



## CLIENT CHOICE PANTRY HANDBOOK



# OVERVIEW

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This Client Choice Food Pantry Handbook provides food pantries with resources and assistance to operate their pantry as a client choice pantry.

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# INTRODUCTION

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## What is a Client Choice Pantry?

A Client Choice Pantry allows clients to select their own food instead of receiving a pre-packed or standard bag of groceries. With this method, clients do not have to take items they already have, do not like, or cannot eat for health or personal reasons.

## Why give clients a choice?

Imagine your family is in need of food. You have a few food items at home, but it is not enough to make complete meals for the next few days. With finances stretched thin, a trip to the grocery store is out of the question. You swallow your pride and decide to visit a food pantry. When you arrive at the food pantry, you are handed a pre-packed or standard bag with some food you already have at home. There are also some items your family does not like. You're not sure what to do with the food; you do not want to insult the pantry people. If you had been able to choose the foods you need and liked, you could have added to your pantry at home to make your meals go further and last longer.

## Benefits of Choice Pantries

- Limit food waste - customers take food they will use and leave the rest for others
- Save money for the pantry
- Make ordering easier - pantries know what popular food to stock
- Uphold the dignity of clients
- Meet clients' health needs
- Make clients feel like they are food shopping for their own food and needs
- Help pantry staff to get to know clients better

## CLIENT CHOICE PANTRY MODEL TYPES

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Setting up a Client Choice Pantry is a bit like putting together a puzzle: all the pieces fit together, but you have to find the right way! Take some time to review the client choice models. Talk it over with your staff. Point out that they won't have to pre-pack food bags, which is one advantage for every client choice model. Decide together which model might be best for your pantry, you can also choose to use a combination of the models. Any space can be made to work as client choice! The models described in this handbook can be modified to fit your pantry, or you can come up with a different way to bring client choice into your pantry.

Many things may affect your decision about how to operate a client choice pantry. They include:

- Equipment needs
- Physical space
- Staff

There are many ways to operate a Client Choice Pantry. How do you decide which set up is right for your pantry? The following models will give you an overview of the different options.

### Client Choice Pantry Model Types

- Supermarket Model
- Table Model
- Window Model
- Inventory List Model

## AGENCY SPOTLIGHT: THE SUPERMARKET MODEL

The following is an example of the Supermarket Model Client Choice Pantry. This pantry is quite large, serving approximately 2,300 clients each month, and their facility is 4,000 square feet, which includes storage space.



CLIENT WAITING AREA



CLIENT INTAKE STATION



CLIENT SHOPPING



CHOICE ITEMS FOR A FAMILY OF 1 OR 2



PRODUCE CHOICE



FROZEN FOODS & BREAD SECTION

# THE SUPERMARKET MODEL

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## Description

Food is set up on shelves by food groups. Clients walk through the space and take food off shelves according to pantry guidelines. The food storage room and the place where clients choose their food can be in the same location. Workers do not need to move the food items on days when clients come in. The whole pantry's stock is open for clients. The space needs to be large enough to display foods and allow clients to walk through. This model allows clients to handle food and look at the labels just as if they were shopping in a grocery store. Pantry space will determine how many clients can shop at a time. This model is considered to be the most client-friendly, since it simulates a typical grocery shopping experience.

## Four Easy Steps to Making It Work

1. Organize food on pantry shelves by food groups.
2. When clients sign in, the worker gives them a Food Card listing how many items they may take based on family size.
3. Clients walk through the pantry alone or staff can walk them through the process.
4. Like in a supermarket, clients can “check-out” and pack their food in a bag or box with the help of a pantry worker. Pantry workers also check to see if the client has taken the amount and type of food that they are allowed based on their family size.

## Equipment Needs and Physical Location

Your pantry needs enough shelving space to display the available food in the pantry. A refrigerator or freezer with clear glass to view products is helpful for this model, but not necessary. If this type of equipment is not available, a list of available refrigerated and frozen foods can be posted for clients to choose from. Grocery carts and a table for “check-out” would also be helpful, but not necessary.

## Staff Tips

- It is important to have workers available before the pantry opens to ensure the pantry is organized and food is stocked on shelves.
- Workers may need to re-stock and straighten shelves during pantry hours.
- If a worker guides clients through the pantry, this offers a chance to talk about the food options.
- If clients do not speak or read English, the pantry might need a translator or food pictures to help with the process.



## AGENCY SPOTLIGHT: THE TABLE MODEL

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Here is an example of a Table Model Client Choice Pantry. This pantry has 900 square feet, serving 250 to 300 clients each month.



CLIENT INTAKE STATION



FOOD STORAGE



CLIENTS SHOPPING FOR CANNED FOOD CHOICE ITEMS



CLIENTS SHOPPING



CLIENTS SHOPPING FOR PRODUCE CHOICE ITEMS



COLD FOOD STORAGE

# THE TABLE MODEL

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## Description

If you do not have enough permanent space or equipment for a Supermarket Model, the Table Model might work best for you. Food is set up on tables by food groups. Clients walk by each table to choose and pack their food. The pantry needs enough room for clients to walk by each table.

Pantry workers can stand by the food tables to guide clients and answer questions about the food. This model can serve many clients at one time. This model allows clients to physically handle food as they would do shopping at a store.

## Three Easy Steps to Making It Work

1. Organize food on tables by food groups.
2. When clients sign in, the worker gives them a Food Card listing how many items they may take based on family size. Tables can also be labeled with the number of items that can be chosen from that table.
3. Clients walk by the tables choosing and packing their food.

## Equipment Needs and Physical Location

Your pantry needs enough tables to display the available food. Arranging tables in a U-shape or an L-shape can maximize space.

## Staff Tips

- Workers may be needed before, during and after open pantry hours to set up, supervise and take down tables.
- It is helpful if the store room and the room displaying the food on tables are close together. If not, dollies or carts are helpful (but not required) to transport the food items.
- Work in pairs to lift heavy cases or containers of food onto tables.
- Workers can accompany clients or stand by each display table to help if needed.
- If clients do not speak or read English, the pantry might need a translator or food pictures to help with the process.



## AGENCY SPOTLIGHT: THE WINDOW MODEL

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Here is an example of a Window Model Client Choice Pantry. This pantry is small, serving approximately 145 clients a month with a 468 square foot waiting room and a 180 square foot storage room.



ENTRANCE OF CHURCH



CLIENT INTAKE STATION



CLIENT WAITING AREA



FOOD STORAGE AREA



PANTRY STORAGE ROOM



CLIENT PICKING UP GROCERIES

# THE WINDOW MODEL

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## Description

Clients choose the type of food they want by pointing to the food on the shelf. Pantry workers then pack food bags according to the clients' choices and family size. This model helps offer client choice when the pantry has limited space. One special consideration is that the window model can only serve a small number of clients at one time.

## Four Easy Steps to Making It Work

1. Organize food on shelves by food group.
2. When clients sign in, the worker gives them a Food Card listing how many items they may take based on family size, or a sign can be placed by the window with all the details.
3. Clients choose food by pointing to the items they want.
4. The worker picks the food items off the shelf and packs the food into a bag or box.

## Equipment Needs and Physical Location

Half door or window that provides easy viewing of pantry storage space.

## Staff Tips

- It is important to have workers available before the pantry opens to ensure the pantry is organized and food is stocked on shelves.
- If clients do not speak or read English, the pantry might need a translator or food pictures to help with the process.

## AGENCY SPOTLIGHT: THE INVENTORY LIST MODEL

Here is an example of an Inventory List Model Client Choice Pantry. Their storage room is 544 square feet, their cold food storage is 176 square feet, their dry/canned food storage is 209 square feet, and their waiting room is 715 square feet. They serve between 400 and 500 clients each month.



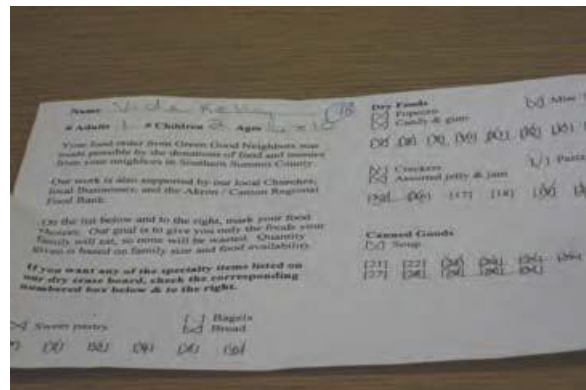
PANTRY ENTRANCE



CLIENT RECEIVING INTAKE FORMS



CHOICE ITEM SELECTION BOARD



CLIENT'S CHOICE ITEM SELECTION FORM



CLIENT SUBMITTING CHOICE ITEM SELECTIONS



VOLUNTEERS FILLING CLIENT'S CHOICE ITEM SELECTIONS

# THE INVENTORY LIST MODEL

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## Description

A list of food available is posted or given to clients. Clients choose their food from the list. Pantry workers then assemble the client's food bags based on the items chosen from the list. This model is helpful for clients who have trouble moving around and for agencies with very limited space. Clients are able to choose foods without having to leave their seats.

## Three Easy Steps to Making It Work

1. When clients sign in, the worker gives them a Food Card listing how many items they may take based on family size. The worker also shows the clients the list of food available, which can be on a piece of paper or displayed on a white or chalk board.
2. Clients write on a piece of paper, check a list of choices, or tell a worker their food choices.
3. The worker packs the selections into a bag or box.

## Equipment Needs

Your pantry needs materials to make a list of foods in stock. You can use paper, pens/pencils, and clip boards for creating a paper food list. A copy machine or computer printer is helpful to make copies of the paper list for clients. Or you can write the food list on a dry erase board or a chalk board.

## Staff Tips

- Update food list as inventory changes.
- Use waiting time to share nutrition handouts, recipes, and other menu ideas with the client.
- If clients do not speak or read English, the pantry might need a translator or food pictures to help with the process.

# CLIENT CHOICE PANTRY COMPARISON CHART

MODEL	DESCRIPTION	EQUIPMENT	SPACE
Supermarket	<p>Food is set up by food groups inside the pantry.</p> <p>Clients choose their food as they walk through the pantry.</p> <p>Workers may help guide clients through their choices or check them out when they have finished shopping.</p>	<p>Shelving</p> <p>Optional:</p> <p>Refrigerators and freezers with clear glass doors to view products.</p> <p>Carts to move food</p> <p>Check-out table</p> <p>Food Cards showing clients how much food they can take.</p>	<p>A space large enough to display food on shelves and enough room for clients to walk through safely.</p>
Table	<p>Food is set up on tables by food groups.</p> <p>Clients walk by each table to choose and pack their food.</p>	<p>Tables</p> <p>Optional:</p> <p>Carts to move food.</p> <p>Food cards showing clients how much food they can take.</p>	<p>A space large enough to set up tables with room to walk in between the tables.</p>
Window	<p>Clients stand outside the pantry area, but can see the food in the pantry.</p> <p>Clients choose by pointing to the food they want.</p>	<p>Shelving visible to clients.</p> <p>Optional:</p> <p>Half door with counter at entry to pantry.</p> <p>Food cards showing clients how much food they can take.</p>	<p>Will work in any space where clients can see the food.</p>
Inventory List	<p>A list of food in stock is posted or given to clients.</p> <p>Clients choose their food from the list.</p> <p>Workers then assemble the clients' food bags.</p>	<p>Paper or board/dry erase board to list food in stock.</p> <p>Optional:</p> <p>Clipboards to hold paper lists.</p> <p>Copy machine or computer printer.</p> <p>Food cards showing clients how much food they can take.</p>	<p>Will work in any space.</p> <p>Intake area and food storage area do not need to be next to each other.</p>

MODEL	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Supermarket	<p>Pantry workers have more one-on-one time with clients, enriching their volunteer experience.</p> <p>Allows clients to ask workers specific questions.</p> <p>Store room and place where clients choose food are the same. Many clients can be served at one time.</p> <p>This is the most client friendly model as it simulates a grocery store.</p>	<p>Planning in advance is required to set up foods by food groups.</p> <p>May need additional space, shelving and tables.</p>
Table	<p>Don't need a dedicated pantry space.</p> <p>Many clients can be served at one time.</p>	<p>Workers need to set up and break down tables.</p> <p>Lifting food onto tables may be difficult for some workers.</p>
Window	<p>Very small space needed to offer client choice.</p>	<p>Can only serve a limited number of clients at one time.</p> <p>They are further away and can't hold the product. This is difficult for clients with low reading level or English as a second language.</p>
Inventory List	<p>Very small space needed to offer client choice.</p> <p>Clients can choose food for themselves without leaving their seat in the intake area.</p> <p>Good for clients with limited mobility.</p>	<p>Difficult for clients with low reading level or English as a second language.</p> <p>Need to update food list as inventory changes.</p>



## GETTING STARTED

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The main reason why client choice can save your pantry money:

Most clients take only the food they need. As a result, less food is wasted and less money is spent obtaining these items.

Before making the switch to client choice, plan ahead by doing the following:

Stock more of the popular food.

- What foods do your clients often ask for?
- Do you run out of some food before others?

Stock less of the unpopular food.

- What food do you receive back in food drives?
- What food do you find in trash containers outside the pantry?
- What food do you have problems giving out?

Make food drives count! If you organize or benefit from food drives, encourage people to donate specific foods that are popular with your clients.

Offer several recipes to your clients. Recipes that can use the same staple ingredients for three days are helpful for clients to plan balanced meals.

Display selection tips for clients. By displaying tips and cooking suggestions for making healthier choices toward a balanced meal, this may help move fresh produce and unpopular items more quickly.

Change the foods you offer clients from time to time. In the meat and non-meat protein group, offer salmon, ground beef, and venison at one time; and tuna, ground turkey, and peanut butter at another time. Change is good!

**Remember:** Your pantry is already providing a 3-day package of food, so you won't see much of a difference in the amount of food you give out. You may see one big difference: quick turnover of the popular food and more leftovers of unpopular food. Client choice will help you make the most of limited resources, by keeping more food on your shelves! Since you will be giving your clients the food they want, they may need to visit your pantry less often.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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

With client choice, popular food moves faster. After a few months, you will see how to stock your food, how often to order, and how much to order.

### Won't our pantry run out of food if we have client choice?

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.

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

Try offering these items to your clients, let them take as much as they can use. Being generous with extra servings of fruits and vegetables can help move these items quickly. Contact us at [programs@foodbankofalaska.org](mailto:programs@foodbankofalaska.org) for help in marketing some of these foods to your clients through cooking demonstrations, food tastings and recipe handouts.

### Does client choice mean we have to increase our variety of food?

Not at all, you can keep the same types of food. If you usually pack a can of corn, peas and carrots in every bag, now clients can choose three of any of the vegetables: corn, peas or carrots.

### Will client choice cost more for the pantry?

Many food pantries have successfully made the change from the standard pre-packed food bags to client choice without additional funds. The Food Bank of Alaska is here to help you make a plan for your program. The client choice system can require fewer staff and volunteer hours since the bags are packed as clients come in and choose their food. Compared to standard pre-packed bags, client choice can cost less to operate!

### Our volunteers don't like change, what happens if they don't like giving clients a choice?

If you think you may encounter resistance to a choice system, start by making small changes, such as having clients select items, such as fresh produce. Each month you can increase the number of foods that clients select, while pre-packing the rest. Eventually, you will make the switch to full client choice. Small steps will help both volunteers and clients feel good about the changes. Often volunteers are happy no longer packing bags, because this can be hard work! Client choice gives staff and volunteers the opportunity to speak to clients about likes and dislikes enhancing the consumer's experience and restoring client dignity.

### Will client choice mean more work for my volunteers?

Implementing a client choice pantry will not require more time from workers, but it will mean using their time differently. Volunteers will spend more time serving and talking with clients instead of packing bags. Most of the volunteer time will be spent during program service hours rather than before clients arrive.

### We have a line around the block for our pantry, how can we offer client choice in our program?

If your program uses two hours to pack bags and two hours to give out bags, this totals four hours of volunteer time. Since you no longer need volunteers to pack bags beforehand, you can use all four hours of volunteer time to serve clients. You can let your clients know that your program hours will now be longer, so they will not all arrive at the same time.

# VOLUNTEER JOB DESCRIPTIONS

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## Greeter

The greeter will greet and acknowledge all customers in a friendly and professional manner. The greeter is responsible for the opening and closing of door or entrance/exit, directing customers to the client sign-in table, as well as giving an overview of how the program operates to all new clients.

## Sign-In (Paperwork)

Sign-In person(s) watches over client intake form process or fills out TEFAP paperwork for clients. This position makes sure forms are completed thoroughly, as well as signed by each client.

## Stocker

The stocker position organizes and stocks shelves that clients will be shopping from during distribution.

## Product Organizer/Inventory Control

The Product Organizer will log all incoming food. This volunteer will make sure the product that comes in from the Food Bank of Alaska or various food drives is checked, dated, separated and stocked. This volunteer will be responsible for sending thank you notes to any organizations or people who have held food drives or any donations to your organization.

## Shopping Assistant

The Shopping Assistant works directly with the client while they shop. This person will engage the client in conversation while making sure they take the correct amount specified for each family size.

## Bagger

The Bagger will bag all of the client's groceries after they are finished shopping.

## Carrying Assistant/Runner

The Carrying Assistant or Runner will make sure the clients get everything to their vehicle quickly and efficiently, and help the client load all of their items into their vehicle.

## Manager/Supervisor

The Manager or Supervisor makes sure the pantry is operating smoothly and efficiently.

## Floater

The Floater will be responsible for helping out where needed. This person will float from station to station to make sure everything is running smoothly and other volunteers don't need help. This person will also relieve other volunteers from their job duties for a short time if they need a break or time away.

*\*Not all of these positions are needed to run a Client Choice Pantry. The above positions are simply suggestions.*

# FOOD PANTRY CHECKLIST

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Is your pantry ready?

- I believe clients benefit from selecting their own food in a pantry.
- I am willing to discuss making changes with my staff.
- My staff will work with me to put client choice into action at my pantry.
- I have an idea which client choice model would best fit my pantry's space.
- I can get, or I already have, the supplies I will need to put client choice into action.

Contact the Food Bank of Alaska to discuss ways to put client choice into action!

Call the front desk at 907-222-3120 or, email [programs@foodbankofalaska.org](mailto:programs@foodbankofalaska.org)

*“The only kind of dignity which is genuine is that  
which is not diminished by the indifference of others.”*

Dag Hammarskjöld  
Author, Diplomat, and Secretary General of the United Nations 1953-1961