

Frequently Asked Questions

Change can be hard. Part of supporting food pantries increase choice is listening for resistance and empowering food pantries to solve the issues they anticipate themselves. However, being equipped with some commonly asked questions and having language to lessen concerns can build confidence and help food pantries plan for a successful transition.

1. Will switching to a full choice model really make that big of a difference?

Yes! Offering a full choice model provides the opportunity for neighbors to touch and select their own food while encouraging a dignified experience where guests feel respected by staff and volunteers. Data shows neighbors at pantries offering full choice reported a higher satisfaction with the choice offered, experienced a shorter wait time and were more likely to use all the food they received from the pantry compared with neighbors at pantries offering less than full choice.

2. How will we be able to serve all the neighbors that use our pantry with a choice model? Won't it take more time?

Implementing a full choice model will likely decrease prep time for your distribution, leaving additional time for volunteers to focus on stocking shelves and creating a welcoming environment for neighbors. You might need to be open to neighbors more hours per week, which can be done by repurposing prep time to be open for neighbors to shop. Switching to choice will allow for multiple neighbors to shop at the same time (like they would in a grocery store) which will help cut down on wait times as well.

3. Do I need more volunteers to offer choice?

Switching to a full choice model does not necessarily mean you will need to recruit more volunteers, rather, it creates an opportunity for volunteers to switch up their roles. For example, volunteers who arrive early to pack food boxes may transition to welcoming neighbors as they come in and stocking shelves instead. The choice model maximizes volunteer time while also providing more opportunities to interact one-on-one with neighbors. If you need more volunteer support, consider inviting neighbors to volunteer at the pantry. This can help reduce the power dynamic between “giver” and “receiver”. Many people want to be able to give back to their community and this can encourage more engagement.

4. How will ordering from the food bank and food sourcing change when offering choice?

When switching to a full choice model, it will be important to track the food items you purchase or order over the first few months to ensure that your sourcing meets the needs of the neighbors you serve. Offering a full choice model will allow you to gain insight on the food preferences of neighbors and can provide the chance to better meet cultural or dietary needs as well, based on what items neighbors select. Switching to a full choice model will provide an opportunity to request more targeted food donations from the community and expand variety of options.

5. Our pantry is very small. How do we maximize our space to offer choice?

Often the biggest concern of traditional pantries switching to choice is that there is not enough space. With a little creativity, all sizes of pantries can implement a successful full choice model! Consider using stationary or rolling shelving racks rather than table displays to maximize the use of space. If you need additional storage equipment, you can contact vendors in the area (like local grocery or convenience stores) for possible donations of shelving, storage racks, or even additional refrigeration units. With full

choice models, pantries also often reduce their storage areas so most of the food is stored in the shopping area. Consider your current storage area – could this be your new shopping floor?

6. English is not the first language for many of our neighbors. Do you have suggestions on how we can communicate information about choice at our pantry when there are language barriers?

Displaying proper signage at the pantry is critical in communicating important information to guests. When possible, consider communicating information using photos AND words. Some pantries draw on the knowledge of their pantry community (staff, volunteers, neighbors) to help translate signage and other materials to other languages. This not only helps to break down language barriers, but also provides an opportunity to engage with neighbors and volunteers in a meaningful way.

7. Will switching to client choice cost more for the pantry?

Many food pantries have successfully made the change from the standard pre-packed food bags to offering a full choice model without additional funds. It might be helpful to acquire new equipment such as shelving, shopping carts or even a fresh coat of paint – if these are needed, consider asking local stores for donations or community support. Compared to standard pre-packed bags, offering choice can cost less to operate, and it also helps in reducing food waste!

8. How do we get some of our hesitant, long-term volunteers on board with this change?

Consider making small changes, such as having neighbors choose a few items to start. Each month you can increase the number of foods that neighbors select, while pre-packing the rest. Eventually, you will make the switch to full choice. Small steps will help volunteers and neighbors alike feel good about the changes. Choice gives team members the opportunity to speak to neighbors about likes and dislikes, enhancing the neighbor's overall experience while restoring dignity. Maybe consider how you might attract new volunteers whose values align with the pantry's new direction - in offering more choice and dignity for guests. If you're able to open evenings and weekend, when neighbors are also more available, you might attract the non-traditional volunteers and open the doors for new partnerships.

9. Our volunteers prefer offering pre-packed bags/drive thru model. We are planning to switch to a choice pantry but want to keep our volunteers happy. How would you recommend addressing this?

Building buy in with volunteers is key. Consider highlighting some of the research findings and testimonials on switching to choice to emphasize the benefits found by other pantries, and especially neighbors, to provide extra encouragement. Be vulnerable with the volunteers that this is new for everyone and everyone will learn together. Their suggestions for how to make the process better are welcome and appreciated. Some agency partners offer a couple different distribution models: in-person on some days and drive-thru on other days. This gives the neighbors the opportunity to choose which one to attend and offers more options for volunteers as well.

10. We have recently noticed a large increase in the number of neighbors coming to the pantry lately. How do we offer choice while serving an increasing number of guests in a limited amount of time?

Pantries that notice an increase in visitors could benefit from reviewing current hours of operation to see if there are ways to extend open times or add additional days to reduce time waiting in line. Using strategies like appointments can also help maintain a steady flow of guests rather than having people

come all at once or waiting in line for a long time. For more considerations on selecting days and hours of operation when switching to choice, please see page 26 for more information.

11. We are interested in offering choice in a hybrid or drive-thru model. How would we do that?

Being able to order food in advance or not come in and select your food is another form of choice and there are many models that still allow for full choice. Programs like OrderAhead (see page 29) can allow for precise online ordering and flexible pick ups. Be sure to communicate any changes to neighbors in advance and you might ask how people would like to place orders – whether on paper forms, online, or over the phone as not everyone has access to the internet.

12. Does switching to a full choice model mean we will have to increase our variety of food?

Not at all, you can keep the same types of food that you usually have on hand. One of the many advantages of transitioning to a full choice model is that neighbors will have the opportunity to select their own food rather than taking things home that they may not need or use. Remember, neighbors are the experts on what food items they need for themselves and their families. This may mean that neighbors will need more of some items than others or won't take the full allotment of certain items. Offering choice *can* facilitate offering more variety. Instead of sourcing enough of each item for every neighbor to get 1, you can offer a mixture of similar items and neighbors can select their preference.

13. How do I maintain equity without imposing limits in a full choice model?

Sometimes placing limits on certain food items is necessary to maintain inventory and to keep things fair. For example, if you have a limited supply of fresh pineapple, you may limit availability to offering one per household. If you have more than enough of a given product to accommodate all of the neighbors you generally see that day, consider removing limits.

14. As a school pantry, how do we offer more choice while maintaining the safety of our schools?

Schools are a key connection point in serving families as they are already coming on site. It is up to the school to decide if you would like parents and community members to come on site to use the pantry or have the students select the foods themselves and take it home. Offering pantry hours during resource/family nights can be one option. Sharing the options with parents in advance can also facilitate students selecting foods themselves, with a family grocery list - a great life skill!

15. School staff often have limited time and resources to offer choice, combined with a high turnover rate. What can we do as a food bank to support site sustainability?

Offering choice can be a less time and space intensive process for school pantries as the limited staff do not need to pack backs or store prepacked bags. Food banks can support the schools by connecting to local volunteer groups (such as local churches or service groups) and coordinate deliveries for shopping nights so that the school is not storing perishable materials on site for long periods of time. Identifying a secondary contact at each school can also help with sustainability planning in the case of staff turnover.

16. What resources are available to support us during this transition?

When in doubt, reach out! Contact your food bank for additional support. They are here to help you navigate the transition to a choice model food pantry.