



STEPS TO A HEALTHY FOOD PANTRY

————— Toolkit and Resource Guide

INTRODUCTION

Community members reach out for a helping hand when they are unable to access or afford food. They are in need of filling and nutritious foods, and they may not be able to access those without connections to their local food pantry. When neighbors are left hungry, or consume cheap, non-nutritious foods in order to get full, they are left feeling ill.

Over time, lack of access to healthy foods contributes to the incidence of community members with chronic illnesses. Feeding America, the largest domestic hunger-relief organization in the nation, found that 58 percent of households served have at least one member who has high blood pressure, and 33 percent have one member with diabetes. When these families struggle with illnesses because they don't have fresh, nutritious foods, they end up having to pay increased medical expenses. 74 percent of households served by Feeding America had to choose between paying for food or medicine. There is a crucial opportunity for pantries to interfere with the cycle of poverty and poor health outcomes. Pantries have the power to introduce fresh and healthy produce to their clients that could stop them from getting sick, spending endless money on medical care costs, and continuing the cycle of poverty.

Food pantries are crucial sources of food for many in Northern Michigan, and it is more important than ever that food pantries consider their role in supporting the health and well-being of their clients. Food pantries can improve the nutritional quality and safety of the foods they offer. **This guide is meant to support and continue the critical work food pantry directors, staff members, and volunteers do every day to feed hungry people in their communities. Inside, you'll find tips and ideas for sourcing, storing and incorporating more fresh produce in your food pantry offerings - and ways to get clients to choose it, cook it and consume it.**

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NUTRITION

NUTRIENT DENSITY

A food is nutrient dense if it contains a high amount of nutrients relative to its calorie content. For example, a fresh apple's 100 calories is more nutritionally dense than 100 calories of candy, because the apple contains vitamins, minerals and other nutrients that candy does not. Whole foods naturally have high nutrient density, but this density is altered when foods are processed or cooked with other ingredients like sugar, oil, and salt. Foods with low nutrient densities are sometimes referred to as having "empty calories" because their consumption is generally not beneficial, nutrient-wise.

SUGAR

Sugar is in almost all processed foods, though it is not always explicitly named on labels. It comes in many forms and goes by many names, and so food manufacturers have cleverly disguised it in many of their products.

Purchase, or encourage donations of food items with little to no added sugars. Encourage clients to reach for a piece of whole fruit when they crave sugar. Keeping pre-sliced fruit in the refrigerator offers a sugar-alternative for when a craving suddenly appears.

Other names for sugar include but are not limited to:

- anhydrous dextrose
- brown sugar
- confectioner's powdered sugar
- corn syrup
- corn syrup solids
- dextrose
- fructose
- high-fructose corn syrup
- honey
- invert sugar
- lactose
- malt syrup
- maltose
- maple syrup
- molasses
- nectars
- pancake syrup
- raw sugar
- sucrose
- cane juice
- evaporated corn sweetener
- crystal dextrose
- glucose
- liquid fructose
- sugar cane juice



See “Procuring Healthy Food” and “Creating a Culture of Health” sections for more suggestions that address sugars.

An informative article about updated food labels and the requirement to list sugar breakdowns as part of them: NYTimes, [Is Sugar Really Bad For You? It Depends](https://nyti.ms/3c1qTx2) – <https://nyti.ms/3c1qTx2>

SODIUM

Purchase, and encourage the donation of, products with little to no added sodium. When purchasing canned or frozen foods, favor those without added sauces or seasonings.

Encourage pantry clients to cook at home from unprocessed ingredients to reclaim control over the amount of sodium in the food they consume. Inspire them through taste tests and cooking classes or demonstrations, to experiment with herbs and spices to replace excess salt, and to taste food as they season it.

See “Procuring Healthy Food” section for more suggestions that address sodium.

Information from the American Heart Association on sodium consumption—<https://bit.ly/3bZyIZI>

TIPS TO GUIDE PANTRY FOOD PROCUREMENT

FRUIT AND VEGETABLES:

- Choose whole fruits over canned fruit or fruit juice for your pantry whenever possible. Whole fruits contain no added sugar, and have dietary fiber which aids digestion and provides a sense of fullness.
- Try to get local fruit and vegetables that are in season—they will be at peak flavor and nutrient density. (See “Procuring Healthy Food” section for suggestions)
- When buying or accepting donations of canned fruit, be sure they’re packed in water or 100% juice. Avoid sugar-laden syrups. (See “Procuring Healthy Food” and “Creating a Culture of Health” sections for suggestions)
- Provide a wide variety of produce to help clients experience many types of fruits and vegetables, with a diverse set of nutritional offerings.
- Consider hosting taste tests, cooking demonstrations or classes to highlight less common produce items and easy, healthy ways to prepare them.
- Frozen vegetables and fruits are a great alternative to fresh, especially during the winter. As long as they are frozen raw, and not in sauces or syrups, they are just as nutritious as fresh. In addition, they are often pre-cut, which can save time for your clients.

GRAIN:

- Focus on procuring whole grains for your pantry. Whole grains contain more dietary fiber, iron, and B vitamins than refined grains.
- These ingredients are whole grain:

* Brown rice	* Whole-grain barley
* Buckwheat	* Whole-grain corn
* Bulgur	* Whole-grain sorghum
* Millet	* Whole-grain triticale
* Oatmeal	* Whole oats
* Popcorn	* Whole rye
* Quinoa	* Whole wheat
* Rolled oats	* Wild rice

MENT BASED ON MYPLATE SUGGESTIONS:

PROTEIN:

- Procure and encourage donations of lean meats to your pantry. In order to be considered lean, the product must be at most 8% fat. Sodium, fat and other components are displayed on the nutritional index.
- Make an effort to limit the amount of processed meats available to clients as these typically contain a high amount of sodium and nitrates.
- When procuring nuts and seeds for your pantry, choose unsalted varieties. Suggest that pantry clients add them to oatmeal or salads.
- Encourage clients to focus their protein consumption on sources that contain less saturated fat - leaner meats, nuts and seeds, and vegetarian protein options. Vegetarian options include eggs, beans and peas, nuts, and soy products such as tofu, tempeh, etc

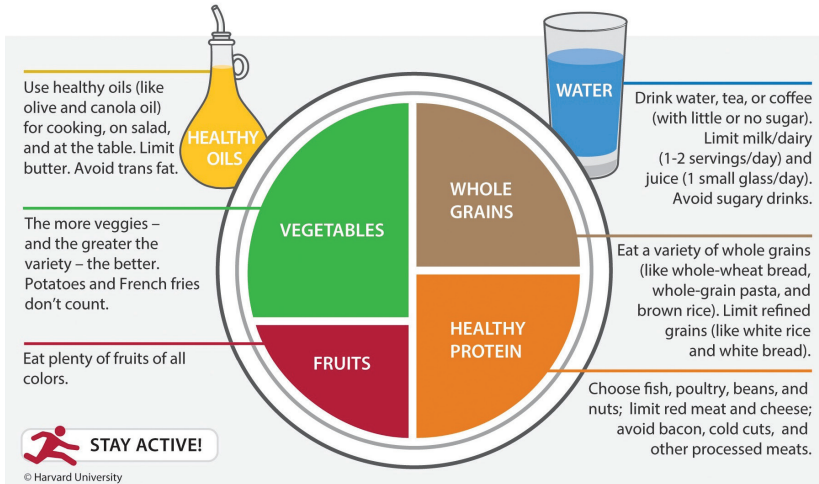
DAIRY:

- Avoid providing sweetened dairy products to clients. Encourage clients to add sliced fresh fruit to their yogurt or cereal if they'd like to sweeten their breakfast.
- Focus on procuring low or nonfat sources of dairy for your pantry.
- While calcium is most easily absorbed by the body when consumed through dairy products, there are other sources of calcium. Some include beans, leafy greens (kale and collard greens), and soy products. Use signage to inform clients about creative ways to increase calcium consumption.

OILS:

- Try to procure oils made up of unsaturated (mono- or poly-) fats. Sources include olive, canola, peanut, soybean, sesame, and sunflower oils.
- Limit items containing trans fats and partially hydrogenated oils when stocking your pantry.

HEALTHY EATING PLATE



Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health
The Nutrition Source
www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource

Harvard Medical School
Harvard Health Publications
www.health.harvard.edu



Harvard T.H. Chan of Public Health released their version of MyPlate, called "Healthy Eating Plate." It includes more details on healthy options for each of the plate's categories, and encourages people to be physically active.

READING A NUTRITION LABEL

Taking note of the total amount of calories contained in a food item is useful, but it doesn't tell the whole story. Calories can be present with or without much nutritional value, and can be an oversimplified representation of food quality.

A helpful tip sheet for reading nutrition labels—

<https://bit.ly/2xZCWMo>

An informative breakdown of information on a nutrition label—

<https://bit.ly/2XhOW6H>

Educate clients on how to read a nutrition label to empower them to make informed choices when selecting food at the pantry, market or grocery store. Consider teaching a class to help demystify nutrition labels - they are filled with confusing, but valuable, information.

PORTION SIZES

When purchasing food for your pantry, be careful to read nutrition labels and take note of how many portions are in one package. Consider communicating this information directly to clients.

This is a great visual to help determine appropriate portion sizes, and includes a Spanish translation—<https://bit.ly/2RnC2jU>

Information on “portion distortion,” or how average portion sizes have increased over time—<https://bit.ly/2x2du9e>

To encourage proper portion sizes, suggest that pantry clients:

- Repackage large bags of snacks into smaller bags
- Drink a glass of water before a meal
- Have vegetables take up half the plate

SERVING MANY COMMUNITIES

Having culturally appropriate food in your food pantry is necessary. Supplying foods that are relevant to a person’s culture strengthens communities by helping them feel validated in their experiences. It is also important to supply foods for those with dietary restrictions, whether they be religious, allergy-related, or disease-oriented.

Be sure to stock items without nuts (both tree and legume), dairy, and gluten to accommodate various food allergies. Be sure to communicate appropriate alternatives to clients with allergies to ensure they are still receiving enough nutrition in their daily diets. Consider if your pantry serves people experiencing homelessness and what items could work well for their circumstances.

Consider surveying clients to determine what alternative types of food your pantry should offer. For example, if your pantry serves a large Jewish population, you’ll want to ensure that you stock kosher items to accommodate their needs. Creating a system that allows neighbors to make suggestions can introduce pantries to new produce and products that could be important to the community.

Developing a suggestion box where neighbors can write down what they need will help you learn more about your community. Offer signage in multiple languages, for example, English and Spanish.

Consider hosting a special or allergen-free food drive. Request donations of gluten-free flour products, kosher items, nut-free snacks, non-dairy milk products, etc. Seek out local religious communities or special-interest food groups (for example, Plant Based Lifestyle Traverse City, <https://www.pbltc.org>, or Celiac Disease Center, <https://celiac.org/celiacdiseasecentersandprograms>) for donations or fundraising drives dedicated to culturally appropriate food.



MEETING FARMERS

Every farm has different products, organizational capacity, and communication styles - but most farms want to help people access fresh food! There are about as many ways to work with farms as there are farms. Connecting to a farm might allow your pantry to source local vegetables or fruit in bulk or at wholesale pricing. In addition, having a relationship with a farmer might encourage that farmer to be in touch to make a donation if they have crops in excess of their markets or a large quantity of seconds - produce that doesn't match stringent retail appearance standards. Be sure to build a good relationship before asking for too much of a farmer. Just like you, they are hard-working and making a living by doing meaningful, and sometimes difficult work. In Northern Michigan, there are a number of resources available to pantries who'd like to get connected to farmers.

- **Register your pantry with onepantry.org.** Taste the Local Difference offers a fantastic online resource to farmers, food pantries and businesses who want to coordinate with each other, called onepantry.org. This site allows food pantries to enter their own information including location, contact information, and the type of service they offer to be listed on the regional registry. It will also provide a private portal for food pantry staff to communicate directly with the farms and businesses that have food available for donation. It promises to provide a one-stop destination for people looking to find food to feed their families while becoming a tool for food pantry staff and food donors.
- **Talk to farmers at the market.** It can be challenging, especially during the busy growing season, to get a farmer on the phone or to answer your emails. Meeting them at the market is a great way to introduce yourself and get to know them -

and what services they might be able to offer your food pantry. Farmers are also fantastic resources for simple recipes! Use the Taste the Local Difference website to find markets near you at www.localdifference.org.

- **Reach out to your local MSU Extension office and Master Gardener Club.** Extension offices might know farmers who are looking to donate or would with a pantry. Master Gardener Program participants are always looking for more volunteer opportunities, and your pantry garden could be a perfect fit. MSU Extension also keeps a directory of area community gardens - you could connect with garden coordinators or participants near you to see if they would be willing to donate excess produce. For more information visit the Master Gardener Association website at www.mganm.org.



GROWING A GARDEN

Growing a garden at your food pantry is a visible way to demonstrate your commitment to healthy, fresh food, and ensure clients get the absolute freshest produce. Below are some tips for starting and maintaining a garden at your site:

- **Break your project into parts, and start small.**

You don't need a lot of time, space or resources to grow food. Even something as simple as growing one tomato plant in a five gallon bucket will work. Or try growing culinary herbs like basil, cilantro and parsley on a sunny windowsill. If you have space, raised beds are a useful way to provide clear, defined garden areas - check out the my square food garden site for more ideas.

RESOURCES FOR STARTING A GARDEN

Michigan State University
Gardening Tip Sheets:

Garden Planning—
<https://bit.ly/2XkBf6W>

Planting Vegetables—
<https://bit.ly/3bVrHDm>

Information on planning and
implementing educational gardens

WI Department of Health Services—
<https://bit.ly/2RjXZQK>

From Life Lab—
<https://bit.ly/2JJVWkK>

- **Choose one or two crops that are easy to grow.** Cherry tomatoes are productive and delicious. Bush green beans are high-yielding and most people are familiar with them. You know what fruits and vegetables are most popular with your clients - try growing some! Don't forget to provide recipes for those who may not know how to use the produce.
- **Talk to local community gardens and plant nurseries.** Most plant nurseries have extra seedlings and starts at the end of the planting season, and might be willing to coordinate with

food pantries in order to find them new homes. Same goes for local farms and community gardens. Many master gardener programs have volunteer lists filled with people who are looking for ways to get involved. Some community gardens offer basic raised bed kits, along with seeds and transplants, so clients can start their own gardens at home.

Need help? Your local MSU Extension office, msue.anr.msu.edu, will also be able to connect you to offices and educators with expertise in growing practices, managing pests and weeds, and developing local food systems.

GETTING HEALTHY FOOD

Studies have shown that consumption of fruits and vegetables increases when there are more options to choose from. Food pantries can take simple steps to encourage their donors to provide more fresh food to those who need it. Adopting a nutrition policy allows pantries to clarify the steps they take to promote their clients' health. A nutrition policy can guide food purchases made by the pantry coordinators to supplement donated food. A strong nutrition policy might also include language restricting the types of donations the pantry is willing to accept.

RESOURCES FOR CREATING A HEALTHY FOOD PROCUREMENT POLICY FOR YOUR PANTRY:

Language and strategies for creating a healthy food procurement policy—
<https://bit.ly/2x43CvE>

Healthy Pantry Conversion Project provides resources to pantries looking to bolster their selection of more healthful foods for pantry clients—
<https://bit.ly/2RmwKoy>

Sample Nutrition Policy from Healthy Pantry Conversion Project—
<https://bit.ly/2XdCfd8>

Educate donors and community partners about your nutrition standards. When pantries are clear about their nutrition guidelines and the types of foods they will offer their clients, it makes it easy for donors to respond with donations that support those guidelines. Making the pantry's needs and values straightforward helps others to be a part of the vision, kindness, and generosity.

- Meet with donors to build good relationships.
- Provide donors with a copy of your nutrition policy; be sure to explain why it was created and what your pantry hopes to accomplish.
- Distribute press releases to local media about desired food donations.
- Update nutrition policy and donation wish list to pantry website.

The University of Wisconsin-Extension offers tips and sample press releases and donor communication materials at <https://bit.ly/2xbmcBW>.

Find Fresh and Local Produce. There are many different ways to acquire fresh and local produce in your area. Here are some ideas to consider for your organization:

- Build relationships with local Master Gardening programs, school gardens and community gardens - they might be able to plant a Row for the Hungry, where extra produce from their garden goes to the food pantry, or facilitate produce drop-offs.
- Hold a fundraiser to purchase food directly from local farmers through a CSA or at the market.
- Connect to a local food rescue that collects and distributes produce and other food from area grocery stores, restaurants, and markets that would otherwise go to waste.

DISPLAYING HEALTHY FOOD

ATTRACTIVENESS, VISIBILITY AND LAYOUT OF DISPLAYS

Paying attention to the way you display food at your pantry can go a long way towards increasing the amount of healthy food your clients select. Here are some simple changes to implement in your pantry:

- Place fresh fruits and vegetables at the beginning of the pantry shopping area.
- Make healthy food displays prominent and easy to access.
- Create well organized, visually appealing displays. Use signage that promotes healthy items.
- Place healthy food items at eye level.
- Display fresh fruits and vegetables in a variety of attractive containers of different sizes.
- Make produce containers look full. The larger the amount displayed, the more likely people are to help themselves to the items.
- Place produce items in more than one area in the pantry for “repetitive exposure.”

CONVENIENCE AND DISTRIBUTION

- Pre-package fresh fruits and vegetables. Use packaging that you would find in a grocery store or farmers market.
- Place appropriate recipes near the foods you want to encourage clients to select. When creating recipes, be sure to format them to be convenient for clients, and be sure to have enough copies so clients can take one home with them.

- Choose a recipe to feature on a rotating basis and have the ingredients for that recipe located together in a prominent area.
- Integrate local produce using Northern Michigan's Harvest of the Month program (<https://bit.ly/3iyZAxJ>), which features a different seasonal produce item each month of the year. This resource includes recipes, educational materials and videos designed to make it easy for clients to learn more about and use fresh produce. This program is also used in farm-to-school settings, so kids may see the same local produce at school and at the pantry!.



REMINDERS AND PROMPTS TO CHOOSE HEALTHY FOOD

- Use signs that normalize the amount of food that clients should choose; for example, “Most people choose at least 5 fresh fruits and vegetables.”
- Use signage, posters and banners to promote the produce section.
- In signage, remind clients that they can easily add more fruit and veggies to their daily meals. Slice fruit into morning oatmeal, add veggies to morning eggs, have a



snack of carrot sticks or other cut vegetables, and focus on the vegetable portion of lunch and dinner.

- Feature a fruit or vegetable for a set period of time, whether that's a day, a week, or a month. Provide recipes, cooking demonstrations, taste tests, and educational materials that highlight why clients might want to choose that food. The Harvest of the Month program has great handouts for this.
- Highlight the value of healthy foods. Use signs and prompts that indicate a sense of value such as fresh, local, organic, natural, quality, etc.

*For more information on displays and “nudges” designed to encourage people to select healthy foods at pantries, check out this article by Feeding America about nutrition nudges in a food pantry setting—
<https://bit.ly/2JTlBLn>*

CREATING A CULTURE OF HEALTH

Once you've procured healthy food for your pantry clients and offered it in accessible and appealing ways, it's time to consider the overall health climate of your food pantry and the community surrounding it.

- Train pantry staff and volunteers to assist clients in selecting healthy food. Make sure everyone at the pantry knows the most nutritious selections available, where they are located, and how to prepare them.
- Engage food pantry clients in the daily operations of your pantry. Invite them to be volunteers at the pantry, and include them in decision-making processes. Some pantries have created a client advisory board, which facilitates communication between pantry staff and clients and allows them to learn from each other.
- Provide community space - like a bulletin board or email list-serve - for people to learn about classes, workshops and other events related to health, such as community cooking classes, free yoga or other exercise classes, bike or walk to work initiatives. Publicizing these events is an easy way to promote healthy living beyond food.
- Encourage clients to cook at home by providing samples, simple recipes, and cooking demonstrations. Good and Cheap is a fantastic online cookbook filled with simple, delicious and thrifty recipes.



PANTRY PROFILES

These pantry profiles outline the efforts of a few food pantries and food banks throughout Michigan and the country that are making efforts to promote healthy eating habits. They are meant to serve as examples for pantries and food banks that would like to encourage healthier diets among their clients.

THE NORTHWEST FOOD COALITION FARM 2 NEIGHBOR PROGRAM



FARM²NEIGHBOR

URL: <https://northwestmifoodcoalition.org/>

The mission of the Northwest Food Coalition is to empower member food programs by coordinating and creating resources to achieve regional food security.

The Farm 2 Neighbor program builds community resilience and supports farmers. The program purchases fresh fruits and vegetables from local farmers and distributes them to hungry neighbors through local pantries and meal sites.

FOOD RESCUE



URL: <https://www.goodwillnmi.org/food>

Since 2008, Food Rescue has collected soon-to-expire, fresh, healthy food, and distributed it to the 60 food pantries and meal sites of the Northwest Food Coalition on the same day, free of charge. Food Rescue does the logistical work in Northern Michigan to bring nutritious food to people who need it, and keep food out of landfills.

MANNA FOOD PROJECT



URL: <https://mannafoodproject.org/>

Manna Food Project helps feed the hungry in Antrim, Charlevoix, and Emmet Counties. Over 250 committed volunteers, partnering with a staff of eight, work together to achieve our mission. Manna operates a food bank (distribution center), a food rescue program, a weekly food pantry, and the “Food 4 Kids” backpack program. Manna also partners with community agencies and local businesses to host cooking classes, community dinners, and other events highlighting the importance of healthy, fresh food.

FATHER FRED FOUNDATION



URL: <https://www.fatherfred.org>

LEELANAU CHRISTIAN NEIGHBORS



LEELANAU CHRISTIAN NEIGHBORS
Serving Residents Of Leelanau County, Michigan

LEELANAU COUNTY, MI

URL: <http://www.leelanauchristianneighbors.org>

UNITED CHURCH OUTREACH MINISTRY



GRAND RAPIDS, MI

Clients served: 50,000 individuals per year

URL: <http://ucomgr.org/home>

GREATER LANSING FOOD BANK



LANSING, MI

Food distributed (2015): 7,413,062 pounds

Founding: 1981

URL: <http://greaterlansingfoodbank.org>

THE FOOD BANK FOR LARIMER COUNTY



FORT COLLINS, COLORADO

Individuals served: 36,000 yearly

Founded: 1984

URL: <http://foodbanklarimer.org>

OREGON FOOD BANK



PORTLAND, OREGON

Founded: 1988

URL: <https://www.oregonfoodbank.org>

THIS GUIDE BROUGHT TO YOU BY:



Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities is a nonprofit collaborating respectfully with citizens and leaders to protect everything we love about Michigan.

We focus on solutions that improve daily life and build community health—things like food, energy, transportation, and economy.



Honor Bank is a northwest Michigan community bank, proudly celebrating 103 years of service, with branches in Traverse City, Bear Lake, Benzonia, Buckley, Copemish, Honor, and Lake Ann.