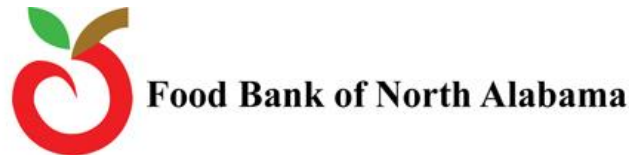




**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION PACKET**  
**FOR NEW or PROSPECTIVE PARTNER AGENCIES**  
*including*  
**TIPS FOR STARTING A FOOD PANTRY**

**THE FOOD BANK OF NORTH ALABAMA**



## Food Pantry Start-Up Tips

### Starting Out:

#### (1) First, Identify the Unmet Need in Your Community

Visit <https://www.foodbanknorthal.org/get-help/find-food/> for a list of food pantries and hunger relief services in your area. Take a look at your community and ask your team these questions:

- Are there food pantries operating already?
- What services are they providing?
- What are their hours of operation?
- Do they have specific geographic boundaries?
- How much food do they give to a family requesting help?
- How many times in a month, quarter, year will they serve the same family?
- Have they ever had to close their doors because they ran out of food?
- Does the pantry staff or volunteers know of unmet needs in your community?

Things to look for:

- Are the food pantries in your community generally open at the same times? For instance, do all the pantries have Monday through Friday hours and all close at or before 5:00? If that is the case, what happens to people who may need food but work the same hours the pantries are open? What about people who may need food on the weekends?
- If the pantry restricts the number of times they will serve the same family, what happens when that family needs food but have exhausted the number of times they can get help from that pantry?
- Are the pantries you visited unable to meet increasing requests for food?

If you have identified an unmet need in your community then move forward! Consider your options and decide what it is you really want to do. What is the best way to impact hunger in your community? Start a new pantry or join forces with an existing one and support it with volunteers, food drives, or financial support. Whatever you decide, the rewards will be great!

#### (2) Identify Community Resources That Will Sustain Your Program

Starting and maintaining a dependable source of emergency food in your community takes work and partnerships with churches, service organizations, businesses, schools, community foundations, local United Way in addition to utilizing the Food Bank of North Alabama. Our member agencies report the

food bank provides up to 80 percent of the food they distribute, so they find other food sources to keep their food pantry well supplied.

- First, develop a simple presentation about what you want to do and why you want to do it. Show the research you have done with existing pantries to identify an unmet need. When you speak to groups or send letters, be sure it is from the heart, share stories about who is hungry and what each group you are talking to can do to help.
- If there is a ministerial alliance in your community, ask to speak at their next meeting to explain what you want to do to meet the needs you have identified. Be clear about what you are asking for i.e., can each church in the alliance adopt a month to collect food and/or money to help your food pantry?
- Locate your local Jaycees, Kiwanis, Optimist or other types of service clubs and ask to speak at a meeting to request help with volunteers or financial support.
- Talk with your local schools and colleges, get students involved by holding food drives or collecting change from the cafeteria for you.
- Identify the Human Resource Directors with local businesses; talk with them about what their company can do to help – volunteers, food drives, food funds.
- If you have a community foundation, ask if they can help you with startup costs, like shelving, refrigerators, freezers, hand carts, etc.
- Talk with your local United Way, they may be able to help you identify other resources or provide ongoing resources themselves.

### **(3) Consider Your Pantry's Physical Location**

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, with a max of 80 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 40 degrees. Freezers should maintain temperatures below 0 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) Develop Your Pantry's Guidelines and Requirements**

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. The Food Bank only requires that a client receiving food complete the provided Eligibility Form.

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) Develop methods for 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.

## (6) How Much to Give Out? How to Decide?

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.

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 might 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) Determine Your Organization's Level of Ongoing 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.

## FOOD BANK OF NORTH ALABAMA SITE VISIT TIP SHEET

As a Food Bank Agency, you will be subject to Site Monitoring Visits at least every 24 Months.

*Someone from Agency Relations will reach out to you about 2 months ahead of your biannual survey to schedule the survey. Remember that these are a mandatory part of your participation with the Food Bank and you need to respond promptly when asked to confirm an upcoming visit.*

Site visits ensure our agency feeding partners (food pantries, soup kitchens, backpack programs, residence programs) maintain safe and effective programs. **The Food Bank of North Alabama requires site inspections for all new agencies before being approved for partnership. We revisit agencies every 18-24 months and do a spot check on recordkeeping and food safety.** This is the perfect time to discuss problems, questions or concerns. Such visits give us an opportunity to know our agencies on a more personal level and see the good work they are doing for our communities on a first hand basis. Additionally, agencies receiving USDA food items may be selected randomly for an audit by the USDA, so our visits keep them well-prepared.

**IMPORTANT:** In order to make this visit an efficient use of both our times, please make sure ALL the records we will be reviewing are gathered up and AVAILABLE at the location we will be visiting.

### **PURPOSE OF MONITORING VISIT:**

- Ensure your agency remains active & successful in our common mission to address hunger in our communities. Ensure good record-keeping and proper food storage.

### **WHAT TO EXPECT:**

- Typical visits last 45-60 minutes. We update our records and ask questions like how many people you serve and what your service area and reach is within your community.
- Visits are normally every other year, though we may visit more frequently as necessary .

### **WHAT WE LOOK FOR:**

- We ask to see your Food Bank invoices and Client Eligibility forms (for the last **TWO years**)
- We ask to see where your food is stored and look for a secure, pest-free and clean environment
- We look for thermometers and temperature logs on freezers, refrigerators and dry storage areas
- We look to see that food is off the ground (4-6 inches) and away from the wall
- We look for monthly inventory reports (for USDA agencies only)

## SITE VISIT FAQ's

### **What are some of the types of Food Storage issues I must pay special attention to?**

We sometimes see problems with food temp logs, either not filled out routinely or missing for certain units. You are required to take weekly (regular program) or daily (USDA program) temp readings of ALL your storage units, which includes refrigerators and freezers, but also dry storage areas. All must have their own temp log and their own thermometer, and readings must be within the acceptable ranges.

### **What are you looking for on our Eligibility forms?**

We sometimes see problems with these forms not being *completely* filled out, including missing means tests or poverty level notations, or missing client signatures on the back when they pick up food. We have seen some pantries who are confused about the annual update of the eligibility form. The form gets updated and the new version sent to agencies around July of every year. At that point, EVERY client must re-certify, using the new form. Even clients you have seen repeatedly the prior year must fill out a new form and recertify when the new form comes out each year.

### **What unique issues do you see with Backpack programs or Soup Kitchens?**

With backpack programs, we want to see that you are filing your annual reports and that you are still following all food safety practices, including temp logs. Soup kitchens must keep "Feeding Event" records, which show how many people were fed at each event, and what food bank food was used at that event.

### **Can I separate items like oatmeal packets or fruit cups from their original package and give them out?**

In a word: No. Federal law says you cannot distribute food (except FRESH produce) that has lost its labeling information. Common problems are individual fruit cups, oatmeal packets, or sleeves of saltine crackers that once removed from their original box have NO ingredient, manufacturing, nutrition, etc information. (Besides being a legal issue, it creates additional liability for your agency in terms of potential food allergens). You may surmount this issue in one of two ways: Use a copier to make copies of the original information and tape it to the individual cups or packets – OR – simply do not distribute individual packets - instead give a client the full, intact package of food instead of separating them out.

### **We're moving or have moved our pantry to a new location (in same building or in a new location entirely) – is that an issue?**

You are required to notify the Food Bank of changes to your program, which includes any location changes. It's important that we visit your new storage location **before** you begin distributing food from it, so we can ensure that it meets the same storage standards of your previous storage location. If you move your food storage location, even within the same building, call us immediately so we can schedule a quick inspection visit.

## ABOUT CLIENT ELIGIBILITY FORMS

*(see Food Bank website for most current form)*

- Client Eligibility forms change every year, usually around June/July of each year. Once the new form is issued (you will receive notification via email), **EVERY CLIENT must re-certify each year.**
  - One neat tip shared by one of our pantries in Morgan County: When the new form is issued each year, copy it on colored paper. That way, when a client presents to you for a food box and they still have “last year’s color form” in the file, it is a quick visual cue for your volunteers to know they need to get the client to fill out a new form, to update their file to this year’s colored form!
- Eligibility forms are slightly different for standard food pantries versus USDA food pantries, so be sure you are using the correct form. The USDA form requires additional information on the back, near the client signature.
- Forms must be filled out in their entirety in order to be valid, including the back side signature/date for each distribution.
- The Food Bank does not REQUIRE you to check client ID’s, proof of residency, etc. We consider the Client Eligibility forms “self-validating.” Your organization may decide to examine ID or proof of residency in order to demonstrate need, but we strongly discourage you from maintaining copies of that information, as it creates a liability in terms of identity theft. If you feel you must keep something on file (like a photo likeness of the person), keep ONLY the photo, without any accompanying information beyond what is absolutely necessary. **Under no circumstances are you permitted to keep copies of social security card.**



## ABOUT TEMPERATURE LOGS

- Temperature logs are available on the Food Bank's website.
- Non-USDA agencies must record temperatures WEEKLY. USDA agencies must record temperatures DAILY.
- Every food storage unit – refrigerator, freezers, and dry storage – must get temperature readings and EACH must have their own thermometer.
- If you have more than a couple storage units, we highly recommend purchasing a Temp Gun, which can be purchased at a Home Improvement store or Harbor Freight for around \$25. It makes taking the temperatures a very quick and accurate operation. If you use a temp gun you are still required to have a thermometer in each unit – the temp gun simply facilitates quicker/more accurate readings.
- If you take a temperature that is out of spec MAKE A NOTE ON YOUR LOG about it. For instance, if you take a temperature of 41 degrees for a refrigerator on the day that your refrigerator is being loaded up with new food from the Food Bank, make a note indicating WHY it was out of spec. You might also do a re-check, and note the temperature once in spec, when the door finally got shut!
- Your readings need to be realistic. It is HIGHLY unlikely, for instance, that a freezer will read “0” degrees every day, week after week, for months. Temperatures in storage units will naturally vary slightly from day to day and season to season. A string of the exact same number, day after day, is highly suspicious and leads us to believe someone is just writing down a number. This is a matter of FOOD SAFETY – your units must be within safe storage standards and the purpose of the temp check is to ensure that they are.
- You are not required to use the temperature logs on our website, as long as your custom log still captures the same basic data : The unit (refrigerator or freezer or dry), the temperature, date and person who took the readings. If a custom form works best for you, create one.
- MAKE SURE your temp logs are “tied” to your storage units. For instance, if your refrigerator is labeled “#1”, make sure the temperature log has “Refrigerator #1” noted on it, so when the log is filled and put away in a file, you have traceability.
- **REMEMBER 0/40/80 as the SAFETY ZONE for storing food:** All Freezers must read below 0; All Refrigerators must read below 40; All Dry Storage areas must read below 80.

## ABOUT STORING FOOD

- Make sure you develop a procedure at your agency for rotating stock so the oldest food is given out before newer food items, and for routinely checking food expiration dates and discarding food that has expired or is damaged in any way.
- Dry food storage must be 4-6" up off the ground, and no cleaning products may be stored above food.
- **If you are a USDA pantry, you are required to CLEARLY LABEL which food in your pantry is USDA product.** If the vast majority of your food is USDA, you can label a certain section of your dry storage, or perhaps just ONE refrigerator or freezer as NON-USDA ; the implication would then be that the rest IS USDA. If you work with a mix of USDA and NON-USDA, you must clearly label which is which. Often pantries with multiple freezers, for instance, will label some as USDA storage, the rest as NON-USDA storage. It must be clear which is which. This also, by the way, helps YOU when it comes time to do your required monthly USDA audits.
- If you are a church, your food bank food which is reserved ONLY for feeding the hungry MUST be isolated from "church food," so there is no chance that someone in the church might use food designated for the needy to feed your church members.
- ***Agencies are prohibited from sharing food bank food with other entities, even with other food bank agencies.*** If another agency or entity is having difficulty procuring enough food, please have them contact the Food Bank directly so we can assist them.
- See the Site Visit Tip sheet for a word about RE-LABELING. Federal law prohibits you from distributing any food except FRESH produce that has no labeling information. When we perform a survey we will check this in your food stuff.