



“Unfortunately, everything the experts tell us about diet is aimed at the whole population, and we are not all the same.” - *The Scientist* magazine

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## **Should Nutrition Influence What Food Banks Do?**

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When discussing the impact of their services, food banks have traditionally focused on quantity, of both people served and pounds distributed. In recent years, however, there has been a lot of debate over the role of nutrition in food banking, with some advocates calling for greater attention to the “quality” of distributed food. Proponents of what is being termed as “nutrition banking” focus on the distribution of nutritious and healthy food, rather than utilizing everything available or donated. This focus on healthy food has prompted some food banks to controversially eliminate items, such as soda and other foods deemed unhealthy, from their shelves. The question remains: *Should nutrition influence what food banks do?*

### **Viewpoint: Yes!**

Willy Elliott-McCrae, CEO of Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County, is a leader in the nutrition banking movement. In addition to Second Harvest’s strong nutrition outreach and education initiatives, they actively select the types of food they distribute; they have banned sodas and energy drinks, and put a high priority on farm-fresh produce. This year, Feeding America awarded the Second Harvest Food Bank Santa Cruz County the Mighty Apple award for receiving the largest percentage of produce to total receipts. Of Second Harvest’s total food distribution for FY11/12, an impressive 62.3% were farm fresh vegetables.

Elliott-McCrae believes that it is not enough for food banks to simply distribute food, but that they should pay close attention to the types of food they distribute. He points to potential health issues brought on by the “cheap food” that is often donated to food banks: “[Distributing high-calorie/low-nutrient food] has long-term, severe negative impacts on the people we exist to serve. It brings devastating diseases, makes it harder to find work, and results in household budgets consumed by health costs.” For Elliott-McCrae, modern hunger rarely means simply too few calories, but rather too few nutrients. In fact, proponents of this model have even gone as far as to say that serving cheap, processed food to hungry people actually makes them *hungrier*, due to the dramatic spikes and drops it causes in our blood sugar levels.

### **Viewpoint: No!**

The late John Arnold, former Executive Director of Feeding America West Michigan Food Bank, was less enthusiastic about “nutrition banking.” For Arnold, the censorship of certain foods was an elitist and undemocratic practice. He argued that food bank clients know what is best for themselves and their myriad of ever-changing needs. Arnold countered the claim that malnutrition caused by unhealthy foods is as equally pressing as hunger, by referring to a 1994 study by Michigan State University, which stated that having nothing to eat is the worst form of

malnutrition. Arnold held that “until [we’ve] overcome that problem we [have] no business censoring or withholding any food we could possibly make available to hungry people.”

While some food banks are designating certain foods unhealthy, such as soda, and consequently refusing to distribute them, Arnold argued that this is a slippery slope. Rather than focusing on securing and distributing food, food banks could find themselves sucked into the minutiae of debating the nutritional benefits of their stock. Where do we draw the line? Does putting vitamins in soda redeem it? Is cake bad – even on someone’s birthday? For Arnold, this type of dilemma threatened to confuse and alienate donors – something that many food banks can’t afford to risk.

### **The Solution?: Using a Client Choice Model**

Client choice, a model which enables food pantry clients to choose their own food based on what they will use, remains a best practice in food banking. This system enables food banks and pantries to feed more people and waste less, by letting clients choose at least some portion of the food they are receiving. It not only ensures that the food given out will be used, but also empowers clients to choose the mix of foods right for them and their families. Banning certain products from distribution goes against the client choice model, because in these instances, food banks are essentially making the choices for their clients. On the other hand, the client choice model also strives to provide variety to clients, which includes nutritious and fresh food. As John Arnold suggested, “We should...not reduce the amount of soda pop, potato chips, candy and ice cream we handle, but instead tremendously increase the quantities of fresh fruits and vegetables we handle!”

People should be given the necessary information and tools in order to make informed choices. While perhaps food banks should not decide - and cannot know - what is “right” for their clients to eat, they can incorporate nutrition education into their programs, enabling their clients to make informed choices. In fact, “nutrition banks” often promote strong nutrition education components in their programs, which are seen as effective by people on both sides of the debate. Nutrition education, in the form of classes, presentations and distributed literature, generally results in participants being equipped with basic nutritional knowledge in order to make appropriate choices for their family.

If you are interested in incorporating nutrition education into your program, Cooperative Extension Services operate state-wide in Alaska to teach people skills and strategies to make healthy eating affordable through interactive classes, workshops, and presentations. For more information, please contact:

Helen Idzorek, CES Family Nutrition Program Coordinator  
[haidzorek@alaska.edu](mailto:haidzorek@alaska.edu) or 907-474-7930

Additionally, USDA has a selection of downloadable nutritional literature:  
<http://www.choosemyplate.gov/print-materials-ordering.html>.

## Resources

Arnold, John. "Why 'Nutrition' Ought Not Influence What Food Banks Do." Feeding America's 2010 Agency Capacity, Programs and Nutrition Conference. Conference session handout.

Gaura, Maria. "[PART ONE] Santa Cruz Food Bank Switches Focus from Calories to Nutrition." Santa Cruz Wire. <http://www.santacruzwire.com/index.php/healthy-living/22-healthy-living/448-food-banks-switch-focus-from-calories-to-nutrition.html>

"Have We Been Making People Hungrier?" From Hunger to Health. <http://hungerintohealth.com/the-food/coming-soon/>

Leonard, Tara. "[PART TWO] Peer Education and Nutrition Outreach at Santa Cruz's Second Harvest Food Bank." Santa Cruz Wire. <http://www.santacruzwire.com/index.php/healthy-living/22-healthy-living/446-the-power-of-peer-education-nutrition-education-and-outreach-efforts-at-second-harvest-food-bank.html>

"Promoting Client Choice: How Food Pantries Can Most Effectively Alleviate Hunger." Congressional Hunger Center. <http://www.hungercenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Promoting-Client-Choice-Carson.pdf>

Second Harvest Food Bank Blog. <http://www.thefoodbank.org/category/category/foodbank-blog/>

*Copies of Alaska Food Coalition White Papers are available online:*

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

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