



RIVER BEND
FOOD BANK

MEMBER OF
FEEDING
AMERICA

Making the Switch

*A Guide for Converting to a
Guest Choice Food Pantry*

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 guests at most food pantries are able to enjoy. Instead, guests are often restricted to pre-selected food items that may not be the best fit for their families or their unique situations. This method of food distribution 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 guests, many began to select items for guests in advance.

Today, we are discovering that this method of food pantry distribution results in guests and families receiving items they may not need or want, or can't use. Many of these items are subsequently thrown away. 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
- Valuable physical and operational resources are wasted when food is thrown away
- Food pantries exhaust resources purchasing items that, if given a choice, a majority of guests may not want or need
- Guests who visit food pantries often have little flexibility in other areas of their lives, and feel a lack of dignity about their food being chosen for them as well



With so many issues surrounding this antiquated pantry model, it is evident that this model no longer fits the the lifestyles or preferences of guests and leads to unnecessary waste. As a result, we believe new methods of distributing food must be explored. Guests should have the luxury of choosing products for themselves, which also helps to prolong precious pantry resources. ***Such a freedom is possible for food pantry guests through the guest choice pantry model.***

The Guest Choice Model

Offering guest choice in your pantry is exactly what it sounds like; although product, staff, and volunteer availability still remain large limitations. The guest choice model allows guests to participate in the food selection process and make decisions about different products for themselves. Well-operated guest choice pantries are conceptually similar to a grocery store: all available products are displayed and guests are permitted to browse and “shop” for what they want and need. In pantries with limited physical space, guests may be provided with a list of available products and can choose which items they want from the list. Pantry staff members or volunteers then assemble food bags or boxes based on guest selections. While there are various ways to implement the guest choice model, they all share one fundamental characteristic: **freedom for guests in making their own food choices**. This model is already currently in use in many pantries. Provided below are testimonials about guest choice from several choice pantry guests and volunteers:



“Wow, this felt like going to the supermarket.”

“Everybody made me feel like it is OK to come to the pantry.”

“This is fun! This is much easier on my back!”

“I like picking my own food because I can plan meals while I am choosing.”

“I can’t believe the choices and amount of food.”

“I can’t pay my 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.”

How does guest choice benefit the food pantry?

Fiscally conscious food pantries are always seeking ways to streamline, especially during periods of high utility costs and low donations. After all, a dollar saved is another dollar that can be used to purchase food. We have found that traditional food pantries often suffer from several financial disadvantages when compared to guest choice pantries.

1

Traditional pantries provide pre-boxed products, and in doing so, may be wasting food as guests throw away food items they cannot use, cannot prepare, or simply do not want. Food preferences, needs, and available resources differ from family to family, and the food going home with a family should reflect those differences. When families are able to use all of the food they receive, the food stretches further, and the pantry experiences far less wasted resources.

Additionally, with the guest choice model, pantries can easily monitor which food items are popular and which are not – simply by observing what is left on the shelf – and use that knowledge to inform future purchases. In turn, the pantry becomes more efficient as rarely selected items are purchased less frequently.



2

Guest choice pantries also benefit from greater staff efficiency. In a traditional model, pre-packing boxes can be very time consuming. With that task removed, in a guest choice pantry, staff can spend more time on other tasks that are beneficial to guests, such as adjusting pantry hours to serve more guests, and spending more time visiting with guests and making them feel welcome.



"But does my pantry have the space?"

Every traditional pantry, from a church basement to large supply closet in the stock room, has enough room to convert to the guest choice model. Keeping a manageable inventory on site allows for a smaller, more organized pantry. The guest 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.

Any space can be adjusted to fit the guest choice model!



How does guest choice benefit the guest?

Most importantly, providing guests the opportunity to make their own food choices helps to establish an atmosphere of dignity. Guests often have very few choices in other areas of their lives, and the traditional food pantry model can in some cases make guests feel embarrassed or lower their self-esteem. Allowing guests to choose their own products when they visit the pantry empowers them to make decisions for their family.

Guest choice also ensures that families with special dietary needs are not receiving food they cannot eat, and it prevents the possibility of distributing highly perishable foods to households unequipped with functional stoves or refrigerators.

Frequently Asked Questions:

1) Our pantry is very small – How do we physically make guest choice work?

Often the biggest concern from traditional pantries is that they lack the space to implement and operate a guest choice pantry effectively. However, with a little planning, all pantry layouts can be converted to the guest choice model. For some pantries, conversion may require adjusting the way food is arranged on the shelves to mimic a grocery store and better accommodate guest shoppers. In some cases, it may be helpful to convert a portion of the storage space into shelving units, which increases the space available for browsing and allows multiple guests to shop at the same time.

Regardless of the layout in your pantry, the guest choice model can be implemented. Below are some things to keep in mind when planning for the physical conversion:

Tips

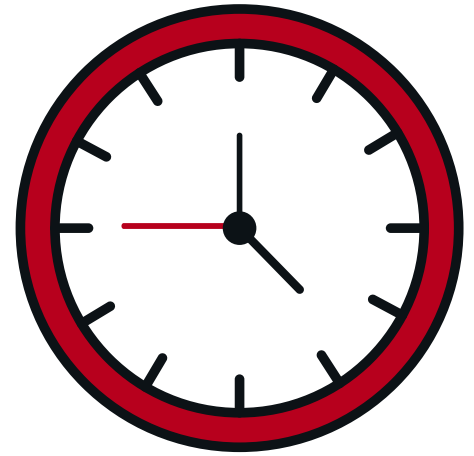
- Consider using stackable or expandable shelving units to maximize the use of space between the floor and ceiling
- Minimize counter space (especially if previously used for creating pre-packed boxes) and use the new open space to accommodate additional shelving
- If a large portion of your pantry is used for storage, consider adding aisles so guests can browse more of the space. Non-perishable items have a long shelf life, so you can simultaneously store extra items and make them available to guests as they shop
- If you're concerned about bulk food storage, keep in mind that ideally with the guest choice model, this will be a temporary challenge. As you start to learn more about which items are selected most often, you can reduce the space occupied by unused bulk food items

One of our smallest guest choice pantries is only about the size of a closet! A corner of the pantry is lined with shelving units, where canned goods and grocery items are sorted by item and stacked. A refrigerator/freezer in the middle of the floor keeps perishable items fresh. Finally, a third of the space (located near the entrance) is reserved for intake purposes.

Space is a common challenge, but also one that can be easily solved with a little creativity from staff and volunteers

2) Will our pantry's hours of operation need to change?

Many food pantries have little to no paid staff, and rely heavily on volunteers to operate effectively. Volunteer availability often dictates a pantry's hours of operation, which in turn affect the number of guests served during those hours. As a wide variety of individuals with various situations graciously devote their time to volunteer, food pantries should try to provide a variety of operational hours to accommodate volunteer needs and preferences.



When a pantry converts to guest choice, the hours the staff and volunteers would have spent preparing 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 8am until 4pm, 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 guests. If this traditional pantry were to convert to the guest choice model, the four volunteers preparing boxes would no longer be required. The six box-distributing volunteer slots would be converted to guest-aiding slots and those volunteers would accompany the guests 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 guest-aiding volunteer slot in both the morning and afternoon, utilizing 8 of the 16 volunteer hours, and four 2-hour guest-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
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
Guest Choice Pantry	4 volunteers to aid guests (16 volunteer hours)	4 volunteers to aid guests (16 volunteer hours)	4 volunteers to aid guests (8 volunteer hours)	20 + 20 = 40

As this example illustrates, a food pantry making the conversion to guest choice could potentially increase the number of volunteers that directly interact with guests 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 two hours on a weekend, it can provide far greater access for more guests to the food they need.

Conversion to guest choice can also impact hours of operation indirectly, as some individuals will be more inclined to volunteer when they are able to interact with guests in addition to routine tasks like packing boxes. In turn, as more attractive volunteer opportunities are offered, the pantry may see an increase in volunteers and volunteer hours, allowing for additional hours of operation.

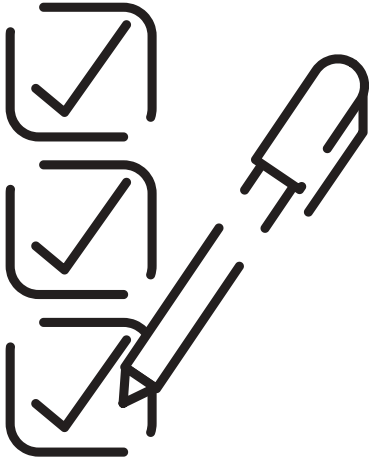
3) Will the role of the volunteer change?

Yes, volunteer roles will change upon making the conversion to the guest choice model. Typical volunteer tasks including box preparation and box distribution will no longer be necessary. Instead, volunteer responsibilities will shift more heavily toward interacting with guests and assisting guests as they shop.

New volunteer responsibilities might include clarifying information on nutrition labels, providing recommendations about which food items to select, sharing healthy recipe ideas, and assisting guests with pushing carts and/or loading items in their vehicles. The shift in volunteer responsibilities to a more conversational, supportive role helps to further establish a store-like shopping experience for guests, and helps to honor their dignity and make them feel welcome.



4) How long will it take to process guests?



In a traditional pantry, a guest arrives, fills out any necessary paperwork, and is handed a pre-packed box of food. The interaction between the guest and volunteers and/or staff is minimal and brief.

In a guest choice pantry on the other hand, guests will spend more time in the pantry just as they would in a grocery store. Guests take time to browse the inventory and carefully select items for their family, so the amount of time each guest spends in the pantry may vary. As a result, it might be difficult at first to predict how many guests your pantry will be able to serve per hour or per day. One helpful tactic can be to keep track of how long each guest is spending in the pantry for a few weeks to find the average length of time per guest. Also, keep in mind that time saved by not making pre-packed boxes can be re-allocated to increase operational hours to serve more guests if necessary.

5) We need more volunteers! Where can we find them?

- Local businesses- In some cases, companies encourage their employees to volunteer and will compensate them for time they miss working while volunteering
- Organizations and churches- These groups often look for opportunities to volunteer together
- Schools and universities- Many high school and college students seek volunteer opportunities to gain new experiences and fulfill community service requirements

Additional Tips:

- Offer volunteer time slots on evenings and weekends when many potential volunteers have a more flexible schedule. This is also beneficial for guests who may not be able to visit the pantry during the work week
- Be intentional about which volunteer tasks you offer. Volunteers are more likely to keep coming back if they feel they had a meaningful experience

6) Will the nutritional quality of meals be affected if guests choose their own food?

The switch to the guest choice model is an adjustment for your guests as well. Although guests will appreciate the freedom to choose their own food, some guests may be accustomed to receiving pre-packed boxes and might not have much experience in making health-conscious food decisions for themselves. Furthermore, guests are often used to making their money stretch as far as possible at the grocery store, which typically means choosing less healthy, lower priced items. You might see the same patterns in your guest choice pantry as guests continue to shop this way out of habit.



This creates a huge opportunity for your volunteers to step in. Volunteers can help guests understand nutritional labels, and provide suggestions for well-rounded meal planning. They can also help guests understand how to prepare foods they aren't familiar with, and can help offer food options that fit the unique needs of the guest's family. This helps guests to expand their horizons and learn to prepare foods with higher nutritional quality for their families - a change that will hopefully last for years to come.

Keep in mind that nutritional knowledge is acquired, and volunteers may need additional training to understand nutritional concepts enough to be comfortable discussing them with guests. In some cases, it might make sense to bring in a dietician or other health specialist to train your volunteers and to ensure they are all on the same page in their ability to provide sound nutritional advice.

7) How can our guest choice pantry prevent giving away food too quickly?

A common misconception is that converting to guest choice will dramatically affect the rate of food distribution. However, we have seen that there is little to no change in the rate food is distributed. As the number of guests visiting your pantry and the amount of food coming in to the pantry remain constant, so will the amount of food going out. Although meals are no longer pre-packed, you can create simple guidelines for guests to follow, such as a certain allotment of each type of item per visit, to ensure that all guests have enough food. Some pantries find it helpful to base these allocations on the number of people in each guest's household.

The change that occurs is in the type of food distributed. As outlined previously, as your staff learns which items guests tend to choose most often, inventory changes can be made accordingly.

8) How can our guest choice pantry accommodate the needs of senior citizens?

According to pantry reports, over 30% of pantry guests are seniors, and that percentage is expected to grow as seniors will soon make up the largest demographic in the nation. This is of particular interest to pantries converting to guest choice because many senior citizens have special dietary and physical needs and/or limitations that need to be considered. This is another area where volunteers can be incredibly helpful. Volunteers can help senior guests read labels, assist in selecting foods, carry baskets, push carts, and pull items from shelves for guests when needed.

Here are a few tips for pantry organization that can help make your guest choice pantry more accessible for seniors and others:



- Try to place food items in a mid-height range to limit how often guests need to reach up or bend down
- Have baskets and/or carts available for guests to use while shopping
- Increase the width between aisles to accommodate walkers, canes, and wheelchairs
- Consider offering products especially relevant for seniors, such as denture cleaners, certain over-the-counter medications and supplements, personal hygiene products, and pet food
- Make sure volunteers are available to assist visually impaired guests in reading labels and selecting items

Additional Information

Can choice pantries place restrictions on certain items?

Yes! In order to ensure that all guests have access to a variety of foods, the pantry should decide which items might need restrictions. Some pantries allow only a certain number of any particular food item. Others put up signs to indicate temporary restrictions based on their inventory. For example, if a pantry is running low on canned corn, a sign can indicate that guests are currently limited to one can of corn per visit. Volunteers should be updated on any current restrictions each time they volunteer.

Can choice pantries place incentives on certain items?

Yes! Certain items, such as fresh produce, have a short shelf life and must be used quickly. Therefore, many pantries offer these items as a free choice. Pantries may also choose to promote healthy items like whole grains, which can be difficult to move, in a similar way.

How should the pantry be arranged?

The choice pantry should be arranged so that food items are shelved according to food groups. Shelves should be color coded using signs or stickers, which makes it easier for guests to see which food items fall into which category. For example, all vegetables should be located in one section of the pantry, and proteins should be located in another.

How many choices should be allowed per food group?

Each 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.



Please feel free to reach out to Becky Gruhl, Director of Agency Partnerships, with any questions:
bgruhl@riverbendfoodbank.org or 563-345-6490, ext. 217.



**RIVER BEND
FOOD BANK**

MEMBER OF
**FEEDING
AMERICA**