

Best Practices for Cultural Relevance in Food Banks

Understand the demographics of your food pantry patrons.

- Review your county & city demographic data. How does that compare to the demographics you see in your food pantry?
- Ask basic demographic information, food preferences, cultural holidays, best days and times for them to access the food pantry, and other unique barriers they experience related to food access.

Client Feedback & Equity.

- Build a client advisory board.
- Set a regular cadence for when the advisory board meets. Consider offering the meeting in a hybrid format to accommodate those that want to be a part of it, but have childcare or transportation barriers.
- Allow clients to advise on the types of and quantities of foods the food pantry purchases, as well as how best to conduct outreach in the community.
- It is becoming common practice to compensate those with lived experience for contributing their time to improving the food system. Compensation may be in the form of gift cards to a local grocery store, providing a meal during the meeting, etc. Remember that participants should be compensated fairly - this is often more than minimum wage to help offset any transportation and/or childcare costs they incur as a result of taking the time to attend a meeting.

Select a Promotora.

- This person is a trusted community member that acts as a liaison between the community and the food pantry. They have a deep understanding of the community's culture and speak their native language.

- A Promotora should be fairly compensated for their time.

Recruit diverse staff and volunteers.

- Multicultural staff and volunteers will have valuable insight into their community.
- This also shows the food pantry's commitment to diversity & inclusion, which helps build trust among community members.
- Consider partnering with local cultural organizations on a particular project.

Focus on fresh produce.

- This is a commonly requested item across all food pantries. Many people feel that canned goods are “unhealthy.” And most immigrant families are not familiar with canned foods, so they will not select them if given a choice.

Focus on whole foods and avoid pre-seasons or pre-packaged meats and pastas.

- This allows for clients to have more flexibility with their foods. They can take a whole food (fresh or frozen) and season it to taste like home.

Use a multicultural holiday calendar when making purchasing decisions or focusing a food drive.

- Clients may want more or less of certain foods during their observed holidays. Consulting a multicultural holiday calendar will help the food pantry plan for changes in demand, and possibly help reduce food waste as well.

Partner with other food pantries when purchasing from international markets.

- Leveraging economies of scale will get the food pantry access to foods that may otherwise be inaccessible. It may help reduce the cost of food items and open doors to bulk orders.

Offer translated documents, posters, and signage.

- Translate important documents into multiple languages.
- Ensure posters and signage are visible in multiple languages. Use simple text. And if translation of posters and signage is not available, consider using images to illustrate the message instead.

Put bilingual staff and volunteers in public facing roles.

- If your front-desk person speaks multiple languages, indicate the languages on their name tag or desk placard.
- If none or few of your staff and volunteers speak another language, consider equipping them with a translation app on a computer or cell phone.

Address transportation barriers.

- For clients that have transportation barriers, consider offering a delivery option, extending or changing food pantry operation hours to include evenings and weekends, or setting up a food locker / food hub / pop-up food pantry / mobile market near a bus stop or another more accessible location.

Situational awareness of external factors.

- If police assist with traffic control or have more of a presence near the food pantry, it may make some clients uncomfortable and limit their visits to the pantry. You may need to consider community outreach methods to ensure clients feel safe and welcome at the food pantry, and/or communicate your concerns with the local police station.

- If the food pantry is part of a religious organization, communities that do not practice that religion may feel uncomfortable and limit visits to the pantry. Consider community outreach methods to ensure clients feel welcome, focus on non-religious displays, inclusive messaging, and do not require any form of prayer or other proselytizing efforts.

Create a choice model.

- Allow clients to choose their own food items, much like a grocery store shopping experience. Avoid pre-select food bags and boxes when possible.
- Modify signage to promote autonomy. Example: Instead of saying, “You can have 3 apples.” say, “Please choose up to 3 fruits.”
- Describe foods when asked, but avoid swaying choice. Perceptions of healthy and unhealthy foods vary greatly between cultures.
- Offer translated recipes or ingredient labels for foods that are regularly available in the food pantry.

Provide diversity, equity, and inclusion training.

- Educate staff and volunteers on unconscious biases and power dynamics.
- Third party agencies often offer training in the form of webinars, readings, and/or exercises.

Be transparent.

- Talk about the efforts the food pantry is making to become more inclusive and culturally relevant. Invite clients and other community organizations to be a part of the food pantry’s efforts!

Resources

Food Bank of the Rockies

<https://www.foodbankrockies.org/about/programs/culturally-responsive-foodinitiative/#:~:text=The%20Culturally%20Responsive%20Food%20Initiative,barriers%20or%20uncertainty%20about%20eligibility>