

Food Pantry Checklist: Planning for Coronavirus COVID-19

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)

Food pantries are essential community resources. Most TEFAP pantries and soup kitchens are managed and staffed by volunteers. Retired people ages 55 to 80 are generally the most active group in pantries operations. At the same time, people who receive food from pantries have disproportionately higher rates of chronic health conditions and disabilities. Some are also seniors living alone. Because COVID 19 poses greater threats to people of advancing age (70 and above) and fragile health conditions, this checklist will help you best safeguard pantry volunteers AND participants who use them as you continue your food distribution mission. Use your judgement, consider recommendations, plan accordingly and implement as soon as you are ready. **Begin now.**

WORKFORCE STRATEGIES

- Follow advice from public health experts.** Handwashing and sanitation in food distribution is particularly important. Continually sterilize high contact exchange points (like door knobs, service counters and bathrooms) and avoid unnecessary physical contact within the pantry. Disposable gloves may be useful for helping both sanitation control and to act as a precaution reminder. Front desk volunteers who have face-to-face contact with members of the public should wear face masks.
- Create and post a pantry “sick policy” for volunteers.** The message is simple: PLEASE DON'T VOLUNTEER IN THE PANTRY IF YOU ARE ILL OR ARE LIVING WITH SOMEONE WHO IS. Remind volunteers regularly. Ask for swift phone notice from volunteers if they exhibit symptoms (coughing, sneezing, fever), become ill, have had large-scale social contact at an event or have been traveling. Make sure everyone understands not to return before they've recovered and their time away has reached the medically-advised window. Volunteers who may have had large-scale social contact – regardless of whether or not they've had symptoms – should also avoid the pantry for the self-quarantine period recommended by health experts.
- Remind participants that if they become ill, they should send a proxy to the pantry for their food.** Remind volunteers to check proxy designations with participants to be sure they are up-to-date. Flag participants who have no proxy and consider what options (if any) you might have to get food to someone who has no proxy if they are homebound and have no other means of obtaining food.
- Assess your pantry's service capacity.** Are there enough “back-up” volunteers to maintain the pantry's service hours if your team is reduced? What functions require particular skills and physical capacities (i.e. operating trucks, trailers, forklifts, pallet jacks, hand trucks, loading and unloading, lifting, making runs to pick up food from Kwik Trip, Walmart and other assigned sources)? Do you have a back-up for these functions? If not, consider reassigning volunteers for essential functions, temporarily ceasing nonessential tasks, or altering or reducing pantry hours if you are forced to make difficult choices. Discuss this with key members of your team now, so they help participate in decision that will affect their work.
- Agree that vulnerable volunteers will take a sabbatical.** Volunteers age 70 and older and those with chronic health conditions should avoid interpersonal contact with the public. Likewise, volunteers who care for vulnerable dependents at home should consider a break from pantry service at this time. Talk with volunteers about safeguarding their own health. **Insist this is a priority for all.**

FOOD DISTRIBUTION STRATEGIES

A change in the way you distribute food may be necessary during coronavirus COVID 19. Many pantries invite participants to select their own food from shelves. While participant “Choice” is the acknowledged standard, COVID 19 conditions suggest an approach that will reduce touching and handling surfaces. This means that pantries should strongly consider packing food for participants rather than allowing shelf selection. The location of a food pantry, whether people drive to it, walk or take public transportation are all factors in modifying food distribution approaches to reduce exposure.

- Strategies for pantries where participant drive to pick up their food:** When participants drive to a pantry, pre-packing groceries and loading them in participant vehicles is a low-contact food distribution strategy. Does your pantry have the volunteer and logistical capacity to distribute this way? Cold and inclement weather, the physical abilities of your workforce and the loading proximity to the building exit are all factors in adjusting to this strategy. Other options for people who drive could include offering each household a list of current foods that they can pick up and review OUTSIDE the pantry, and asking people to wait in their cars while groceries are packed to order and brought outside for pickup.
- Strategies for pantries where participants walk or take public transportation to pick up their food:** Whenever possible, pantries with small waiting areas should identify and use another, larger space for people waiting to pick up food to reduce contact between people. High alcohol hand sanitizer should be available for participants to use. If the pantry can offer participants a current “shopping list” of foods, volunteers can pack the groceries and set them on a counter.
- All pantries should try to provide a two-week supply of shelf-stable food for homebound individuals.** The current Trade Mitigation bounty allows us to distribute more food to each household. Health experts advise that a 14-day isolation period is needed following exposure to the coronavirus COVID 19. Food packages should include some ready-to-eat foods that require little or no preparation.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

- Ask volunteer to update their emails and phone numbers.** Make sure your volunteers remain reachable.
- Update your pantry’s outgoing phone message at least weekly.** Even if you maintain current hours of service, people will seek to confirm that you are open before they come. It is particularly important to change your outgoing message if you are forced to change or reduce hours due to volunteer shortages.
- Advise participants to check the pantry’s phone message to confirm you’re open.** Their ability to verify this will reduce anxiety about food security. If you must close for any reason, make sure that you include that in your outgoing message and refer them to another pantry.
- Ensure your pantry’s after-hours, emergency phone number is current and posted on the front door.** This is an ongoing TEFAP requirement at all times.
- If your pantry takes phone messages, continue checking them regularly.** Participants who live alone might need assistance. Designate a reliable monitor for incoming messages and discuss what you will do if someone leaves a distress message.
- Ask local law-enforcement to hold pre-packed foods for households at their station.** Restock as needed.
- Notify 2-1-1 or your local help-line operator if your pantry must change hours or close temporarily.**

IF YOU DETERMINE YOU MUST TEMPORARILY CLOSE THE PANTRY OR MODIFY HOURS

- Make an independent decision about your pantry’s “open” and “closed” status.** In weather situations, many pantries close when schools close. However, closing an emergency food pantry for an extended period of time can cause hardship. Even if schools close, you may choose to remain open.
- Contact your Emergency Feeding Organization and any other food bank that serves your pantry immediately** (your community action partner, the Hunger Task Force of Milwaukee, Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin, Feed My People, the Hunger Task Force of La Crosse, United Way of St. Croix County, Channel One, Second Harvest Food Bank of Southern Wisconsin, Sheboygan Food Bank, Racine Food Bank, Second Harvest Northern Lakes, and/or any other suppliers you have) to let them know that you must close, when and how long. Update them as the situation changes.
- Make sure your EFO can still contact you -- whether or not your pantry remains open as planned.**
- Notify Wisconsin TEFAP Coordinator, Kitty Kocol at kittykocol@dhs.wisconsin.gov or (608) 267-9071 if you determine you must close or change hours temporarily.**