

Steps for Connecting with Your Local Food Pantry

This document is intended to provide agents with a step-by-step guide to connecting with their food bank/pantries. There are also helpful tips about doing taste tests and cooking demos at food pantries included at the end of this document based on Morgan Marshall and Alyssa Anderson's experiences.

The amount of time it takes to build relationships with a food pantry can vary depending on the schedule of the pantry and the agent. The process can take anywhere from 2 weeks to months in advance. A lot of people who staff pantries are volunteers so it is important to remember that it can take longer for a response or to schedule a date. Working with a pantry can last as long as the agent feels necessary for the pantry to sustain demos or healthy Policy, Systems, and Environmental (PSE) choices on their own.



Step 1: Identify food pantries in your area.

The first step to connect with food banks/pantries is to determine which of the six regional food banks in North Carolina covers your county(ies). Follow this link for a map to see which food bank covers your area.

ncfoodbanks.org/finding-help

Next, follow the link to your regional food bank and look up the contact information for the Outreach Coordinator. This can usually be found under the "About Us" tab under "Staff," or something similar; the Outreach Coordinator may also be called the Agency Relations Coordinator; if in doubt, call the main line of the food bank and explain that you'd like to be connected with the person responsible for working with the food bank's partner agencies, which is the term they use for the organizations that they serve. This person will be the best liaison to help you determine how to reach the food pantries affiliated with the food bank in your county. You can also often find a directory of food pantries in your area on the food bank website, but talking directly to someone at the food bank will help you determine which pantries might be best to work with, and how to reach out to them. The Outreach Coordinator might suggest that you attend a Talking Council to present information to all of the pantries in their service region (see #2 for more about Talking Councils), or you they might choose to connect you directly with a pantry in your area that would be interested in your programs. If you have EFNEP in your county, please work with the Program Assistant, as they may already have established relationships with food pantries in your community.

Step 2: Connect with food banks and their partner agencies.

Often Food Bank staff offer opportunities to connect with regional partner agencies (food pantries, soup kitchens, etc.) to receive educational credit on topics related to nutrition, produce procurement, food safety, SNAP benefits, and more. Sometimes these meetings are referred to as talking councils, member advisory councils, or other names. During these meetings, an agent can share with the partner agencies the resources available through Cooperative Extension.

The following is an email excerpt that you can send to Food Bank staff to forward to all partner agencies following the talking council. This will help remind partner agencies what we can offer and will also give them direct contact to you.



Through NC Cooperative Extension we can offer the food bank and food pantry partners many resources. One of the best ways to start utilizing available resources is through the Healthy Food Pantry Assessment Toolkit. [Your Name], Extension Agent in [County], or [Team Member's Name (if applicable)], Steps to Health Nutrition Educator, can conduct this with the pantry partner. This helps us gain a better understanding of the pantry and how it uses different strategies for helping clients and consumers make healthier choices. The assessment addresses pantry location/set-up, food availability/distribution, policies, food safety, and other available services. For example, do they use a client-choice model, do they use any nudging strategies, pass out recipe cards, offer taste tests or nutrition education classes, etc. It also helps us to create a plan of action to help the pantry begin using strategies for healthier choices.

Based on the results of the assessment, Cooperative Extension can assist in a variety of ways, including:

- 1. Teaching nutrition education classes*
- 2. Leading taste test demonstrations*
- 3. Providing recipe cards*
- 4. Assisting with transitions to client-choice distribution models*
- 5. Facilitating partnerships with farmers/gardeners for fresh produce donations*
- 6. Providing signage with nutritional information*

One of the best ways to make these efforts more sustainable is to train food pantry coordinators/volunteers. We are happy to lead trainings for volunteers to teach them about any of these topics. If the pantry would like to try out some of these strategies but is hesitant about getting started, we also have staff that are willing to come out and help begin the process!

If anyone is interested in learning more about these opportunities or starting the conversation, please let us know!

Step 3: Assess the pantry and create a plan of action.

Steps to Health wants to support you in facilitating policy, system and environmental changes at food pantries. This process involves collecting baseline assessment data and assisting the pantry in creating a plan of action to implement strategies for creating a healthier environment. For more information about receiving Steps to Health PSE support, contact Elizabeth Gerndt at emgerndt@ncsu.edu.

Step 4: Order recipe cards.

Once you have established a relationship with a food pantry and determine they are interested in hosting taste tests during pantry distribution hours, complete this **Google Form** (goo.gl/forms/ir7jh8y9DhASyINI3) to order Food Pantry Recipe Cards. Cards should be used as part of a food demonstration or taste test conducted by agents or EMFV volunteers.

If you need additional handouts, Steps to Health can provide bulk color copies of any of the handouts found in curriculum sessions.

Step 5: Schedule your first taste test.

The pantry contact will more than likely choose what day and time they want you to do the first taste test based on their hours and when they are busiest.

Find out if there is a specific food they would like you to incorporate based on what they are distributing that day, and choose a recipe that includes those foods, or one that can be easily adapted. It is also helpful to see if the other recipe ingredients are available and commonly received through the pantry.

Choose a recipe from an approved source (localfood.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/NC-State-Extension-Recipe-Guidance.pdf?fwd=no). You can use one of the Food Pantry Recipe Cards, or any of the recipes from other Extension Programs. See the mini-lessons for recipe suggestions. Use one of the **12 mini-lessons** for talking points and guidance about how to conduct a taste test.

Make sure to consider the type of distribution at your pantry before choosing a lesson. If clients will be waiting for food, you may have time for a longer lesson or full demo. If they move through quickly, you may only have time for talking points and a taste test.

Step 6: Evaluate your progress.

Dot Surveys

Dot surveys are a great way to get a quick snapshot of participants' reactions to the recipe. For example, you can take a piece of flip chart paper, divide it in three sections, with headings such as "Loved it"/ "Liked it"/ "Maybe next time" and then provide participants with stickers to place in the category that best describes how they felt about the recipe they tried. This will help you get a count of how many people you reached, as well as how many people had a positive reaction to the recipe you used. Consider also having a category that assesses people's interest in making the recipe at home.

Pounds Donated

If you work with a local farmer or gardener to donate local food, please be aware that one of the local food indicators in the Extension Reporting System (ERS) asks about the number of pounds of food donated for vulnerable populations, so keep track of how many pounds are donated so you can report them.

Step 7: Repeat!

Hopefully you can set up a schedule for working with the food pantry and offering taste tests. This is also a great role for an Extension Master Food Volunteer, and an opportunity to promote other programs through Extension. For example, you can connect the pantry with EFNEP to offer a longer class series, or to Extension Master Gardeners if clients are interested in growing their own food. You can also think about other programs you offer that might be of interest, such as food preservation.

HELPFUL TIPS from Morgan and Alyssa

- Tour the pantry before your first demo. Plan where you will set up and see if there are any outlets and sinks nearby. It may help to stop by when clients are visiting the pantry to get an idea of the traffic flow and the best location for you.
- Have someone there to help you, such as an extension or food pantry volunteer. Having one person focused on cooking and the other on talking to clients helps during the busier times. This also helps for engaging clients if they are hesitant at first in visiting the demo table. It is helpful to bring a food tray so that you can easily walk around to offer samples and recipe cards.
- Cooking in small batches allows those that come in at different times to watch how the food is prepared.
- Visual displays or small giveaways can help grab the attention of clients to come visit your table.

