
EMERGENCY FOOD SYSTEM CHALLENGES

ATTRACTING AND RETAINING VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers are an essential part of many food pantry operations. They often do a variety of tasks including collecting, organizing, and distributing food. Managing volunteers is challenging. Organizations often struggle with high turnover, continual training, and language barriers between volunteers and clients. The 2019-2020 Ralph W. Voorhees Fellows examined the role of volunteers in pantry management. Here are some strategies for attracting and retaining volunteers:

THE RIGHT SIZE

- Each pantry works best with an optimal number of volunteers. Too few volunteers and the workload becomes too much. Too many volunteers and there is not enough work to go around. Many pantries have regular volunteers who have become like family. Pantries that are entirely volunteer based may worry about succession and who will run the pantry when they leave. St. Vincent de Paul in New Brunswick, NJ, is creating an institutional infrastructure that expands the number of people who know how the pantry operates to ensure its continuation.

VOLUNTEER TRAINING AND EDUCATION

- The Fallbrook Food Pantry in Fallbrook, CA is primarily run by volunteers and offers a volunteer orientation session, as well as a guidebook for individuals who want to volunteer, which allows people to understand the organization's expectations and requirements.
- The Connecticut Food Bank offers "Hunger 101," an experience-based program that helps volunteers understand poverty and food insecurity. The program allows volunteers to play an important role in education and advocacy about poverty and hunger, as they host presentations about food insecurity for the community.
- As part of their Volunteer Toolkit, Philabundance in Philadelphia, PA, suggests having regular discussions with volunteers about how to build on their strengths and provide in-depth and on-going training to skilled volunteers.

DIVISION OF LABOR

- Saint Vincent de Paul's coordinator in New Brunswick, NJ, emphasized the importance of creating easy-to-complete work through division of tasks, easy explanations, and volunteer placement in a specific job. This approach makes it possible for a variety of volunteers, including youth who complete community service hours.

VOLUNTEER RECOGNITION AND APPRECIATION

- All Faiths Food Bank in Sarasota, Florida recognizes volunteer efforts with various tokens of appreciation, from an annual dinner that celebrates their "Hunger Heroes" with a Volunteer Appreciation Celebration, to an employee of the month award that also highlights volunteers in a monthly spotlight.

ABOUT THE CENTER

The Ralph W. Voorhees Center for Civic Engagement at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy seeks to enhance educational opportunities and facilitate innovative research through community based research and discussion. This food brief has been adapted from the following reports:

Arshad, Hina, Nashia Basit, Cassie Bolinger, Aiza Nageeb and Julien Rosenbloom (December 2019) "Innovative Practices in Emergency Food Delivery."

Bonilla Martinez, Ana G., Daniela Ortega, Reshma Parikh, Katarina A. Piasevoli, Abigail M. Thompson, Kathe Newman, and Cara Cuite (September 2017), Chapter 8: "Food Pantries and the 'Emergency' Food System in New Brunswick," in Kathe Newman, Cara Cuite, and Erin Royals (Eds.) *New Brunswick Community Food Assessment*

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