Making the Switch
A Guide for Converting to a Client Choice Food Pantry

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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 Ohio 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 Ohio 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 of St. Paul United Methodist Church; Dayton, Ohio.

"This is fun! This is much easier on my back!"
- a volunteer of St. Paul United Methodist Church; Dayton, Ohio.

"I can't pay my Cinergy [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."
- a client of Middletown Choice Pantry; Middletown, Ohio.

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 prechosen 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.

<u>But Does My Pantry Have the Space?</u>

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.**

The choice pantry model also provides clients with an opportunity to exercise financial skills as they "browse and compare" items. Regardless of what food distribution method (to be discussed later) is in place at a particular pantry, clients will have to make some compromises regarding which items they select and which items they leave on the shelf. For example:

A client has five food "points" remaining and she wants two things that "cost" three points each. This client will have to make some decisions. Does she put something else back in order to get both items? Does she choose the more nutritional item of the two? Does she select an item that she knows her children will like more? Does she opt for the item with more servings per container?

Faced with options, clients will be forced to think critically about what is important to themselves and their families and will ultimately make food decisions based on what they value most. Thus, the client choice model provides clients the opportunity to acquire and exercise skills in budgeting, which certainly may have a ripple effect in other areas of life (for instance, while shopping at a regular grocery store). Additionally, **by choosing their own food, recipients are sure they are receiving food that they and their families need, enjoy, and will use. This not only plays in to client integrity; it promotes client joy and satisfaction.**

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 Point System

A common method of client choice implementation, the Point System is based upon how much each item would cost if purchased at a typical grocery store. The pantry first devises cost ranges on which point values will be established, and next develops point values for each range. Each item is subsequently provided a point value. The client or family is allotted a certain number of total points to "spend" on that pantry visit. The total point allotment per client or family is determined by the pantry depending on supply, demand, and size of household.

In the Point System example illustrated below, a food pantry has developed five cost ranges, with each item receiving a pre-determined point value depending on which cost range it falls in. The food pantry then chooses to denote each item's point value using a color sticker on the package. Remember that **in the Point System, the costs of the items are based on typical grocery store prices.**

An implementation example of the Point System

Foods that cost this much:	Receive this many points:	And are coded with a sticker of this color:
$0 – $1.00	1	Red
$1.01 – $2.00	2	Orange
$2.01 – $3.00	3	Yellow
$3.01 – $4.00	4	Green
$4.01 +	5	Blue

The Point System strategy allows for flexibility in implementation. For one, the pantry can create as many or as few cost increments and "point values" as they feel necessary, allowing for greater or less cost specificity. Secondly, there are various ways to determine the number of total points to provide each client, such as basing it on the number of members in the client's family or by converting the value of a traditional box to points. Your pantry may wish to consider point options for non-food and/or personal care items, as some essential items may be quite expensive in the grocery store.

By providing such items to your clients at "affordable" point values, you will save them money which they can use for other needs such as utility expenses or life-sustaining medications.

An additional advantage of the point system is that it could potentially enable clients to learn valuable skills in budgeting. For supplemental training in budgeting and resource management for your clientele, your pantry is encouraged to contact your county's Ohio State University County Extension office which may have Money Management and Budgeting classes available to your clients. Contact information for each OSU Extension office is available at www.ag.ohio-state.edu/~directory. OSU Extension Educators may also be available to train volunteers to assist clients in making wise "shopping" choices as they browse the pantry.

The Pound System

Although similar to the Point System in concept, the Pound System is based entirely on the weight of each food item rather than the cost. The food pantry allots each client a total number of pounds that can be used to "shop" with and "purchase" goods. The clients then choose items they need or want until their poundage allotment is expended.

The pantry can also utilize a variation on the Point System described previously by assigning point values based on ranges of weights instead of prices and allotting clients a total point value to "shop" with. Such a strategy is illustrated below in which a pantry has chosen to allocate point values based on five weight ranges.

An implementation example of the Pound System

Foods that weigh this much:	Receive this many points:	And are coded with a sticker of this color:
0 – 0.5 pound	1	Red
0.5 – 1 pounds	2	Orange
1 – 1.5 pounds	3	Yellow
1.5 – 2 pounds	4	Green
Over 2 pounds	5	Blue

Similarly to the Point System, the Pound System allows for much flexibility in implementation as pantries establish as many or as few weight increments as necessary. Also, there are various ways to determine the number of total pounds allotted to each client. In doing so, pantries may need to consider how to attribute points to non-food or personal care items; this may entail "blending" of both the Point System and the Pound System in some fashion in order to maximize pantry resources and encourage thoughtful selection by the clients.

The Food Pyramid System

A common and more health-conscious variation of the Pound System, the Food Pyramid System warrants a name of its own. In this strategy, the pantry first categorizes all food items into food groups and then provides each client with poundage allotments for each food group. For example, using this system based on food groups, a family of four might be allotted:

    2 pounds of protein products (e.g. fresh meat, eggs)
    1 pound of protein alternatives (e.g. peanut butter, tuna, canned meat)
    3 pounds of fruits and/or vegetables
    4 pounds of grain items (e.g. bread, cereal, rice, pasta)
    2 pounds of dairy products (e.g. milk, yogurt, cheese)
    2 pounds of fats, sweets, and/or desserts
    1 pound of condiments (e.g. cooking oils, spices, ketchup)

Alternatively, the pantry could elect to implement a variation on this strategy using points in which the client is provided with a different point total for each food group.

The Food Pyramid System helps to ensure that families are receiving a variety of foods from different food groups, thus encouraging healthier eating habits and better nutrition. Along these lines, a pantry may opt to impose less-restrictive "spending" limits (or no limits at all) on certain foods that spoil quickly, such as fresh meat or highly perishable produce and vegetables. Doing so increases the possibility that all such food items are distributed to families before spoiling occurs.

Of course, it is quite likely that a client choice pantry based on this method will attract questions from clients as to why they are being required to choose items from different food groups. This may be a result of clients having less understanding of healthful eating or being unfamiliar with the preparation of some food items. **One way to limit client questions is to have staff or volunteers provide health tips and meal plan ideas, or have them make healthy choice recommendations as they accompany the clients in browsing the aisles.** Another idea is to offer samples of foods unfamiliar to many clients, thus providing them with a taste of something new. This is an excellent way to expand the clients' nutritional horizons and provide them with an authentic "grocery store" experience!

The Rainbow of Colors System

This unique system, developed by Ohio State University Extension under direction of the Butler County, Ohio F.E.E.D. (Feed, Educate, Empower, Deliver) alliance, is a slight modification of the Food Pyramid System. Instead of using pounds, a client receives a total number of food item choices which is divided by food group (grain, meat, dairy, fruit, vegetable, "combination," and "miscellaneous" which includes fats/oils/sweets) to ensure that the client chooses a variety of foods. Based on inventory, pantries decide what constitutes a choice and how many choices are allowed per food group for

each client. Each food group is then color coded according to the MyPyramid food guidance system developed by the USDA, as illustrated in the following figure.

The MyPyramid Food Guidance System

For more information on MyPyramid, you are encouraged to visit www.MyPyramid.gov. Within the pantry, food items are then placed on color-coded shelves according to the food groups. The Rainbow System integrates choice with nutrition education within the pantry. Where available, the Family Nutrition Program (FNP) from Ohio State University Extension can do cooking demonstrations and nutrition education workshops during the pantry hours. Using MyPyramid teaching tools, the FNP educator promotes dietary variety by encouraging families to choose a "rainbow of colors." Nutrition education is also a means to orient families to the pantry. **For more information on the Rainbow of Choices system, please see the "Rainbow of Colors" System Q&A section in the Appendix.**

With obesity and associated chronic disease affecting more and more families, one advantage of the Rainbow System is that it could potentially teach clients about health and nutrition. Contact your Ohio State University County Extension office to see if nutrition workshops, food demonstrations, or classes could be available to your clients (for a listing of all OSU Extension offices, visit www.ag.ohio-state. edu/~directory). In addition, Extension Educators could possibly train volunteers to help clients make wise, healthy choices in the choice food pantry.

The Number of Items System

In this system, each client or family is simply given a number of items they can choose. Typically, this is the easiest client choice method to implement upon conversion, functioning well as a transitional step to a Point or Pound System. In order to maximize resource efficiency, one restriction commonly employed is limiting to a pre-determined maximum the number of a single item that any given client or family may take on any single visit. These maximums are determined by the individual pantry based on supply, demand, and household size and are frequently displayed on the shelves.

Some pantries implementing this system may choose to offer a certain number of items on a per person basis, for example, 10 items per family member. Thus, a client "shopping" for a family of 6 would receive 60 items. As food inventory levels fluctuate, it may be necessary for pantries to adjust allotment allowances. Alternatively, a pantry might offer certain numbers of items based upon ranges of family size. Such ranges may look something like:

Families of 3 – 4 family members receive 35 items.
Families of 5 – 6 family members receive 55 items.
Families of 6 – 8 family members receive 70 items.

In implementing this system, the food pantry should consider how to address non-food and personal care items that are expensive on a grocery store shelf.

The Item List System

This system for conversion to a client choice pantry entails providing each client with a current list of available food items and allowing them to "check" on paper which items they would like. A staff member or volunteer would then take the list and use it to prepare a bag or box for the client containing the selected items. As the pantry would likely impose some limits on the amount of food that each client can choose, this system works best in conjunction with the Point System, Pound System, or Food Pyramid System. Specifically, each item on the food list would have a point value or pound value associated with it, and the client would need to "shop" from the list according to his or her point or pound allotment.

It is very important to note that **this system is the least preferred client choice system because it prevents the client from actively participating in the "browsing" of food options.** As many of us value the visual aspects of grocery shopping, so will your clients! Of course, many traditional food pantries are laid out in such a way that dispersing of pre-made boxes is done efficiently, and conversion to a client choice pantry may require altering the physical layout of the building. **Thus, the Item List System is recommended as a transitional step between a traditional and a more preferred client choice system, allowing for clients to at least begin choosing their foods while physical alterations to the pantry are made.** If another system is simply impractical, the Item List System does provide the clients with choice in making food selections and is therefore a great stride in the right direction towards maximizing client and pantry benefits and satisfaction.

<u>So As You Can See...</u>

There is a variety of ways to implement the client choice model in your pantry and each model is flexible so as to be easily adapted to your particular pantry. Although the methods have been presented with specific examples, all strategies are intended to serve as frameworks for conversion only. The timeframe for conversion and specific number values will certainly vary from pantry to pantry.

In implementing the client choice model, it is important to be creative! Mix certain aspects of different strategies; for example, implement the Food Pyramid system using pounds for all food groups except fats, sweets, and/or desserts; for that group, allot the Item List system to ensure that families are receiving more nutritious foods and fewer items of minimal nutrient value. Come up with new variations based on the six strategies presented that would more effectively utilize your pantry resources and space, or simply use the proposed strategies to get the creative juices flowing and come up with your own implementation scheme. Regardless of how your pantry makes the switch from traditional to client choice, the important thing to remember is that providing your clients with some degree of freedom in making their own food choices will provide benefits to the clients and the pantry.

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 how the Friends & Neighbors pantry in Waverly, Ohio, 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: only 10 ft x 15 ft!

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 noon, 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
In a Traditional Pantry	**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 **= 40**
In a Client Choice Pantry	**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 **= 40**

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.

- Ohio Department of Job and Family Services: In addition to providing aid to your clients in applying for Food Stamps and other public benefits, ODJFS can assign Ohioans involved in Ohio Works First to your pantry to help them fulfill their weekly work requirements. You can obtain more information at http://jfs.ohio.gov or by calling 614.466.6282.

- 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.

The Ohio State University Extension is a good starting point for locating professionals that can provide such training to pantry volunteers. As the flagship land grant university in Ohio, OSU Extension has an office in every county. The mission of OSU Extension is to "engage people to strengthen their lives and communities through research-based educational programming," and Extension educators with expertise in Family and Consumer Sciences and Community Development can play a significant role in educating clients and training volunteers on health and nutrition issues. Contact your county's OSU Extension office to see what educational programs might be available (for a listing of all OSU Extension offices, visit www.ag.ohio-state.edu/~directory).

You might also ask your volunteers if any have nutrition education experience. In addition, basic overviews of "general nutrition" are available at the USDA's Food Pyramid website (www.MyPyramid.gov) and the Produce for Better Health Foundation's 5-A-Day website (www.5aday.com).

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 groc-ery 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 panty 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. With the allotments now being in terms of "total points" or "total pounds" (depending on what client choice method your pantry implements), each client can be provided with an equivalent

number of points or pounds with which to "shop." It is vital to understand that a **conversion to client choice will not impact the total amount of food that goes out the door, as long as your pantry correctly attributes "pound" or "point" values to each item.** This is why planning your implementation thoroughly is vitally important! Additionally, it will be necessary to carefully track individual items and types of items so future pantry purchases reflect what clients want and need.

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...

Hopefully, this guide has proven beneficial to you, your pantry, and its staff and volunteers as you plan the conversion to the client choice pantry model from the less-efficient traditional model. Of course, not all pantries nor clients are the same. As this guide attempts to detail common implementation strategies and address the most common concerns, it is difficult to predict exactly what issues will arise during conversion. Thus, it is important to go into this process with an open and creative mind, remembering that client choice can be made to work anywhere and will benefit all involved: the pantry, the clients, the volunteers, and the staff. If you put the time and energy in, you will quickly realize that conversion is certainly worth the effort. In doing so, your pantry can take an even more interactive role in the battle against hunger and help to strengthen the dignity of the most desperate of our fellow Ohioans.

For more information, ideas, or suggestions, or to provide comments, questions, or concerns regarding this manual or your particular pantry's conversion plan, please do not hesitate to contact the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks. We are eager to assist your food pantry in becoming a client choice pantry. You can also contact your regional foodbank and obtain locations of converted pantries in your area. Visit these client choice pantries and discuss with them the pros and cons, problems and triumphs of making the switch. There is no better way to realize that conversion is both possible and truly beneficial than to see it in action.

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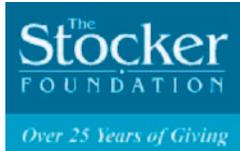
We also wish to acknowledge the following sources used in the development of this manual:

Client Choice Food Pantries: Models For Now And The Future, Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, 2004; www.state.in.us/fssa/families/pdf/tefap10.pdf.

"MyPyramid.gov Food Guidance System," United States Department of Agriculture; www.MyPyramid.gov.

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APPENDIX

"Rainbow of Colors" System Questions and Answers

What is the Rainbow of Colors System?

Ohio State University Extension, under the direction of the Butler County F.E.E.D. Alliance, created the Rainbow of Choice System. This system is based on MyPyramid.gov, developed by the United States Department of Agriculture. Foods are shelved according to color-coded food groups and clients are allowed a predetermined number of choices per food group. This system ensures that clients choose a variety of different foods so that they can provide healthy, balanced meals and snacks for themselves and their families. The Rainbow of Colors System can be easily integrated with nutrition education provided by Ohio State University Extension's Family Nutrition Program or volunteers. Extension educators can talk about healthy choices within each food group and how to use a variety of food groups to prepare healthy balanced meals and snacks, thus using a "rainbow of colors."

Why is nutrition education important?

Obesity and associated chronic diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease, are growing epidemics in Ohio and 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 informa-

tion on the value selection card, contact Dan Remley at the Butler County Extension office by calling 513.887.3722 or by emailing remley4@ag.osu.edu.

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.

How do volunteers know where to shelve food items especially when some food items are difficult to categorize into the food groups?

Some items are easy, such as canned fruit, whereas others are difficult, such as nuts, snack foods, and combination foods that belong in more than one food group. For the purpose of shelving such items, the Rainbow of Colors System has two categories, "combination" and "miscellaneous," which allow volunteers to shelve food items that may be difficult to categorize. "Combination" foods generally have more than one food group in them. Examples include soups, macaroni and cheese, and meal-in-boxes. Other food items, such as cooking ingredients, oils, snacks, and desserts can be placed in "miscellaneous." Some pantries might choose to place desserts and junk foods in actual food groups. For example, pudding (a dessert) can be placed in dairy instead of "miscellaneous." Finally, some foods can be placed in multiple categories. Baked beans, for example, could be placed in "vegetables" or "meat and beans" or "combination" groups.

Contact your local county OSU Extension office, a community dietitian, or visit MyPyramid.gov for questions related to where foods belong on the pyramid. For a listing of all OSU Extension offices, visit www.ag.ohio-state.edu/~directory.