



March 12, 2020

Food Pantries: Suggestions for safety and effectiveness during the Covid-19 outbreak

1. Pre-bagged distribution:

Although the Choice Pantry model is important for reducing waste and increasing client self-respect and dignity, during this crisis seriously consider going to a pre-packed bag model to reduce the chance of clients infecting volunteers or each other. Choice typically involves contact with many shared surfaces that are difficult to keep sanitized between clients. Distributing pre-packed bags minimizes this. Check with local supermarkets to see if they will donate a few boxes of “T-shirt bags” to help with the effort.

If you can use a drive-thru model, you can set up stations to stop cars as they come in to the parking lot to get names and family sizes and relay that information to a station with loaders later in the line (cheap walkie-talkies from Walmart come in handy!) you can have the right number or size of bags ready and load them directly into trunks to keep things moving. Remember to keep your first station a little way in from the road so clients’ cars don’t back up into the road and block traffic.

2. Volunteer Protection:

Pine-sol or Mr. Clean type cleaners (full strength) in a spray bottle works in place of disinfectant wipes for surfaces inside your pantry. Remember to spray enough to get the surface completely wet and let it sit a minute before wiping off with a paper towel.

Remind volunteers to wash hands often – any soap will do, even bar soap. Soap is even more effective at killing the virus than alcohol wipes or lotion.

3. Latchkey-Lunches:

It is possible that some schools may close – on short notice – leaving working parents scrambling to make plans for their children. Help take some of that pressure off with an extra bag of kid-friendly lunch foods like Ravioli or mac-n-cheese in cans, extra peanut butter and jelly with bread, or hot-dogs. Most kids can safely use the microwave, and having a least a few days worth of food ready for their kid if they need to leave them at home will take some of the worry out of parent’s minds.

4. SFPP and TEFAP signature waivers:

If you require in-person sign-up or proxy assignments because of state or USDA reporting requirements, be aware that some of those requirements have been temporarily waived. Check with your provider, but in many cases you can now sign up new clients over the phone, and they can call in proxies for pickup as well.

5. More volunteer ideas:

If your regular volunteers become hard to line up, remember that there may be working-age people in your community whose employers have closed and they are stuck at home twiddling their thumbs. A call for new volunteers via social media, churches, etc. may bring in fresh, more resilient volunteers to give your more vulnerable volunteers a break.

6. Don’t close down:

Although it may be tempting to go into full lock-down mode, please continue your food pantry services to whatever extent you are able. Now is a particularly trying time for those who are susceptible for food insecurity – and in fact there may well be a marked increase in new requests for help. Your pantry has an important role in your community – now more than ever.