

How to Run a Food Pantry

Introduction

Food insecurity and hunger are very real problems in the United States. Though the U.S. has long been among the richest nations in the world, our national poverty rate has never dropped below 10%. Of those individuals and families living above the poverty line, many can easily be plunged into a financial crisis by a lost job, a medical emergency, a broken down car, a stolen purse, or other unexpected expense or loss of income. In all, up to 70% of Americans are vulnerable to food insecurity or hunger; and at any given moment, 30 to 40 million of us are either hungry or only acquiring sufficient food by shortchanging another critical need.

Hunger hurts, it damages mental and physical health, it lowers performance in school and at work, and the strain it causes can tear families apart. Hunger contributes to many social ills, from domestic violence to drug use to theft - you may have once heard someone self-righteously claim that they would never steal anything, only to have someone else counter with "...but what if your family was hungry?", causing the original speaker to sheepishly admit that in that instance they might indeed resort to doing something desperate. Reducing the prevalence of hunger can cause a ripple of positive changes throughout a community.

Whether they are called food pantries, shelves, closets, kitchens, or something completely different, the thousands of charities that provide non-governmental food aid to the needy play a critical role in our nation's fight against hunger and poverty. This guide exists to help them in their work.

Chapter 1 - What does ending hunger mean?

The work of food-related charities is based on the knowledge that hunger currently exists in our society, and needs to be addressed now, regardless of the potential (or lack thereof) for a systemic solution to the problem in the future. For our purposes, ending hunger in a given area means this:

“Whenever anyone in the area experiences a time of needing food assistance, they can readily access timely, adequate, appropriate assistance sufficient to see them safely through that time of need.”

It is difficult to predict the exact amount of non-governmental food aid that must be distributed in a given area to achieve our goal, but to make an approximation, use the following formula:

Need = (number of people living at or below the poverty line) x 234 lbs. of food aid per year

So, in an area with 1,000 people living at or below the poverty line, it would take roughly 234,000 lbs. of non-governmental food aid distributed each year to meet the need. The number of people living at or below the poverty line in your area may be found at the U.S. Census Bureau website (www.census.gov).

The intimidating size of many of the numbers produced by the above formula may give you some idea of why hunger is such a persistent problem. The good news is that most communities already have the ability to meet the need - if they use their resources efficiently. The next chapter will address the single biggest piece of that puzzle.

Chapter 2 - Finding Food

Charity food distribution programs are remarkably adaptable - some have buildings and paid staff, some have one but not the other, and some thrive without either. The need for food, however, is inexorable, and the limits of an organization's food supply often define the scope of its operations.

There are four primary sources of food for charity organizations:

Food Drives

Soliciting individual donations (often in the form of canned goods) is a traditional standby of charity food programs. Unfortunately, most items donated to food drives are/were purchased from a store at full retail price, placing the cost of sustainably securing enough food to meet the need well beyond the means of most communities. Food drives also tend to be a poor source of important perishable foods, like fresh fruits and vegetables.

Food drives are primarily useful for procuring relatively small quantities of very specific items, or as educational opportunities for children.

Food Rescue

Some charities build relationships with local businesses, like restaurants, who then donate their edible leftovers. This food tends to have a very short shelf life, making it most suitable for programs that can immediately turn around and serve it to their clients, like soup kitchens and shelters.

While food saved through food rescue is generally free in and of itself, the logistics of regularly picking up and properly handling product (maintaining it at safe temperatures, etc.) from many sources at odd hours tends to make large-scale food rescue impractical for most organizations.

Purchasing

Many charities raise money with which to purchase food. This has several advantages:

1. Purchasing can lead to economies of scale, as buying in bulk is often less expensive.
2. The charity's supporters, having made their donations in an easily documentable fashion, can receive tax benefits, which reduces the cost to the community.
3. The charity has more control over what food it receives, and when.

However, even at bulk food prices, purchasing by itself will not usually yield enough food to meet the need in a community on a sustainable basis.

Food Banks

Food banking is rather like food rescue, but on a much larger scale. Food Banks (and America's Second Harvest, their national association) are nonprofit organizations that deal primarily with food manufacturers and distributors, gleaning product in quantities that would overwhelm most individual charities. Food Banks then offer the goods they have rescued to local hunger related charities, charging only a small per-pound shared maintenance fee.

From the perspective of a food pantry or other charity, using a Food Bank is a lot like purchasing, with the key differences being that a Food Bank's inventory changes more quickly than that of a grocery store, and that Food Bank food costs considerably less.

Financial donations used towards acquiring Food Bank food are eligible for the same tax benefits as those made towards purchasing food commercially, and some states offer additional Food Bank related tax benefits. (See Appendix 3 for details.)

Using a Food Bank will allow most charity food programs to acquire and distribute at least five to ten times as much food as they could through any other means.

Conclusion

To develop a food supply adequate to meet the need in their communities in a cost-effective manner, most charities should acquire at least 3/4 of their food through their local Food Bank, with the remainder coming from either small-scale food rescue or the targeted purchasing (either directly or through food drives) of specific items frequently requested by clients which the Food Bank does not regularly offer.

Chapter 3 - Food Handling

Like any food related enterprise, your organization is responsible for storing food in a manner that will keep it safe for your clients to eat. Here are some of the key standards your food storage space should adhere to:

- Intact room with a lock to assure that the food only goes to screened individuals
- No broken windows, cracks in walls, ceilings, floor (to prevent pest contamination)
- No evidence of pest contamination
- Relatively clean
- No chemicals or cleaning supplies stored with food
- No clothing or personal items stored with food
- No food on the floor (whether it is packaged or not)
- Thermometer in each refrigerator or freezer, with a log documenting safe temperatures
- No flaking paint or other physical hazards
- Pantry or storage area should smell clean, no mold mildew or chemical smells

Spoilage is another area of concern, as some product received by food pantries will be either out-dated or close to it. While you should examine all goods carefully before they are offered to clients, a product being past its code date does not necessarily mean that it is unsafe to eat.

Though evaluating odor and appearance will always be your most important tools, here are three useful terms used in food product coding to help you judge a product's status:

- "Sell by" or "pull" date - Refers to the last date product should be sold (seen primarily on dairy and fresh bakery products). This date allows for a reasonable length of time to use at home in an unfrozen state.
- "Best if used by date" - Often used on canned foods, frozen foods, cereals, and fried snack foods, this coding indicates the approximate date after which the product will no longer be at the highest quality level. Most products can still be used for 6-18 months after this date, depending on the item.
- "Expiration" date - Last day an item should be used before it is likely to lose flavor or quality. Frequently appears on refrigerated dough products, yeast and eggs.

Your local Food Bank may be able to provide you with additional guidelines and materials. Other good sources of food storage and handling information are the FDA Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (www.cfsan.fda.gov) and the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation's ServSafe program (www.servsafe.com).

Chapter 4 - Clients and Hours and Intake

Asking for help is hard, especially when it is for something as basic and personal as feeding one's family. When they get to you, your clients will almost certainly be frightened, frustrated, and humiliated. The last thing you want to do is make them feel even worse. This chapter will look at what you can do to make sure your clients have a good experience.

Hours

Take your clients' lives into account when planning the hours in which you distribute food. Many of those in need of emergency food aid are employed; to serve them you will need to plan some distribution time outside of the normal workday. Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays are badly underserved in many communities - if yours is one of them, try to fill that gap!

At The Door

- 1) Make sure clients feel welcome - have someone greeting people as they come in.
- 2) Serve clients promptly, or if they have to wait, give them a reasonable reason why ("Hi. As you can see, we have a number of people in line ahead of you, but we will get to you as quickly as we can.").
- 3) If anyone has to wait, make sure they have a comfortable place to sit.

The Interview

Intake interviews are tricky - it is all too easy to turn one into a humiliating reminder of the client's situation. Here are some things you can do make the process as friendly and non-confrontational as possible:

- 1) Do not seat the client and your interviewer opposite each other in an adversarial positioning. Have the client seated at the side of the desk (a conversational positioning), and make sure they can see everything that is being written down.
- 2) Give the client a chair comparable to the one used by the interviewer. An inferior chair is a clear reminder of the client's status.
- 3) Keep the tone of the interview positive ("I just need to get a couple of pieces of information from you to help us do our job better...") rather than negative ("We have to weed out the liars and cheaters...").

Chapter 5 – Distribution Models

While there are almost as many ways to distribute food as there are food pantries, nearly all of them are based on one of these two models:

The Standardized Food Box/Bag Pantry

As the name suggests, a standardized food box/bag pantry prepares standardized packages of food to give to clients. The main strengths of this model are its “fairness” - every client receives more or less the same thing, and the pantry’s ability to control the nutritional balance of the food package a client receives.

Unfortunately, clients and their families aren’t standardized. Giving out a jar of peanut butter to go with a loaf of bread makes sense... unless the family in question contains someone with peanut allergies. Giving a family a can of pork-and-beans makes sense... unless they happen to be vegetarians or believe in a religious prohibition against eating pork. Between food allergies, religious and other dietary restrictions, special needs (as a result of diabetes, etc.), and certain people (young children particularly) loathing certain foods, as much as half the food distributed by a standardized food box/bag pantry may go to waste, effectively doubling how much food must be acquired and distributed to meet the need. That is not an efficient use of resources.

Standardized food box/bag pantries are also generally ill suited to using Food Banks. The problem is that while Food Bank inventories are diverse, they are also constantly changing, and most standardized food box/bag pantries try to offer fairly static menus. Compensating for this incompatibility generally requires purchasing food, running food drives, and limiting how often clients can seek help - all solutions that tend to make pantries less effective than they would be otherwise.

Finally, being told what to eat is anything but an uplifting experience - most clients have been picking out their own food for years, and not being able to do so is just one more unpleasantly added to their already unhappy situation.

In light of these problems, it is not surprising that standardized food box/bag pantries across the country are increasingly adopting elements of the other major model, the client-choice pantry.

The Client Choice Pantry

This model is built on the idea of allowing clients to choose their own food. Many client choice pantries resemble small grocery stores, with products arrayed on shelves and in coolers/freezers, from which clients can fill boxes or bags. Others produce a list of the food they have available, and then prepare individual packages based on clients’ selections. Client choice pantries tend to be very space-flexible, some have been successfully run out of closets, and still others thrive without using a building at all. (See Appendix 2 to find out how!).

Client choice food pantries are strong where standardized food box/bag pantries are weak. Choosing their own food gives clients a sense of control rather than the helplessness of being

told, in essence, that “this is what you get”; and since clients tend not to take food they won’t use, relatively little of a what a client-choice food pantry distributes goes to waste.

The diverse and shifting inventories of Food Banks are well suited to providing client choice food pantries with a wide array of products to offer their clients. Client choice pantries generally only need to acquire non-Food Bank food to accommodate people with special needs, like very young children or the diabetic, and are otherwise entirely stocked by simply taking some of everything their local Food Bank has.

All told, a client choice pantry can generally offer the needy in its community many times more help than a standardized food box/bag pantry with the same resources.

Conclusion

The decision between client choice and standardized food box/bag is not all or nothing. Some organizations choose to operate on a hybrid model such as having clients select items based on some sort of framework (generally based on the food pyramid), or offering clients a “choice” section from which to pick food to supplement their standardized packages. While such hybrids may face their own unique challenges, they nevertheless tend to produce significant improvements in performance compared to the standardized food box/bag model alone.

170(e)(3), 501(c)(3) and You

As discussed in Chapter 2, it is very difficult, if not impossible, for charity food assistance organizations to acquire sufficient food resources to meet their community's food aid needs without drawing food from the area's Food Bank. (Not sure who/where your area's Food Bank is? See Frequently Asked Questions.)

Food Banks were made possible largely as a result of Congress's adding Section 170(e)(3) to the U.S. Internal Revenue Code in 1976 in order to provide companies with a tax incentive to donate their useable discards for charitable purposes. Per that section, if a company destroys such products or donates them directly to charity agencies they are able to deduct only the cost of the goods from their taxes, but if they donate the goods to a Food Bank, and the Food Bank adheres to certain requirements, the donor company is able to deduct an amount equal to its costs plus up to 50% of its normal profit. So generally large companies, or companies with large quantities of products to donate, prefer to donate those goods to Food Banks.

Among the rules Food Banks must follow is distributing goods only to organizations of the type described in Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code. Section 501 lists various types of not-for-profit organizations in 20+ Subsections, each one numbered. Labor Unions are (c)(5)'s, Chambers of Commerce are (c)(6)'s, social and recreation clubs are (c)(7)'s, etc. 501(c)(3) organizations are: churches/synagogues/mosques/temples and, in general, nonprofit organizations that (1) have incorporated, (2) have a mission of aiding the needy, and (3) have applied to the U.S. Internal Revenue Service for a determination by the IRS that the organization is exempt from paying Federal taxes as a result of meeting the requirements of Section 501(c)(3).

Confused? If your organization supplies food aid at no charge to needy people, or wishes to provide that service, contact your area's Food Bank and/or the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (www.irs.gov) for help. They deal with these requirements all the time and can assist you.

Beyond Emergency Food Aid

Everything we have discussed to this point has been focused on acquiring and distributing food to the needy in as efficient and pleasant manner as possible. While that should be the focus of any food-oriented charity's operation, here are a few additional things you can do to further benefit your community:

Communicate with your elected officials.

Three things are true of most elected officials:

1. They want to do a good job for the people they were elected to serve.
2. Their brains are hardwired to interpret any communication from any source on any topic as a plea/demand/request for action - if it is an issue that the official could logically be expected to know about, care about, and do something about, it doesn't matter if an explicit request for action was actually made.
3. They know next to nothing about the poverty situation in the area they represent, and almost always underestimate its magnitude, seriousness, and consequences. If nobody tells them that there is a problem, they will not figure it out on their own.

Fortunately, the first two points make the third relatively easy to remedy. Elected officials do not get as much mail as you might think, and a lot of what they do get is either isolated/bizarre (some guy is worried that Russia faked the fall of Communism to put us off our guard) or comes from obviously orchestrated letter writing campaigns. That stuff usually gets more or less ignored. If, however, an elected official receives many pieces of mail from independent sources, all talking about the same issue, that tends to capture his or her attention very quickly indeed, and attention leads to action, even if none was explicitly asked for.

If every time your charity prepares an activity report (number of persons served, amount of help provided, etc., but not client names) you simply make seven extra copies, and send one each to: The President of the United States, your two U.S. Senators, your local member of the U.S. House of Representatives, your state's Governor, your state Senator, and your state Representative, it can make a huge difference in the shape of public policy.

Promote available state and federal assistance programs.

Food stamps, unemployment insurance, WIC, workers compensation, and other state and federal assistance programs exist to serve those in need, but many of them are underutilized. By promoting these programs, you can bring significant additional resources to bear against poverty and hunger in your community.

A good way to start is to meet with someone from your county's welfare department. Ideally, they will be supportive of getting more eligible people signed up for their programs and will provide you with information and materials - posters, brochures, applications, etc. If that doesn't

Mobile Pantries

In a perfect world, food would flow out of food banks and into the hands of needy people fast enough to keep any of it from spoiling. In the real world, food banks are often offered more perishable product than the agencies they serve can possibly transport and store, and the food pantries in many communities are too few in number, or lack the capacity to meet the need. In those cases food goes to waste, and needy people remain hungry. As of 2007, at least 60 food banks around the U.S. are using a new tool to solve this problem: the mobile food pantry.

Mobile pantries are very simple: Any church or other 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that would like to distribute food to the needy can sign up to use a Food Bank. They don't have to own a building or have a "normal" food pantry. Many mobile pantry agencies just borrow a parking lot for a few hours (school parking lots after school lets out work very well!). After scheduling a mobile pantry distribution with their local Food Bank, an agency can leaflet the neighborhood, send notes home with kids from the school, etc. announcing to potential clients when and where the distribution will take place.

On the day of the distribution, the Food Bank loads a recommissioned beverage truck with food and dispatches it to the agency's chosen site. When the truck arrives, the host group's volunteers set up tables around the truck and load them with product. Clients fill out short questionnaires or go through brief entrance interviews, then simply walk around the truck like they would at a farmers' market, selecting the goods they would like. When the last client has been served, the volunteers simply load any leftovers back onto the truck, leaving the parking lot as clean as it was before the distribution.

In short, mobile pantries are a quick, easy, inexpensive way to help hundreds of people with food that would otherwise have gone to waste.