Tips for Organizing and Operating a Food Pantry Program

FEEDMORE’s CENTRAL VIRGINIA FOOD BANK
working together to feed more

Nourishing the Community; Empowering Lives.
Starting a food pantry program:

A food pantry program is a community-based program that collects and stores food and household products for free distribution to those in need. FeedMore’s Central Virginia Food Bank has established pre-requisites and guidelines that your organization should review prior to your decision to start a pantry that is intended to affiliate with the Food Bank. (Please refer to “How to Become a Partner Agency” in the Addendum at the end of this document).

Before you begin planning, look closely at your community. Is there a need for food assistance in your community? If so, what do you know about this perceived need and those who would benefit? Your church or organization should contact the Central Virginia Food Bank and local organizations to find out what programs already exist in your area that offer emergency food assistance. You may be better able to help meet the need in your community by joining forces with an existing program than by duplicating services within the area. It is also a good idea to visit or volunteer at an existing agency to learn more about what is already being done.

If after evaluating the need and existing services in your area and that your program meets the basic criteria and expectations of the Food Bank, you have determined a new food pantry program is necessary, it’s time to get started. This guide can be used to help you generate ideas and develop your vision. Please inform the Agency Relations Team at the Central Virginia Food Bank of your intentions to begin a pantry, as a Program Coordinator may be able to provide you with helpful advice or further instruction. Our team can be reached at 804/521-2500.

Community Support and Organizing Team:

Your program will need community support to operate. Also, you can benefit from the experience of others and the diversity of their insight, so talk with people you think will be interested. Tell them about your plans to start a food pantry program. Three good sources of interested people are:

People in need of food — no one can you give you a better idea about what services are needed in the community.

Social service agencies — people working in social services have an awareness of the need and experience with working to meet those needs.

Community organizations — members of clubs, churches and fraternal organizations can act as volunteers, offer funding assistance, make referrals and share their insights and experiences.

Networking with members of the community right from the start builds a vested interest in the program’s success, and lays the groundwork for volunteer recruitment and information exchange.

From this group of people, call together a meeting to form an organizing committee. You’ll need a core group of about 4-15 people to plan your direction and accept responsibility for the primary committee positions (such as Chairperson, Vice Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer). In churches, this group is often a designated Committee, or perhaps a task force of an already-established Committee. This organizing group needs to be committed and passionate to principles of sustainability, aware that providing an on-going service to your
community will take: 1) budget planning, a sustained budget flow and fund raising; 2) a volunteer and/or paid staff greater than this initial team of organizers; and 3) leadership that can govern the program. When you meet, make sure everyone agrees on the definition of a food pantry program. Discuss its basic function of immediate (emergency) aid and consider related services, such as counseling and referrals. This should be incorporated into your mission statement.

MAJOR DECISIONS TO MAKE OR ACTIONS TO TAKE

➤ **Mission Statement:**

Your Organizing Committee should create a mission statement that everyone agrees on and that reflects the spirit and primary purpose of the program. This mission will help with developing a service plan as well as guide your program’s action in unexpected situations.

➤ **Establishing a Budget**

Well before initiating your program, your agency should know (within reason) the amount of funds you have to work with or the amount of funds needed to operate the kind of program you seek. You will want to assure that your budget is sustainable, and not dependent on voluntary donations or hoped-for gifts from others. Your budget should be realistic from the funding side, as well as from the expenditure side. Some guiding questions are:

*Where will funding be sought? How will funding be secured?*
*Is there ‘internal’ funding consistently available (such as through a church’s budget process)?*
*Will you operate ‘fund drives’ for any of your regular income?*
*Do you need to know facility or maintenance fees or expenditures?*
*What about the purchase and upkeep of storage areas and refrigeration?*
*How much money do we need for the food we will provide (and do you know the costs)?*

FeedMore’s recommendation for a ‘typical’ (a medium-sized pantry that may serve 20-30 families weekly, and operating at least twice a month) pantry is to expect to spend $400 on food monthly.

➤ **Developing a Service Plan:**

Once you have formed your organizing committee and agree on your purpose and mission, it’s time to determine the size and scope of your operation and other details. Developing your service plan and your program’s budget will go hand-in-hand. Limited funding will dictate what your program can provide; or an aggressive service plan may influence how and the amount of funding sought. Some basic questions are:

*What area will be served?*
*Who will be served?*
*Where will the pantry be located?*
*How often will assistance be provided?*
*Who will do the work?*
When you are making these decisions, keep in mind the needs of your prospective clients and how your agency could best meet those needs. Every possible effort must be made to treat the food recipients with dignity and respect.

- **Set policies and procedures:**

Establish eligibility guidelines based on your service plan. Set hours of operation. Decide whether you will accept walk-ins or require referrals or appointments. It is recommended that you also determine how many times a client may come to you for food (i.e. serve each household only once a month, or a certain number of times per year). Discuss the security of the food and the staff/volunteers’ safety. Keep in mind that policies should be uniform and fair for all recipients. For example, it would be unfair to allow congregation members to get food every week, but restrict clients from outside the congregation to once a month. You may also consider posting these eligibility guidelines to make them easy to see and understand for all food recipients.

Although the Food Bank allows agencies to create and operate by their own policies and guidelines regarding operating practices, potential agencies of the Food Bank should review all Guidelines of the Food Bank to assure compliance at that level. *(Please see Agency Agreement in Addendum)*.

**MAKE SURE SOME KEY OPERATING PRACTICES ARE CONSIDERED AND HANDLED**

- **Facility Readiness & Upkeep:**

Before opening for service, your facility should be ready – organized, clean, attractive. There are a number of details your organization should make sure are addressed from a food-safety perspective as well as from a people-safety perspective. Is your facility well-lighted? Are food-storage areas secured, neat and clean? Are directional signs and guidelines posted? Is a pest-control policy in place? Do refrigerators and freezers have thermometers, and do waste bins have lids? You will want to be proud of the facility through which you offer your food program, and you will want your recipients to appreciate the readiness of your facility. *(Please refer to the itemized Inspection List in the Addendum for a more thorough checklist of items needing attention)*.

- **Establish record keeping practices:**

FeedMore requires your agency to keep all receipts in order dating back 3 years. You must also gather at least the following information from the food recipients and keep these records in a safe place:

Name  
Address  
City, State, Zip Code  
Phone number  
Number in household  
Number of adults (19 – 54)  
Number of children (Birth – 18)
Number of seniors (55+)

This information is critical for contacting the food recipients in the event of a food recall of items distributed by your program. All this information is required by the IRS but also offers evidence of your program’s contribution to the community. This information is needed for planning, fund raising and general accountability. It can also be helpful in educating the public about the hunger problem in your community. This basic information is also captured in Monthly Reports agencies of the Food Bank are required to complete.

- **Selecting food for your program:**

  When selecting food for your program’s clients, think about the meals you prepare for yourself and your family and which ingredients you would need. If you are going to select pasta sauce, you’ll need pasta to go with it. Also, think about your program’s mission. How much food do you want to give away for each household? The Food Bank’s expectation is that you provide roughly three days worth of food – an amount of approximately 11-12 pounds/person. For a family of four, 45 or so pounds would be an appropriate amount.

  We encourage you to let each individual choose what is needed and only limit items if you feel you might run out before the end of the distribution. Most clients will take only what they truly need. Asking for food assistance is a very humbling experience.

  Try taking some of everything the food bank offers – you may be surprised what items are popular!
  - Mixed meats (instead of just one kind of meat for everyone);
  - Take advantage of the fresh and perishable options the Food Bank receives – fruits and vegetables from local stores daily, produce that the Food Bank purchases, dairy and eggs on occasion, etc.
  - Cased canned items (fruit, beans, vegetables, etc.) that the Food Bank purchases at a retail price and can offer it to agencies cheaper than what’s on-sale at most grocers – as these items are ALWAYS available and can provide consistency at your agency level.
  - The Food Bank offers donated grocery foods in mixed boxes of similar items, such as: vegetables, soups, breakfast items, protein, snacks, etc.

  You should also consider ethnic, cultural or dietary needs or preferences your clients might have. For example, if you work with a large senior population, you may want to stock items that are low in sodium and sugar.

- **Designing a Distribution method:**

  There are essentially two methods of distributing food boxes: Pre-boxed and Client-choice. We recommend the client choice method. It prevents waste, treats clients with dignity and ensures they are receiving items they need and will eat.

  **Pre-boxed/bagged:** Staff/volunteers fill boxes/bags with food before the clients arrive, and typically each box contains the same items. The number of boxes a client receives depends on the size of their household.
Disadvantages: The client may get items s/he did not want and items are wasted. Need more staff/volunteers and time to pack boxes. But imagine receiving a box of clothes and shoes to wear. Would one size and style fit everyone? Of course not! Food choices are also unique and are influenced not only by personal preference, but also by cultural and medical requirements.

Client choice: Shopping method and Ordering method

Shopping: The client goes into the pantry, picks out what s/he needs, and fills his/her own bag/box.

Advantages: The client receives only items he/she wants. Does not require as many staff/volunteers as other methods. Items are not wasted. Ability to meet special dietary and allergy needs. Clients feel more in control, and therefore, dignified.

Disadvantages: Pantry may become disorganized, but, once done and maintained, most agencies will tell you there is no disadvantage to this method!

Ordering Method: The client will get a list of items available, or can view them from behind a table or counter. S/he will indicate which items s/he wants and how many. Staff/volunteers fill the boxes according to the order.

Advantages: The client receives only items he/she wants. Keeps pantry organized. Ability to meet special dietary and allergy needs. Items are not wasted.

Disadvantages: Takes extra time to make up the order form for each distribution. May run out of some items on the order form. This MAY take more staff/volunteers and time than the Shopping method.

- **Safe Food Storage:**

Depending on the type of distribution you select for your food box program, you’ll need different capacities for storage. For pre-boxed distribution, you’ll need less storage space, but you’ll need additional space to assemble the boxes and bags and to store them once they are packed. For shopping method, you’ll need space for shelves to display all the options as well as enough space for 2-3 people or more to do their shopping at once. For ordering method, you’ll need a similar storage space as is needed for shopping, as well as a space to assemble the orders.

These guidelines are important for safe food storage for all food box programs:

- Choose a storage space with locking doors, preferably with no outside entrance.

- Dry storage should be between 50-70 degrees in a dry, clean, well-ventilated area. This will help prevent mold, and pest infestation. Cleanliness discourages pests. The air flow will help control temperatures as well. Dry goods can become unsafe if they get too cold or too hot.

- Use free-standing shelves, with the lowest shelf at least 6 inches off the floor. Food should also be kept at least 2 inches from the walls.
-Whenever possible, remove individual items from the cardboard cases. This is a good opportunity to inspect the product as you store it to look for pests, or bad items that have bulges or are leaking. Getting rid of the cardboard also eliminates hiding places for pests.

-Store all pet food, non-food items, and cleaning supplies on separate shelving away from food storage.

-Ensure that older items are rotated out first by labeling items with the date received, and always using the First In, First Out rule.

-Use only non-toxic insect and rodent traps. Never spray chemicals or lay poison in a food storage area.

-Refrigerators and Freezers: refrigerator temperatures should be between 32-40 degrees, and freezer should be 0-negative 20 degrees. Thermometers should be in all freezers and refrigerators on the front of shelves where they are easily visible when you look in. This helps staff/volunteers to spot problems easily and quickly.

-When you bring food into the storage area, store it properly immediately. Never leave items on the floor, and place frozen and refrigerated items in coolers immediately.

NOW . . . you may be ready to “Open for Business!”
How to Become a Partner Agency of FeedMore, Inc.

Requirements and Steps for New Agencies

An organization is expected to meet the following prerequisites in order to apply for affiliation with FeedMore:

1) Have a current 501(c)3 registration status with the IRS or be a Church as defined by the IRS.
2) Be an organization whose purpose it is, or operate a program designed, to provide emergency food to those in need, or provides meals to a targeted population who would be at-risk otherwise.*
3) Located in an area deemed by FeedMore to be in need of additional emergency food providers.**
4) The food service program should be currently operating for a 2-3 month period in order to show budgetary and distribution sustainability. Records of expenditures, families served, and amount of foods distributed should be maintained. Distribution sustainability is expected at a level of providing at least three days of meals per person served (approximately 11 pounds per individual).
5) Be committed to use dry (shelf-stable), frozen and perishable foods regularly within its programs, and have on-site refrigeration and freezer storage capacity to accommodate a minimum of 25% of the program’s distribution.
6) Have on-site computer and internet access for ease of communication and reporting, and agree to place orders using FeedMore’s online food shopping system, Agency Express.
7) Agrees to be listed on FeedMore’s online search tool and willing to indicate affiliation with FeedMore on agency signage.

*Child Care or Senior Centers whose purpose it is to serve low-income families and targeted Rehabilitation Programs/Agencies are among those which could qualify. Group Homes and/or Schools that serve meals to residents/students as part of their focal program may not qualify.

**Will be based on such factors as the area’s Food Insecurity, and the strength and location of other Food Bank agencies and partners.

Once an organization meets the above criteria, Applications Steps are as follows:

1) Complete the written Application, with ALL supporting documents as indicated.
2) Have appropriate program representatives attend Agency Orientation.
3) Have at least two appropriate individuals trained in Food Safety – for Pantries, basic Food Handling; for Meal Sites, ServSafe (8-hr. class) certification required.
4) Work with appropriate Food Bank staff in scheduling and conducting a Site Visit in completion of the Site Inspection Checklist & Readiness.
5) Understand and agree to all criteria of the Partner Agreement and have appropriate Agency representative to sign.

NOTE: a new agency will not be accepted until all the above are met/completed.
MEMBERSHIP AGREEMENT FOR PARTNER AGENCIES OF THE CENTRAL VIRGINIA FOOD BANK/FEEDMORE

Agency Name _______ (NOT TO BE COMPLETED AT THIS TIME)                  Agency # _____ X _____ X
Address ____________________ (A PROGRAM COORDINATOR WILL ASSIST WHEN TIME)_________________

1. Agency must have a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status with the Internal Revenue Service, or be approved through Church Qualifier, and provide all documentation necessary to verify.

2. Agency must be a partner that serves the needy, ill or infants (minor children) and/or those in crisis. **Records will be maintained** on file for each household receiving food.

3. Agency agrees not to sell, transfer, barter or fund raise with the items supplied by FeedMore in exchange for money, property or services, or otherwise allow the items to re-enter commercial channels.

4. Agency agrees to distribute food **free-of-charge** and without reference to attendance or membership of any church, organization, group or activity. Donations from recipients are acceptable, provided they are clearly voluntary and anonymous, unassociated with any food received.

5. Agency will not deny access to food on the basis of race, color, citizenship, religion, gender, national origin, ancestry, age, marital status, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, unfavorable discharge from the military, or status as a protected veteran.

6. Agency will not promote religious proselytizing, including general communication pieces or services to attend. Information regarding religious opportunities may be available to recipients, provided they are available as an option for recipients to receive or choose.

7. Agency must be licensed as appropriate by the State and/or City/County according to the service it provides.

8. Agency agrees to provide to FeedMore copies of state/local licenses/certificates of liability insurance required to operate

9. Agency agrees to provide food directly to recipients in need in the form of prepared meals (for soup kitchens and other meal sites) or take-home groceries (for pantries).

10. Agency agrees to safely and properly handle all foods, which conforms to all Local, State and Federal regulations; and must have adequate refrigeration and storage space to ensure safe food conditions and temperatures are maintained at all times.

11. Agency agrees to be monitored at any time and/or at least once every two years by Food Bank representatives.

12. Agency agrees to pay the Handling Fees assessed for most food withdrawn and agrees that all items are accepted in “as is” condition.

13. Agency agrees to maintain a file of all Food Bank/FeedMore receipts on site for one year and all other Food Bank/FeedMore records on site for three years.
14. Agency agrees to participate in Community Forums when scheduled within your locality and attend a refresher New Members’ Orientation if more than 2 years have passed since last training.

15. Agency agrees to ensure that at least two current staff/primary volunteers are trained in appropriate level of Food Safety scheduled by FeedMore or show proof of other training completed.

16. Agency agrees to make clients aware of other supplemental benefits and encourage SNAP (Food Stamp) Application.

17. Agency agrees to withdraw food at least once a month from CVFB’s Distribution Center. (Seasonal/CARITAS agencies are exempt)

18. Agency agrees to complete/submit Monthly Reports by the 10th day of each month.

19. Agency agrees to adhere to stated days/hours of operation of no less than monthly. Distribution time/s should be known by the general public.

20. Agency agrees to keep FeedMore updated of all program aspects, and agrees to notify in writing its Agency Relations Staff/Program Coordinator in advance of or immediately of any program change such as operating hours, staff changes, shoppers’ deletions or additions, location/address changes or email contacts. No additional/new shopper will be approved without attending Monthly Agency Orientation.

21. Agency agrees to adhere to additional donor stipulations.

22. Agency agrees to pay a fee of $35.00 for returned checks in addition to the face value of the check.

23. Agency must request a refund of any credit amount, in writing, by December 31st of current year, if decision is made not to continue membership (Agency Year is October – September). All monies left in the account at year’s end will be considered a donation to FeedMore.

24. Agency agrees to release the original donor, FeedMore and Feeding America free and harmless against all liabilities, damages, claims, losses, cause of action, and suits of law or inequity, and offer no express warranties in relation to the gift of goods.

25. Compliance: If the Agency violates any provision of this Agreement or other policies or procedures associated with Agency Membership, FeedMore may suspend the agency’s ability to acquire food through any related resource until such violation is remedied.

26. Term: There is no set term of this Agreement – it is considered effective until FeedMore changes such, or the Agency declares itself inactive (and withdraws as a Partner Agency), or until the authorized Agency Representative signing below is no longer relevant. The Agency is responsible for re-signing a new Agreement when the signatory changes at the Agency level.

Authorized Representative of Partner Agency

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Site Inspection
Checklist of Standards & Readiness

The following items are the primary aspects Food Bank staff will check/verify upon site visits to your facility. You may use this form as your own Checklist, although Food Bank staff will have their own form to complete. These items are important, as they pertain to the condition and readiness of your agency’s facility. Food safety, cleanliness and appearance of your facility are of utmost importance. Although these items are primary, this list/form may not include every item a staff may need to review or inspect upon his/her visit. If problems are found with the condition, cleanliness, safety or readiness of the facility, the program may not be approved until conditions are met.

Dry Food Storage Area/s:

- __ Size & Description (general acceptability for type of Program desired)
- __ Basic Food Safety Standards:
  - __ Cleanliness
  - __ Food stored 4-6 inches off floor
  - __ FIFO practiced in all areas;
  - __ Cleaning supplies and chemicals separated from food
  - __ Trash receptacles – in appropriate areas, clean and with lids

Refrigeration & Freezers:

- __ Size/s & Description/s
- __ Refrigerator capacity can account for 25% of total food
- __ All appliances have appropriate working thermometers
- __ All appliances working, clean and sanitary

Miscellaneous:

- __ On-site Computer & Internet
- __ Overall condition of the facility clean, neat and orderly
- __ All food storage areas under lock and key
- __ Sufficient lighting throughout the facility
- __ Appropriate client information and guidelines posted
- __ Pest Control procedure or contract
- __ Secured, on-site filing area of all required documents
- __ Handicapped accessible*
- __ External signage displayed/visible*

*Not required

Primary Contact Information will be confirmed during Site Visit:

- __ Name of Responsible Representative (and Title)
- __ Name of Site Coordinator /Title (if different)
- __ Two appropriate Phone Numbers (Site & Coordinator)