

Starting a Food Pantry

The Greater Boston Food Bank's Role

The Greater Boston Food Bank (GBFB) was founded with a vision to end hunger here to create a hunger-free Eastern Massachusetts within the 190 cities and towns that we serve. GBFB is one of the largest food banks in the country and a member of Feeding America, the nation's largest hunger-relief organization. In FY2016, we distributed more than 57 million pounds of nutritious food into the community through our network of more than 500 member agencies, including local food pantries, meal programs, and shelters. In addition to providing food to stock our agencies' shelves, we provide support in the form of trainings, best practice resources, grant opportunities, growth planning sessions, fulfillment of data requests, letters of support, and more.

A Note About this Guide

This resource is meant to serve as a guide for those considering beginning a new food pantry. This guide outlines a variety of considerations but it is not necessarily the only way to approach the process.

Assessing Need in Your Community

Before starting up a new food pantry, it is best to research what existing resources may already be in operation in your community. If there are a number of food pantry or meal programs in the area already providing hunger relief, it may just be a matter of connecting those in need to these existing resources. Collaborating with these organizations, rather than competing for resources, can make for more efficient hunger relief efforts. You may wish to contact these organizations to let them know of an unmet need in the community, ask for ways to get involved to provide support, or refer clients to their distributions.

If you are not sure how to find existing pantries or meal programs in your community, contact GBFB and we would be happy to provide you with a list. Alternatively, you can follow this link to see a list of food pantries and meals programs near you: <http://gbfb.org/need-food/>.

If through this research, you determine that there aren't enough resources in the community to meet the need try bringing together local community leaders, social service agencies, community organizations and the individuals you plan to serve to gather feedback on what resources are most needed. For instance, you may learn that the resources are most needed on certain days or in certain neighborhoods. Gathering this information in advance will ensure that your efforts moving forward will have the greatest impact. Suggested discussion topics include:

- What resources and supports are already available in the community?
- Are there individuals who are not eligible for these supports but are still in need?
- Are those in need in the community aware of existing resources?
- Are there specific populations who are hesitant or unable to access existing resources?
- Is lack of transportation, lack of child care, work hours, etc. prohibiting individuals from accessing existing resources?
- Are there specific items that are not available through existing resources, such as fresh produce?
- What does the community think is the best way to meet the remaining need?

Establishing the Basics

Once you've decided you are going to start a food pantry, you will need to establish your tax-exempt status with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Specifically, you will need a 501(c)(3) designation which is reserved for charitable, religious, and educational organizations. Most churches already have 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status which would be extended to food pantries run by churches. If your food pantry is an independent entity you will need to apply to the IRS for tax-exempt status. To get started, consult a tax accountant or begin your research at <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/applying-for-tax-exempt-status>.

You will want to ensure that you have a safe place to store and distribute your food. Food should be stored:

- In a secure location, separate from food meant for other uses
- Away from any potential contaminants, such as cleaning supplies
- Within the proper temperature ranges
- Away from walls and 6 inches off the floor
- Never in a private residence

When designing your pantry lay out, consider your volunteers and their ability to move and lift heavy items as well as your desired flow of clients during distributions.

You will also need to obtain a Board of Health permit from your local city or town health department. If you are based in a church you may already have a Board of Health permit, however it is important to contact your local health department to determine if any additional permitting is required for food pantries.

For more information on pantry food safety, contact GBFB's Nutrition team about our Pantry Food Safety Workshops, which are available to all member agencies, at nutrition@gbfb.org.

Establishing Your Team

Now that you've gotten started, you'll need a team to help you keep your pantry running. Key roles for your food pantry might include:

- Director – This individual should be comfortable taking on a variety of integral tasks, including everything from the administration of the daily operations to strategic planning and board management.
- Manager – this may be the same individual as the director, or you may wish to have a separate individual responsible for managing the day-to-day operations.
- Finance – You'll need an individual responsible for tracking the food pantry's finances and ensuring your donations are used efficiently.
- Outreach – Having someone who is responsible for outreach to the community can help bring in more food, funds, and clients in need.
- Client support – You'll need several volunteers who can work directly with clients to do intake, help them navigate your pantry, and refer them to outside resources, all while providing a warm and positive client experience.
- Inventory Management– This person, or the pantry manager, should be responsible for tracking your inventory and ordering more product when it is needed.
- Driver - You'll also need one or several individuals who can pick up product and bring it back to stock your pantry.
- Other – Each food pantry is different and there could be unique aspects of your pantry that require a unique role.

You may find that your team is comprised of just a couple of individuals with the ability and passion to wear multiple hats and tackle multiple roles. That is great too! Just be sure you have a clear plan for who is responsible for what and how much time your team will need to commit to each task.

Establishing a Distribution Model

Next, you'll need to determine how you will operate. Weigh community feedback against your capacity to provide support to determine the following:

- Hours of operation – GBFB recommends offering at least some night and weekend hours to allow those with traditional work schedules to access your pantry. For food pantries seeking membership with GBFB, this is a requirement.
- Requirements for individuals to receive support – GBFB recommends keeping the barriers for accessing food pantries very low. Most individuals who access food pantries have already had to face their own internal or cultural barriers to seek the services they need.
- Level of client choice – GBFB recommends that all food pantries allow clients to choose their own items either through a menu of choices, or a full shopping experience, as opposed to supplying pre-packed bags. Offering client choice eliminates waste of unwanted items and increases client dignity. If full client choice is not an option, consider providing a swap table for clients to trade out items they don't want.
- Frequency of service – will clients be able to access every distribution at your pantry or will you limit them to a certain number of distributions every month? It is a best practice to allow clients to access your pantry as often as they need it.

Establishing Client Intake Procedures

There are multiple reasons for food pantries to track who has accessed their services. For example, if an item is recalled after you've distributed it to clients, having contact info allows you to get in touch with those individuals with important information about the recall. Additionally, knowing how many clients you have served within a given timeframe is valuable information that can help you properly plan your food ordering, assess your current operations for future strategic planning, and demonstrate your community impact for advocacy or grant seeking purposes. GBFB recommends tracking the following and it is important to note that GBFB member agencies are required to report this information to GBFB monthly:

- which towns your clients are from
- their household demographics, such as number of adults, seniors, and children in the household
- how much product they receive at your pantry
- how often they've accessed your pantry

There are a variety of ways to track this information. You may choose to use sign-in sheets or index cards, however GBFB recommends using electronic methods, such as Excel or an electronic database, if possible. However you decide to gather this information, be considerate of client privacy and confidentiality.

Establishing Your Food Sources

For reliable operations, it is best to have a variety of food sources for stocking your pantry. Food rescue is based primarily on availability and even food pantries with membership with GBFB need to have alternative sources of food for what they may not be able to get from us. You can seek donations from local grocery stores and ask community members to hold food drives. Organizations that may be willing to hold a food drive include:

- Schools
- Businesses
- Boy Scout troops
- Churches
- Post offices

You may also need to purchase some items, particularly those things that are perishable or in high demand. In this case, we recommend comparing purchase prices at local retailers, including big box stores. Additionally, if you were to gain

membership with GBFB you would have access to our COOP program. GBFB negotiates bulk pricing, purchases a large amount of certain items, and then makes that product available to agencies at the same price paid by GBFB. This can be a great option for agencies looking to purchase items below the typical retail price.

Establishing your Funding Sources

Running a food pantry requires working within a budget to support your operational costs, such as the cost of food, gasoline and truck/van maintenance for food pick-ups, rent, utilities, staff compensation, inspectional/extermination services, etc. To support these costs, food pantries should consider seeking funding through the following:

- Individual donations – consider social media campaigns or calls to donate on your food pantry website
- Fund drives – contact local businesses and rotary clubs to ask them to hold a fund drive
- Grants – consider applying to the United Way or other foundations committed to supporting hunger relief efforts
- Fundraising events – partner with local businesses to hold events that will benefit your food pantry

Finding Volunteers

As important as food and funding are the volunteers you will need to keep your pantry running. Volunteers can be recruited in multiple ways. Consider posting volunteer opportunities on your website, with volunteer organizations such as Volunteer Match, and other local spots, such as:

- Newspapers
- Coffee shops
- YMCA locations
- Town bulletin boards
- Local college campuses

Start by creating specific job descriptions for the volunteer roles you hope to fill. It also helps to have standardized volunteer times so that individuals can plan their schedules and know how many hours they are committing to. To fully engage volunteers:

- Provide them with general info on your pantry, such as your mission statement.
- Give them a tour of your pantry, being sure to identify emergency exits, high risk areas, coat closets, break areas, and restrooms.
- Set clear guidelines regarding appropriate clothing and footwear, client privacy, cell phone use, etc.
- Establish goals to motivate and engage during the volunteer shift.
- Be available for questions but allow them autonomy in their given tasks.
- Show gratitude for their willingness to give of their time!

Finding and Referring Clients

To be most impactful you'll want to be sure that those in need in your community are aware of your pantry, the services you provide, and the hours when those services are available. There may also come a time, once your food pantry is well-established, that you want to reach out to surrounding communities to extend your services to new clients. To do so, consider posting your food pantry information in the following places:

- Social service offices
- Community centers
- Recreation centers
- Churches

- Schools
- Post offices
- Libraries
- Supermarkets
- Bus and train stations
- Police and fire stations
- Mass 211 hotline
- Project Bread hotline

You may also find that the clients you are serving have needs that you cannot meet singlehandedly. In these cases, you will want to be aware of the organizations in your community offering resources, such as:

- Other local food pantries
- Meal programs
- Shelters
- SNAP application assistance
- DTA offices
- WIC offices
- Housing and/or utility assistance
- Employment and job seeking assistance

Consider using resources such as Mass 211 to keep your list of available resources updated. Keeping an updated list of the resources in your community means you can assist your clients in getting the help they need quickly.

Membership with GBFB

Once your food pantry has been established and running for a minimum of three months, you may be eligible for membership with GBFB. To find the full list of requirements, visit <http://gbfb.org/agency-resources/become-a-member-agency/> or contact us at capacity@gbfb.org for more information.