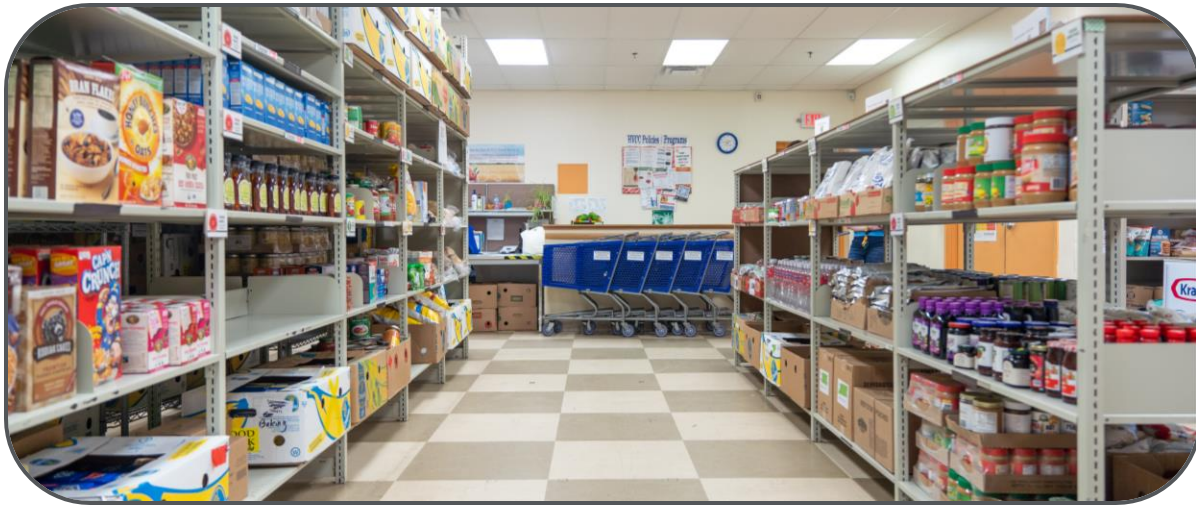


## Offering Choice in Food Pantries

*Having guests choose their own food from food pantries creates a dignified experience that ensures guests will have the foods that best meet their and their family's dietary preferences and needs.*



Hockanum Valley Community Council pantry

### What is Choice?

An important way to show the values and culture of a food pantry is by allowing guests to handle and choose their food with dignity, what is commonly called "offering choice." Many food pantries distribute identical prepacked bags to guests, regardless of food needs or preferences. While such a model may seem efficient for the volunteers and for distribution, it can create stigma for guests to ask for "charity" and create a power dynamic between the "giver" (food pantry volunteers/staff) and the "receiver" (guests).

**Every pantry is unique, but the following descriptions help illustrate different levels of choice that can be offered:**

#### None

Every guest gets the same, predetermined items. Volunteers/staff handle the food and prepare bags or boxes for guests.

#### Limited

Guests can choose among a few types of prepacked boxes or can combine a prepacked box with choice of certain food items from a table or basket. Guests typically do not touch or handle the food directly.

#### Modified

Guests may select from general food types such as soup or cereal, but not the specific flavors or brands by:

- Selecting items from a menu
- Telling volunteers or staff what food items they want by pointing.

Volunteers or staff then pack the bag or box.

#### Full

Guests may select from specific flavors or brands such as chicken noodle soup or lentil soup by:

- Shopping for food like at a grocery store
- Ordering online for specific products

The pantry may set limits on quantity to select, but guests may freely handle and select foods.

# Benefits of Offering Choice

- **Promotes dignity:** Guests have the ability to select foods like they would at a grocery store.
- **Better accommodates dietary needs and culturally preferred foods:** Guests select the foods they will use and eat, which **decreases food waste** and amount of food returned to pantry by guests (in food drives or left behind in the parking lot).
- **Richer volunteer experience:** Volunteers spend more time engaging with guests and building relationships.
- **Requires less storage space:** All or some food is stored in the shopping area, and extra space to store prepacked bags is not needed.
- **Easier to control inventory and order foods:** By seeing what foods guests select, it will become easier to order foods that people want and will use.
- **Provides opportunities to offer nudges or nutrition education:** Nudges and nutrition ranking systems like SWAP (Supporting Wellness at Pantries) are most effective in full choice pantries where guests can use the nutritional information to select healthier foods.

“Our volunteers are getting to know the guests a little more [since offering choice]. And that’s a bonus. Because now they’re getting to form a relationship.”  
- Pantry staff



Ann B Clark Community Co-op, Goodw in College

## Any space can offer choice. A place to start:

**Layout:** Start by considering the layout of your space. Consider how the shopping might flow if you opened the space for guests to select their own food. *Tip: Maximize space by using shelves rather than using table-top displays.*

**Volunteers:** You will likely need to reimagine volunteer roles in order to increase choice. Be open and candid with volunteers about why you are making this transition and how shopping will benefit the guests. *Tip: Avoid “policing” guest choices.*

### Take one step to offer more choice:

- Offer a choice table where guests can exchange items they will not use with other guests or choose from a variety of items like condiments or fresh produce.
- Offer a menu of items for the day. This can be part of a modified choice model or used to inform guests of the day’s offerings before they start shopping.



“Our guests have been so excited about the change [to full choice], expressing how grateful they are to self-select the foods that works best for their family and dietary needs and expressed how dignified the shopping experience was.”  
- Emma Witwer, Project SHARE of Carlisle

To learn more, visit: [www.foodshare.org/institute](http://www.foodshare.org/institute)