

How to Start a Food Pantry

1. Identify Unmet Community Needs

Take a look at your community and answer these questions:

- Are there food pantries operating already?
- What services are they providing?
- What are their hours of operation?
- Do they have specific geographic boundaries?
- How much food do they give to a family requesting help?
- How many times in a month, quarter, year will they serve the same family?
- Have they ever had to close their doors because they ran out of food?
- Do the pantry staff or volunteers know of unmet needs in your community?

Things to look for:

- Are all food pantries in your community generally open at the same times? For instance, do all the pantries have Monday through Friday hours and all close at or before 5:00? If that is the case, what happens to people who may need food but work the same hours the pantries are open? What about people who may need food on the weekends?
- If the pantry restricts the number of times they will serve the same family, what happens when that family needs food but have exhausted the number of times they can get help from that pantry?
- Are the pantries you visited unable to meet increasing requests for food?

If you have identified an unmet need, move forward! However, you may be able to impact hunger in your community by joining forces with an existing pantry and helping them with volunteer workers, food drives and consistent financial support. Consider your options and what it is you really want to do.

2. Identify Community Resources

Starting and maintaining a dependable source of emergency food in your community takes work and partnerships with churches, service organizations, businesses, schools, community foundations and even your local United Way in addition to utilizing West Ohio Food Bank. Our member agencies tell us that the food bank provides 40% to 80% of the food they distribute, so they must find 20% to 60% in other resources.

- First, develop a simple presentation about what you want to do and why you want to do it. Show the research you've done with existing pantries to identify an unmet need. When you speak to groups or send letters, be sure it is from the heart, share stories about who is hungry and what each group you are talking to can do to help.
- If there is a ministerial alliance in your community, ask to speak at their next meeting to explain what you want to do to meet the needs you've identified. Be clear about what you are asking for (ie: can each church in the alliance adopt a month to collect food and/or money to help you?)

- Locate your local Jaycees, Kiwanis, Optimist or other types of services clubs and ask to speak at a meeting, request help with volunteers or financial support.
- Talk with your local schools, get the students involved by holding food drives or collecting change from the cafeteria for you.
- Identify the Human Resources Directors with local businesses, talk with them about what their company can do to help – volunteers, food drives, fund drives.
- If you have a community foundation, ask if they can help you with start up costs, like shelving, refrigerators, freezers, hand carts, etc.
- Talk with your local United Way, they may be able to help you identify other resources or provide ongoing resources themselves.

3. Starting Up

Location, location, location! Remember, some people who will need services will not be able to climb steps. Also remember that you and your volunteers will have to carry food from your trucks into the pantry.

Below are our storage guidelines and requirements, take these into consideration when deciding on the locations of your food pantry:

STRUCTURE

- The food storage facility should be temperature controlled, with adequate ventilation. Allowable temperature variance is 45 to 85 degrees.
- The structure should be secure, with locks in good working order and, if necessary, windows with security glass or grillwork.
- All walls and floors should be washable, in good repair and have non-toxic food service approved paint or sealer applied, with no cracked, chipped, scaling, peeling or torn areas.
- Food storage areas should be separate from interviewing areas.
- A pest control program should be performed regularly. Where evidence of infestation occurs, a commercial pest control company must be engaged.

DRY STORAGE

- All surfaces should be of a non-porous, washable material, and be washed with an USDA approved disinfectant at least quarterly, and as needed during the interim.
- No product can be stored directly on the floor. If supply exceeds shelving capacity, excess can be stored on pallets, but must be at least 12" from all walls.
- Thermometers must be present in all dry storage areas.
- Dry food storage should be of adequate size to allow for easy stock rotation and inventory.
- All non-food products must be stored separately from food products. At a minimum, all non-food products should be stored on lower shelves and never above food products.

REFRIGERATED & FROZEN STORAGE

- Refrigerators should maintain temperatures not exceeding 45 degrees. Freezers should maintain 0 degrees.
- Thermometers must be present in all refrigerators and freezers.

- All refrigerators and freezers should be defrosted and cleaned with an USDA approved disinfectant at least quarterly, and as needed in the interim.
- Refrigerators and freezers should be large enough to allow for easy stock rotation and inventory.

4. Your Food Distribution Policies

You should develop the guidelines or policies you will use to determine if a family is eligible for your food services. You will have to decide what information or verification you will require a person to provide. Or, you may decide that anyone who asks for food will be given food. It is up to you.

For instance, you may want the person to show a picture ID or proof of residency in your area. You may want them to show proof of their family size and income verification. You may want to ask why they need help and how long they will need the groceries you give them to last.

You need to decide on hours of operation and be consistent on days and times your pantry will be open to provide food services. Please consider evening or weekend hours to help low income working families.

Whatever you decide, be sure your policies and hours of operation are posted in the area where people will be going to ask for food so they know what you want from them. Also let other providers know when you will be open for business and what your service policies are, ie: The Welfare Department, Social Security Office, Community Action Program, United Way, etc.

5. Record Keeping

If you intend to apply for membership with West Ohio Food Bank, you will have to develop some method of keeping track of who you are serving, by name, address and family size (number of seniors 60+ adults and children living in the home.) We will require you to file monthly statistics with us that show the total number of families, seniors 60+ adults and children you served in the month. We can provide you with sample copies of record forms from other pantries, just ask!

6. Packing Groceries

Food pantries organize their shelves much the same way grocery stores do – so you can see all the product you have to choose from when packing groceries for people in need.

How much food do you give? First, during the interview process, you should've gotten an idea of how large the family is and how long they will need the food you give them to last. If possible, *bring the person with you to help pack their groceries*. They can tell you what their family will like and what they probably won't eat. You may be surprised at their selections, let's give them a *choice* sometimes people needing assistance do not have many choices. Remember, you are giving groceries according to *their* need and food preferences, not yours. At the very least, be sure you provide enough food for three days. The food you give should provide a breakfast, lunch and dinner meal for each person in the family in addition to snacks and beverages if available.

People who don't have enough food to feed themselves and their families, probably also need non food items like hand soap, shampoo, toothpaste, laundry supplies and paper products. Give these items in a separate bag whenever you have them available.

A typical bag packing menu can look like this:

Breakfast	Cereal, Toaster Pastry, Juice, Bread, Jelly, Granola Bars, Milk (powdered or fresh), Fruit
Lunch	Soup, Peanut Butter, Crackers, Tuna, Lunch Meat, Fruit, Bread, Chips, Cookies
Dinner	Spaghetti and Sauce, Stew and Rice, Tuna and Noodles, Macaroni and Cheese, Vegetables, Fruit, Cookies, Desert Items

Additional Items: Coffee, Tea, Snacks, Beverages, Fresh Fruit and Vegetables, Margarine, Condiments, Spices, Sugar, Flour, Treats, Soap and Paper Products and any other odds and ends you may have.

Most importantly, in packing groceries, be sure to check expiration dates and condition of the food – if you wouldn't serve it to your family, don't expect anyone else to either.

7. Commitment

If you haven't realized by now that running a food pantry and offering food services to people in need is a **big job**, think about the responsibility it carries:

Liability – Your church or organization will be liable for the food you distribute if someone should fall ill. That is why it is critical for you to be sure the food you give away is in date and wholesome.

Liability – If someone is injured on your property while there to ask for help, you are liable. That is why it is critical for you to be sure your location is easily accessible and free from hazards.

Dependability – People will come to depend on your services, so be consistent in what you offer and how often. Food Pantries are, more often than not, the first coping strategy people turn to after they have exhausted help from family and friends.

Resources – Be sure you have lined up enough help both in volunteers and food or money to keep you open. It does more harm than good to open for a short time, then close because it is too much work. Please be sure you are committed in mind, spirit and body to doing this kind of work. There are many rewards, many miracles, many smiles and many tears.

Good Luck and call if you have any questions – Emily Stimmel, Agency Relations Manager
419-222-7946 Mon-Thurs. 8am-4pm and Fridays 8am-11:30am.