This might include unsold produce or items brought from the farm specifically for donation. Customers can join in as well by donating purchased items or simply making a cash donation, which is then used to purchase produce for donation. At the close of market, the produce is transported to the food pantry's cold storage unit and made available at the next food distribution. Donation stations are most successful when they are advertised well and have good volunteer staffing.

Gardener Direct

In many towns, homes, schools, and communities gardeners donate a sizable portion of produce to local food pantries. To make this happen, it is important for food pantries to make their hours of operation and procedures for donating fresh produce known. Likewise, gardeners may need to time their harvests to coincide with the food pantry distribution schedule. Programs such as Plant A Row for the Hungry  are often able to make a bigger impact by involving the whole community in growing and donating produce for local agencies. Local Master Gardeners and 4H groups, along with high school Future Farmers of America (FFA) clubs make great partners.

Enhancing SNAP

Where there is a farmers' market, there is an opportunity to get healthy food into people's hands while also boosting farmers' incomes. Farmers' markets may be designated as approved SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as the food stamp program) retail sites through an application to the USDA . This enables people to use their SNAP benefits for a range of foods at the market, excluding prepared foods, cosmetics and other products. Generally, the market will develop and manage a token system to centralize the SNAP transactions and relieve individual farmers from the burden of obtaining card readers.

Some communities go a step farther and create incentive programs for SNAP customers. These programs essentially increase the buying power of SNAP benefits by matching the SNAP dollars spent by a customer with a predetermined amount of money raised through fundraisers, grants, or other means. Programs such as Double Up Food Bucks from Michigan  and Beans and Greens from Kansas City  provide examples from which to learn. Farmers' markets are required to inform the USDA of their incentive program during the SNAP application or reapplication process.

Grow your own

There are additional opportunities to increase fresh fruit and vegetable access for food pantries that have the space and capacity to host a community garden. In a similar vein, there is much that can be gained by providing resources for food pantry customers to either get started in food gardening or maintain or expand their current gardens.



Top: A local resident grows her own. Bottom: A farmers' market shares information about using SNAP benefits.

SHARE THE HARVEST



Growing for the common good

Greenview, Mo.

Judy Wimmer has grown the size and scope of Share the Harvest from small beginnings into a full-scale food pantry and resale shop in Greenview, Missouri. "In 2005, we started a youth center and added a small food pantry. At that time, we were working out of a small building with limited space and limited selection of fresh foods," said Wimmer. In 2009, they embarked on a capital campaign and with the help of Neighborhood Assistance Program tax credits, raised over \$300,000. In 2011, they completed construction of a new building with walk-in cooler and freezer units, a kitchen, and more space for the thrift store.

All along, Wimmer dreamed of a food pantry garden to supply the pantry with fresh vegetables. She partnered with Lake of the Ozarks Habitat for Humanity to start the first garden off-site. With the help of local volunteer Guy Winters and the Lake Area Community Garden Coalition, the group broke ground in 2010.

The garden grew, Shelia Morse became involved as a volunteer, and in the third year a raised bed garden was built right outside the pantry's front door. Then, with the help of a grant from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Wimmer added a 30-foot by 72-foot high tunnel in 2013. "The high tunnel helps us extend the season, grow more produce, and share more with the families we serve," said Wimmer. The combined gardens have produced thousands of pounds of tomatoes, green beans, peppers and a variety of other crops. Fruit trees and berry bushes have been recently added.

Speaking of Morse, who is now a paid employee, Wimmer says, "Sheila truly enjoys what she does, and is such a hard worker. I could have looked the world over and never found a more perfect person for that job. Even though she is paid now, it doesn't mean she is paid what she's worth!"

Never one to stop moving forward, Wimmer has plans to add another high tunnel and is researching funding opportunities to cover the costs and make it happen.

Starting a community garden

Community gardens can take many shapes and forms. They work best when a variety of people, partner agencies, and businesses are involved. We recommend starting with a core group of five to seven people willing to develop and organize the garden, recruit gardeners and volunteers, and prepare the site. Gardens take time to develop and may change over time. Ultimately, they can serve as a source of healthy food and build community at the same time. For more information, see the University of Missouri Extension Community Gardening Toolkit .

Growing gardeners: Seeds that Feed

A unique project, one that puts the power directly in people's hands, involves providing food gardening resources directly to food pantry customers during normal food pantry distribution hours. In our own work to date, we have concentrated on providing new garden seeds, reader-friendly educational materials, and gardening advice to all levels of gardeners. Additional project activities include helping new gardeners get started with a container garden, providing vegetable transplants to gardeners, and developing print and email newsletters with timely gardening information.



Seeds that Feed at a Missouri pantry.

Food consumption

What we eat has a direct impact on our health.

In fact, a number of chronic health conditions can be prevented or managed with diets that include fresh fruits and vegetables, beans, whole grains, lean proteins, and foods that are lower in sodium and sugar. Our staff dietician spent time getting to know the foods available at food pantries and the preferences of food pantry customers. The activities and approaches featured below focus on providing resources and education to help people have healthier diets and make the most of the foods offered at food pantries.

Make the Recipes Fit

Recipes are a great way to introduce new foods, cooking techniques, and shopping tips that contribute to better health. In our experience, the best recipes for food pantries are ones that:


- Feature foods available at the pantry;
- Contain inexpensive and easy-to-find ingredients;
- Provide a vegetable or fruit;
- Use healthier fats (olive or canola oil versus butter or heavy cream); and
- Are relatively simple to prepare.


To help groups
start their own

SEEDS THAT FEED

program, resources
including supplies
needed, cost
projections, and
templates for creating
seed labels
are available at:

<http://foodsecurity.missouri.edu>.

One approach is to use the USDA What's Cooking website  to generate recipes to accompany food distribution. This site features a recipe search tool based on ingredients, audience, cooking equipment, cost, and other criteria. Single recipes can be generated or whole cookbooks can be created. As a general rule, look for recipes that have been highly rated (three or more stars) and cost no more than \$1 per serving or \$5 per recipe. At the pantry, recipes can be placed near the food items or point of selection, in every bag or box, or arranged in a literature display with other relevant information.

Other websites and sources of recipes exist, too. We encourage you to stick to trusted sources. State and local Cooperative Extension  can be excellent resources. Favorite cookbooks and cooking shows can be another source, but be sure to evaluate the recipes based on the criteria above.

Show and Tell

In our experience, recipes are good but demonstrations are better. We explored two approaches for providing people with more hands-on experience with healthy food and meal preparation.

Food prep and recipe demonstrations

These activities involve demonstrating either food preparation techniques or the actual creation of a recipe. They take place during food distribution and are set up either in the flow of traffic or nearby. The **food prep demos** include a focus on a particular food (e.g., the many ways to prepare a sweet potato or using kohlrabi), or a focus on food handling and cooking methods (i.e., storing, washing, steaming, sautéing, etc.). On the other hand, **recipe demos** feature the creation of a particular recipe or combination of related recipes. In either case, it is important to allow people to taste the final product and walk away with inspiration and some printed materials in hand.

We discovered some tips of the trade during our time in the field:

Know your site – Not all sites are the same. Make sure there is an electrical outlet if you need it, access to a sink, refrigeration, a good space to set up, or anything else needed to make for a successful and safe demo. Be familiar with the way people move through the food pantry during distribution.

Prepare ahead of time – Gather and organize all of your materials including food, utensils, equipment, and handouts. Prepare foods and dishes ahead of time if possible.

Keep it safe – It is vital to use safe food handling practices from start to finish. Check with your local health department to see if local ordinances apply.

HEALTHY FOOD PANTRY COLLABORATIVE



Collaboration creates opportunity

Springfield, Mo.

For most food pantries, day-to-day work keeps them occupied. Receiving food donations, managing volunteers, and organizing distributions for hundreds of people is more than a full time job. However, for a group of Springfield food pantries, taking the time to meet together has yielded positive results.

The Healthy Food Pantry Collaborative is an ongoing effort to change the landscape of healthy food options and education at food pantries. The group is comprised of over 20 food pantries and agency partners who gather to find ways to improve access to fresh fruits and vegetables, and offer healthier choices at food pantries.

For Glenda Miller, a chronic care manager at Cox Health and member of the collaborative, the link between diet and health is clear. She counsels patients daily on ways to manage a host of chronic health conditions including heart disease and diabetes. "When I learned that some of my patients were using food pantries, I became interested in the types of food available there," said Miller.

Her research led her and a small team to think about ways to improve the overall quality of food offered at food pantries, especially for those who have dietary restrictions because of serious diagnoses.

The Collaborative launched a number of innovative strategies to meet the need. A Healthy Food Wish List was created for food drives and donors. A pilot Healthy Choices section offering lower sodium and higher fiber foods was established at one food pantry. Another pilot project, the Nutrition Ambassadors, was launched to train pantry volunteers about healthy food choices, who in turn help pantry clients select healthier foods. University of Missouri Extension has been providing nutrition education at various sites.

"Equally important is the chance for food pantries to get together as a group. They learn a lot from each other," said Miller. Because of the relationships formed, pantries are able to share resources such as when large shipments of perishable foods arrive that need to be moved quickly.

Initial funding for the collaborative was provided by the Missouri Foundation of Health. Looking forward, the group plans to expand current projects, find ways to offer clients more choice at food pantries, and involve other pantries in the southwest Missouri region.

Classes

Classes allow people to learn about healthy food and meal preparation in a classroom setting. They may be single classes or a series of sessions and are often taught by trained professionals. Classes provide a more in-depth learning experience and more time for sharing among class participants. However, they also require more commitment on the part of organizers and participants. Organizers will need to find an appropriate classroom location and market the class to ensure good enrollment. Participants may need to find transportation to the site outside of food distribution hours.



Participants in an MU Extension Cooking Matters class.

Engage the Experts

Thanks in large part to federal funding provided through SNAP, every state in the U.S. offers nutrition education to low-income audiences. In Missouri, the University of Missouri Extension Family Nutrition Education Program [\[link\]](#) offers programs on healthy food, physical activity, food safety, and food budgeting in every county of the state. Trained educators are able to offer one-time sessions or a series of classes depending on the circumstances. Programming is also provided to students of all grade levels in schools and afterschool centers. To find a contact in your state, go to the USDA State SNAP-Ed Contacts website [\[link\]](#).

Cooking Matters [\[link\]](#), a program of Share our Strength, offers hands-on cooking courses and a variety of educational tools to help families stretch their food budgets and cook healthy meals. Other opportunities may exist through local health departments, community colleges, universities, or culinary schools.

Food pantry capacity and development

In addition to starting programs and activities aimed at improving the nutritional quality of the foods consumed by food pantry customers, many food pantries are taking steps to develop their organizational capacity and presence in the community.

The following are some strategies worth considering.

Make it a Group Effort

There is much to be gained when a community comes together to address a need. Consider forming a **Wellness Team** to understand the pressing issues facing food pantry customers

and develop creative solutions. Team members may include food pantry customers, volunteers, and staff along with representatives from the local health department, Extension, businesses, colleges and universities, hospitals, community action, garden club, or other groups. With strong leadership and facilitation, the team will be able to identify local assets, develop a plan, and expand its reach over time. Start with brainstorming sessions and data gathering. Then move into actual hands-on projects and activities. Keep an eye out for others who could be involved.

It is also important to look for ways to sustain the group effort over time. Good leadership is key. Look for someone who can fit the duties into their current work, a retiree, or someone who has the time to give. It might make sense to seek grant funding to pay for someone's time or consider programs such as AmeriCorps VISTA  that place volunteers in communities to serve in a variety of roles.

Partner with a Passion

As with forming a Wellness Team, there is much to be gained by befriending and involving those individuals and agencies that offer programs and services in your community. As a means of reaching out, attend the meetings of other organizations, speak in front of groups, and let others know how they can be involved. Set up a schedule for other groups to come to the pantry to provide their information or classes. There is no need to create something from scratch if it already exists and is available. Many groups are looking for outreach or volunteer opportunities.

Go Digital

Are you on Facebook? Do you have a website? Are they up-to-date and functional? Creating a presence on the internet is relatively easy. Keeping up with your social media account or changes to your website is more challenging. Developing a digital strategy can help with determining which type of internet presence is best for your organization. It is important to understand the cost (in terms of time and money) of different options, the amount of skill needed to manage an account or site, and your audience.

Network with other Pantries

Those who operate food pantries are a creative bunch. Whether finding new ways to efficiently distribute food or partnering to offer a full range of services in the community, they seem to always be up to something new. However, often, food pantry directors, staff, and volunteers don't know what it is happening in food pantries nearby – but they'd like to learn! We found that those directors who did reach out to their fellow directors gained a great deal from the exchange. They picked up new operating tips, gained new contacts, learned about grant opportunities, and sometimes found used equipment at a bargain price. Our current project is exploring options to gather people on a regional or statewide basis, either virtually or in-person, or both. The goal is to identify common aspirations and needs, gather and share resources, and create opportunities for greater collaboration.



Food acquisition and distribution

Changing the way in which food is acquired and distributed at food pantries can promote better nutritional health and provide customers with a more dignified experience.

One example of interest from the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank is called CHOP or Choose Healthy Options Program [\[link\]](#). The program uses a points system to rank foods. Healthier foods receive more points. Less healthy foods receive fewer points. This system helps the food bank make choices about the types of food they bring in. Likewise, it allows partner agencies and food customers a chance to learn about and make healthier choices.

Examples from the West Michigan Food Bank [\[link\]](#) offer ways to increase client choice and move away from the standard food box or basket that is prepared without the customers' input. Examples include a swap table that allows customers to exchange products, a shopping list system that provides customers with a list of items to choose from, and pure client choice that enables clients to shop for and select their own foods as if they were in a shopping market.

Another innovative idea focused on diabetes management is Feeding America's Diabetes Initiative [\[link\]](#), a partnership between food banks and health care providers. This pilot project provides individuals with diabetes screening, education, health care services, and access to a food box containing whole grains, fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, and lean meat. The project is helping organizers learn about methods for structuring educational classes, the types of foods that are most beneficial to people with diabetes, and the ways in which the program helps people manage their health.

SEDALIA AREA FARMERS' MARKET



A farmers' market partner for good health

Sedalia, Mo.

"Everyone deserves access to fresh, local food at a reasonable price." That is the philosophy of Brenda Raetz and Beverly Rollings, market masters at the Sedalia Area Farmers Market.

This philosophy, plus their own personal experience of having health issues remedied by changes in diet, help drive their passion for the market.

Started in 2009, the market has grown to include a stable cadre of vendors and a loyal customer base. From the beginning, the market accepted Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. Funding from the USDA, administered by the Missouri Department of Agriculture, provided the card readers for swiping benefit cards.

Later in 2011, Raetz and Rollings initiated a SNAP matching program with a donation from Bothwell Regional Health Center. The matching program provides an additional \$10 per market day for people using SNAP at the market. Ongoing support for the program comes from Bothwell, local businesses, individuals, and churches. "It's a win-win for the whole community," says Rollings. "People are healthier. Our vendors benefit. It creates good will."

"The market is like a family reunion I get to go to twice a week," said Raetz. Numerous incentive programs including coupons, raffles, and a Friends of the Market program keep customers engaged and help improve sales for vendors. The market also coordinates donations of fresh produce from vendors to the Open Door Benevolent Ministries food pantry.

Raetz and Rollings note that part of the market's success comes from a group of committed volunteers and vendors. Long-term, the group envisions a permanent pavilion to house the market.

Other opportunities

The ideas discussed in this publication may be the tip of the iceberg. Some additional ideas that are gaining traction are described below.

Do something about food waste – In the U.S., approximately 30 to 40 percent of the food supply is wasted. There is tremendous opportunity to change this and feed more people. The U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency have issued a Food Waste Challenge  to reduce food loss and waste, recover wholesome food for human consumption, and recycle discards for other uses including animal feed, composting, and energy generation. Other local efforts are underway across the country.

Make policy – Policy is nothing more than a set of principles or statements used to guide decisions. Within food banks and food pantries, policies can inform decisions about food purchases, standards for donated foods, and how food is distributed. In addition, advocating for policies at the local, state, and national level can help improve the safety net for people struggling with hunger.

Help people access other sources of support – For struggling families, the support provided by food pantries is invaluable but it will not likely address all of their needs. By helping people sign up for federal programs such as SNAP and WIC, or accessing housing and utility assistance or job training programs, food pantries can help families address a broader set of needs and potentially reduce the demand for food pantry services.

Bring in help – New opportunities exist to enlist high school students, college students, and recent graduates in important community-based work through service learning programs. These programs generally place young people looking for professional experience with local agencies that need the help. Projects may range from providing direct service to clientele to developing ongoing educational programs. Check with your area school district, college, or university or learn more about the national service program Americorps VISTA.

Additional resources

Many of the tips and resources mentioned in this guide are available on the web. Go to the Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security website at <http://foodsecurity.missouri.edu/> to download some of our own additional resources.

Healthy Food Drives – for hosting a food drive with a focus on healthier food donations.

Donating Produce from Farms and Gardens – for tips on how food pantries and growers can work together to increase produce donations.

Safely Harvesting and Handling Produce – for tips on using safe harvesting and food handling practices when making donations of fresh produce to a food pantry.

Seeds that Feed – for tips on starting a seed distribution and gardening education program to help more food pantry customers grow their own.

Other resources mentioned in the guide can be found at the following web sites  :

Plant a Row for the Hungry

<http://www.gardenwriters.org/gwa.php?p=par/index.html>

Society of St. Andrew

http://www.endhunger.org/gleaning_network.htm

USDA - SNAP at Farmers Markets

• **General information & application**

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/ebt/learn-about-snap-benefits-farmers-markets>

• **How-To Guide**

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELPRDC5085298>

Double Up Food Bucks

<http://doubleupfoodbucks.org/>

Beans and Greens

<http://beansandgreens.org/>

Community Gardening Toolkit

(University of Missouri Extension)

<http://extension.missouri.edu/p/MP906>

USDA What's Cooking

<http://www.whatscooking.fns.usda.gov/>

Cooperative Extension System Offices

<http://www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension/index.html>

Family Nutrition Education Programs

(University of Missouri Extension)

<http://www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension/index.html>

SNAP-Ed Contacts (national)

<http://www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension/index.html>

Cooking Matters

<http://cookingmatters.org/>

AmeriCorps VISTA

<http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameri-corps/ameri-corps-vista>

Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank Choose Healthy Options Program (CHOP)

<https://www.pittsburghfoodbank.org/resources/nutrition/chop/>

West Michigan Food Bank “Choices of how to give food pantry clients choices” tipsheet

<http://www.feedingamerica-westmichigan.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Choices-of-how-to-give-food-pantry-clients-choices.pdf>

Feeding America Diabetes Initiative

<http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/news-and-updates/our-perspective/feeding-america-e2-80-99s-diabetes-initiative-helping-clients-manage-their-health.html>

USDA (with the Environmental Protection

Agency) Food Waste Challenge – <http://www.usda.gov/oce/foodwaste/>

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