

# CLIENT CHOICE

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## A Handbook for Food Pantries



**Foodlink**  
NOURISHING LIVES

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# Section 1: What is Client Choice?

A client choice pantry provide clients with the opportunity to choose the food that best meets their needs. Every household has different food needs, which is why client choice is a better option than a standardized food package.

There are several different models for operating a client choice pantry. This handbook provides food pantry coordinators and workers with the guidance needed to set up and operate a client choice pantry that is right for them and their clients. See Section 2 for details about each of the operating models.

## The Benefits of Offering Choice

- **Serve with dignity** – Offering choice upholds the dignity of everyone who enters the pantry.
- **Enhance capability to offer cultural foods and special diet foods** – A client choice pantry is able to incorporate more varied food options that meet the needs of clients with different needs – whether those needs be due to health condition, religious practice, or community culture.
- **Enrich worker-client interactions** – Creating positive worker-client relationships can lead to increased trust, understanding, and respect among neighbors. It also can help workers understand other needs clients may have and be able to offer them information about wrap-around services or outside resources available.
- **Decrease food waste** – When clients are able to choose foods they want and have the appropriate tools to prepare, less food is wasted or left unused.
- **Make ordering and stocking the pantry easier** – Over time, pantry workers are able to determine which items are more or less desired. This makes it easier to know what to order or request from community donations.

## Testimonials

Don't just take our word for it! The following quotes are from a 2022 Feeding America survey of new client choice pantry coordinators.

**Less food waste:** “[I]f you make me take food that I don’t like or I’m not going to eat, it is going to be wasted and what’s the point?”

**More efficient services:** “It’s been really easy for [workers] to transition to this [full choice] model because not only does it take less time, but we can serve a lot more families.”

**More meaningful connections:** “It’s much more personal, it’s much more about being with the person.... [W]e have regulars [who] look for a certain volunteer... and it becomes a bond. For some people that’s the only warm face they see.”

**Clients prefer choice:** “90% of folks, when presented with the choice, would choose to shop over just getting what they get.”

**Not that hard!** “It’s just not that hard to do. Looking back, it was a lot of worry over nothing. It was very easily done.” And “Choice doesn’t take a lot of time, it’s easy to maneuver, we put it in an old room that already had shelves. It’s easier to manage than I thought.”

**Never going back!** “Once you make the switch, you don’t want to go back.” And “I also would never go back. Because allowing choice has been so powerful for people.... They feel worthy and valued because we care enough to check in with them and provide an opportunity for them to shop.”



## Section 2: Which Client Choice Model is Right for Your Pantry?

Client choice is not a one-size-fits-all system. There are several choice models to choose from, as you will see below. The model you implement will be based predominately upon these factors:

- Physical space
- Equipment
- Workers

Take some time to review the client choice models on the following pages. Discuss the details with your pantry workers and decide together which model might be best for your pantry. Keep in mind that you can modify the models, even by combining elements of different models.

Any pantry can operate as client choice; you just need to figure out which model is right for you. Make it work for your pantry!

For additional guidance, see [Appendix A](#) for a comparison table of client choice models. Below is an abbreviated version of that table.

Model	Description & Worker Role	Equipment	Space	Advantages	Disadvantages
<b>Grocery</b>	<p>This model functions much like a grocery store. Food is set up by food groups inside the pantry. Clients choose their food as they walk through the pantry.</p> <p>Workers may guide clients through their choices and/or check them out when they have finished shopping.</p>	<p><u>Necessary</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food shelves</li> </ul> <p><u>Optional</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refrigerators and freezers with clear glass doors to view products</li> <li>• Merchandising baskets and signage</li> <li>• Shopping carts</li> <li>• Check-out table</li> </ul>	<p>A space large enough to allow clients to walk around safely and view available items</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pantry workers have significant one-on-one time with clients.</li> <li>• In many cases, pantry inventory and shopping area are able to be one and the same.</li> <li>• Often, more than one client can be served at a time.</li> <li>• Clients appreciate a pantry experience that resembles shopping in a grocery store.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some pantries will not have enough space to implement this model.</li> <li>• May require labor and time to rearrange space and product setup</li> <li>• May require acquisition of additional shelving, tables, or other equipment</li> </ul>
<b>Table</b>	<p>Food is organized on tables by food group. Clients walk by each table to choose their food.</p> <p>Clients may pack their own food, or workers may assist them. Often, at least one pantry worker staffs each table.</p>	<p><u>Necessary</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tables</li> </ul> <p><u>Optional</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utility carts to transport food</li> <li>• Shopping carts</li> </ul>	<p>A space large enough to set up tables, including room to walk in between and on either side of the tables</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good option for a pantry that does not have space conducive for the grocery model to still facilitate clients being able to pick up and assess items for themselves, similar to how they would in a grocery store</li> <li>• Pantry shelves and food setup do not need to be rearranged or staged for client viewing</li> <li>• Pantry workers have one-on-one time with clients.</li> <li>• Often, several clients can be served at one time.</li> <li>• Can be implemented outdoors</li> <li>• Can be utilized for drive-thru distributions (with cases of food on pallets), with workers picking up the chosen items for the clients</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workers need to move food to and from inventory location</li> <li>• In most cases, workers will need to set up and break down folding tables.</li> <li>• Perishable foods are taken out of cold storage. This requires close attention to how long the food has been out on the tables and how hot it is in the room or outside.</li> </ul>

## Grocery Model

The Grocery Model of client choice functions much like a grocery store. Food is set up by food groups inside the pantry, and clients choose their food as they proceed along the aisles – past food shelves, refrigerators, and freezers. Workers may guide clients through their choices and/or check them out when they have finished shopping.



The pantry needs to be large enough to safely accommodate clients shopping, often while pushing a small cart. One of the great advantages of the Grocery Model is that the food storeroom and the place where clients choose their food are able to be one and the same. A backstock area is not necessary for the majority of pantries who operate a Grocery Model, and therefore, workers do not need to move the food from one room to another for the clients.

### Making It Work

1. Keep food organized by food group on pantry shelves. Have workers come to the pantry before open pantry hours, so that items can be restocked and tidied up, if necessary.
2. During the client intake, ask the client for the number of adults, children, and seniors in their household. In the Appendix, there are resources that can be printed, copied, and laminated to inform clients about the number of choices allocated per food group based on household size. Those resources can be posted to walls and shelves, or handed to clients to carry as they shop.
3. Workers can walk through the pantry with clients. This is especially helpful for clients who need assistance reaching or picking up items. And it is an excellent opportunity to encourage clients to choose more nutritious options, items they may not be familiar with, or foods that you are trying to move more quickly due to perishability.
4. Some clients may prefer to shop on their own. If that is case, make sure that they know if there are any limits on certain products – either by handing them that information to carry with them or by posting signs by those items. And you will need to have a “check-out” table in order to verify that they are receiving a pantry package that meets the minimum guidelines.

**Tip!** inform clients upfront that there is a “check-out” table. It is important to set these expectations, so they are not surprised and feel like you are “policing” food choices. Be sure to emphasize that the “check-out” is to ensure they are receiving a well-balanced pantry package, and it is not that you do not trust them.

## Equipment

- You will need shelving that accommodates the amount of food you are offering to clients.
- Refrigerator and freezer storage is important to help increase the variety of options available to clients. Ideally, your refrigerators and freezers will have glass doors. This allows clients to see into them to make choices instead of holding the doors open, thus keeping the units at proper temperatures.



**Tip!** If you do not have glass-door equipment, you can post a list of products contained within. Be sure to update the list, as needed, so you are able to meet client expectations.

- These items are helpful and in some pantries may be necessary:
  - Shopping carts
  - Table for intake and table for “check-out”
  - Merchandising baskets and signage (See Section 4 for more information.)

## Adapting the Model

There may be times that you need to adapt the Grocery Model to accommodate a particular situation, such as a pantry worker shortage or physical distancing guidelines necessary for health and safety.

You also may need to adapt the model to meet the needs of specific clients, such as those with limited English proficiency, clients with disabilities, clients without transportation, and more.

Whether you need to adapt temporarily for all clients, or as needed for specific clients, you will likely find that the easiest models to utilize are Distance and Inventory. You will not need to make any significant changes to your set-up in order to implement those models.

Guidance on implementing Distance and Inventory Models are on the pages that follow.

## Table Model

The Table Model of client choice presents foods organized by food group on tables for clients. Clients walk by each table to choose their food. Clients may pack their own food, or workers may assist them. Often, each table is staffed by at least one pantry worker.

You will need enough space to set up all the tables needed to display the available food and allow for both workers and clients to easily and safely navigate through the space and along the tables. If space is tight, try setting up tables in a U-shape.



## Making It Work

1. Have pantry workers come before open pantry hours, so that food can be transported from the storage area and organized on tables by food group. You will also need pantry workers to stay after the distribution to bring leftover food back to the storage area. Depending on what tables you have, you may need workers to set up and break the tables down, as well.

**Tip!** Some workers may find it physically difficult or tiring to assist from set-up to clean-up. Consider having workers sign up for specific shifts, so that some workers help set up and stay for part of the distribution and other workers arrive partway through the distribution and stay through clean-up.

2. During the client intake, ask the client for the number of adults, children, and seniors in their household. In the Appendix, there are resources that can be printed, copied, and laminated to inform clients about the number of choices allocated per food group based on household size. Those resources can be posted to walls and tables, or handed to clients to carry as they shop.
3. Clients walk along the tables, choosing and packing their food. Workers are available at the tables to provide information about the food available, re-stock the table if needed, and assist with reaching or picking up items for clients. Some pantries may choose to have workers walk along with the clients instead of or in addition to having workers stationed at tables. Either way, it is an excellent opportunity to encourage clients to choose more nutritious options, items they may not be familiar with, or foods that you are trying to move more quickly due to perishability.
4. If you have limits on products, be sure to tell clients upfront or have signs posted at the tables. This will help clients know that the food is being handled equitably among all clients, and that you are not “policing” food choices or favoring certain clients.
5. If you are putting perishable foods out on the tables, you must be mindful of how long those items are out of cold storage. Be sure to consider how long the food was out before the distribution started. For food safety guidelines, contact the Nutrition Resource Manager.



## Equipment

- You will need enough tables to display the available food. Often, these are folding tables that are set up and broken down for each pantry distribution. But they can be tables that are always in a certain room, and the pantry uses them at certain scheduled times.
- These items are helpful and in some pantries may be necessary:
  - Utility carts
  - Transport dollies
  - Shopping carts
  - Table for intake
  - Coolers with ice and/or thermal blankets for perishable items on hot days
  - Merchandising signage to post to walls or tables (See Section 4 for more information.)

## Adapting the Model

There may be times that you need to adapt the Table Model to accommodate a particular situation, such as a pantry worker shortage or physical distancing guidelines necessary for health and safety.

Under those circumstances, you may want to consider temporarily implementing a drive-thru distribution. You can largely operate your distribution the same way, but the food is presented on pallets and loaded into clients' cars for them. You can still offer choices to clients by talking to them through their windows. Or, you can present them with an inventory sheet to select their choices, and then the sheet can be passed along the workers as the car passes each station.

You also may need to adapt the Table Model to meet the needs of specific clients, such as those with limited English proficiency, clients with disabilities, clients without transportation, and more. The Distance Model and Inventory Model are both excellent options for meeting the needs of those clients.

Guidance on implementing Distance and Inventory Models are on the pages that follow.

## Distance Model

The Distance Model enables pantries to offer client choice that may not be otherwise able to do so. Commonly, this is due to the pantry being within a very small space, like a closet. But the Distance Model can be implemented for many other space or location-related reasons. For example, sometimes a pantry may be situated in a part of a building that cannot permit public access – perhaps due to security restrictions or handicap accessibility (e.g. only accessible by staircase).



Additionally, even if a pantry typically operates a different Client Choice model, the Distance Model can be implemented by pantries on an as needed basis. For example, a Grocery Model pantry might utilize the Distance Model if there is a need for physical distancing, due to temporary health or safety measures. Or a Grocery Model pantry may use the Distance Model as a means to accommodate specific clients who are not able to go inside the pantry personally for a particular reason, e.g. health condition, anxiety disorder, lack of transportation, and more.

There are two different ways to operate a Distance Model pantry – In-person and Remote.

### *In-person*

The In-person Distance Model is also called the “Window” Model. The name comes from the idea of a client looking into the pantry through a window, as in the picture at right. Clients make choices by pointing to and/or telling the worker which food they want.



### Making It Work

1. Keep food organized by food group on pantry shelves. Have workers come to the pantry before open pantry hours, so that items can be restocked and tidied up, if necessary.
2. During the client intake, ask the client for the number of adults, children, and seniors in their household. In the Appendix, there are resources that can be printed, copied, and laminated to inform clients about the number of choices allocated per food group based on household size. Those resources can be posted to walls or handed to clients to refer to during their visit.
3. A worker inside the pantry works directly with the client situated just outside of the pantry. The client points at and/or tells the worker their choices.

**Tip!** To avoid potential miscommunication and frustration, workers should pick up items and bring them over to the client if there is a question of whether they have chosen the right item, or if the client simply wants a closer look. Pantries can also hang signs with large, bold lettering naming the foods available on the shelves.

## Equipment

- Shelving and refrigerator and freezer storage
- Window or Dutch door (aka half-door), pictured at right, to allow clients to look into pantry and choose items
- These items are helpful and in some pantries may be necessary:
  - Intake table
  - Table to place packed-up pantry packages for clients to pick up
  - Merchandising signage to post to walls or shelves (See Section 4 for more information.)



## Remote

The Remote Distance Model utilizes electronic technology for the worker and client to communicate. The client can be on-site, but it is not necessary. Read on for several different electronic methods that can be utilized to implement this model.

## Making It Work

1. Set up a method for clients to be able to see what is available in the pantry and for workers to be able to communicate with pantry clients. Here are some options:
  - Set up video cameras strategically around the pantry to show what is available in each food group. Transmit the video feeds to computer monitors in a waiting room. Clients can fill out an inventory sheet, based on what they see and want to choose. (See Inventory Model for guidance on inventory sheets.) Or, an intercom system, Ring doorbell, or phone can be utilized for the client to communicate with the worker.
  - Set up web cams strategically around the pantry to show what is available in each food group. Transmit the video feeds to a website that clients can access to see what is available. Clients can fill out an online form for what they would like to choose. (See Inventory Model for guidance on online forms.) Or, a pantry worker can speak to the client on the phone, while shopping for the client.
  - Worker and client can communicate via a smartphone video call app, such as Facetime or Zoom. The worker shows options to the client as they walk around the pantry shopping for them. The client can be in a waiting room, outside, or completely off-site.
2. Keep food organized by food group on pantry shelves. Have workers come to the pantry before open pantry hours, so that items can be restocked and tidied up, if necessary.

3. During the client intake, ask the client for the number of adults, children, and seniors in their household. As the client shops, the worker will inform the client of the number of choices per food group that are available to them. If utilizing an inventory sheet, write down for the client how many choices per food group. (See Inventory Model for further guidance.)
4. A worker inside the pantry works directly with the client, creating the pantry package for them.

## Equipment

- Shelving and refrigerator and freezer storage
- Applicable electronics, based on how this model is being implemented, e.g. video cameras, web cams, computer monitors, Ring doorbell, intercom, smartphone, website
  - **Tip!** Think about the technological capabilities of the majority of your workers and clients. Do most have smartphones? Keep in mind that if you use a smartphone for video communication, both users need to be able to access the same application. So you would not want to rely on Facetime, for example, as that is only available to iPhone/iPad users.
- Back-up method, in case of technological failure or user error, e.g. inventory sheets and pens
- These items are helpful and in some pantries may be necessary:
  - Intake table
  - Table to place packed-up pantry packages for clients to pick up
  - Merchandising signage to post to shelves (See Section 4 for more information.)

## Adapting the Model

The Distance Model requires significant one-on-one time between a worker and a client. Take that into account when planning. Consider complementary strategies for streamlining the process. Here are some ideas:

- Schedule client appointments, so that there is never more than one client looking through the pantry window and talking with the worker at a time.
- Pre-pack several different “meal kits” that can be offered to clients as part of their pantry package, e.g. tuna noodle casserole meal kit. This still provides choice but can cut down on the amount of time needed for each client.
- Plan for how you can handle potential difficulty communicating remotely, especially if there is a language barrier. For example, if some of your clients are most comfortable speaking Spanish, try to have a Spanish speaking worker available to work directly with them.

## Inventory Model

The Inventory Model is the one client choice model in which clients do not see inside the food pantry. Instead, they are presented with a list of what is available. While it is preferable for clients to be able to see the options for themselves, some pantries may not be able to implement the other client choice models. But the great advantage of the Inventory Model is that *any* pantry can do it.

There are three different ways to operate an Inventory Model pantry – In-person, by Phone, or Online.



### *In-person*

A list of food available is posted or provided to clients, who are in a waiting area. The clients choose their food from the list by marking off choices on inventory sheet. Workers take the sheet into the pantry and assemble the clients' pantry packages.

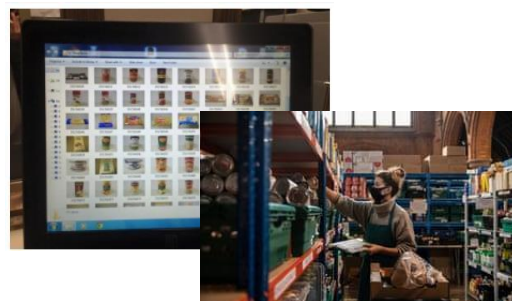
### *Phone*

Over the phone, a worker tells clients which foods are available. Clients tell the worker their choices. Workers assemble the clients' pantry packages, which are then staged for pickup and/or delivery.



### *Online*

Clients make selections through an online ordering system. Workers assemble the clients' pantry packages, which are then staged for pickup and/or delivery.



## Making It Work

1. Create a system for compiling a list of the pantry's inventory by food group. This list then needs to be communicated appropriately per the method of Inventory Model being implemented.

**In-person:** Available inventory can be written on a white board or chalk board. When an item is no longer available, it should be erased. Alternatively, a paper inventory list can be provided to clients. That list can be formatted so that the client can mark off their choices right on it. Or, they can write their choices on a separate provided sheet.

**Phone:** There are two different ways to implement Inventory by phone. One option is for a worker to be in the pantry while talking on the phone to the client. The worker lists for the client what they see is available in the each food group. The other option is for an inventory list to be provided to the worker(s) on the phone with clients. This can be a physical piece of paper or an

electronic communication. When an item is no longer available, this information needs to be conveyed to the worker(s). The worker can mark off the client's choices right on the inventory sheet, on a separate sheet, or in an electronic file or program (e.g. Word document, Excel spreadsheet, or Google Form).

**Online:** The inventory must be updated in the online application being used, so that the client only sees options that are truly available to them. The client makes their selections and submits the shopping form, which the pantry receives through the application.

**Tip!** Consider using an online platform that enables you to upload images of special items that you typically do not have. Or if you pre-pack meal kits, showing what those look like may be helpful to clients.

2. During client intake, ask the client for the number of adults, children, and seniors in their household. For the online version, this would be asked at the beginning of the shopping form.
3. Once the worker has the client's choices, the pantry package can be packed – either by that worker or by a different worker.

**Tip!** If implementing the phone version, it is possible for the worker to volunteer from home. The worker can send the client's information over to the pantry (e.g. via email) or bring the order to the pantry later. As long as the client understands when the pantry package will be available for pickup or delivery, the ordering and packing do not need to happen back-to-back.

4. If in-person, the pantry packages are handed off to the client. If by phone or online, the pantry packages are staged for pickup and/or delivery.

**Tip!** For phone and online, make sure the client knows exactly how and when their pantry package will be available for them. If possible, provide them with options (e.g. time ranges for pickup.)

## Equipment

- Shelving and refrigerator and freezer storage
- Table to place packed-up pantry packages for clients to pick up or be staged for delivery
- If using a phone and the *worker is in the pantry* while talking to client:
  - Cordless phone or smartphone
- If using a phone and the *worker is not in the pantry* while talking to client:
  - Any kind of phone

- Inventory list
- Inventory sheet or electronic file or platform to fill out client's choices
- If Online:
  - Online client ordering platform (Examples: [Google Forms](#), [Oasis Insight](#), [SmartChoice](#), [PantrySoft](#), [PantryEasy](#))
  - Photos of available product uploaded to ordering form (optional)
- If In-person:
  - White board (and dry erase markers) or chalk board (and chalk) and/or inventory lists
  - Inventory sheets for clients to fill out (and pens)
  - Copy paper and ability to make copies
  - Chairs for clients waiting
  - Clipboards (helpful if other writing surfaces are not available)
  - Intake table

## Adapting the Model

The In-person and Phone versions of the Inventory Model require significant one-on-one time between a worker and a client. And the Online version may not be accessible for all clients nor for all pantry workers. Take these into account when planning and consider these strategies:

- For Phone: Use a pantry voicemail system, so that clients do not have to wait on hold or get a busy signal. In your voicemail message, ask clients to say when they will be available for a call-back. And set expectations in your voicemail message about how soon they can expect that call.
- In-person and Phone: Offer several different pre-packed "meal kits" that can be offered to clients as part of their pantry package, e.g. tuna noodle casserole meal kit. This still provides choice but can cut down on the amount of time needed for each client.
- Online: Consider utilizing the Online method in conjunction with the Phone or In-person method. Some clients may have difficulty using the platform or may not have consistent access to the internet. And some pantry workers may not be comfortable with the technology required.

## Section 3: Client Choice Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. Will our pantry run out of food if we offer client choice?

No. Client choice does not mean clients can take any amount of food they want. Pantries have guidelines for how much food clients can take according to household size, and that does not change for a client choice pantry. In general, you should not see an increase in the overall quantity of product movement.

### 2. What if just a few clients take all of the inventory of specific items?

Just as client choice does not mean that clients can take an unlimited amount of food, it also does not mean that clients can take an unlimited number of specific items. As needed, due to inventory considerations, pantries may utilize product limits. For example, if you have 10 dozen eggs in stock, and you expect to see 10 or more households during pantry hours, you can limit eggs to one dozen per household.

### 3. Will client choice cost our pantry more to run?

No. In fact, you should find that you are using your food dollars more efficiently and effectively. There are two main reasons:

1. Clients are able to take the food they want and need. As a result, less food is wasted.
2. Pantries do not have to ensure they are giving the same food to everyone, which can allow for the purchase of more variable food items, including great, low-cost, grant-eligible donated items.

### 4. How will we know what food to stock?

Start by considering these questions about your current operations:

- What foods do your clients often ask for?
- What foods do your clients often ask to take out of their pantry packs?
- Do you find food you distributed left outside the pantry, in your trash containers, or donated back to the pantry?

Once you have operated as client choice for a little while (typically a few months), it will become apparent which foods are more or less popular – based on which product moves quickly and which product you have trouble moving, and based on your conversations with clients when they are making their selections. Also, you can survey your clients and then assess the responses!



## 5. How much variety am I expected to offer?

It will take time to figure out how much variety works for your pantry. Here are some tips to help you:

- **Start small. You don't have to offer 10 different options for every type of food.** You may find that some food groups need several options to be available in order to meet the client needs, while some food groups only need a few.
- **Vary the foods you offer clients from time to time.** Clients do not necessarily need all options at all times. And offering different choices will help you discover what is more popular with clients. For example, if you typically offer three items in a food group at a time, switch out those foods for different choices. Such as, in the protein group, offer canned salmon, ground beef, and canned beans one time, and canned tuna, ground turkey, and peanut butter another time.
- **Make community donations count!** If you receive community donations, e.g. through food drives, encourage people to donate *specific* foods that are popular with your clients. You can create a flier or brochure that informs the community about what the pantry needs.
- **Order mixed retail donated product from the food bank.** When you receive assorted retail donated product that is sorted by product category into banana boxes, you are instantly better able to offer your clients choice. The product in those boxes are not uniform and will bring great variety to your pantry.

## 6. What if we don't have enough food to offer choice and still meet the pantry packing guidelines?

Whether providing standardized food packages or offering client choice, any pantry receiving support from the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) is required to meet the minimum food guide for a 3-day pantry package. In general, there should not be a significant difference in the overall quantity of food that is distributed via standard pantry packages and client choice pantry packs. For assistance, contact Foodlink's Nutrition Resource Manager.

## 7. People with many different life experiences and needs visit our pantry. The way we handle that is by treating everyone the same and giving everyone exactly the same food. How will be able to accommodate so many different needs?

By listening to your clients, and monitoring how your product inventory moves, you can learn what you need to have in stock as much as possible to meet as many of the needs of your clients as is feasible. It will also help you to avoid offering certain products that the majority of your clients *do not* want. Additionally, because there are several different models for offering client choice, your pantry can incorporate accommodations needed in order to better assist clients, such as individuals with disabilities, special needs, or limited English proficiency.

## **8. How can we move unpopular food or items that may spoil quickly, such as ripe fresh fruit and vegetables?**

There are numerous strategies you can utilize to move these items. First, let clients take as much of that item as they want! You can also implement merchandising techniques (see section 4), provide recipes, suggest meal “bundles,” or set up cooking demonstrations with samples. For assistance and resources or for other ideas, contact Foodlink’s Nutrition Resource Manager.

## **9. What if our volunteers don’t want us to switch our pantry model?**

Change can be difficult for many people. It will be important to provide plenty of information and give them the opportunity to ask questions and express concerns. You will want to explain to your volunteers why you believe client choice will be positive for the pantry, the clients, and even the workers too. Here are some tips to help you:

- Share this handbook with them; have group conversations and one-on-one conversations. Don’t disregard their concerns, but explain why you personally think it is important to offer clients choice. Discuss how you can work together to make the transition.
- Discuss the details of different client choice models. (See Section 2 and [Appendix A.](#)) Decide together which model will best suit your pantry. You can even consider combining elements of different models or implementing different models at different times.
- Emphasize the benefits to the pantry workers, such as enhanced volunteer experience, improved interactions with clients and opportunities for relationship-building, and less physical labor. If any of your workers are looking to gain job skills, client choice can provide customer service experience and the opportunity to improve communication skills.
- Ask Member Services staff for assistance setting up a visit to an existing client choice pantry in your community. If your volunteers see one in action, they will likely feel a lot more comfortable with the idea. And it’s a great opportunity to ask questions of experienced client choice pantry workers.
- Remember that you can start small. You do not need to transform your entire pantry or even every food group right away.

## **10. Will client choice mean more work for pantry volunteers?**

Not at all. Client choice will require *different* work from volunteers, but not *more* work. Volunteers will spend more time assisting and talking with clients instead of preparing standard

food bags. Most of their work time will be spent during program service hours rather than before clients arrive.

### **11. What roles do volunteers play in a client choice pantry?**

There are many different roles for a volunteer in a client choice pantry. Some examples are: Greeter, Sign-in/Intake, Inventory Replenishment, Shopping Assistant, Bagger, and Carrying Assistant/Runner, and Floater. For detailed descriptions, see [Appendix B](#).

### **12. We have a line around the block. How will we have time to offer client choice?**

Client choice does not require more time; it requires rethinking how time is spent. For example: Let's say your program currently spends two hours packing bags and two hours distributing bags. That is four hours of volunteer time. If you implement client choice, you no longer need volunteers to pack bags in advance, and therefore, you can use all four hours of volunteer time to serve clients. To avoid having clients waiting in line for hours, you can let your clients know that your program hours will now be longer (four hours instead of two) and that there will be plenty of food available throughout the entire open hours. That way they will not all arrive at the same time. You also can implement an appointment system, so that you can spread out when clients arrive.

### **13. Our pantry is very small. Doesn't client choice require that we set up our pantry like a grocery store?**

No. Client choice is a concept that can be implemented many different ways, including with extremely limited space. A grocery store style set-up is a great option, which pantries are encouraged to implement if it is feasible for their operations. But this is not a requirement for a client choice pantry. Section 2 provides details on different client choice models.

### **14. Our pantry is delivery-only. Is it possible for us to operate as client choice?**

Yes! Client choice can be implemented even if clients never enter your pantry – whether that is because you offer delivery only or must restrict access due to health or safety considerations. Read on in the handbook for how to implement client choice at a distance.

## Section 4: Merchandising for a Client Choice Food Pantry

Merchandising is the activity of promoting goods, especially by their presentation, in retail outlets. Merchandising your pantry product allows individuals to notice and select items they may have otherwise overlooked. You can use this technique to promote the most nutritious items in your pantry.

You do not need to operate a Grocery client choice model to implement merchandising techniques. Any client choice model that involves clients seeing the product for themselves should incorporate at least some of the principles of merchandising. Additionally, merchandising techniques also help your workers implement client choice – even if you are implementing the Inventory Model.

### Keys to Successful Merchandising:

- Present a clean and organized pantry
- Create the appearance of abundance
- Be thoughtful with placement of product
- Use signage to help guide individuals

Read on for how to implement these strategies. Small changes to your pantry can help you make the healthy choice the easy choice for your clients!

## Cleanliness and Organization

First impressions count. Create a welcoming space by keeping your pantry neat, clean, and organized.

- **Demonstrate high food safety and sanitation standards.** Clients will see that you value the importance of their health and well-being.  
*Tip!* Create a Master Cleaning Schedule. Make regular cleaning a routine.
- **Keep dust off shelves and products.** This makes the product more enticing to clients (and helps with pest control).  
*Tip!* Have workers dust product when there is downtime. Prevent dust from building up in the first place.
- **Organize product by the five food groups.** It is easier for clients to make choices within a food group if the relevant foods are grouped together.

**Tip!** Print, laminate, and hang these signs to help organize product and create an attractive display. (See [Appendix G](#) for full-size signs, in English and Spanish.)



## Abundance

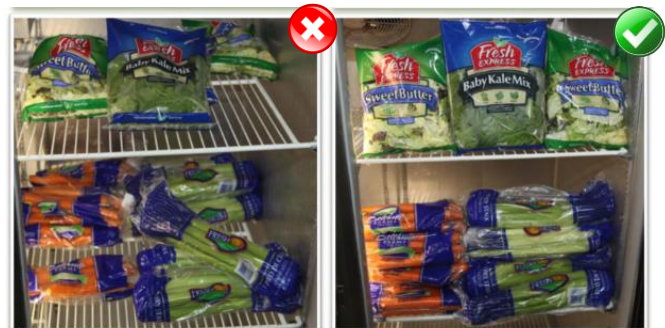
Create and maintain displays that appear full and abundant, even if stock is running low.

Pile it high! A fuller display is more noticeable and conveys freshness. Tilting baskets forward can also make the product appear plentiful.



Consolidate items to make displays appear bountiful and attractive. In the example at left, the apples and oranges can each be transferred to smaller baskets. Or, they can be combined into one larger basket, as shown.

“Fronting” or “facing” product is aligning product on the outer edge of the shelf. This assists in stock rotation, but it also makes the shelves look tidier and create a sense of abundance, encouraging customers to select an item.



For canned goods, you can purchase can dispensers, as pictured below, to achieve this practice with ease.

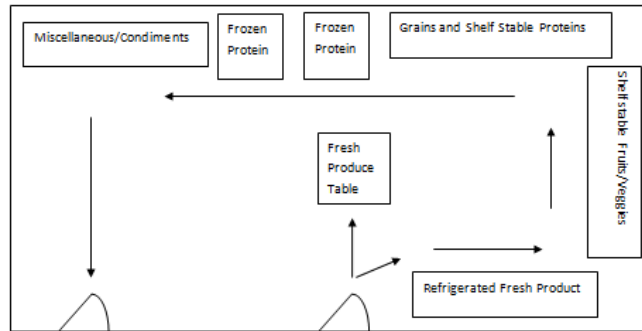


## Placement

Think about the general layout of your food shelves. Consider what a client will see first when they enter the space and what they will see right before they leave. How can you set up the flow of shelving and displays to promote healthy and fresh foods in high-traffic areas?

Try placing highly nutritious items, like fresh produce, at the front entry of the pantry. This encourages clients to fill up their shopping cart with healthy foods first.

Here is an example of a pantry set-up that is promoting highly nutritious items first and less nutritious “extras” last.



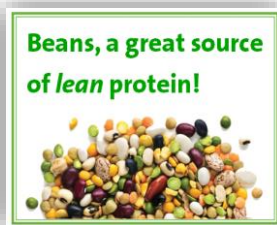
You can also promote items by placing them at eye level, so they are more likely to be noticed and chosen.

## Signage

Use signs to steer clients to healthier choices. Remove advertising for non-nutritious choices like soda pop, and strategically place healthy imagery and information in high-traffic areas.

For example, you could hang up a MyPlate poster or produce imagery in the client intake or waiting area.

There are free MyPlate posters available at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/team-nutrition>.



Use these signs (available to print from [Appendix G](#)) to promote some of your most nutritious offerings.

## Section 5: Additional Resources

Your Member Services team is here to help – by offering nutrition education workshops and cooking demonstrations for clients, trainings for pantry workers, and the ability to apply for capital equipment funding support. Contact any member of the Member Services team for assistance, and see below for more information.

### Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables

Just Say Yes to Fruits and Vegetables (JSY) is a SNAP-Ed nutrition education program. JSY offers free, creative nutrition workshops to food pantry clients. Each class is about 30 minutes long and includes a food demonstration and taste-testing of a fruit or vegetable recipe, as well as handouts, low-cost recipe ideas, and free, useful take-home items, like serving utensils and cutting boards.

Topics include:

- Preparing fruits and vegetables
- Food budgeting
- Food safety
- Cooking with dried beans
- The benefits of physical activity
- Choosing healthy beverages
- Meal planning

To learn more about the JSY program, visit [www.jsyfruitveggies.org](http://www.jsyfruitveggies.org) or contact Foodlink's Nutrition Resource Manager.

### Capital Equipment

Foodlink may be able to help with some funding opportunities for equipment, such as food shelving, refrigerators, freezers, and more. If you need equipment to better meet your clients' needs, including being able to expand your client choice opportunities, let us know. Contact Foodlink's Member Services Manager for details.

### Nutrition Resource Manager

Do you need a refresher on how to implement pantry packing guidelines? Want hands-on client choice technical assistance? Unsure about certain food safety guidelines? Looking for recipe cards or meal kit ideas? Contact Foodlink's Nutrition Resource Manager for nutrition and food safety resource and training needs.

## Section 6: Additional Resources Available Online

[Appendix A: Table of Client Choice Models](#)

[Appendix B: Client Choice Volunteer Job Descriptions](#)

[Appendix C: Guidelines for Providing a Well-Balanced Pantry Package \(English & Spanish\)](#)

*Minimum Food Guide for a 3-Day Pantry Package (English & Spanish)*

*Minimum Food Guide for a 5-Day Pantry Package (English & Spanish)*

*Minimum Food Guide for a 7-Day Pantry Package (English & Spanish)*

[Appendix D: Cards for Number of Choices Based on Household Size \(English & Spanish\)](#)

*Cards for 3-Day Pantry Package (English & Spanish)*

*Cards for 5-Day Pantry Package (English & Spanish)*

*Cards for 7-Day Pantry Package (English & Spanish)*

[Appendix E: Cards for How Much Equals a Choice \(English & Spanish\)](#)

[Appendix F: Inventory Sheet Templates \(English & Spanish\)](#)

[Appendix G: Food Group and Produce Merchandising Signs \(English & Spanish\)](#)



**Foodlink**  
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2011 Mt. Read Blvd.  
Rochester, NY 14615  
(585) 328-3380  
[www.foodlinkny.org](http://www.foodlinkny.org)