**How to Start a Food Pantry, Part II - Food Bank of North Alabama**

1. **Starting Up**

Location, location, location! Remember some people who will need services will not be able to climb steps. Also remember that you and your volunteers will have to carry food from your trucks into the pantry.

Below are storage guidelines and requirements. Be sure to take these ideas into consideration when selecting the location of your food pantry.

*STRUCTURE*

* The food storage facility should be temperature controlled, with adequate ventilation. Allowable temperature variance is 45 to 70 degrees.
* The structure should be secure, with locks in good working order.
* All walls and floors should be in good repair without chipped, scaling, peeling or torn areas.
* Food storage areas should be separate from interviewing areas.
* For food safety reasons, create a simple pest control program. If there is evidence of an infestation, it is advisable to engage a commercial pest control company.

*DRY STORAGE*

* All surfaces should be of a non-porous, washable material, and be washed with an approved disinfectant at least quarterly, and as needed during the interim.
* Store food at least 4-6 inches off the ground to prevent pest control problems. No products can be stored directly on the floor. If your supply exceeds shelving capacity, excess food can be stored on pallets, a few inches away from all walls so air can circulate.
* Thermometers must be present in all dry storage areas.
* Dry food storage should be of adequate size to allow for easy stock rotation and inventory.
* All non-food products must be stored separately from food products. For example, all non-food products should be stored on lower shelves and never above food products.

*REFRIGERATED & FROZEN STORAGE*

* Refrigerators should maintain temperatures not exceeding 41 degrees. Freezers should maintain temperatures below zero degrees.
* Thermometers must be present in all refrigerators and freezers.
* All refrigerators and freezers must be defrosted and cleaned at least quarterly, and as needed in the interim.
* Refrigerators and freezers should be large enough to allow for easy stock rotation and inventory.

**4. Your Food Distribution Policies**

You should develop the guidelines or policies you will use to determine if a family is eligible for your food services. You will have to decide what information or verification you will require a person to provide or you may decide that anyone who asks for food will be given food. It is up to you.

You need to decide on hours of operation and be consistent on days and times your pantry will be open to provide food services. Please consider evening or weekend hours to help low income working families.

Whatever you decide, be sure your policies and hours of operation are posted in the area where people will be going to ask for food so they know what you want from them. Also let other providers know when you will be open for business and what your service policies are, i.e.: 211 (Alabama Statewide Resource and Referral Program), Department of Human Resources, Social Security Office, Community Action Program, United Way, etc.

**5. Record Keeping**

If you intend to apply for membership with Food Bank of North Alabama, you will have to develop some method of keeping track of who you are serving. We will provide you with a simple eligibility form to use. Our donors may require you to submit monthly statistics to us that show the total number of families, adults and children you served in the month. We can provide you with sample copies of record forms from other pantries, just ask!

**6. Packing Groceries**

Food pantries organize their shelves much the same way grocery stores do – so you can see all the product you have to choose from when packing groceries for people in need.

How much food do you give? First, during the interview process, you should have received information of how large the family is and how long they will need the food you give them to last. Some food pantries allow the client to choose their food items, based on your limits that meet their family’s special dietary and/or food allergies. Other food pantries, pre-pack bags/boxes based on family size. Remember you are giving groceries according to their need and food preferences, not yours. At the very least, be sure you provide enough food for three days. The food you give should provide a breakfast, lunch and dinner meal for each person in the family in addition to snacks and beverages if available.

People who do not have enough food to feed themselves and their families, probably also need non-food items like hand soap, shampoo, toothpaste, laundry supplies and paper products. Give these items in a separate bag/box whenever you have them available.

A typical bag packing menu can look like this:

Breakfast Cereal, Toaster Pastry, Juice, Bread, Jelly, Granola Bars, Milk (powdered or fresh), Fruit

Lunch Soup, Peanut Butter, Crackers, Tuna, Lunch Meat, Fruit, Bread, Chips, Cookies

Dinner Spaghetti and Sauce, Stew and Rice, Tuna and Noodles, Macaroni and Cheese, Vegetables, Fruit, Cookies, Dessert Items

Additional Items: Coffee, Tea, Snacks, Beverages, Fresh Fruit and Vegetables, Condiments, Spices, Sugar, Flour, Treats, Soap and Paper Products and any other odds and ends you may have.

Most importantly, in packing groceries, be sure to check the condition of the food – if you would not serve it to your family, do not expect anyone else to either.

**7. Commitment**

You may have realized by now that running a food pantry and offering food services to people in need is a big job, think about the responsibility it carries:

Dependability – People will come to depend on your services, so be consistent in what you offer and how often. Food Pantries are, more often than not, the first coping strategy people turn to after they have exhausted help from family and friends.

Resources – Be sure you have lined up enough help both in volunteers and funds to keep your food pantry open. It does more harm than good to open for a short time, and then close because it is too much work. Please be sure you are committed in mind, spirit and body to doing this kind of work. There are many rewards, many tears and many smiles.

Good Luck and please call if you have any questions!

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