**Reinventing Food Banks and Pantries: New Tools to End Hunger**

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Preface

Food banks and pantries have grown in number and size over forty years and are located in nearly every community in the U.S. Collectively they provide billions of meals a year to people in need. Most Americans have been involved in the charitable food system by donating food or volunteering at a food pantry or food bank. Yet hunger still affects one in nine Americans, and very little research has been conducted to measure the impact of charitable food on the people served. We can do better. This book presents a new model for charitable food, one where success is measured not by pounds of food distributed but by lives changed. The key is shifting our focus from a lack of food to strategies that build empathy, equity, and political will. One of the key themes of the book is that it takes more than food to end hunger.

Chapter 1 Introduction

The goal of this book is bold yet simple: to reinvent the way we provide charitable food in America. While we have done good work to fight hunger, we can do better. This chapter opens with an inspiring vision for what a holistic food pantry can look like. The brief introduction describes the target audience, outlines upcoming chapters and sets the tone for how to shift our approach from short-term transactions of food toward long-term solutions that promote health, equity and food security.

Chapter 2 History of Food Assistance Programs

If we want to end hunger, it’s important to understand the history of federal food assistance programs in the U.S. such as food stamps (SNAP) and child nutrition programs. It is also important to examine the evolution and expansion of charitable food banks and pantries over the past forty years. When we define the problem of hunger as a lack of food, then the solution is quite simple: grow, collect and distribute more food to those in need. But if we describe hunger as a symptom of poverty caused by a broken system and rooted in inequalities, then the solution becomes more complex. If we want to get serious about truly ending hunger, we need to confront these more challenging root causes of hunger. To provide an example, this chapter describes the history and evaluation of a holistic food pantry model that tackles the underlying root causes of food insecurity by offering connection, coaching, and more than just food.

Chapter 3 Changing the Conversation about Hunger

This book aims to create a paradigm shift in the way we provide charitable food. A part of this shift comes from the language we use to describe the problem of food insecurity and our response to it. For example, even though many food pantries have operated for over 30 years, and research shows that clients visit food pantries on a chronic basis, many organizations continue to use the term “emergency” to describe their programming. This chapter provides a detailed history of how food security has been defined and measured by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and academic researchers. The chapter concludes with descriptions of key terms used frequently when describing charitable food, and provides suggested language to reflect current research and a more empowering approach to the problem of food insecurity.

Chapter 4 Creating a Welcoming Culture

Visiting a food pantry often conjures up images of embarrassment and stigma. It doesn’t have to be this way. Readers are encouraged to think about the experience of clients (which are often referred to as guests or customers) when they go to a food pantry. It is important to recognize that being food insecure is traumatic, and trauma can be both a cause and effect of food insecurity. This chapter describes research on trauma and provides tools for offering trauma-informed care. Examples are given for how to design pantries to create a welcoming environment with attention to seating and signage, how to designate a greeter, and how to de-escalate situations when tensions rise. To help move food pantries from transactional to transformational, we can train staff and volunteers in hospitality and customer service, taking tips from the retail and hotel industry.

Chapter 5 The Dignity of Choice

In traditional food pantries, people wait in line until they reach the front of the line and are handed a bag of food that has been prepared by volunteers. One key step to transforming the way we provide charitable food is allowing people to shop for their food with dignity, like they would at a grocery store. Not allowing guests the ability to choose their food sends an understated message of distrust and creates a barrier between giver and receiver. When volunteers spend less of their time bagging food, they can spend more time greeting guests and building relationships. This chapter highlights the perceived barriers and reasons why food pantry staff are reluctant to offer choice, and provides evidence and examples for shifting to a client-choice model. We often talk symbolically about wanting to provide not just a handout, but a hand up. However, if we are selecting food for clients and asking them to put their hand out to receive it, we are not fulfilling our greater mission. Offering client choice is a good first step in building equity within a food pantry setting.

Chapter 6 Promoting Healthy Food

Research shows that people who visit food pantries often have a double burden of food insecurity and chronic diseases, including both physical and mental health challenges. Despite strong evidence of the link between food security and health, more work is needed to improve the nutritional quality of food provided by food banks and pantries. We can make it easier for guests to select fresh fruits, vegetables, and lean protein in food pantries, which are often harder to access and afford when you have a limited budget. This chapter cites current research and provides examples for promoting healthy food at food banks and food pantries, including a stoplight nutrition ranking system, nutrition policies, behavioral economic strategies, and tools for asking food donors to donate healthier food. Good nutrition at food pantries is largely a health issue, but it is also a matter of social justice. We should all be able to eat healthy food, regardless of income or zip code.

Chapter 7 Connecting to Community Services

To shift charitable food from transactional to relational, it is important to explore why people have a difficult time getting enough food and to address root causes of hunger. Rather than simply handing out food, pantry staff and volunteers can build relationships with guests and help connect them to existing community programs and services to offer wrap-around supports. This chapter describes an evidence-based program called More Than Food. The name comes from the fact that after providing billions of meals to people every year, we know that it takes more than food to end hunger. The More Than Food model is based on the Stages of Change theory and utilizes coaches who are trained in motivational interviewing skills in a strength-based and non-judgmental approach to help individuals set and reach goals. The coaches work one-on-one with individuals to identify the reasons why the family is struggling with food insecurity, and to connect the family with community resources that will build their self-sufficiency, such as job training, skill building, and education.

Chapter 8 The Vital Role of Volunteers

The charitable food system would not exist if it weren’t for the valuable contributions of volunteers. This chapter poses some hard questions related to the role of volunteers. For example, are food pantries providing food and services in ways that benefit their volunteers and donors or their neighbors who don’t have enough to eat? Are charitable food programs open on days and times most convenient for volunteers or for guests, particularly working families? When the people who utilize a food pantry are a significant part of the volunteer base, it helps break down the division between “us” and “them”. This chapter highlights the challenges of organizational change and stresses the importance of strong leadership to change the way food pantries operate.

Chapter 9 Evaluation: What Gets Measured Gets Done

Even though there are food banks and food pantries in nearly every community across the country, and they have operated for decades, there is very limited research evaluating their impact. The validated USDA Food Security Module is a useful survey instrument for those interested in studying food security. While we know a lot about who is food insecure and who is most likely to go to food pantries, we know very little about what types of food pantries reduce food insecurity or what impact food pantries have on the health and well-being of those receiving food. There is tremendous opportunity for additional research within the charitable food system. The chapter provides examples for how to get started conducting research in food pantry settings with both quantitative and qualitative data collection.

Chapter 10 Structural Inequalities and Systems Change

A big part of the journey toward transformational change in food pantries requires exploring the underlying reasons why people struggle to get enough food, including income inequality, structural racism, and systemic injustices that create and perpetuate food insecurity for marginalized groups. When we define food insecurity as simply a lack of food, it is easy to focus on food distribution and remain apolitical. Recognizing that food insecurity is caused by policies and unequal privilege can help food banks and pantries enter the political arena to advocate for a stronger social safety net and living wages. This will also help us move from charity to justice. This chapter highlights the importance of social capital, systems change and strategies for creating bridges out of poverty.

Chapter 11 Equity within Food Banks and Pantries

As we advocate for more equitable policies in our broader communities, this chapter describes ways that food banks and pantries can promote equity from within their organizations. Examples are to engage people who have experienced food insecurity on the board of directors, pay living wages, and to include the voices of those who have experienced hunger to raise awareness about the problem. Food banks typically describe the impressive number of pounds they distribute each year, and this chapter will describe the importance of ethical story telling to describe the impact that those pounds have on the people being served. Sharing the stories and experiences of the people who visit food pantries can help reduce social stigma and serve as a powerful advocacy tool for broader systemic changes.

Chapter 12 New Partners and Community Food Hubs

New organizations are interested in partnering with food banks and food pantries. For example, healthcare providers and colleges recognize that their patients and students may be struggling with food insecurity and are finding creative ways to increase access to healthy food and reduce health disparities. This chapter provides examples and best practices when creating a food pantry in a health care setting or college campus. This chapter also provides suggestions for utilizing a collective impact approach to consolidate smaller pantries and develop a holistic community food hub that is open multiple days of the week and offers wrap-around services. This type of approach requires strong leadership from the food bank and other community partners and will help create a collaborative and coordinated response to food insecurity.

Chapter 13 Conclusion – Take One Step

The goal of this book is to create a paradigm shift to not only meet the immediate need for food but to stop the cycle of hunger and poverty for the next generation. Each chapter in the book includes action steps that people working to increase food security can take in their communities. Recognizing that not everyone will be immediately ready for these changes, this chapter provides tools for building organizational buy-in to adopt these new approaches in food banks and food pantries, and among community partners and academic researchers. The chapter ends with an optimistic and inspiring vision for long-term strategies that will promote the health and stability of families and create a bridge for self-sufficiency rather than merely a short-term Band-Aid of food.