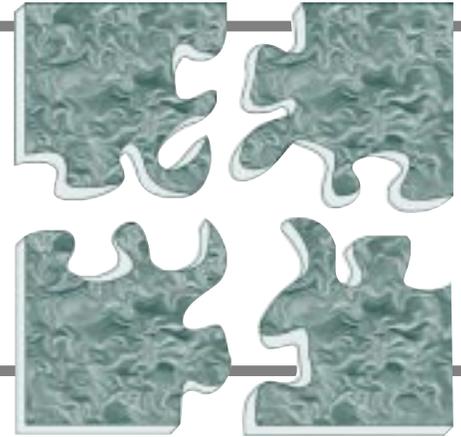


BEST PRACTICE BRIEFS



PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

REDUCE HUNGER

- by maximizing choice and access for recipients

COLLECT

- money to make contributions go further

PROVIDE

- technical assistance to food pantries in making changes

PURSUE

- user-friendly service and marketing strategies



OUTREACH
PARTNERSHIPS

MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

OVERCOMING HUNGER IN THE UNITED STATES

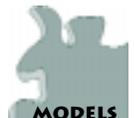
*As one approach to overcoming hunger in the United States, this **BRIEF** explores possible changes in the service delivery pattern for food distribution to the poor through food pantries. The Waste Not, Want Not approach, developed in Kent County, Michigan, and similar efforts by food bank and food pantry service providers in other areas are one way of achieving effectiveness by approaching recipients as consumers. This **BRIEF** does not explore issues related to other food programs such as food stamps, WIC, school lunches, etc.*

THE SAFETY NET FOOD DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM

An extensive network of food pantries operated by dedicated volunteers and food banks serves as a safety net for the 20 percent of America's adults and children experiencing hunger and the additional 5 percent who worry that money will not be available when food runs out.¹ All public and private food programs in Michigan provide 68.6 percent of the meals needed by individuals at or below 130 percent of the poverty level. Many such individuals, however, have little or no disposable income and are likely missing meals. More than two-thirds of persons using outlets served by food banks had no income available for food purchase. Many people requiring food assistance must choose between buying food or paying rent (35%) or obtaining medical care (28%).²

While communities have made substantial gains in making food available to the hungry, an estimated 96 billion pounds of food from all sources are wasted each year according to the United States Department of Agriculture. This is twelve times the amount of food needed to feed the hungry in the United States.³

One way proposed for increasing food availability is the *Waste Not, Want Not* approach piloted in Kent County, Michigan, in 1994 by Michigan State University Extension staff Dianne Novak and Nancy Ullrey together with John Arnold of the Second Harvest Gleaners Food Bank of West Michigan.⁴



USERS OF MICHIGAN FOOD PANTRIES WHO RESPONDED TO A 1997 SURVEY

- averaged 45 years old
- 72% are white
- 82% live with a child
- 33% were retired or unable to work.⁵

HOW MANY FOOD PANTRIES OPERATE NOW

Most food pantries were started in response to the emergencies resulting from the recession in the early '80s and are operated by volunteers through churches or other community settings. Characteristically, food pantries have provided persons seeking food with a box containing a standard array of food (e.g., dried beans, powdered milk, canned goods) intended to last for three days. If these products are not available from the food bank, the food pantry will often purchase them at retail or wholesale to provide a nutritionally balanced assortment.



Food pantries generally limit the number of times a person can access the pantry—usually to once a month. This is intended to enable pantries to accommodate more people and to discourage overuse and dependency.

Some food pantries screen applicants, asking for such information as proof of neighborhood residence and evidence of need. This information may be used to assist in referrals for longer term solutions.

While hungry people are often resourceful in meeting their needs, there are some concerns with this mode of delivery:

- Recipients may perceive questions to establish eligibility as intrusive.
- The contents of the standard box are not always wanted by recipients and thus may not be fully utilized.
- The amount in the standard box is often not sufficient to keep a person/family fed until the next allowable access time.

Food banks may turn away products offered to them that are not included in the standard packets put together by food pantries. They may give or sell accumulated food products to farmers for animal feed.

WASTE NOT, WANT NOT MEANS CHANGE IN THE MODE OF OPERATION FOR FOOD PANTRIES:

- from standard boxes to allowing for client choice
- from restricted access to open access
- from volunteers packing boxes to providing information
- from “charity” to empowerment

AND FOR THE FOOD BANK:

- from passive distribution to open marketing and technical assistance

¹ *The National Survey of America's Families*, conducted in 1997 by the Urban Institute, focused on economic, health, and social characteristics of 44,461 randomly selected families in 13 states.

² *Hunger 1997: The Faces and Facts*, a survey conducted by Second Harvest National Food Bank Network. Michigan data covered food pantries across the state except for the Upper Peninsula and parts of west Michigan.

³ *Estimating and Addressing America's Food Losses*, a study conducted by the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The study was published in *Food Review*, Vol. 20, #1, Jan.–Apr. 1997.

⁴ The pilot was funded by the Heart of West Michigan United Way. The *Waste Not, Want Not* approach started with research into the practices of food pantries and the behavior, responses, and preferences of recipients. Some food banks use other designations for efforts to maximize effective distribution.

⁵ *Hunger in Michigan*, a needs assessment of all food pantries undertaken by Michigan State University Extension in 1997.

THE FOOD DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM FOR THE POOR

The food distribution system for the poor parallels the general food distribution system, with producers, wholesale distributors (food banks), and retail outlets (food pantries and feeding sites).

SECOND HARVEST National Food Bank Network develops arrangements with producers and advocates for the 185 member food banks across the country. State associations, such as the Food Bank Council of Michigan, Inc., carry out similar functions.

FOOD BANKS

- are non-profit, often regional, organizations.
- gather tax deductible donations of food from factories, wholesale and retail distributors, and farmers. Donations include surplus food as well as discards that are still usable.
- distribute the food for 0 to 14 cents per pound handling fee to charitable organizations that provide food services for the poor. This is a much lower price than the average \$2.00 per pound cost at retail.

WHO USES FOOD BANKS?

- Food Pantries, providing food supplies
- Congregate Sites, serving prepared meals⁶
- Shelters for homeless and domestic violence victims, providing prepared meals and beds
- Agencies that serve meals as part of

programming (e.g., senior centers, rehabilitation programs, half-way houses, low income day care facilities, and summer camps)

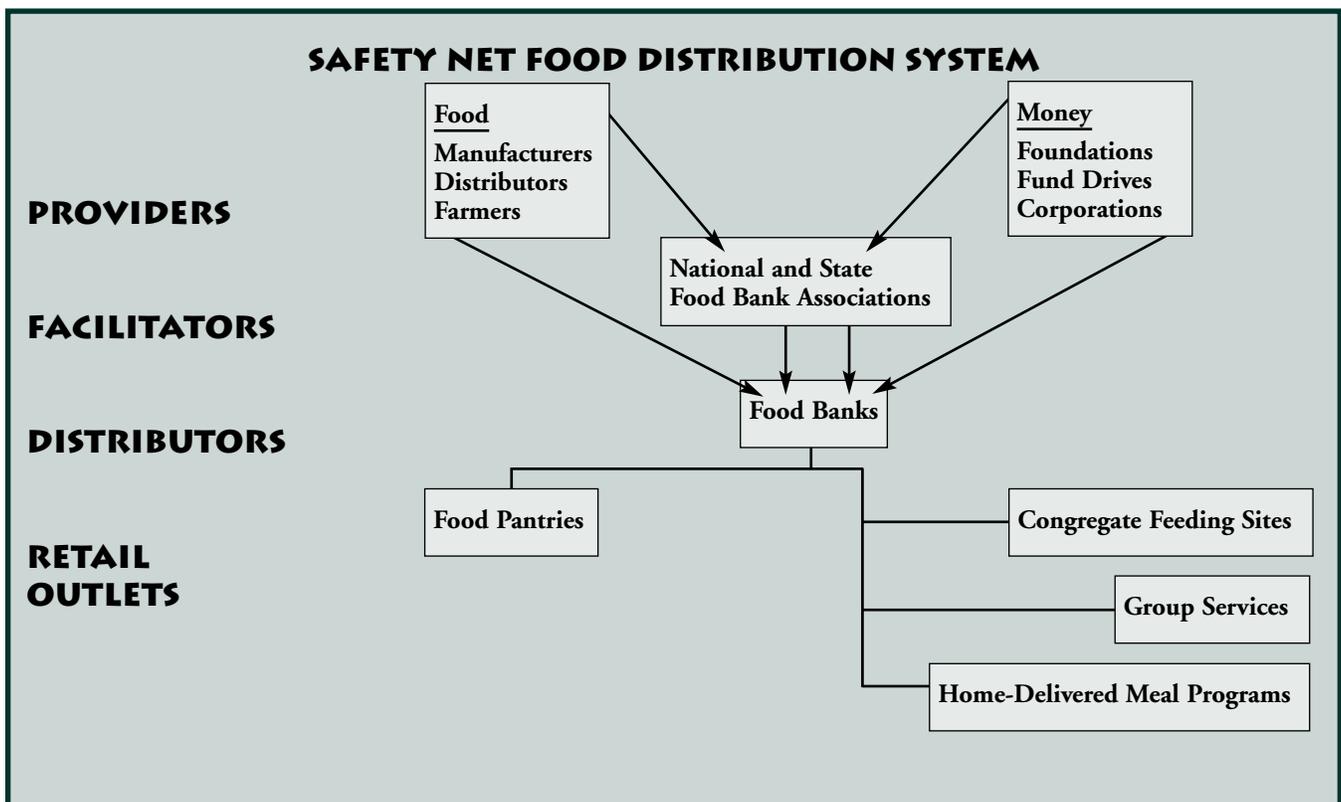
- Home-delivered Meal Programs

FOOD PANTRIES

- maintain a supply of grocery-type food that is available to needy persons, at neighborhood-based sites.

WHO USES FOOD PANTRIES?⁷ As many as one in ten Americans needs food assistance sometime during the year because of

- insufficient income to cover basic needs—*48% to 70% of persons using Michigan food programs in selected areas*
- job loss—*39% to 51% of persons using Michigan food programs in selected areas*
- an unforeseen expense or medical emergency
- a fire or other natural disaster
- ineligibility for, or reduction in, food stamp assistance⁸—*other assistance was inadequate for 25% to 47% of persons using Michigan food programs*



SOME WAYS TO FEED HUNGRY PEOPLE

Communities and food pantry sponsors determine how they will operate based on their resources and values. The following suggestions indicate some ways that food pantries and food banks might consider.

FOOD PANTRIES

ACTION 1: DEVELOP A “USER-FRIENDLY” SYSTEM OF DISTRIBUTION

- **Give the recipient more control over what food and how much food is taken.** This can be accomplished by
 - **ALLOWING FOR “FULL CLIENT CHOICE”**
 - **Operating as a “Grocery Store.”** The food pantry sets available food on shelves and recipients shop for items wanted from the food displayed, filling their own boxes. Recipients make their own food choice.
 - **Filling Orders.** The food pantry itemizes available foods on a list. Recipients check items wanted on the list and staff assemble a box with those items. This method is particularly appropriate for food pantries that do not have the space to place food products on shelves.
 - **PROVIDING SOME CHOICE**
 - **Fixed Menu Bags for Emergencies and Recipient-Selected Assortments for All Others.** The food pantry maintains a supply of fixed menu bags for recipients in crisis; e.g., those who are in immediate need. All others may select goods from the food pantry.
 - **Fixed Menu Plus Grab Bag Option.** The food pantry distributes traditional standardized food boxes but also displays additional items. Recipients may take limited or unlimited amounts of these goods.
- **Set no limits on the number of times recipients may access food resources.** While some sponsors may feel that offering unlimited services could lead to recipients abusing the system, most recipients use food pantry services only when they are in need. If overuse is perceived, the situation can be handled by a conversation between the pantry staff and the recipient. The practice of permitting the needy to draw food from a pantry only once per month, however, may reflect a lack of supplies and money, or limited staffing resources to provide more frequent access.

DEGAGE FOOD PANTRY, open Tuesdays to the needy in Grand Rapids, Michigan, provides recipients with carts and the opportunity to choose the items as well as how much food they need. *“Clients want to switch to our food pantry because they can choose the food themselves. Client Choice promotes dignity and less food is wasted.”*

⁶ Congregate Meal Sites are mass feeding sites in urban and rural areas. In regions where access to services is limited, a local agency may host the meal with the assistance of other organizations, including food banks.

⁷ *Hunger 1997: The Faces and Facts.*

⁸ Food stamp benefits have been reduced from 80 cents per meal to 66 cents per meal. New criteria have reduced the number of families and individuals eligible for food stamps.

Recipients must

- have U.S. citizenship; many immigrants are ineligible but should not be discouraged from applying.
- meet work requirements: adults with no children are eligible for benefits only three months over three years unless they work at least 20 hours per week, participate in a work program 20 hours per week, complete community service requirements or are exempt from work requirements.
- meet poverty income requirements.

ACTION 2: CONSIDER HOW AVAILABLE FUNDS CAN BEST BE USED

■ Encourage community to donate cash.

Donating money will go further in reducing hunger than donating cans of food purchased at retail. A \$10 gift of store-purchased food gives a pantry \$10 worth of food to distribute. However, a \$10 monetary donation that the food pantry uses to acquire food at the food bank provides the pantry about 100 pounds or between \$150 to \$200 worth of food to distribute.

A monetary donation is also tax deductible for those who itemize their federal returns. Contributions in Michigan and Virginia are eligible for a credit against the state income tax.

■ Use the food bank whenever possible.

Food pantries characteristically have determined what items will be given to the needy, often obtaining some food bank items from the food bank, then purchasing the remaining items at the grocery store. Because store-bought food is ten times more expensive, obtaining food from retail stores should be used only as a last alternative or to meet a specific need.

■ Use bulk buying power.

Food banks and food pantries may jointly purchase a truckload of a specific item at wholesale.

ACTION 3: EXPAND REFERRAL SERVICES OF THE FOOD PANTRY

■ Ask recipients what they want to know and provide information⁹ about

- sources for **job search and health care**
- federal and state **resources** for which recipients may be eligible
- **inexpensive meal preparation, and food safety**

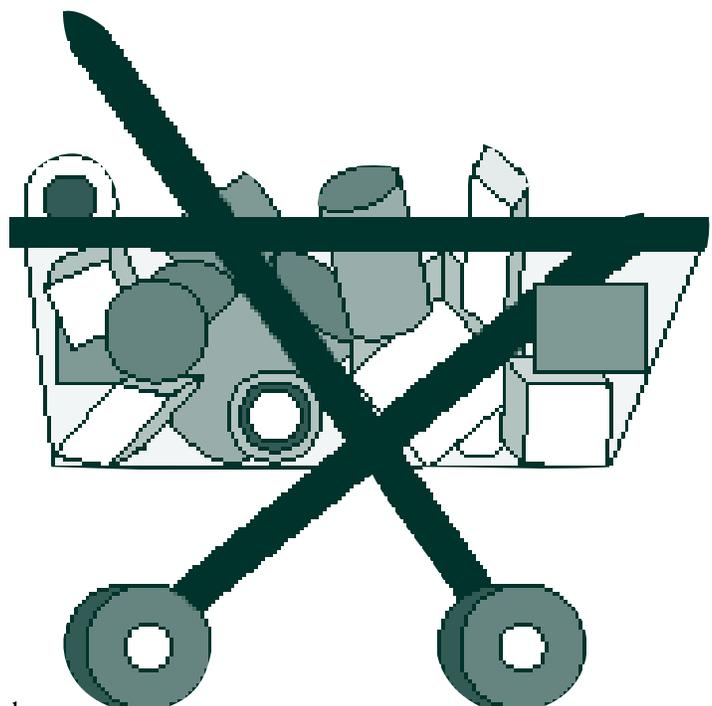
■ Work with community agencies

(other basic needs agencies, public assistance programs, social service agencies, utility companies) to assist families to use the food pantry for food and release funds to meet the costs of such items as rent, utilities, and needed household goods.

Example. The United Way's waiting period for cribs is nine months long while used furniture stores carry a large stock at \$100 per crib. Families can not afford this cost, but food pantries could enable families to access \$100 of food bank goods (that cost the food pantry \$5), thus freeing funds to purchase the crib.

■ Identify why some recipients are making extensive use of the food pantry.

Direct them to appropriate services that may assist them (including training in budget management and purchasing skills).



⁹ These needs were identified by participants in the assessment reported in *Hunger in Michigan*. Volunteers will need training to distribute information.

FOOD BANKS

- **Aggressively seek and stock donations** of all food products.
- **Develop a marketing system** to reach agencies.
 - **Send weekly** faxes or mail to food pantries listing available food bank items, highlighting new items.
 - **Develop flyers** to highlight new items, giving nutritional information as well as recipes.
 - Offer some new items at **no charge**.
 - **Provide delivery services** for agencies not able to pick up items at the food bank.
- **Develop a professional relationship** with agencies, similar to that of a wholesaler accommodating the needs of customers.
 - Develop a sense of trust.
 - Offer products requested by food pantries.
 - Stand behind products.
 - Make deliveries.
- **Provide technical assistance** to food pantries to assist them in making needed changes.

Michigan State University Extension (MSUE) developed resources to provide information on pantry set-up and procedures, on determining recipients' level of need, and on providing recipients with nutritional food assistance. MSUE staff worked with agency staff and volunteers to put in place a model appropriate for that agency.

Materials were organized as **Hunger Tool Boxes**. These have been distributed to 83 county MSUE offices, 15 Michigan Food Banks, and 31 Michigan Community Action Agencies. A Hunger Web site has been created to increase awareness of hunger issues in Michigan (see **REFERENCES**).



SECOND HARVEST GLEANERS FOOD BANK OF WEST MICHIGAN

*In four years under the **Waste Not, Want Not** approach, the amount of food distributed to provider agencies grew by nearly 55%, from 8.3 million pounds of food to 12.8 million pounds.*

RHODE ISLAND COMMUNITY FOOD BANK developed a marketing program and began to assist the food pantries in the transition to “Recipient Choice” with a handbook and video.

- In one year, **food distribution increased** from 250,000 pounds to 600,000 pounds of produce.
- The **cost of trash removal declined** because less food was wasted.
- Volunteers and workers spend **time interacting with recipients** instead of making up boxes.

OTHER ACTIONS¹⁰

Michigan currently provides funding for transporting food to food banks.

State or foundation grants to improve the facilities and equipment of food pantries and food banks would expand the ability to stock food and serve recipients.

REFERENCES

FOOD BANK COUNCIL OF MICHIGAN, INC. (1999). *Improving Michigan's Statewide Response to Hunger*. 501 N. Walnut Street, Lansing, MI 48933. (517) 485-1202.

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION. (1997). *Hunger in Michigan. Are We Doing the Right Things? Are We Doing Things Right?*

Hunger Homepage: <http://www.msue.msu.edu/fnh/hunger>

RHODE ISLAND COMMUNITY FOOD BANK. *A Recipient's Choice Handbook*.

Contact Erica Franco or Natasha Ribeiro at (401) 826-3073.

Web site: <http://www.rifoodbank.org>

SECOND HARVEST GLEANERS FOOD BANK OF WEST MICHIGAN.

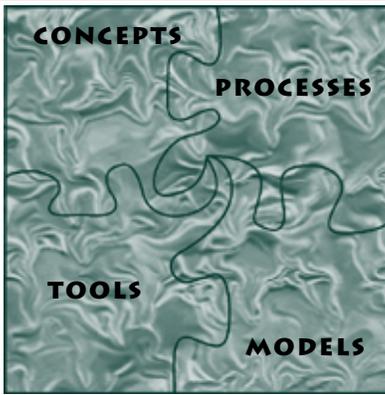
Waste Not... Want Not! Toward A Hunger-Free America, paper by John Arnold.

Waste Not Want Not video and resource packet, \$10.00.

1250 Front Avenue, NW, Grand Rapids, MI 49504.

Web site: <http://www.wmgleaners.org>

¹⁰ For recommendations directed at other food programs, see Food Bank Council of Michigan, Inc., *Improving Michigan's Statewide Response to Hunger*.



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Photograph courtesy of Food Bank Council of Michigan, Inc. and Second Harvest Gleaners Food Bank of West Michigan.



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