On Your Way
to Offering Client Choice
A Hand Book for Food Pantries

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Handbook's Purpose:

As the persons who come to food pantries change, so have the ways to serve them. One of these changes is the client choice food pantries. Many food banks are joining in this national trend to improve service at their member agency food pantries.

This manual was developed to give you and your food pantry workers information on how to set-up and operate a client choice food pantry. The goal of the Client Choice Initiative is to provide food pantries with resources and assistance to operate as client choice.

Therefore, this handbook contains information on:

- What is Client Choice
- Why should you operate your pantry as Client Choice
- Finding the Client Choice model that will work for your pantry
- What you will need to operate as Client Choice
- Frequently asked questions about Client Choice
- Client Choice resources

We all care about the persons who come to our pantries because they need food. Client Choice is a way to show that we care enough to serve them in a dignified and personal manner.

Section 1:
Introduction to Client Choice

What is a Client Choice Pantry?

A client choice pantry allows clients to select their food instead of receiving a pre-packed or standard bag of groceries. They are not given items they have already, do not like, or cannot eat for health or personal reasons.

Why give clients a choice?

Imagine your family is in need of food. Your kitchen has some items but not enough to make meals for the next few days. You need to visit a food pantry. When you go to the food pantry, you are handed a pre-packed or standard bag with food you already have at home. There are also some items your family does not like. You're not sure what to do with the food. If you had been able to choose the foods you need and like, your family could have enjoyed a well-rounded, nutritious meal.

Pantry coordinators say that client choice:

- Upholds the dignity of clients
- Meets clients' health needs
- Makes clients feel like they are food shopping
- Limits food waste - customers take food they will use and leave the rest for others
- Helps pantry workers get to know clients
- Saves money for the pantry
- Makes ordering easier - pantries know what popular food to stock

Both pantry workers and clients have positive things to say about client choice. Here are some quotes:

"This is not our food to choose. It's the clients' food. What's good for one person may not be good for another. Client choice works for everyone."

- Pantry coordinator

"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."

- Pantry client

"This is fun! This is much easier on my back!"

- Pantry worker

Section 2:
Which Client Choice Model Will Work for Your Pantry?

There are many ways to set up a client choice pantry. But how can you decide which set up is right for your pantry?

Many things may affect your decision about how to operate as client choice. They include:

- Equipment needs
- Physical space
- Workers

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The Table of Client Choice Models on page 6 gives you an overview of the different options. For more details on each model, please read the descriptions that follow the tables.

Setting up a client choice pantry is a bit like putting together a puzzle: all the pieces fit together, but you have to find the right way! Take some time to review the client choice models. Talk it over with your workers. Point out that they won't have to pre-pack food bags, an advantage for every client choice model. Decide together which model might be best for your pantry, you can also choose to use a combination of the models. Any space can be made to work as client choice! The models shown can be modified to fit your pantry, or you can come up with a different way to bring client choice into your pantry.

Model	Description	Equipment	Space	Advantages	Disadvantages
Supermarket	Food is set up by food groups inside the pantry. Clients choose their food as they walk through the pantry. Workers may help guide clients through their choices or check them out when they have finished shopping.	Necessary • Shelving Optional • Refrigerators and freezers with clear glass doors to view products • Grocery carts • Check-out table	A space large enough to display food on shelves. There needs to be enough room for clients to walk through safely.	Pantry workers have more one-on-one time with clients enriching their volunteer experience. This also allows clients to ask workers specific questions. Store room and place where clients choose food are the same. Many clients can be served at one time. In addition, this is the most client friendly model as it models a grocery store.	Planning in advance is required to stock foods. May need additional shelving, tables or equipment.
Table	Food can be set out on tables by food groups. Clients walk by each table to choose and pack their food.	Necessary • Tables Optional • Carts to move food	A space large enough to set up tables with room to walk in between the tables.	Many clients can be served at one time. Clients can handle food like they would in a grocery store.	Workers need to set up and break down tables. Lifting food onto tables may be difficult for some workers.
Window	Clients stand outside the pantry area but can see the food in the pantry. Clients choose by pointing to the food they want	Necessary • Shelving visible to clients Optional • Half door with counter at entry to pantry	Will work in any space where clients can see the food.	Very small space needed to offer client choice.	Can only serve a small number of clients at one time.
Inventory List	A list of food in stock is posted or given to clients. Clients choose their food from the list. Workers then assemble the clients' food bags.	Necessary • Paper or board to list food in stock Optional • Clipboards to hold paper lists • Copy machine or computer printer	Will work in any space. Needs only enough space to store food and have intake area	Very small space needed to offer client choice. Clients can choose food for themselves without leaving their seat in the intake area.	Hard for clients with low reading level or English as a 2nd language. Need to update food list as inventory changes.

Supermarket Model

Description

Food is set up on shelves by food groups. Clients walk through the space and take food off shelves according to pantry guidelines. The food store room and the place where clients choose their food can be in the same location. Workers do not need to move the food items on days when clients come in. The whole pantry's stock is open for clients. The space needs to be large enough to display foods and allow clients to walk through. This model allows clients to handle food and look at the labels just as if they were shopping in a store. Pantry space will determine how many clients can shop at a time. This model is the most client-friendly, as it is like a grocery store.

Four easy steps to making it work

1. Organize food on pantry shelves by food groups.
2. When client signs in, the worker tells them how many pounds they may get based on family size.
3. Clients walk through the pantry alone or a worker can walk them through the process.
4. Like in a supermarket, clients can "check-out" and pack their food in a bag or box with the help of a pantry worker. Pantry workers also check to see if client has taken the amount of food that they are allowed based on their family size.

Equipment needs

Your pantry needs enough shelving space to display the food available in the pantry. A refrigerator or freezer with clear glass to view products is helpful for this model. If this type of equipment is not available, a list of available refrigerated and frozen foods can be posted for clients to choose from. Grocery carts and a table for "check-out" would also be helpful, but not necessary.

Worker tips:

- It is important to have workers available before the pantry opens to ensure the pantry is organized and food is stocked on shelves. Workers may need to re-stock and straighten shelves during pantry hours.
- If a worker guides clients through the pantry, this offers a chance to talk about the types of food the client chooses. This may lead to the worker and the client discussing client needs, how to choose nutritious food or how to prepare unfamiliar food.

Table Model

Description

Food is set up on tables by food groups. Clients walk by each table to choose and pack their food. The pantry needs enough room for clients to walk by each table. Pantry workers can stand by the food tables to guide clients and answer questions about the food. This model can serve many clients at one time. This model allows clients to physically handle food as they would do if they were shopping for food.

Three easy steps to making it work

1. Organize food on tables by food groups.
2. When clients sign in, the worker tells them how many pounds they may get based on family size.
3. Clients walk by the tables choosing and packing their food.

Equipment needs

Your pantry needs enough tables to display the available food. Arranging tables in a U-shape can save space.

Worker tips

- Workers may be needed before, during and after open pantry hours to set up, supervise and take down tables.
- It is helpful if the store room and the room displaying the food on tables are close together. If not, dollies or carts are helpful (but not required) to transport the food items.
- Work in pairs to lift heavy cases or containers of food onto tables.
- Workers can accompany clients or be by each display table to help if needed.

Window Model

Description

Clients choose the type of food they want by pointing to the food on the shelf. Pantry workers then pack food bags according to the clients' choices and family size. This model helps offer client choice when the pantry has limited space. One special consideration is that the window model can only serve a small number of clients at one time.

Four easy steps to making it work

1. Organize food on shelves by food group.
2. When clients sign in, the worker tells them how many pounds they may get based on family size.
3. Clients choose food by pointing to the items they want.
4. The worker picks the food items off the shelf and packs the food into a bag or box.

Equipment needs

Your pantry needs shelving set up so clients can see the food items through a window or a half-door.

Worker tips

- It is important to have workers available before the pantry opens to ensure the pantry is organized and the food is stocked on shelves.
- If clients do not speak or read English, the pantry might need a translator or food pictures to help with the process.

Inventory List Model

Description

A list of food available is posted or given to clients. Clients choose their food from the list. Pantry workers then assemble the client's food bags. This model is helpful for clients who have trouble moving around – they are able to choose foods without having to leave their seats.

Three easy steps to making it work

1. When clients sign in, the worker tells them how many pounds they may get based on family size. The worker also shows the clients the list of food available, which can be on a piece of paper or displayed on a white or chalk board.
2. Clients write on a piece of paper or tell a worker their food choices.
3. The worker fills a bag(s)/box with the client's food.

Equipment needs

Your pantry needs materials to make a list of foods in stock. You can use paper, pens/pencils, and clip boards for creating a paper food list. A copy machine or computer printer is helpful to make copies of the paper list for clients. Or you can post the food list on a white dry erase board or a chalk board. Either dry erase markers or chalk is needed if posting the food list on one of these types of boards.

Worker tips

- Update food list as inventory changes.
- Use waiting time to share nutrition handouts, recipes, and other menu ideas with the client.
- If clients do not speak or read English, the pantry might need a translator or food pictures to help with the process.

Section 3:
Making it Work

Frequently Asked Questions about Client Choice Pantries

Food pantries new to client choice have many questions. Here are nine common questions. Each question has a response based on the experiences of client choice pantries.

1. How will we know what food to stock?

With client choice, popular food moves faster. After a few months, you will see how to stock your food, how often to order, and how much to order. Before making the switch to client choice, you can plan ahead by doing the following:

Stock more of the popular food.

- What food do your clients often ask for?
- Do you run out of some food before others?

Stock less of the unpopular food.

- What food do you receive back in food drives?
- What food do you find in trash containers outside the pantry?
- What food do you have problems giving out?

TIPS:

Make food drives count! If you take part in food drives, encourage people to donate

specific foods that are popular with your clients.

Change the foods you offer clients from time to time. In the meat and nonmeat protein group, offer salmon, ground beef, and venison at one time; and tuna, ground turkey, and peanut butter at another time. Change is good!

2. ***Won't our pantry run out of food if we have client choice?***

Client choice does not mean clients can take any amount of food they want. Pantries have guidelines for how much food clients can take according to household size.

> **Remember:** If your pantry is already providing a 3-day package of food, you won't see any difference in the total amount of food you give out. You may see one big difference: quick turnover of the popular food and more leftovers of unpopular food. Client choice may keep more food on your shelves! Since you will be giving your clients the food they want, they may need to visit your pantry less often.

3. ***What if we don't have enough food to meet the Food Pyramid Choice guidelines?***

Ideally, try to offer a choice in each of the 5 food groups: Grains, Vegetables, Fruits, Dairy, and Proteins. This may change the food you order, as you may want to increase the variety of items in some food groups. For example, dairy items are often limited in variety, and some clients may not choose non-fat dry milk.

4. ***How can we move unpopular food or items that may spoil quickly, such as ripe fresh fruit and vegetables?***

Try offering these items to your clients, let them take what they need. Being generous with extra servings can help move these items quickly. Contact your local cooperative extension representative for help in marketing some of these foods to your clients through cooking demonstrations, food tastings and recipe handouts. A food pantry in Ohio moved all of their USDA figs with the help of their cooperative extension!

5. ***Does client choice mean we have to increase our variety of food?***

Not at all, you can keep the same types of food. If you usually pack a can of corn, peas and carrots, now clients can choose three of any of the vegetables: corn, peas or carrots.

6. ***Will client choice cost more for the pantry?***

Hundreds of food pantries have successfully made the change from standard pre-packed food bags to client choice without additional funds. The client choice system can require fewer staff and volunteer hours since the bags are packed as clients come in and choose their food. Compared to standard prepacked bags, client choice can cost less to run!

There are two main reasons why client choice can save your pantry money:

1. Most clients take only the food they need. As a result, less food is wasted.
2. Pantries are more open to ordering less expensive, donated foods from the Food Bank. Pantries don't have to worry about giving the same food to everyone. It is OK to order donated salmon and wholesale tuna rather than feeling pressured to order just tuna.

7. *Our volunteers don't like change. What happens if they don't like doing client choice?*

Some people don't like change. If this is the case for your program, the Food Bank recommends making small changes at the beginning of your switch. You can start by having clients choose only some of their items, such as fresh produce. Each month you can increase the number of foods that clients select, while pre-packing the rest. Eventually, you will make the switch to full client choice. Small steps will help both volunteers and clients accept changes. Many volunteers are happier that they are no longer packing bags because this can be hard work! Client Choice gives staff and volunteers the opportunity to speak to clients about likes and dislikes which enhances the consumer's experience, restoring client dignity, and giving workers experience in customer service.

8. *Will client choice mean more work for my volunteers?*

Moving to client choice will not require more time from workers. It will mean using their time differently. Volunteers will spend more time serving and talking with customers instead of packing bags. Most of the volunteer time will be spent during program service hours rather than before clients arrive.

9. *We have a line around the block. How can we offer Client Choice in our program?*

If your program uses two hours to pack bags and two hours to give out bags, this totals four hours of volunteer time. Since you no longer need volunteers to pack bags beforehand, you can use all four hours of volunteer time to serve clients. You can let your clients know that your program hours will now be longer, so they will not all arrive at the same time.

Section 4:
Client Choice Resources

See Client Choice in action:

Community Market of the Food Bank of East Alabama

> 3810C Pepperell Parkway
> Opelika, AL 36801

334-749-8844

Loaves and Fishes

337 Hatcher St.
Dadeville, AL 36853
256-825-4766

The Food Bank of East Alabama can help your pantry learn more about client choice and answer any other questions you may have.
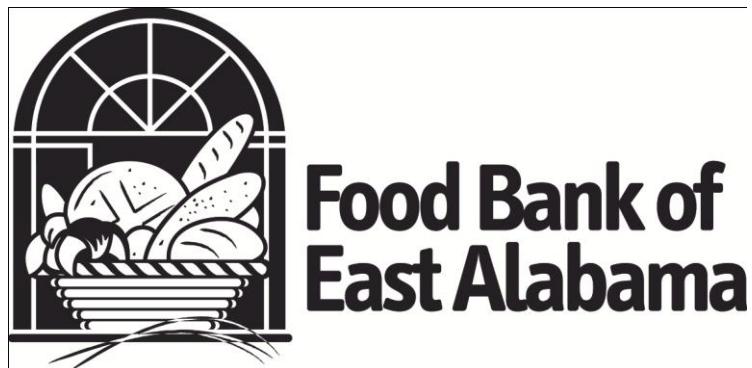

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Tips for your client choice food pantry:

- Client choice is about choosing from available food even if the variety of items is small.
- Allow pantry customers to choose food from your inventory.
- Aim for a variety and balance of foods from each of the food groups.
- Arrange pantry shelves or tables according to the food groups. This can help pantry customers make better and more balanced food choices.
- Rotate your stock. Use the FIFO system - First In First Out.
- Be generous with fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Offer whole grains (whole-wheat bread, brown rice, oatmeal) as much as possible.
- Provide lean protein options such as tuna, beans, and venison.
- Keep low-fat dairy products handy (non-fat dry milk, 1% fresh or shelf stable fluid milk, non-fat or reduced fat cheese, yogurt).
- Hand out recipes from Foodlink and other sources.
- Invite Cooperative Extension representatives to bring samples of food with pantry ingredients for recipients to taste.
- Make a place for crackers, cookies, pastries, and other goodies. Your customers will enjoy the special treats.

Food Group Information
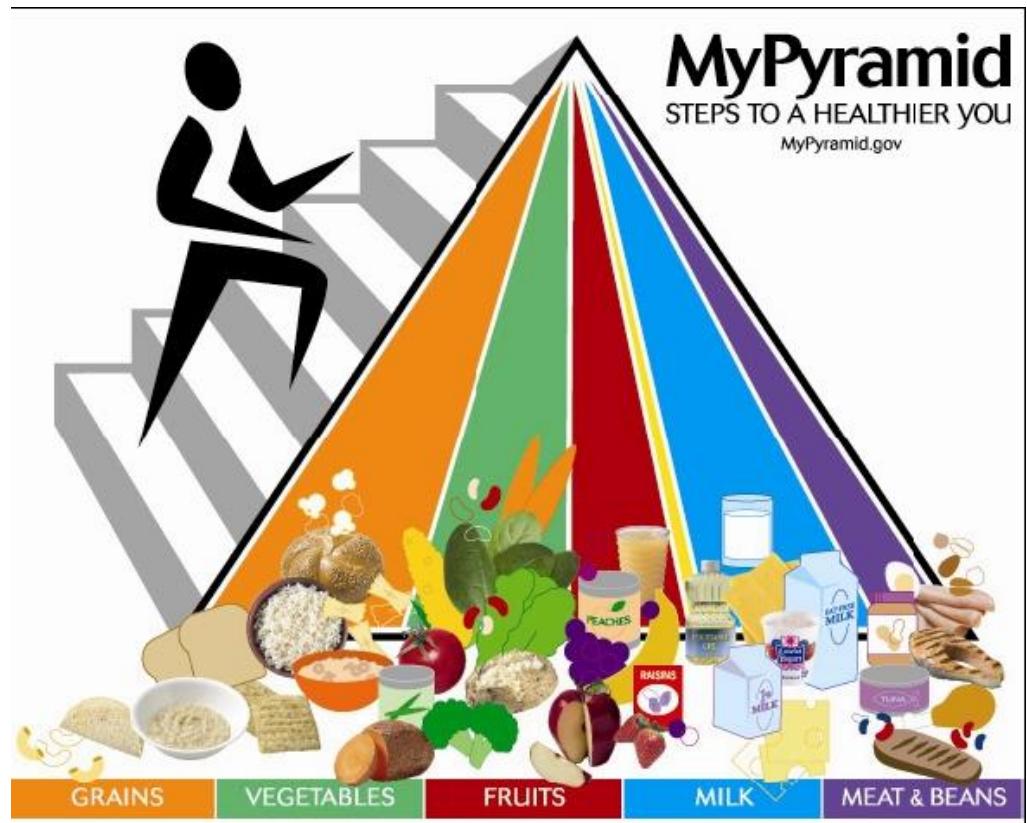
For more information on the food groups and healthy eating visit:
www.MyPyramid.gov