

So You Want to Start an Emergency Food Pantry...

Individuals seeking food for their families may have approached your church or organization, and you want to respond. Meeting the needs of the hungry is a noble and wonderful ministry. If you do want to start an emergency pantry, perhaps with the plan of becoming a partner agency of the Food Bank, here are some hints to help you succeed.

Look Into Local Resources

Before investing your organization's resources in starting up a program, investigate the local food resources. Treasure Coast Food Bank can tell you of our partner agencies that already exist in your area. Call 772-489-5676, ext. 17, for more information. Learning about your neighborhood and what services are available will help you decide when and how you want to become part of the hunger solution.

Mission

Have a mission to feed the hungry. Identify the population you expect to serve and learn the level of need in your area.

501(c)(3)

To be a partner of the Food Bank, your agency will need a 501(c)(3) Letter of Determination from the IRS. To get this, you will have to contact the IRS and request Form 1023 ("Application for Recognition of Exemption") and its instructions. You may call 800-829-1040 for information or 800-829-3676 for the form. The application, and process, is also available on-line at www.irs.gov. It will take at least six weeks, if not considerably longer, to receive the Letter of Determination once you have filed for it. Note: 501(c)(3) is different from the Florida Certificate of Tax Exemption.

Storage Site

Treasure Coast Food Bank requires its partner agencies to be able to store food safely and securely on the premises of the agency. Locate a room with adequate shelving for accepting food by the case quantity. This room must be able to be locked. If you want to distribute frozen or refrigerated food, the storage units for these must be able to be locked as well. Food for your pantry should not be accessible for general church or agency activities. If you wish to learn more about the specific storage guidelines for the Food Bank, the "Basic Food Storage Guidelines" are enclosed.

Budget

You will need a budget to pay for your pantry expenses. Your budget may come from a benevolence fund, donations, grants, or other sources, but you will need a regular source of money. In addition to the costs connected with getting food—whether through shared maintenance or purchase—you can count on some, at least, of the following expenses: staffing, transportation, pest control, photocopying of forms, cleaning supplies, thermometers, and storage containers.

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Staffing

Your pantry staff may be comprised of volunteers or paid employees. You will need enough people to perform the following chores on a regular basis:

- Stock food on the shelves and make up boxes or bags of food
- Conduct client intake
- Clean and maintain the facility
- Attend meetings and training sessions
- Do distribution record keeping and write reports
- Pick up food

Volunteers staff most pantries; here are a few pointers to keep them happy. First, make them feel they are an integral part of your organization and that their work is meaningful. It often helps to have a volunteer job description so that they know where their responsibilities begin and end. You also might consider having a volunteer handbook with information they can refer to when they have or receive questions. Check on volunteers while they're working to make sure everything is going well. Finally, appreciate them! Recognize the important role volunteers play in your pantry. Of course, paid staff deserves appreciation, too.

Transportation

You will need reliable and consistent transportation for collecting food. The vehicle or vehicles should be large enough for the size of your program.

Client Eligibility

Your emergency pantry should set guidelines—regarding whom you will help, how often, and with how much food. While the IRS rules state that you cannot require your clients to make a donation, attend a church service, or work for food, you still need to decide on client eligibility guidelines. Some pantries limit their service area or post income limitations.

Record Keeping

You should account for all the food that you distribute. It lets food donors know how you use their donation, and it helps in hunger advocacy to be able to document who needs food and where emergency food is going. Treasure Coast Food Bank requires its partner agencies to record the date of distribution, the client's name and address, the number of people in the household, and the number of days' food supply going out.

Getting Started

If you feel that starting a pantry is an appropriate response to hunger in your area, and you have all these components of your program worked out, you can get started. Start small, so that you can work out any unresolved details, and be flexible. Be sure that the highest authority in your organization, whether pastor or director, is kept informed of your plans and your pantry operation.