

A Healthier Choice at Food Pantries

by: Judy Fowler, MS, RD

SUMMARY

Food pantries have been hesitant to request healthier food choices from their donors and need assistance in determining what are the healthier foods they could have available to their clients with chronic diseases. Many food pantry staff state clients are requesting healthier foods to meet their health needs when they come into the food pantries. To fill that gap, Tri-County Health Department created a Healthy Food Pantry Tool Kit containing guidance for a healthy food drive, advice on healthier choices, and handouts that address chronic health needs.



CHALLENGE

People coming to food pantries are often in need of and desire healthier food choices to address their chronic health conditions and circumstances such as diabetes, hypertension, poor dental status, weight status or homelessness. Meanwhile, staff at the food pantries is apprehensive about asking for healthier food donations as they are so appreciative when receiving any type of food. Food pantries really need all the food they receive due to concerns about having

enough for all the people coming through their doors.

There are also different perceptions of what constitutes a healthy food. The use of the word "Healthy" in labeling is confusing for staff and clients. There is typically a lack of guidance in the food pantry environment related to healthier choices.

YOUR INVOLVEMENT IS KEY

You can help your community food pantries by organizing healthy food drives within the organizations in which you participate. Many food pantry recipients have chronic health concerns. Donations including fresh produce, lean proteins, whole grains and healthy fats help clients have a healthier diet. Staff also value guidance to the healthier choice. Tri-County Health Department held a Healthy food drive that provided a food pantry with 600 pounds of healthier food items. We did it and you can too!

"It is time that the first concern in this country is feeding the hungry."

- Pastor Kent Replogle

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SOLUTION

With assistance from coalition members, a relationship was developed with the food pantries serving our target area, the City of Thornton. Research into other tool kits and input from food pantry staff helped create the Healthy Food Pantry Tool Kit. It contains: reasons for the tool kit, an assessment tool, guidance for a healthy food drive, guidance for healthier choices in their stock of foods, reproducible handouts on healthier choices for different chronic diseases, handout for dental sensitivity, and a handout for those who are homeless. In addition, it includes reproducible "A Healthier Choice" display cards to place with the available foods to easily identify foods to meet their needs.

RESULTS

Individual assessments of two community food pantries found that they had strategies already in place to provide healthy foods to their participants such as a good variety of fresh produce, some low sodium canned vegetables and no sugar added canned fruits, special diet requests are taken into consideration, food resources are promoted, and refrigeration and freezers appropriately in use. It also determined that training staff about the tool kit could be of benefit as it gives more specific guidance about healthier foods by providing specific food lists for chronic diseases, education using My Plate and resource needs such as WIC and SNAP. The kit also gives the food pantry staff ideas on how to hold a healthy food drive and display cards to denote the healthier food choices.

SUSTAINING SUCCESS

The goal beyond the CPHMC grant timeline and the targeted community is to improve the availability of healthier food choices to those in need by increasing access to the Healthy Food Pantry Tool Kit. This includes most food pantries in the Tri-County Health Department service area and elsewhere in the entire state through collaborating partners such as Hunger Free Colorado and beyond the State of Colorado in the following years.

Currently we are promoting it at regional meetings of food banks and food pantries with great interest.

We are creating a link to the Tool Kit on our Tri-County Health Department web page and have contacted Hunger Free Colorado to add this Tool Kit to their website and promote with their Food Pantry Network.