

CLIENT CHOICE PROGRAMS & TIPS FOR PARTNER AGENCIES



Client choice programs incorporate the ability for neighbors to choose their food. From offering a select number of options to a full-scale grocery store experience, there is a way for partners of any size to utilize a choice model.

This brief guide shares learnings from food banks to assist partner agencies in implementing client choice programs.

This resource is for partner agencies.

WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM?

- A successful program is one in which clients have some level of choice in their food selection and have a welcoming, judgement-free experience during their visit.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF OFFERING CHOICE?

- **Serve with dignity:** Offering choice is a core component of serving with dignity, which is a primary goal of the Feeding America network and agency partners who receive product from food banks.
- **Less food waste:** When clients are able to choose what they need, want, and have the appropriate tools to prepare, less food may be wasted or unused by those who receive it.

Sue Estee, Second Harvest North Central Food Bank, Grand Rapids, MN: People only take what they need. There's a misconception that people take more, but they want there to be food for the next person. You will distribute less food, because people take what they want. We never had any agency go back. Once they change, we hear that they wish they had started earlier. Everyone feels good about people making their own choices. Everyone appreciates being able to offer that.

- **Better accommodate special diets:** Clients who have health conditions - diabetes, chronic kidney/heart disease, or celiac disease, for example - are required to follow specific diets to manage their conditions. A choice model may allow those clients to more closely align with any dietary restrictions and their personal health requirements.
- **Offer culturally appropriate foods:** Many religions incorporate dietary tenets - e.g. avoiding pork, restricting dairy, coffee, or tea, or following a vegetarian diet - that are important to large populations of neighbors. Specific cultural practices may also mean that some foods will have more utility than others that may not be traditionally incorporated into diets.
- **Volunteer hours can be spent interacting with clients:** Packing fewer boxes in advance just requires a shift in volunteer work, not necessarily more volunteers. Volunteers can stock shelves and assist clients with their selections, enhancing the neighbor experience.

CLIENT CHOICE TIPS FOR PARTNER AGENCIES

WHAT ARE OUR OPTIONS? AND WHERE DO WE START?

- Some level of choice can be offered in all settings: mobile pantries, set-up/tear down shelves, drive-through distribution, home delivery, even with largely pre-packed models.
- Although one end of the continuum is a grocery store model, in which clients shop with a cart and select options similar to the local market, all programs start somewhere. If beginning, consider adding one or two choices to regular distribution. Fresh items may be a good place to start, if available.
- Many partners who have limited space begin with a choice table, or “swap table”, where clients may select between items, or exchange an item they received for something that better suits their needs.

Emily Alt & Kate Long, Maryland Food Bank, Baltimore: Agencies don't have to have a full set up. You can do choice in a closet. Consider setting up your shelving differently, guiding the flow of traffic, a checklist for the drive-through, even just one choice of meat with a packed bag.



Tip: Some of the most effective partners have eliminated their check-out practices. If you still need to have a check-out process to track poundage, for example, don't use it to cross-check or restrict quantities, as that may have the effect of clients feeling like they are being monitored while making their selections.

CLIENT CHOICE TIPS FOR PARTNER AGENCIES

CLIENT CHOICE PRACTICES

- A simple list can be an extremely effective tool for beginning or intermediary choice models. When clients enter the drive-through line, or participate in the intake process, they are given a list with their choices for that visit to complete and hand back to the staff member/volunteer. Remember to allow for multiple families in the same vehicle/visit.

Brandy Love, Food Bank of Northern Indiana, South Bend, IN: We do a choice model with our drive-through. They get a list when they get in the queue, and we have a shopper who puts it together and takes it out to their car. We asked our clients, and they like ability to choose with car pick up. They're a little more anonymous in the car. More privacy.

- Limits: If hesitant about offering unlimited choice, many agencies still guide clients to select quantities according to household size. Provide a handout and post guidelines on tables/shelves.
- Share flexible recipes: Recipes that can be modified to accommodate different types of grains or vegetables will be most useful to clients who may choose whole-grain pasta over brown rice, for example. Recipes are also helpful when encouraging selection of a new or healthier item, or an item you have in abundance.
- Collect feedback: Give clients the option to share feedback you can use in evaluating how effective new programs are. You can use a post-visit survey if you have contact information, QR code on a handout, or a listening session with a select group. Make sure the feedback method is easy and that comments or scores can be tied to the specific services you would like to measure.
- Those who already offer choice and want to grow may find a pantry logistics consultation with their agency relations partner helpful. The food bank staff may be able to offer suggestions on shelving, flow, and other storage solutions.
- If you are excited about offering choice, or expanding your existing program, contact your food bank for assistance. They can provide guidance and support.

Jennifer Belisle, Channel One Regional Food Bank, Rochester, MN: We give people a shopping cart and a suggested list; they can get the amount they want. We opened access to the amount of visits and no longer check out people. We noticed at first, families did stock up a bit, but now they understand that they can come back whenever they want and get what they need.

RELAUNCHING CHOICE MODELS

Many food banks and partner agencies scaled back or temporarily halted their choice models as a result of safety precautions implemented during the pandemic. Choice can still be accommodated in any model, even amidst these challenges, and **returning to full-scale client choice is important** when safe to do so.