



**RIVER BEND FOODBANK**

*Feeding the Hungry Since 1982*

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# **Making the Switch**

A Guide for Converting to a  
Client Choice Food Pantry

## The Traditional Pantry Model

While shopping for groceries, we often take for granted the choices we are able to make. With a wide variety of foods to choose from, we have control over our purchases. However, this is not a freedom that clients of most food pantries are able to enjoy. Rather, the food pantry clients of traditional pantries are restricted to obtaining pre-selected food items which, oftentimes, the client and his or her family neither wants nor can consume due to dietary restrictions or preparatory limitations. This method of distributing pre-chosen food to needy families is a direct result of diminishing resources and time constraints since the inception of food pantries in the 1980s. As pantries were forced to limit the amount of food distributed to clients, choosing items for them became necessary.

But today, we are discovering that this method of food pantry distribution results in clients and families receiving items that they neither need, want, nor can use. Many of these items are subsequently thrown away and wasted. A wide variety of other issues also stems from this food distribution method, including:

- Certain items may become overstocked as food is distributed through standardized boxes or because food is dispensed based on availability rather than nutritional value;
- Negative consequences result from both the environment and the operational costs of the food pantries as a result of goods being thrown away by the client;
- Food pantries exhaust valuable resources purchasing items that, if given a choice, a majority of clients may not want or need;
- Clients who visit the food pantries oftentimes have little flexibility in other areas of their lives, and feel further undignified at having their food chosen for them as well.

With so many issues surrounding this antiquated pantry model, it is evident that this model no longer fits the clients' lifestyles or preferences and leads to unnecessary wasting of food and monetary resources. Hence, new ways of distributing food to pantry clients must be explored. **Clients should have the luxury of choosing for themselves the food they will receive and consume, thus helping to prolong precious pantry resources.** Such a freedom is possible for food pantry clients through the **client choice pantry** model.

## The Client Choice Model

Offering client choice in your pantry is exactly what it sounds like, although product, staff, and volunteer availability still remain large limitations. The client choice model allows clients to participate in choosing for themselves which foods they will take home. Well-operated client choice pantries are conceptually similar to a grocery store: a full array of available goods is displayed and clients are permitted to browse and “shop” for what they want and need. In pantries with limited physical space, clients may be provided with a list of available food and they choose what items they want; pantry staff members or volunteers then assemble the clients’ food bags or boxes based on client selections. **While there are various ways to implement the client choice model, they all manifest one fundamental characteristic: freedom for clients in making their own food choices.** This model is already currently in use in many pantries. Provided below is actual testimony on client choice from several choice pantry clients and volunteers:

“I can’t believe the choices and amount of food.” “Wow, this felt like going to the supermarket.” “Everybody made me feel like it is OK to come to the pantry.” “I like picking my own food because I can plan meals while I am choosing.”

**-four clients**

“This is fun! This is much easier on my back!”

**volunteer.**

“I can’t pay my gas and electric bill and feed my kids. Without this pantry, I’d have to make a choice whether to keep my heat on or feed my family.”

**client**

## How Does Client Choice Benefit the Food Pantry?

Of utmost interest and importance to all food pantries are issues involving money. Money stocks the shelves with food. Money pays the employees and the bills. Simply, money keeps the pantry doors open and ensures food is getting to those in need. Hence, fiscally conscious food pantries are continually seeking ways to streamline whenever and wherever possible, especially during periods of high utility costs and low donations. **After all, a dollar saved is another dollar that can be put towards buying food.** With that said, traditional food pantries suffer from several financial disadvantages relative to client choice pantries.

First, traditional pantries, by providing pre-boxed goods, may indirectly be wasting food as the recipients throw away food items they cannot use, cannot prepare, or simply do not want. Distributing pre-chosen items to clients presumes that every family wants and can use each food item. As one family's preferences, needs, and preparation abilities will often differ dramatically from the next, so should the food going home with each one. Discarded food directly translates into wasted monetary resources for the food pantry as pantry-purchased goods end up in the trashcan. Additionally, **families who receive non-consumable food items during each visit are forced to rely more heavily on pantry services.** This can prove problematic for pantries that allow only one visit per month per client. During a time when so many people are going hungry, there are no good reasons why any food should go to waste. Fortunately, the client choice model addresses this very critical financial inefficiency of the traditional model. When clients have the ability to fill their own boxes, they will likely only choose those items that they know they can and will use, complementing what they already have at home. Naturally, this will result in significantly less product being discarded and leave more food options on the shelf for the next family to browse. Additionally, with the client choice model, the food pantry can easily monitor which food items are popular and which are not – simply by looking at what is left on the shelf – and base future purchase orders on that knowledge. In turn, money will be saved as rarely selected items are not purchased as frequently.

Second, in addition to having a financial upper hand, client choice pantries also benefit over traditional pantries with regards to staffing resources. In the traditional model, much of the staff time is utilized in careful preparation of pre-planned bags or boxes. Staff or volunteers may expend hours preparing many identical parcels. In a client choice pantry setting, on the other hand, this staff time could be spent in other ways such as keeping the pantry open later in the evenings or during the weekend. Workers otherwise busy preparing boxes in a traditional setting can have the opportunity in a client choice setting to interact more frequently with the clients, thus enhancing the overall client experience and client morale.

## But Does My Pantry Have the Space?

Every traditional pantry, from a church basement to large supply closet in the stock room, has enough room to convert to the client choice model. Once you learn how this model is designed to fit with your clients' needs, you will better understand how your on-hand grocery inventory will reduce in size, allowing for a smaller, more organized pantry. The client choice model can also increase the number of food and non-food items you are able to offer with less money being spent on unwanted food items.

Please read on and discover the many benefits of making the switch to the client choice model. And remember: **any space can be made to work!**

## How Does Client Choice Benefit the Client?

Most importantly, providing food pantry recipients with the liberty to make their own food choices helps to establish an atmosphere of dignity. Clients often have very few choices in other areas of their life, and the traditional food pantry model may actually serve as an additional knock to the clients' self esteem. While traditional pantry clients may present a demeanor of gratitude for the service, you can rest assured that they are not proud of having a box of pre-selected food handed to them. Add to this the public stigma of relying on food pantries in the first place, and it becomes apparent that **providing a single point of flexibility (in this case, personal food choice) will have a significantly positive impact on the client's confidence level.**

Client choice also ensures that recipients with special dietary needs, such as diabetes, are not receiving food that cannot be consumed. It also prevents the possibility of distributing highly perishable foods to households unequipped with functional stoves or refrigerators. Further, some clients may not know how to cook or bake with certain items such as flour.

For these primary reasons, traditional food pantries which convert to the client choice model can have a much greater impact on the lives of their clients.

## Implementing the Client Choice Model in Your Pantry

Client choice enables clients to choose for themselves the food items they will take home. There is a wide variety of strategies for implementing a client choice model in your food pantry which employ different methods of client-food interaction. Some may fit your pantry arrangement, resources, and staff better than others. Review the methods, discuss an implementation plan with your pantry, and, if necessary, adjust the details of the strategy to suit your needs. **Regardless of how you implement the client choice model, take comfort knowing that in doing so you will maximize both the resources of your pantry and the benefits to your clients and their families!**

## The Client Choice Model Sounds Great, But First Some Questions...

The conversion from a traditional pantry setting to client choice will probably not occur instantaneously; making the decision to convert is only the first step. Actually doing so will require some forethought and planning, and many questions will inevitably arise in regards to the multiple facets of a client choice pantry operation. On the pages to follow, several “frequently asked questions” that food pantries typically raise when converting will be addressed. You are encouraged to carefully consider the questions and answers and discuss them with your staff and volunteers while planning the client choice model implementation process.

### **1) Our pantry is very small; how do we physically make client choice work?**

Often the biggest concern of traditional pantries considering conversion is that there is not enough space to implement and operate a client choice pantry efficiently. But with a little planning, all pantry layouts can be converted to client choice. For some pantries, conversion may require simple adjustment of the arrangement of food on the shelves into an order suitable for client “shoppers.” For others, it may prove more efficient to convert some storage space to shelving units, thus increasing the total “browsable” area and enabling more clients to “shop” at a single time. **Regardless of the layout in your pantry, client choice can be made to work!** Below are some things to keep in mind when planning for the physical conversion:

- If you are having trouble envisioning how all food items can be displayed at once, think about using stackable or expandable shelving units to maximize the use of space between the floor and the ceiling.
- If your pantry has a large, bulky counter that is used for distributing pre-made food boxes and filling out paperwork, consider downsizing it and putting shelves in the acquired space.
- If a large percentage of your pantry is used for storage, consider converting some of that to aisles with shelves. As non-perishable items can sit on a shelf for a long time before expiring, you can simultaneously utilize the shelves to display food to clients and as storage!
- If you are concerned about how to store future bulk food purchases if you convert storage space to client browsing space, remember that the client choice model will enable your pantry to efficiently track which items are more popular among clients, as opposed to the traditional box method where every client received the same items. You can use this information when placing future orders, thus reducing the space occupied by certain bulk foods that you may discover your patrons do not prefer when they are given a choice.

**Remember that client choice can be made to work anywhere, and it doesn’t need to cost much. It may just require a little staff and volunteer creativity. The following pictures illustrate one food pantry was able to implement and operate the client choice model in a tiny 10ft x 15ft space!**

## **A client choice pantry implemented in the smallest of small spaces: All you need is a closet!**



As shown, the small pantry is lined with shelving units which are stocked in an organized fashion with canned goods, commodities, and many other grocery items. Foods requiring refrigeration (meats, some breads and produce, etc.) are kept in a refrigerator or freezer positioned in the middle of the floor. A third of the space located in the front of the pantry is reserved for intake purposes.

Although space is the most common concern for traditional pantries converting to client choice, it is a concern that can be overcome in any circumstance with a little planning!

### **2) Will our pantry hours of operation need to change?**

Many food pantries often have limited or no paid staff, relying heavily or entirely on volunteers to operate efficiently and effectively. Availability of volunteers often dictates if a pantry has evening or weekend hours and influences the number of clients served during operation. As a wide variety of senior citizens, working parents, and entire families graciously devote their time to volunteer, food pantries similarly should provide a variety of operational hours to accommodate volunteer needs and preferences.

When a pantry converts to client choice, the hours that the staff and volunteers would have spent preparing pre-made boxes for distribution can be translated to volunteer time slots that occur later

in the evening or on the weekend. Take, for example, a traditional pantry open from 8am until 4 p.m., Monday through Thursday:

The traditional pantry's "maximum output" is achieved with two morning volunteers and two afternoon volunteers, each working a 4-hour shift to prepare boxes (a total of 16 volunteer hours). An additional three volunteers each shift distribute the boxes to clients. If this traditional pantry were to convert to the client choice model, the four volunteers preparing boxes would no longer be required. The six box-distributing volunteer slots would be converted to client-aiding slots and those volunteers would accompany the clients in browsing the shelves or choosing healthy food items. The 16 volunteer hours "saved" by eliminating the need to pre-make boxes could be used to offer an additional 4-hour client-aiding volunteer slot in both the morning and afternoon, utilizing 8 of the 16 volunteer hours, and four 2-hour client-aiding slots in the evening, utilizing the other 8 hours. This is shown in the diagram below.

	Volunteer Slots Available From 8am – 12pm	Volunteer Slots Available From 12pm – 4pm	Volunteer Slots Available From 4pm – 6pm	Total volunteer hours per day
<b>In a Traditional Pantry</b>	2 volunteers to pre-make boxes 3 volunteers to distribute boxes (20 volunteer hours)	2 volunteers to pre-make boxes 3 volunteers to distribute boxes (20 volunteer hours)	None	20+20 = <b>40</b>
<b>In a Client Choice Pantry</b>	4 volunteers to aid clients (16 volunteer hours)	4 volunteers to aid clients (16 volunteer hours)	4 volunteers to aid clients (8 volunteer hours)	20+20 = <b>40</b>

As this example illustrates, a food pantry making the conversion to client choice could potentially increase the number of volunteers that directly interact with the clients in addition to keeping the pantry doors open for two additional hours each evening. If a pantry can stay open even an hour later on a single evening, or perhaps for a couple of hours on a Saturday or Sunday, it can help more clients obtain the food they need. After all, **hunger does not cease at the end of a typical workday or workweek.**

Conversion to client choice can also impact hours of operation more indirectly. Although some individuals seeking volunteer activities are enthusiastic about any volunteer opportunity, one would be deluded to believe that all such individuals would be excited by the prospect of filling identical boxes for hours on end. Hence, if the volunteer hours required by this mundane responsibility were converted to hours spent interacting with clients, pantries may be able to attract a greater number of interested

volunteers, likely resulting in a greater breadth of time availability. Simply, the client choice model could offer more attractive volunteer opportunities to more potential volunteers, leading to more help during longer hours on a greater number of days.

### 3) Will the role of the volunteer change?

Yes, the role of the volunteer will change upon making the conversion to the client choice model. In a client choice setting, regardless of which method your pantry implements, the “box preparer” and “box distributor” roles will no longer be necessary. The volunteers that provide these traditional pantry functions will see a dramatic increase in their interaction with clients as their role evolves to “client-aiding” roles in the client choice setting.

When clients walk through the choice pantry door, the volunteers will no longer hand them a box and wish them well. Rather, each client or family will benefit from the volunteer’s support, guidance, and aid from a volunteer who will be available during the client’s entire “shopping” experience. The volunteer may have multiple responsibilities, including supplying information from the nutrition labels, aiding the client in making sound budgetary decisions, providing recommendations on which food items to select, educating the client on choosing healthy foods, and carrying the basket or pushing the cart. Of course, the clients may wish to enjoy browsing and shopping on their own; volunteers can then lend a smile, thus creating a friendly atmosphere. Remember that one of the greatest client benefits of this model is the emotional benefit: when volunteers help establish the sense that the client is actually shopping rather than receiving a handout, it eases the undignified feeling and stigma which often shroud a pantry visit.

Volunteers that go from preparing boxes to interacting with and aiding the client in a multitude of ways may require some training in order to effectively make the switch. Such training can be initiated by providing each volunteer with all the necessary information, including strategies for helping clients plan healthier meals and any details specific to your pantry regarding the physical layout and/or client choice implementation plan.

**Overall, the role of the volunteer in your client choice pantry will likely evolve from having little or no interaction at all with the client to being a fully interactive, conversational, and supportive role.** The increase in interaction will be appreciated by both the volunteers and clients, enhancing the overall pantry experience.

### 4) How long will it take to process clients?

In a traditional pantry, a client arrives, fills out any necessary paperwork, and is handed a pre-prepared box of food. The interaction between the client and volunteers and/or staff is minimal and brief, limited mainly to the physical passing of the food parcel to the client. Typically, the client could be in and out in a matter of minutes.

Conversely, an individual visiting a client choice pantry will find his or herself there for a longer period of time, due to the nature of the “shopping experience.” This time will vary from pantry to pantry and will depend on factors such as the physical size of the pantry, the amount of grocery inventory on the shelves, and the maximum number of clients that can be “browsing” the aisles at any given time. Also, as one might take one’s time at the grocery store deliberating over one food item or the next, each pantry client will likely do the same. As a result, the time it takes one client to complete his or her “shopping trip” may differ vastly from another client, depending on factors such as family size, time spent comparing and selecting each item, and the client’s age and physical mobility.

With this in mind, it may at first be difficult to predict how many individuals your choice pantry will be able to process per hour or day. If your first impression is that fewer total clients will be processed, keep in mind the significant amount of volunteer and staff time saved by converting all pantry workers to “client-aiding” roles which may then be used to extend pantry hours in the evenings or on the weekend.

Regardless of the number of clients served hourly, daily, or monthly, the emotional and social benefits that the clients reap from the “grocery store” environment are of utmost interest. Client feelings of dignity can promote general well being, something that has personal impact beyond just putting food on the dinner table each night.

### **5) We need more volunteers! Where can we find them?**

During peak holiday seasons, many food pantries will have more volunteers offer their services than there is physical space to accommodate them all. Since many volunteers during these periods are quite flexible in the times or days they work, extending pantry hours into the evenings or on weekends is often a viable option. Volunteers offering seasonal service are commonly employed full-time during the week. Take advantage of this fact and supply them with volunteer slots in the evenings and weekends!

Unfortunately though, there is not a waiting list of pantry volunteers for much of the year, and since hunger knows no season, a volunteer shortage at any time can prove problematic and crippling to pantry operations. **Luckily, a client choice pantry maintains a significant advantage over a traditional pantry in this regard by offering volunteer opportunities that are likely to be more personally rewarding and enjoyable for the volunteer.** If an individual is asked to repetitively pack boxes for hours on end, the volunteer will probably not say “no,” but chances are more likely that he or she will offer his or her volunteer services elsewhere next time. By offering all pantry volunteers the opportunity to meet, greet, interact with, and support the clients, you will likely notice an increase in volunteer morale and enthusiasm.

There may be times, however, that even client choice pantries experience volunteer deficits. It is therefore valuable to know where to seek volunteers. Below is a list – by no means comprehensive

– of organizations and locations that make good starting points for locating volunteers for your client choice pantry:

- Large organizations and businesses in your area: Some organizations encourage employees to volunteer by paying them for any time they miss while volunteering.
- Schools, colleges, and other educational institutions: Many students are involved in extracurricular community service activities and are always seeking volunteer opportunities for their groups. Some schools have community service requirements for students and can offer large pools of possible volunteers.
- Involvement groups: By contacting your local Boy Scout, Girl Scout, or 4-H group, you may find some excellent and eager volunteers!
- Your clients: Occasionally, clients are moved to volunteer after receiving food from the pantry and realizing the immense devotion of the volunteers who assisted the clients in obtaining such a basic necessity.

## **6) Will the nutritional quality of meals be affected if they choose their own food?**

It is undeniable some clients of your new client choice pantry have grown accustomed to receiving pre-made boxes. These clients, while enjoying the freedom to choose their own food, may not know how to make health-conscious decisions. Many low-income individuals who have shopped at a real grocery store are aware of what foods will get them the most “bang for the buck.” When browsing the food pantry shelves, the clients may automatically reach for less healthy, lower-priced food items simply out of habit, not realizing that they can now choose a variety of healthier foods without financial restriction. Some clients may not know how to compare nutritional value of different foods and select only the items with which they are familiar. Therefore, it may be uncommon at first to see a pantry client choosing highly nutritious foods. This is where the client-aiding volunteers come in.

**The client choice volunteer, entrusted with the responsibility of interacting with the clients and making their pantry experience as pleasurable as possible, can be utilized to encourage clients to select healthy items.** While accompanying the clients through the pantry aisles, volunteers can help clients read the nutrition labels while educating them on food nutrition basics and providing suggestions for well-rounded meal planning. By making recommendations on which foods to select, volunteers encourage clients to explore new horizons in taste by trying new and unusual foods. With the role of pantry staff and volunteers evolving, it may be beneficial to provide volunteers with training on nutritional issues since much nutritional information is “acquired knowledge” and volunteers may have different backgrounds and different definitions of “healthy” and “healthier option.” Consequently, it may be useful to employ the services of a dietician or other health

specialist to ensure all volunteers are on the same page in terms of providing sound nutritional advice to the clients.

Overall, if the volunteers are utilized correctly, the nutritional quality of clients' food choices and subsequent meals will not decrease upon conversion to client choice; rather, it will actually increase as volunteers interactively educate clients on making healthy food choices. When a client is able to shop at a regular grocery store, he or she will likely remember the nutrition information obtained from the pantry volunteers and make healthier food choices. Thus, the client choice pantry has the ability to actually improve the lives of clients for years to come.

## **7) How can our client choice pantry prevent giving away food too quickly?**

When pantry staff considers making the switch to client choice, controlling the rate of food distribution is of utmost concern. Initially, it may seem that it will be more difficult to gauge this. However, the client choice model has little or no effect at all on the amount of food going out. What this model will affect is the type of food going out, as clients have the freedom to make decisions on their own. Why will there be no effect on the amount of food going out? For one, your pantry will likely continue to serve the same number of clients each month. Also, the amount of food coming in from different donations and purchases should maintain similar levels. Thus, by simply allotting the same amount of food to each client as you did in the traditional pantry, you can prevent food from being distributed too quickly. The allotments now being in terms of number of cans of vegetables/fruit, number of boxed pasta etc. to each person depending on size of household, they will be adequately provided with food.

## 8) How can our client choice pantry accommodate the needs of senior citizens?

According to pantry reports, over 30% of clients are seniors. This population is likely to rise, as recent counts suggest that seniors will soon constitute the single largest demographic in the nation. This is of particular interest to pantries converting to client choice since senior citizens may have special dietary and physical needs and/or limitations that need to be addressed. This is where the client-aiding volunteer or staff member will prove truly vital. Volunteers can help senior clients read labels, assist in selecting foods, carry the basket or push the cart, and even do the physical shopping for the client. Each client may have different needs that the volunteers should be able to accommodate.

While it may be difficult to plan ahead for all types of senior needs or disabilities, there are several things that you may want to consider while strategizing the implementation of client choice:

- Placement of items on the shelves: If your pantry uses tall shelving units to maximize space, be sure to have a volunteer that can reach all shelves aiding the clients who may be unable to reach as high. Do the same for items placed on shelves near the floor as some clients may be unable to bend down far enough.
- Baskets and/or carts: While your pantry is strongly encouraged to utilize at least one or the other, make sure to have physically-able volunteers in the event that certain clients are unable to either hold a basket or push a cart on their own.
- Reading, browsing, and making food selections: Visually impaired clients will have difficulty knowing what foods are available to them and a hard time reading labels in order to compare nutrition facts or product details. Volunteers and staff should realize that "patience is a virtue" in these cases, as it may be necessary to tell the client about every food option, read labels, and make very important decisions for the client, such as identifying certain food items that contain or do not contain certain ingredients.
- The physical layout of the aisles and shelves: Some clients may arrive at the pantry using walkers, canes, or wheelchairs. For these clients to "shop" successfully (or simply accompany the volunteer as the volunteer pushes and loads the cart or basket), you may wish to consider the width of each aisle or distance between shelves so as to accommodate all types of mobility-aiding equipment.
- Products for seniors: With so many seniors frequenting the pantries, your client choice pantry may wish to purchase or seek personal items mostly relevant to senior citizen living. Some examples may include denture cleansers, certain over-the-counter medications or supplements, and

various hygiene products. While some of these personal items tend to be more expensive yet extremely important, you may wish to consider offering them free-of-charge or at reduced “point” costs if and whenever possible. Also, senior citizens may prefer to feed their pets before themselves, and your pantry might consider this while placing bulk orders.

**Overall, senior citizens constitute an increasing percentage of pantry clientele. It is thus important that volunteers and staff members be prepared to accommodate any and all special needs.** The volunteers who aid seniors have an opportunity to make a real impact on seniors' lives!

## **So In Conclusion...**

### **Can choice pantries place restrictions on certain items?**

Yes, and in order to ensure that all clients have access to a variety of foods, the pantry should decide what restrictions to place on which items. Some pantries allow only a certain number of any particular food item, and other pantries put up signs to indicate that such restrictions are in place. For example, if a pantry is running low on canned corn, a sign can indicate that clients are currently limited to only one can of corn. Volunteers should be updated on restrictions.

### **Can choice pantries place incentives on other items?**

Yes; certain items, such as fresh produce, have a short shelf life and must be taken quickly. Therefore, many pantries offer these items as a free choice. Also, pantries may wish to promote healthy foods such as whole grains or items that are difficult to move by allowing free choice.

### **Why is nutrition education important?**

Obesity and associated chronic diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease, are growing epidemics in the United States. These diseases are costly to individuals and society. Although there are many causes, lifestyle factors such as poor diet and exercise are key contributors. Nutrition education can help individuals live healthier and more productive lives.

### **How many choices should be allowed per food group?**

The pantry determines how many choices are allowed per food group. Decisions are usually based on the pantry's current inventory. Family size should also be taken into consideration when determining how many choices per food group.

### **How should the pantry be arranged?**

The choice pantry should be arranged so that food items are shelved according to the food groups. The shelves should be color coded using signs or stickers. If possible, food groups should be grouped together. For example, all vegetables should be in one part of the pantry and all foods in the meat and bean group should be in another.

### **How do clients choose?**

Client-aiding volunteers can guide the clients through the pantry using a value selection card. The value selection cards are distributed according to family size and illustrate how many choices per color-coded food group each client receives. Clients choose foods independently but shopping assistants have the opportunity to offer nutritional advice if they are comfortable. For more information contact Diane at the River Bend Foodbank 309-764-7434 ext. 3.