Choice Capacity Handbook

Care and Share Food Bank for Southern Colorado

Revised March 2023

Contents

Section 1: What is Neighbor Choice?

Neighbor Choice pantries provide your neighbors with the opportunity to choose the food that best meets their needs. Every household has different food needs so neighbor choice is often a better option than a standardized food package.

There are several different models for operating a neighbor choice pantry. This handbook provides food pantry coordinators and volunteers with the guidance needed to set up and operate a neighbor choice pantry that is right for them and their neighbors. See Section 2 for details about each of the operating models.

Why should we offer Choice?

Serve with dignity – Offering choice upholds the dignity of everyone who enters the pantry.

Enhance capability to offer cultural foods and special diet foods – A neighbor choice pantry can incorporate more varied food options that meet the needs of neighbors with different needs – whether those needs be due to health condition, religious practice, or community culture.

Enrich host-neighbor interactions – Creating positive Host-Neighbor relationships can lead to increased trust, understanding, and respect among neighbors. It also can help staff and employees understand other needs neighbors may have and be able to offer them information about wrap-around services or outside resources available.

Less food waste – When neighbors can choose foods they want, less food is wasted or left unused.

Make ordering and stocking the pantry easier – With time, pantry staff and volunteers can determine which items are desired. This makes it easier to know what to order or request from community donations and food bank orders.

Testimonials

Don't just take our word for it! The following quotes are from a 2022 Feeding America survey of new neighbor choice pantry coordinators.

Less food waste: *"[I]f you make me take food that I don't like or I'm not going to eat, it is going to be wasted and what's the point?"*

More efficient services: *"It's been really easy for [workers] to transition to this [full choice] model because not only does it take less time, but we can serve a lot more families."*

More meaningful connections: *"It's much more personal, it's much more about being with the person…. [W]e have regulars [who] look for a certain volunteer… and it becomes a bond. For some people that's the only warm face they see."*

Neighbors prefer choice: *"90% of folks, when presented with the choice, would choose to shop over just getting what they get."*

Not that hard: *"It's just not that hard to do. Looking back, it was a lot of worry over nothing. It was very easily done." And "choice doesn't take a lot of time, it's easy to maneuver -- we put it in an old room that already had shelves. It's easier to manage than I thought."*

Never going back: *"Once you make the switch, you don't want to go back." And "I also would never go back. Because allowing choice has been so powerful for people…They feel worthy and valued because we care enough to check in with them and provide an opportunity for them to shop."*

Section 2: Which Neighbor Choice Model is Right for Your Pantry?

Neighbor choice is not one-size-fits-all; there are several choice models to choose from. The model you implement will be based predominately upon these factors:

• Physical space

• Equipment

• Workers

Take some time to review the following neighbor choice models and discuss the details with your pantry workers to decide together which model might be best for your pantry. Keep in mind that you can modify the models, even by combining elements of different models.

Any pantry can operate as neighbor choice; you just need to implement tactics that work for your organization.

Grocery Model

The Grocery Model of neighbor choice functions much like a grocery store. Food is set up by food groups inside the pantry and neighbors choose their food as they proceed along the aisles past food shelves, refrigerators, and freezers. Workers may guide neighbors through their choices and/or check them out when they have finished shopping.

The pantry needs to be large enough to safely accommodate neighbors shopping, often while pushing a small cart. One of the great advantages of the Grocery Model is that the food storeroom and the place where neighbors choose their food can be one and the same. A backstock area is not necessary for most pantries who operate a Grocery Model, and therefore, workers do not need to move the food from one room to another for the neighbors.

Making It Work
1. Keep food organized by food group on pantry shelves. Have workers come to the pantry before open pantry hours so that items can be restocked and tidied up if necessary.

2. During neighbor intake, ask the neighbor for the number of adults, children, and seniors in their household.

3. Workers can walk through the pantry with neighbors. This is especially helpful for neighbors who need assistance reaching or picking up items. It is an excellent opportunity to encourage neighbors to choose more nutritious options, items they may not be familiar with, or foods that you are trying to move more quickly due to perishability.

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4. Some neighbors may prefer to shop on their own. If that is the case, make sure that they know if there are any limits on certain products by posting signs by those items. You will need to have a "check-out" table to verify that they are accounted for their visit. Inform neighbors upon arrival that there is a "check-out" table. It is important to set these expectations, so they are not surprised and feel like you are "policing" food choices. Be sure to emphasize that the "check-out" is to ensure they are receiving a well-balanced pantry package, and it is not that you do not trust them.

Equipment

You will need shelving that accommodates the amount of food you are offering to neighbors.

Refrigerator and freezer storage is important to help increase the variety of options available to neighbors. Ideally, your refrigerators and freezers will have glass doors. This allows neighbors to see into them to make choices instead of holding the doors open, thus keeping the units at proper temperatures.

Tip! If you do not have glass-door equipment, you can post a list of products contained within. Be sure to update the list, as needed, so you can meet neighbor expectations.

These items are helpful and, in some pantries, may be necessary:

- Shopping carts or baskets

- Table for intake and table for "check-out"

- Merchandising baskets and signage (See Section 4 for more information.)

Adapting the Model

There may be times that you need to adapt the Grocery Model to accommodate a particular situation, such as a pantry worker shortage or physical distancing guidelines necessary for health and safety.

You also may need to adapt the model to meet the needs of specific neighbors, such as those with limited English proficiency, neighbors with disabilities, neighbors without transportation, and more.

Whether you need to adapt temporarily for all neighbors, or as needed for specific neighbors, you will likely find that the easiest models to utilize are Distance and Inventory. You will not need to make any significant changes to your set-up to implement those models.

Guidance on implementing Distance and Inventory Models.

Table Model

The Table Model of neighbor choice presents foods organized by food group on tables for neighbors. Neighbors walk by each table to choose their food. Neighbors may pack their own food, or workers may assist them. Often, each table is staffed by at least one pantry worker.

You will need enough space to set up all the tables needed to display the available food and allow both workers and neighbors to navigate through the space easily and safely and along the tables. If the space is tight, try setting up tables in a U-shape.

Making It Work

1. Have pantry workers come before open pantry hours, so that food can be transported from the storage area and organized on tables by food group. You will also need pantry workers to stay after the distribution to bring leftover food back to the storage area. Depending on what tables you have, you may need workers to set up and break the tables down.

Tip! Some workers may find it physically difficult or tiring to assist from set-up to clean-up. Consider having workers sign up for specific shifts, so that some workers help set up and stay for part of the distribution and other workers arrive partway through the distribution and stay through clean-up.

2. During the neighbor intake, ask the neighbor for the number of adults, children, and seniors in their household. Determine how many items households of different sizes can receive and give a printed guide or signage for neighbors to reference.

3. Neighbors walk along the tables, choosing and packing their food. Workers are available at the tables to provide information about the food available, re-stock the table if needed, and assist with reaching or picking up items for neighbors. Some pantries may choose to have workers walk along with the neighbors instead of or in addition to having workers stationed at tables. Either way, it is an excellent opportunity to encourage neighbors to choose more nutritious options, items they may not be familiar with, or foods that you are trying to move more quickly due to perishability.

Tip! If you have a large amount of one item or you are not confident that neighbors will know how to utilize and item, you can print recipes featuring that food to encourage folks to pick it for themselves!

4. If you have limits on products, be sure to tell neighbors upfront or have signs posted on the tables. This will help neighbors know that the food is being handled equitably among all neighbors, and that you are not "policing" food choices or favoring certain neighbors.

5. If you are putting perishable foods out on the tables, you must be mindful of how long those items are out of cold storage. Be sure to consider how long the food was out before the distribution started. For food safety guidelines, contact your Regional Manager.

You will need enough tables to display the available food. Often, these are folding tables that are set up and broken down for each pantry distribution.

Additionally, the following items are helpful:

- Utility carts

- Transport dollies

- Shopping carts

- Table for intake

- Coolers with ice and/or thermal blankets for perishable items on hot days

- Merchandising signage to post to walls or tables (See Section 4 for more information.)

Adapting the Model

There may be times that you need to adapt the Table Model to accommodate a particular situation, such as a pantry worker shortage or physical distancing guidelines necessary for health and safety. Under those circumstances, you may want to consider temporarily implementing a drive-thru distribution. You can largely operate your distribution the same way, but the food is presented on pallets and loaded into neighbors' cars for them. You can still offer choices to neighbors by talking to them through their windows. Or you can present them with an inventory sheet to select their choices, and then the sheet can be passed along to the workers as the car passes each station.

You also may need to adapt the Table Model to meet the needs of specific neighbors, such as those with limited English proficiency, neighbors with disabilities, neighbors without transportation, and more. The Distance Model and Inventory Model are both excellent options for meeting the needs of those neighbors.

Guidance on implementing Distance and Inventory Models is discussed in more detail later in the handbook.

Distance Model

The Distance Model enables pantries to offer neighbor choice that may not otherwise be able to do so. Usually, this is due to the pantry being within a very small space, like a closet. However, the Distance Model can be implemented for many other space or location-related reasons. For example, a pantry may be situated in a part of a building that cannot permit public access – perhaps due to security restrictions or handicap accessibility (e.g. only accessible by staircase).

Additionally, even if a pantry typically operates a different Neighbor Choice model, the Distance Model can be implemented by pantries on an as needed basis. For example, a Grocery Model pantry might utilize the Distance Model if there is a need for physical distancing, due to temporary health or safety measures. Or, a Grocery Model pantry may use the Distance Model as a means to accommodate specific neighbors who are not able to go inside the pantry personally for a particular reason, e.g. health condition, anxiety disorder, lack of transportation, and more.

There are two different ways to operate a Distance Model pantry – In-Person and Remote.

In-Person

The In-person Distance Model is also called the "Window" Model. The name comes from the idea of a neighbor looking into the pantry through a window, as in the picture at right. Neighbors make choices by pointing to and/or telling the worker which food they want.

Making It Work

1. Keep food organized by food group on pantry shelves. Have workers come to the pantry before open pantry hours, so that items can be restocked and tidied up.

2. During the neighbor intake, ask the neighbor for the number of adults, children, and seniors in their household.

3. A worker inside the pantry works directly with the neighbor situated just outside of the pantry. The neighbor points at and/or tells the worker their choices.

Tip! To avoid potential miscommunication and frustration, workers should pick up items and bring them over to the neighbor if there is a question of whether they have chosen the right item, or if the neighbor simply wants a closer look. Pantries can also hang signs with large, bold lettering that make the foods available on the shelves.

Equipment

- Shelving and refrigerator and freezer storage

- Window or Dutch door (aka half-door), to allow neighbors to look into the pantry and choose items

Helpful Items to have on-hand:

- Intake table

- Table to place packed-up pantry packages for neighbors to pick up

- Merchandising signage to post to walls or shelves (See Section 4 for more information.)

Remote

The Remote Distance Model utilizes electronic technology for the worker and neighbor to communicate. The neighbor can be on-site, but it is not necessary. Below are several different electronic methods that can be utilized to implement this model.

Making It Work

- Set up a method for neighbors to be able to see what is available in the pantry and for workers to be able to communicate with pantry neighbors. Here are some options: • Set up video cameras strategically around the pantry to show what is available in each food group. Transmit the video feeds to computer monitors in a waiting room. Neighbors can fill out an inventory sheet, based on what they see and want to choose. (See Inventory Model for guidance on inventory sheets.) Additionally, an intercom system, Ring doorbell, or phone can be utilized for the neighbor to communicate with the worker.

- Ask your Regional Manager about getting OrderAhead, a free technology offered by Feeding America that can help your neighbors place their orders before opening so your pantry workers can assemble the orders before opening.

- Set up web cams strategically around the pantry to show what is available in each food group. Transmit the video feeds to a website that neighbors can access to see what is available. Neighbors can fill out an online form for what they would like to choose. (See Inventory Model for guidance on online forms.) Or, a pantry worker can speak to the neighbor on the phone, while shopping for the neighbor.

- Workers and neighbors can communicate via a smartphone video call app, such as Facetime or Zoom. The worker shows options to the neighbor as they walk around the pantry shopping for them. The neighbor can be in a waiting room, outside, or completely off-site.

2. Keep food organized by food group on pantry shelves. Have workers come to the pantry before open pantry hours, so that items can be restocked and tidied up.

3. During the neighbor intake, ask the neighbor for the number of adults, children, and seniors in their household. As the neighbor shops, the worker will inform the neighbor of the number of choices per food group that are available to them. If utilizing an inventory sheet, write down for the neighbor how many choices per food group. (See Inventory Model for further guidance.)

4. A worker inside the pantry works directly with the neighbor, creating the pantry package for them.

Equipment

- Shelving and refrigerator and freezer storage

- Applicable electronics, based on how this model is being implemented, e.g. video cameras, web cams, computer monitors, Ring doorbell, intercom, smartphone, website.

Tip! Think about the technological capabilities of the majority of your workers and neighbors. Do most have smartphones? Keep in mind that if you use a smartphone for video communication, both users need to be able to access the same application. You would not want to rely on Facetime, for example, as that is only available to iPhone/iPad users.

- Back-up method, in case of technological failure or user error, e.g. inventory sheets and pens

These items are helpful:

- Intake table

- Table to place packed-up pantry packages for neighbors to pick up

- Merchandising signage to post to shelves (See Section 4 for more information.)

Adapting the Model

The Distance Model requires significant one-on-one time between a worker and a neighbor. Take that into account when planning. Consider complementary strategies for streamlining the process. Here are some ideas:

- Schedule neighbor appointments, so that there is never more than one neighbor looking through the pantry window and talking with the worker at a time.

- Pre-pack several different "meal kits" that can be offered to neighbors as part of their pantry package, e.g. tuna noodle casserole meal kit. This still provides choice but can cut down on the amount of time needed for each neighbor.

- Plan for how you can handle potential difficulty communicating remotely, especially if there is a language barrier. For example, if some of your neighbors are most comfortable speaking Spanish, try to have a Spanish speaking worker available to work directly with them. Ask your Regional Manager for help downloading free translation apps.

Inventory Model

The Inventory Model is the one neighbor choice model in which neighbors do not see inside the food pantry. Instead, they are presented with a list of what is available. While it is preferable for neighbors to be able to see the options for themselves, some pantries may not be able to implement the other neighbor choice models. But the great advantage of the Inventory Model is that *any* pantry can do it.

There are three different ways to operate an Inventory Model pantry – in-person, by phone, or online.

In-person

A list of food available is posted or provided to neighbors who are in a waiting area. The neighbors choose their food from the list by marking off choices on an inventory sheet. Workers take the sheet into the pantry and assemble the neighbors' pantry packages.

Phone

Over the phone, a worker tells neighbors which foods are available. Neighbors tell the worker their choices. Workers assemble the neighbors' pantry packages, which are then staged for pickup and/or delivery.

Online

Neighbors make selections through an online ordering system. Workers assemble the neighbors' pantry packages, which are then staged for pickup and/or delivery.

Making It Work

1. Create a system for compiling a list of the pantry's inventory by food group. This list then needs to be communicated appropriately per the method of Inventory Model being implemented.

   In-person: Available inventory can be written on a white board or chalk board. When an item is no longer available, it should be erased. Alternatively, a paper inventory list can be provided to neighbors. That list can be formatted so that the neighbor can mark off their choices right on it. Or, they can write their choices on a separate provided sheet.

   Phone: There are two different ways to implement Inventory by phone. One option is for a worker to be in the pantry while talking on the phone to the neighbor. The worker lists for the neighbor what they see is available in the each food group. The other option is for an inventory list to be provided to the worker(s) on the phone with neighbors. This can be a physical piece of paper or a form of electronic communication. When an item is no longer available, this information needs to be conveyed to the worker(s). The worker can mark off the neighbor's choice right on the inventory sheet, on a separate sheet, or in an electronic file or program (e.g. Word document, Excel spreadsheet, or Google Form).

   Online: The inventory must be updated in the online application being used, so that the neighbor only sees options that are truly available to them. The neighbor makes their selections and submits the shopping form, which the pantry receives through the application. Ask your Regional Manger for help getting OrderAhead, a free platform offered by Feeding America.

Tip! Consider using an online platform that enables you to upload images of special items that you typically do not have. Or if you pre-pack meal kits, showing what those look like may be helpful to neighbors.

2. During neighbor intake, ask the neighbor for the number of adults, children, and seniors in their household. For the online version, this would be asked at the beginning of the shopping form.

3. Once the worker has the neighbor's choices, the pantry package can be packed – either by that worker or by a different worker.

Tip! If implementing the phone version, it is possible for the worker to volunteer from home. The worker can send the neighbor's information over to the pantry (e.g. via email) or bring the order to the pantry later. As long as the neighbor understands when the pantry package will be available for pickup or delivery, the ordering and packing do not need to happen back-to-back.
4. If in-person, the pantry packages are handed off to the neighbor. If by phone or online, the pantry packages are staged for pickup and/or delivery.

Tip! For phone and online, make sure the neighbor knows exactly how and when their pantry package will be available for them. If possible, provide them with options (e.g. time ranges for pickup.)

Equipment

- Shelving and refrigerator and freezer storage

- Table to place packed-up pantry packages for neighbors to pick up or be staged for delivery

- Inventory list

- Inventory sheet or electronic file or platform to fill out neighbors' choices

- Online neighbor ordering platform (Examples: Google Forms, Oasis Insight, SmartChoice, PantrySoft, PantryEasy)

- Photos of available product uploaded to ordering form (optional)

- White board (and dry erase markers) or chalk board (and chalk) and/or inventory lists

- Inventory sheets for neighbors to fill out (and pens)

- Copy paper and ability to make copies

- Chairs for neighbors waiting

- Clipboards (helpful if other writing surfaces are not available)

- Intake table
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Adapting the Model

The In-person and Phone versions of the Inventory Model require significant one-on-one time between a worker and a neighbor. The Online version may not be accessible for all neighbors nor for all pantry workers. Take these into account when planning and consider these strategies:

For Phone: Use a pantry voicemail system, so that neighbors do not have to wait on hold or get a busy signal. In your voicemail message, ask neighbors to say when they will be available for a call-back. And set expectations in your voicemail message about how soon they can expect that call.

In-person and Phone: Offer several different pre-packed "meal kits" that can be offered to neighbors as part of their pantry package, e.g. tuna noodle casserole meal kit. This still provides choice but can cut down on the amount of time needed for each neighbor.

Online: Consider utilizing the Online method in conjunction with the Phone or In-person method. Some neighbors may have difficulty using the platform or may not have consistent access to the internet. And some pantry workers may not be comfortable with the technology required.

Section 3: Neighbor Choice Frequently Asked Questions

1. Will our pantry run out of food if we offer neighbor choice?

No. Neighbor Choice does not mean neighbors can take any amount of food they want. Pantries have guidelines for how much food neighbors can take according to household size, and that does not change for a neighbor choice pantry. In general, you should not see an increase in the overall quantity of product movement.

2. What if just a few neighbors take all the inventory of specific items?

Just as neighbor choice does not mean that neighbors can take an unlimited amount of food, it also does not mean that neighbors can take an unlimited number of specific items. As needed, due to inventory considerations, pantries may utilize product limits. For example, if you have 10 dozen eggs in stock, and you expect to see 10 or more households during pantry hours, you can limit eggs to one dozen per household.

3. Will neighbor choice cost our pantry more to run?

No. In fact, you should find that you are using your food dollars more efficiently and effectively. There are two main reasons:

1. Neighbors can take the food they want and need. As a result, less food is wasted.

2. Pantries do not have to ensure they are giving the same food to everyone, which can allow for the purchase of more variable food items, including great, low-cost, grant-eligible donated items.

4. How will we know what food to stock?

Start by considering these questions about your current operations:
1. What foods do your neighbors often ask for?
2. What foods do your neighbors often ask to take out of their pantry packs?

3. Do you find food you distributed left outside the pantry, in your trash containers, or donated back to the pantry?

Once you have operated as neighbor choice for a little while (typically a few months), it will become apparent which foods are popular – based on which product moves quickly and which product you have trouble moving, and based on your conversations with neighbors when they are making their selections. Also, you can survey your neighbors and then assess the responses!

5. How much variety am I expected to offer?
It will take time to figure out how much variety works for your pantry. Here are some tips to help you:

Do go too big too fast. You don't have to offer 10 different options for every type of food. You may find that some food groups need several options to be available in order to meet the neighbor's needs, while some food groups only need a few.

Vary the foods you offer neighbors from time to time. Neighbors do not necessarily always need all the options. Offering different choices will help you to understand what is more popular with neighbors. For example, if you typically offer three items in a food group at a time, switch out those foods for different choices. Such as, in the protein group, offer canned salmon, ground beef, and canned beans one time, and canned tuna, ground turkey, and peanut butter another time.

Make community donations count! If you receive community donations, e.g. through food drives, encourage people to donate *specific* foods that are popular with your neighbors. You can create a flier or brochure that informs the community about what the pantry needs.

Order mixed retail donated product from the food bank. When you receive assorted retail donated product that is sorted by product category into banana boxes, you are instantly better able to offer your neighbors choice. The product in those boxes are not uniform and will bring great variety to your pantry.

6. What if we don't have enough food to offer choice and still meet the pantry packing guidelines?
Whether providing standardized food packages or offering neighbor choice, any pantry receiving support from the Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) is required to meet the minimum food guide for a 3-day pantry package. In general, there should not be a significant difference in the overall quantity of food that is distributed via standard pantry packages and neighbor choice pantry packs. For assistance, contact Foodlink's Nutrition Resource Manager.

7. People with many different life experiences and needs visit our pantry. The way we handle that is by treating everyone the same and giving everyone the same food. How will be able to accommodate so many different needs?
By listening to your neighbors, and monitoring how your product inventory moves, you can learn what you need to have in stock as much as possible to meet as many of the needs of your neighbors as is feasible. It will also help you to avoid offering certain products that most of your neighbors *do not* want. Additionally, because there are several different models for offering neighbor choice, your pantry can incorporate accommodations needed to better assist neighbors, such as individuals with disabilities, special needs, or limited English proficiency.

8. How can we move unpopular food or items that may spoil quickly, such as ripe fresh fruit and vegetables?

There are numerous strategies you can utilize to move these items. First, let neighbors take as much of that item as they want! You can also implement merchandising techniques (see section 4), provide recipes, suggest meal "bundles," or set up cooking demonstrations with samples. For assistance and resources or for other ideas, contact Foodlink's Nutrition Resource Manager.

9. What if our volunteers don't want us to switch our pantry model?

Change can be difficult for many people. It will be important to provide plenty of information and give them the opportunity to ask questions and express concerns. You will want to explain to your volunteers why you believe neighbor choice will be positive for the pantry, the neighbors, and even the workers too. Here are some tips to help you:

- Schedule a meeting to go over concerns with your Regional Manager
- Share this handbook with them; have group conversations and one-on-one conversations. Don't disregard their concerns, but explain why you personally think it is important to offer neighbors choice. Discuss how you can work together to make the transition.
- Discuss the details of different neighbor choice models. (See Section 2) Decide together which model will best suit your pantry. You can even consider combining elements of different models or implementing different models at different times.
- Emphasize the benefits to the pantry workers, such as enhanced volunteer experience, improved interactions with neighbors and opportunities for relationship-building, and less physical labor. If any of your workers are looking to gain job skills, neighbor choice can provide customer service experience and
- Remember that you can start small. You do not need to transform your entire pantry or even every food group right away.

10. Will neighbor choice mean more work for pantry volunteers?

Not at all. Neighbor choice will require different work from volunteers, but not more work. Volunteers will spend more time assisting and talking with neighbors instead of preparing standard food bags. Most of their work time will be spent during program service hours rather than before neighbors arrive.

11. What roles do volunteers play in a neighbor choice pantry?

There are many different roles for a volunteer in a neighbor choice pantry. Some examples are: Greeter, Sign-in/Intake, Inventory Replenishment, Shopping Assistant, Bagger, and Carrying Assistant/Runner, and Floater.

12. We have a line around the block. How will we have time to offer neighbor choice?

Neighbor choice does not require more time; it requires rethinking how time is spent. For example: Your program currently spends two hours packing bags and two hours distributing bags. That is four hours of volunteer time. If you implement neighbor choice, you no longer need volunteers to pack bags in advance, and therefore, you can use all four hours of volunteer time to serve neighbors. To avoid having neighbors waiting in line for hours, you can let your neighbors know that your program hours will now be longer (four hours instead of two) and that there will be plenty of food available throughout the entire open hours. That way they will not all arrive at the same time. You can also implement an appointment system, so that you can spread out when neighbors arrive.

13. Our pantry is very small. Doesn't neighbor choice require that we set up our pantry like a grocery store?

No. Neighbor choice is a concept that can be implemented in many ways, including with extremely limited space. A grocery store style set-up is a great option, which pantries are encouraged to implement if it is feasible for their operations. But this is not a requirement for a neighbor choice pantry. Section 2 provides details on different neighbor choice models.

14. Our pantry is delivery-only. Is it possible for us to operate as neighbor choice?

Yes! Neighbor choice can be implemented even if neighbors never enter your pantry – whether that is because you offer delivery only or must restrict access due to health or safety considerations. Read on in the handbook for how to implement neighbor choice at a distance.

- Present a clean and organized pantry
- Create the appearance of abundance
- Be thoughtful with placement of product
- Use signage to help guide individuals

Section 4: Merchandising for a Neighbor Choice Food Pantry

Merchandising is the activity of promoting goods, especially by their presentation, in retail outlets. Merchandising your pantry product allows individuals to notice and select items they may have otherwise overlooked. You can use this technique to promote the most nutritious items in your pantry. You do not need to operate a Grocery neighbor choice model to implement merchandising techniques. Any neighbor choice model that involves neighbors seeing the product for themselves should incorporate at least some of the principles of merchandising. Additionally, merchandising techniques also help your workers implement neighbor choice – even if you are implementing the Inventory Model.

Keys to Successful Merchandising:

Read on for how to implement these strategies. Small changes to your pantry can help you make the healthy choice the easy choice for your neighbors!

Cleanliness and Organization

First impressions count. Create a welcoming space by keeping your pantry neat, clean, and organized.

Demonstrate high food safety and sanitation standards. Neighbors will see that you value the importance of their health and well-being. *Tip!* Create a Master Cleaning Schedule. Make regular cleaning part of your routine.

Keep dust off shelves and products. This makes the product more enticing to neighbors (and helps with pest control). *Tip!* Have workers dust product when there is downtime. Prevent dust from building up in the first place.

Organize product by the five food groups. It is easier for neighbors to make choices within a food group if the relevant foods are grouped together.

Tip! Print, laminate, and hang these signs to help organize the product and create an attractive display.

Abundance

Create and maintain displays that appear full and abundant, even if stock is running low.
Pile it high! A fuller display is more noticeable and conveys freshness. Tilting baskets forward can also make the product appear plentiful.
Consolidate items to make displays appear bountiful and attractive. In the example at left, the apples and oranges can each be transferred to smaller baskets. Or, they can be combined into one larger basket, as shown.
"Fronting" or "facing" product is aligning product on the outer edge of the shelf. This assists in stock rotation, but it also makes the shelves look tidier and create a sense of abundance, encouraging customers to select an item.
For canned goods, you can purchase can dispensers, as pictured below, to achieve this practice with ease.

Placement

Think about the general layout of your food shelves. Consider what a neighbor will see first when they enter the space and what they will see right before they leave. How can you set up the flow of shelving and displays to promote healthy and fresh foods in high-traffic areas?
Try placing highly nutritious items, like fresh produce, at the front entry of the pantry. This encourages neighbors to fill up their shopping cart with healthy food first.
Here is an example of a pantry set-up that is promoting highly nutritious items first and less nutritious "extras" last.
You can also promote items by placing them at eye level, so they are more likely to be noticed and chosen.

Signage

Use signs to steer neighbors to healthier choices. Remove advertising for non-nutritious choices like soda pop, and strategically place healthy imagery and information in high-traffic areas.
For example, you could hang up a MyPlate poster or produce imagery in the neighbor intake or waiting area.

There are free MyPlate posters available at https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/team-nutrition. Use these signs to promote some of your most nutritious offerings.

Section 5: Additional Resources

Your Regional Manager is here to help – by offering nutritional education workshops and cooking demonstrations for neighbors, SNAP enrollment, and more. Contact us to talk about how we can help!

SNAP Enrollment

We have a team at Care and Share ready to help your neighbors enroll in the SNAP program (FKA Food Stamps). Reach out to your Regional Manager to make this connection.

Cooking Matters

Cooking Matters offers free, creative nutrition workshops to food pantry neighbors. Reach out to your Regional Manager to contact our Cooking Matters Team about scheduling free courses at your agency.