



*"There is no life as complete as the life that is lived by choice."*

- Dr. Shad Helmstetter, Behavioral Researcher and Author

## Client Choice Model

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### **What is a Client Choice Model and Why Should We Implement It?**

A client choice pantry allows clients to select their food instead of receiving a pre-packed or standard bag of groceries. With this model, they are not given items they have already, do not like, or cannot eat for health or personal reasons. The client choice model is considered a best practice amongst food pantries because it typically reduces food waste, saves the pantry money and preserves the dignity of our clients by allowing them to select their own food. There are a wide range of client choice models, and any pantry can find a form that works for them; see the resources listed at the end of this whitepaper for a full explanation of the various models.

### **Misconceptions about Client Choice<sup>1</sup>**

#### ***If a client is hungry, they will eat whatever a pantry puts in their bag.***

Many clients may have health conditions, such as diabetes or allergies, which prevent them from eating certain foods. Clients' needs are not one-size-fits-all, so the food we offer should try to accommodate different preferences and restrictions when possible. Above all, client choice helps create an atmosphere of dignity and respect for clients, which is something that every pantry should strive for.

#### ***Running a client choice pantry requires more time from workers than a pre-pack pantry.***

Moving to client choice will not require more time from workers. It will mean using their time differently. Volunteers will spend more time serving and talking with customers instead of packing bags. Most of the volunteer time will be spent during program service hours rather than before clients arrive. In fact, running a client choice pantry often requires less volunteers because you don't have to pre-pack those bags yourself. You can run a client choice pantry with only one volunteer.

#### ***In switching from pre-pack to client choice, a pantry will need to increase the amount and variety of food provided to clients.***

Not at all; you can keep the same types of food. If you usually pack a can of corn, peas and carrots into a box, now clients can choose three of any of the vegetables: corn, peas or carrots. Likely, you will actually have more food because people are only going to take what they want and need. None of the food in your pantry will be wasted.

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<sup>1</sup> List taken in part from: Second Harvest Food Bank Orange County <http://feedoc.org/AgencyAccess/ClientChoice.aspx>, and Food Bank of East Alabama <http://foodbankofeastalabama.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Client-Choice-Handbook-2.pdf>

***If a pantry is client choice, it risks wasting perishable food that people may not want.***

Client choice models have been proven to waste less food than other models, because people take only what they will eat and leave the rest for others. If you have a large quantity of perishable food that you want to move, encourage people to take extra servings. You may also want to try connecting with your local cooperative extension representative for help in marketing some of these foods to your clients through cooking demonstrations, food tastings and recipe handouts.

***Client choice requires a pantry with a large space.***

You don't need much space at all. A client choice pantry can be the size of a small closet. It doesn't have to be elaborate. If you don't have a storage space, you can put items on tables and still let people choose. Even if you only have the option to pre-box food, you can still consider having a shared table, for example.

**Examples of AFC Members Who Use Client Choice Models**

Client choice is a continuum and can be offered at different levels; some agencies utilize choice in every aspect of their distribution, while others might simply have a shared tab. Most pantries should be able to find a client choice model that works for them. The Alaskan agencies featured here all use client choice, but offer it in very different ways.

**St. Francis House** in Anchorage operates their pantry a bit like a grocery store. Director Linda Bond says, "Clients like [this model] because they feel like they are in control; it's like they are going to Carrs or Safeway. They choose items that they will actually use, and there is less waste than if we just box it up for them." In her pantry, clients have a lot of options to choose from. Typically, items are shelved by food type - such as "pasta," "canned fruit" or "protein" - and clients are able to choose from 3-7 different types of food on each shelf. Of the client choice model, Linda says, "We get very positive comments from our clients. We have been doing it for many years, and it definitely does work."

The **Willow Community Food Pantry** has a very robust client choice model. Distribution is done by solely by weight; clients can get 10 lbs. per person of anything. In addition to this, they have "weight exempt" items, which are items that the pantry gets for free (such as produce, dairy, etc) or that they have an abundance of. Those "weight exempt" items might be doled out "one of each," but it's basically a yes or no answer. Fran Lynch, who runs the pantry, feels good about offering client choice: "I appreciate seeing someone choose something that they are really excited about. It's neat to have kids come in and shop, because they are learning about how to select food. They can read packaging and talk about the nutritional information...I think it encourages healthy choices and encourages meal building." In addition to these benefits, Fran says that client choice reduces waste, even with fresh foods.

The **Bristol Bay Regional Food Bank** operates in the rural hub of Dillingham and mails food boxes to surrounding villages, so they have fewer options for client choice. Despite the transportation and shipping challenges they face, they are still able to offer some choice for clients that come to the food bank in Dillingham. Food bank Coordinator Barbara Nunn explains, "Some food, including canned vegetables and cereal, that I order from SPAN [freight company] comes as a

variety, so I am able to ask clients which types they want. They are really happy that they get to pick. There is more value in their box, because it has something that they wanted."

### **Additional Resources**

If you are interested in learning more about client choice models, or making the switch, there are a number of great guides and handbooks out there:

*Alaska Food Coalition, "Client Choice: Why it Works, and How You Can Implement it into Your Organization (January 2010)."*

<http://www.alaskafood.org/whitepapers.shtml>

*Ohio Association of Second Harvest Food Banks, "Making the Switch: A Guide for Converting to a Client Choice Food Pantry."*

<http://www.taafb.org/documents/ChoicePantryGuide.pdf>

*Food Bank of East Alabama, "On Your Way to Offering Client Choice: A Hand Book for Food Pantries."*

<http://foodbankofeastalabama.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Client-Choice-Handbook-2.pdf>

*Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank, "Client Choice Pantry Handbook."*

[http://www.akroncantonfoodbank.org/Data/Sites/52/assets/agency/Available%20Agency%20Forms/General%20Membership/choice-pantry-handbook\\_may2012.pdf](http://www.akroncantonfoodbank.org/Data/Sites/52/assets/agency/Available%20Agency%20Forms/General%20Membership/choice-pantry-handbook_may2012.pdf) same as food bank of east Alabama

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<http://www.alaskafood.org/whitepapers.shtml>

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