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Humboldt County Case Study:

Food for People's Choice Food Pantries: The Power of Choice

by Jenna Jo Barry Highfield, CCRP Research Associate

Due to the economic downturn in 2007, many non-profit agencies are re-evaluating the systems they have in place to help the community. Humboldt County has been identified as having one of the highest rates of food insecurity and hunger statewide, highlighting the need for agencies that provide food for low-income people and families.^{1,2} One such agency is Food for People, Inc. (FFP), the food bank for Humboldt County located in Eureka, California.

FFP opened its doors in 1979 as a small food pantry, and has grown into Humboldt County's main source in assisting hunger needs, serving approximately 10,000 to 12,000 low-income people every month. With 68-70% of the agency's funding coming from the local community in the form of donations or grants, FFP has diligently worked on providing programs to meet the needs of the county. The agency currently has a total of 12 different programs assisting the community in meeting hunger needs as well as providing nutrition education, one of which is the newly-implemented Choice Pantry.¹

With more and more people needing assistance in feeding themselves and their families, non-profit agencies came to the realization that a change in the way their programs, or systems, were run was needed in order to accommodate and feed this growing population of people. Once economically stable families are now in need of assistance due to unemployment and increased food costs. A news article on CNN in early 2009 reported a 30% increase in people seeking assistance



Rather than hand customers a box filled with food that they may or may not need, like, or have the ability to use, the Choice Pantry provides customers not only with a dignified way of seeking food assistance, but also with the freedom to choose foods they can actually use.

from food banks nationwide.³ Food pantries have identified a need for a more dignified way of seeking assistance. Instead of handing out pre-filled boxes, the conception of Choice Food Pantries gives customers the independence to choose the food that they will use. This method of food distribution is described in more detail below.

Methods

The information for this report was obtained from two key informant interviews and a review of the literature about local and national food security issues, especially reports focusing

on the development and use of Choice Pantries. Key informants were adults with knowledge about the development of the Choice Pantry program in Humboldt County. These informants provided much of the information regarding the conception of the Choice distribution method for FFP presented in the current report. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and took approximately 30 minutes to complete. The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Humboldt State University.

Program Origins

The West Side Campaign Against Hunger (WSCAH) out of New York City became the model for up-and-coming food pantries. WSCAH made the transition to a customer-choice pantry in 1993 in hopes of promoting self-reliance and independence for people needing assistance.⁴ After participating in a detailed intake interview with a county social worker, each customer is given a card indicating the amount of each type of food they are allotted to take for the month. For example, the card specifies the amounts of fruits, vegetables, cereals, meats, and dairy each customer receives, all based on the number of people in the person's household. The difference in this distribution method from traditional pantry distributions is that

instead of being given a pre-packaged box of food, clients, now known as "shoppers" or "customers," choose their own food. Customers must use budgeting skills as they only have so many points to spend in each food category.

Customers also learn about healthy eating via the Food Pyramid Guide, as the food groups on their cards correspond to the different food groups in the Pyramid.^{4,5} At WSCAH, a household of two people would be allotted four points of grains, two points of fish or meat, four points of beans, six points of vegetables, six points of fruit, and six points of dairy. In comparison, a family of four would be allotted four points of grains, three points of meat or fish, seven points of beans, 10 points of vegetables, 10 points of fruit, and 10 points of dairy.⁴

The Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks issued a guide that explains how to convert from a regular pantry to a client-choice food pantry. Testimonies from shoppers using the St. Paul United Methodist Church Pantry in Dayton, Ohio are provided below:⁶

"I can't believe the choices and amount of food."

"Wow, this felt like going to the supermarket."

"Everybody made me feel like it is OK to come to the pantry."

"I like picking my own food because I can plan meals while I am choosing."

A client of Middletown Choice Pantry in Middletown, Ohio said the following:⁶

"I can't pay my Cinergy [gas and electric] bill and feed my kids. Without this pantry, I'd have to make a choice whether to keep my heat on or feed my family."

Such positive testimonials provide pantries with more incentive to continue such choice models, as they seem to be succeeding in promoting client dignity and comfort.

The Ohio guide points out that in addition to the positive effect on and feedback from the clients, choice pantries have several fiscal advantages in comparison to the traditional pantry set-up. The traditional handing out of pre-packaged food boxes brings about the possibility of food being wasted because of the customer's inability to prepare it, special dietary restrictions or personal preferences. Each family has different needs and preferences that cannot always be met through one prepackaged box of food. If the food provided in that box cannot be used to feed the family, they might dispose of the unwanted food and return to the pantry for more food as their nutritional needs still



haven't been met.

The two main reasons for transitioning to the choice pantry are to reduce food waste and to provide clients with a dignified way of shopping for food. There are several different systems used to implement the choice pantries, including point systems, pound systems, rainbow systems and more.⁶ Each of these systems will be discussed below in more detail.

Different Models of Choice Pantries

There are a number of different models to choose from when implementing the choice pantry. The Point System assigns points to products based on their availability, size of product, or type of product. Customers are allotted points to spend during each pantry visit based on their household size and the current amount of available food at the pantry. The pantry can also color code each point value in order to make shopping easier on the customer and checkout easier on the volunteer or staff member. This Point System also has the potential to help some customers learn menu planning skills.

The Pound System is analogous to the Point System except it uses pounds instead of points. Each client is allotted a specific number of pounds to shop with rather than points. Another way to implement this system would be to assign a range of poundage to different point values, similarly to the Point System above.

The Food Pyramid System is a variation of the Pound/Point System, allotting specific poundage or points to each food group. Each family is allotted a specific amount of points in each area of the Food Pyramid, encouraging healthy eating. Similarly, the Rainbow of Colors System divides foods up by group and allots each customer a specific number of items for each food group (e.g., grain, dairy, vegetables, etc.). The number of items each customer or family is allotted per food group depends on the supply and demand of the particular products at that pantry, as well as the number of people in their household. Food items can be labeled with different colored stickers to represent the different food groups (coded according to MyPyramid by USDA).^{5,6}

There are other ways to implement choice pantry distributions, including allocating each client a specific number of total items, or letting them choose the items they want from a list and having staff or volunteers bag it for them. However, the latter model allows the client less freedom to browse the pantry and choose their food, but can be a useful tool when a pantry is attempting to transition to a choice distribution system.

Local Context

Humboldt County has one of the highest rates of hunger and food insecurity statewide making programs that feed low-income residents necessary.² The necessity of these programs has increased as more people are becoming unable to keep up with the overall cost of living. FFP approximates that, through their 12 programs throughout Humboldt County, they serve 10,000 to 12,000 low-income individuals, children, seniors, and people with disabilities per month. The food boxes and programs such as those provided at FFP are supposed to be supplemental, but for many families, it is their primary source of food.^{1,7}

After a visit to the WSCAH site in April 2009, Deborah Waxman, Director of Programs of FFP, returned to the non-profit agency with an unofficial idea for transitioning the Eureka-based food bank into a similar choice pantry like the one in New York. Waxman presented the idea of a Choice Pantry to the agency's staff and board members, describing how the distribution structure enabled and pushed for a focus on the personal needs of customers, aiming to boost shopper self-esteem and nutritional knowledge. A committee was formed to begin restructuring the food bank's distribution process to become one of the first Choice Pantries in the state of California.^{4,8}

FFP's transition to a Choice Pantry borrowed principles from several pantries including the WSCAH food pantry. Waxman, Anne Holcomb, FFP's Executive Director, and the rest of the staff, wanted to make the food distribution process more dignified for the clientele and create opportunities for nutrition education. Rather than hand customers a box filled with food that they may or may not need, like, or have the ability to use, various agencies nationwide are embracing the idea of the Choice Pantry to provide customers not only with a dignified way of seeking food assistance, but also with the freedom to choose foods they can actually use.^{8,9,10} Customers needing assistance with the shopping process at FFP are helped by volunteers, and pre-filled boxes are still available if requested.

"This is [or could be] the one part of a person's day where they feel human, and can choose," said one key informant about the pantry. The choice system

Table 1: Choice Pantry Hours

Tuesday	10am – 3pm
Wednesday	10am – 3pm
Thursday	10am – 4pm (2nd and 4th Thursdays only)
Friday	10am – 4pm

gives customers the opportunity to be more proactive in their shopping experience, leading to more self-reliance and learning of nutritional information of foods.¹¹

Prior to transitioning to the Choice Pantry, hours of operation had to be extended, the intake process discussed and decided upon, the food distribution layout redesigned, and the distribution system determined. All of this was done by the Choice Pantry Committee, made up of FFP staff (see Program Collaborators section). The new Choice Pantry is estimated to serve approximately 1100 households, or about 3000 individuals, on a monthly basis.^{7,8}

Table 2: USDA Emergency Food Assistance Program Income Eligibility Guidelines^{8,9}

Household Size	Monthly Household Income
1	\$1,354
2	\$1,821
3	\$2,289
4	\$2,756
5	\$3,224
6	\$3,691
7	\$4,159
8	\$4,626
9	\$5,094
10	\$5,561
Over 10	Add \$468 each

Customers must first go through an intake interview before they can use the pantry services. The intake process transitioned to making pre-scheduled appointments instead of same-day appointments. Prior to the transition, appointments were made for every 15 minutes with 12 people appointed to each 15 minute time period. By pre-scheduling appointments, FFP can schedule 12 clients per hour to interview with one of two staff members or volunteers, accommodating 1,200 client visits per month.⁸ Pre-scheduled appointments are now done individually, giving customers the opportunity to learn more about the pantry services as well as outside services and possible referrals. This shift in appointment scheduling also provides clients with enough time to shop, and helps to reduce the crowd of people in the

waiting room, which caused stress to both clients and staff/volunteers in the past.

To be eligible for the Choice Pantry, a person must meet specific income guidelines (see Table 2) and identify all household members. Clients receive points for donated and FFP purchased items. The income guidelines apply only to the USDA commodity items; if a customer is above the income level specified by the USDA, they cannot receive commodity items. However, these customers will still be allowed to utilize the rest of the pantry. Clients can shop at the Choice Pantry once per month; however, if they run out of food during the month, FFP provides emergency food boxes for households in need. FFP also has miscellaneous food items in the lobby of their distribution center that are free to take by whomever.

“We don’t let anyone go hungry,” said one interviewee.

How Does our Local Choice Pantry Work?

After completing the intake interview and receiving their shopping list, the customer can start the shopping process. The Choice Pantry at FFP is set-up similarly to a grocery store, where customers take a cart around the “market,” and pick out food items. The only difference is, instead of using money, customers are allocated points according to The Rainbow of Choice Point System. Points are allotted based on household size. Each food item is allocated a certain number of points based on product size and/or type, and current supply and demand of the products in the pantry (which is based mostly from donations). Foods are grouped into color-coded categories (e.g., dairy, fruits, vegetables, grains, protein, combination, miscellaneous) based on the MyPyramid Food Guidance System. The use of the color-coding of the food groups is intended to reinforce healthy eating and encourage eating from a variety of food groups.^{8,9,12}

Each shopper also receives a certain amount of commodities as specified by USDA guidelines. Such USDA commodities are considered “free items” and are the first items presented to the shopper when beginning his or her shopping. Smaller households (1 to 3 people) are allowed one of each commodity, medium sized households (4 to 6 people) are allowed two of each commodity, and larger households (7+ people) are allowed three of each commodity.¹⁰ The shoppers can choose to take or leave the different commodities, but they cannot exchange them with anything else per USDA guidelines. However, by presenting shoppers with the commodities first, FFP recommends shoppers use points to supplement

commodities in order to make complete meals. Volunteers are ready to assist shoppers if they need help during their shopping experience.⁸

The Choice Pantry is heavily dependent on donations, which fluctuate day to day, meaning sometimes items may be in short supply. Milk is nearly always donated and often in short supply. In trying to make the distribution process as fair as possible, FFP will only give out milk to larger families during times when it is in short supply. However, there are other dairy products shoppers can choose from, such as yogurt, sour cream, or cheese. Protein is another item that may be unavailable on some days due to fluctuation of donations; however, there will always be at least one protein item in the USDA commodity section for every customer to take. In addition, some months the Choice Pantry may have more USDA commodities as well as choice items to choose from, meaning families get to take home more of certain items. For example, there is often an abundance of fresh produce because of donations from grocery stores and local farmers, meaning fresh produce is available for less points than items such as canned fruits and vegetables.¹⁰

Each shopper is provided a reusable bag on their first visit to the pantry, and is required to bring their own bags on subsequent visits, making it possible for FFP to focus on purchasing food. The check-out process is similar to that at the grocery store, where one volunteer checks the items and the shopping guide, and another volunteer helps the shopper bag his or her items.

Prior to the transition, the Pantry required about 60 to 70 volunteers a month to assist with distribution (totaling over 1,100 hours of volunteer time per month). With the transition to the Choice Pantry, it was expected to need about 10 to 20 additional volunteers due to the increased role they would have in the running of the Pantry. According to Food Distribution Coordinator Ivy Matheny, the volunteers basically run the pantry.

There are many benefits to transitioning to a Choice Pantry, including increased efficiency as clients will only take what they will use or need, resulting in less waste; increased service, providing more multicultural options and special needs foods; improved ability of food tracking, allowing FFP to tailor orders and food drives to what is used most; reduction of stigma as clients can conveniently choose their own food; increased client nutritional knowledge and balanced nutrition; and finally, increased dignity as clients are

now taking responsibility for meal planning.⁸

Client Feedback

Once customers became comfortable with the new process of choice, they really enjoyed being able to pick out food and plan their own meals. "People are more comfortable now. There are many new types of households coming in and using the pantry because of the availability of choice."

Most shoppers need help their first time through the pantry. Some shoppers prefer the box distribution method, deeming the choice method too complicated. However, most customers have indicated that they like the switch and the ability to choose their own foods, finding the pantry easy to navigate after the first time through.

Program Collaborators

In April 2009, a committee was put together to make decisions on the process of transitioning to a Choice Pantry. The Choice Pantry Committee consisted of the Food Distribution Coordinator, the Volunteer Coordinator, the Operations Manager, the Pantry Network Director, the Local Food Resources VISTA (AmeriCorps Volunteers in Service to America program), the Community Education and Outreach Coordinator and VISTA, and the Administrative Assistant. Together, they worked to devise a plan of action to transition the current system to a choice system where clients, called shoppers, could peruse the pantry like a grocery store.⁸

Federal contracts contribute 30-32% of the annual funding for FFP, requiring the agency to rely on local donations, food drives, and grants for the additional 68-70% of annual funding needed. In 2010, FFP received and distributed about 1.4 million pounds of food. Local farmers donate fresh produce for the Gleaning Program. Because of these generous donations, FFP is often able to offer shoppers large quantities of fresh produce. The agency also collaborates with county social services to help shoppers with access to food stamps as well as introduce shoppers to cooking and nutritional information through classes offered at the agency.^{8,9,10}

FFP was described as the hub for a network of 17 food pantries in the Humboldt County area, distributing food to each of these individual pantries. In addition, FFP allows other local non-profit agencies to do their shopping in bulk at the FFP warehouse in order to keep their costs down.

Volunteers make up the majority of the internal

workings of the Choice Pantry, and assist throughout the workings of the agency's programs. In general, over 2400 volunteer hours are provided to the agency per month. Without volunteers, the agency would not be able to function.

Successes, Challenges and Opportunities

Key-informant interviewees identified the implementation of the new distribution system as one of the biggest challenges to the switch to a choice pantry. Inventory now takes much longer as each item has to be sorted by group (grains, vegetables, etc.), weighed and priced by size, and labeled with the color for its specific category as well as with its point value.

In the past, an interviewee identified the pantry having problems with the distribution of fresh produce. Conflicts would occasionally arise about produce because there was not enough to go around. Also, because the pantry used to hold same-day appointments, the lobby would often be filled with people waiting for food, worrying that what they need or want wouldn't be there by the time it was

their turn. One of the interviewees described it as "organized chaos," and said the new system has helped turn this around as fewer people are waiting in the lobby at a time.

The food distribution system is now more transparent, helping shoppers understand why some shoppers get more food than others. "This honesty leads to less stress and competition among consumers because they understand that people with bigger families will undoubtedly need more food," said one key informant.

The Choice Pantry has also opened the door to understanding what it's like to utilize the food bank: unlike the traditional model of handing a client a pre-prepared box of food, FFP can walk donors and funders through the shopping process to experience what a shopper goes through in their decision making.

FFP is an inspiration for other agencies, and is open to sharing their innovative work with other agencies who are interested in adopting the Choice Pantry model of food distribution.

Volunteer Opportunities

Food for People is always looking for and welcoming more volunteers especially since the opening of the Choice Pantry in October. They hold a volunteer orientation every Monday at 12:30p.m. at the Food for People warehouse located at 307 W. 14th Street, in Eureka. For more information, please call (707) 445-3166 or visit www.foodforpeople.org.



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