



Best Food Safety Practices for Hunger Relief Organizations When Distributing Foods

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Introduction

It is important for food handlers in hunger relief organizations – like food banks, food pantries, and meal kitchens - to safely distribute safe food(s). This is because hunger relief organizations are often serving vulnerable populations; for example, individuals that lack healthcare access, and or individuals who are immunocompromised (Chaifetz and Chapman 2015; Feeding America 2017).

Food can be distributed in many ways. Some examples include:

- A grocery store model, where guests can select the items, they want to take home (also known as “client choice”)
- A restaurant model, where guests are served a meal to eat on-site (also known as a meal kitchen or soup kitchen)
- A grab-n-go model, where guests receive a pre-packed box of food(s) and other items
- A meals-on-wheels model, where food is delivered directly to a guest in their home or a community center
- A “pocket pantry,” or convenience fridge model, where someone can get food from an unsupervised location to take with them

Organizations may only operate using one of these models, while some could also offer food in multiple ways.

There are some ways in which distributing food will be unique for each of those models, and many ways they are the same. When distributing food, it is important to avoid cross-contamination, practice good personal hygiene, control temperature, and

observe internal policies for printed dates on food packages. This publication summarizes food safety best practices for hunger relief organizations when distributing food(s)

This publication was created using information from:

- Alexander, 2022
- Butz, 2021
- Chaifetz and Chapman, 2015
- Feeding America, 2017
- Food Safety and Inspection Services, 2017
- Makenzie, Holston, and Xu, 2021
- ServSafe, 2023
- Schonberger, Boyer, and Chase, 2018
- StateFoodSafety Resources, 2023
- Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station & Cooperative Extension Service, 2014
- Nwadike, 2015
- Webstaurant Store, 2022
- Wrap FoodPack Solutions, 2020

Avoiding contamination, cross-contamination and cross-contact

It is important to keep foods separated from each other as one way to avoid cross-contamination and/or cross-contact. Cross-contamination is where microorganisms that have contaminated one surface are transferred to another, and cross-contact is where an allergen that is present on one surface is transferred to another.

Some ways you can do this include:

- Following good personal hygiene practices (washing hands, wearing gloves, tying hair back, wearing aprons, etc.)
- Packaging food in clean, food-safe containers
- Monitoring food packaging for any leaks and discarding any foods which are in leaking packages or have been contaminated by leaks
- Keeping foods which are a potential source of contamination (for example, packages of ground beef) below and/or away from foods they could contaminate (for example, fruits and vegetables)
- Inspecting insulated carriers for contamination, cleaning and sanitizing insulated carriers before and after use, and replacing carriers that have been torn or otherwise worn out

The lists below provide additional information on best practices based on the distribution model.

Client choice and grab-n-go model pantries

- Storing food in designated areas
- Wrapping or covering food before storing
- Storing food in containers designated for food storage
- Storing raw meat and ready-to-eat foods separately, including during transportation

Restaurant model meal kitchen

- Asking meal kitchen guests if they have any food allergies before serving them
- Making sure serving equipment is cleaned and sanitized before and after use
- Using gloves, aprons, and hair and beard covers when assembling food. Gloves should be worn when handing out meals

Meals-on-wheels meal delivery model

- Using gloves, aprons, and hair and beard covers when assembling food. Gloves should be worn when handing out meals
- Using hot packs or ice packs to keep hot food hot and cold food cold while delivering
- Cleaning and sanitizing insulated carriers used during transportation

Unsupervised fridge model

- Labeling shelves in the fridge so that so that ready-to-eat foods are on the higher shelves and foods which will require cooking are on the lower shelves



Figure 1: An insulated carrier. They come in different material types, sizes, and shapes. They can be used for transporting cold or hot foods (Webstaurant Store, 2022).

Distributing foods that require time and temperature control for safety

Foods that require time and temperature control for safety (also known as TCS foods) should be distributed with some additional setup:

- If you are distributing TCS foods at a food pantry, consider keeping them under refrigeration or in the freezer and only taking them out when you plan to distribute them. If you plan to distribute everything you have, consider only taking out what you plan to distribute within a set period (for example, an hour), and then put out more.
- If you are planning to distribute meals, use insulated carriers to keep any hot food hot, or any cold food cold.
- Add ice packs to maintain temperatures for food that requires refrigeration (at 41 °F or below).
- Before using any insulated carriers, inspect them for any damage. If you observe any damage, let the supervisor know and use another container.
- Use thermometers to monitor the temperature in insulated carriers when in use.
- Never hold food out of refrigeration for over 2 hours during distribution. If the outside temperature is above 90 °F, food should not be left out for more than 1 hour.



Figure 3: Temperature danger zone (40 °F - 140 °F; Wrap FoodPack Solutions, 2020).

Delivering Food

There may be times when you, as a volunteer, drive to deliver food to someone. You may do this in your vehicle, or your organization's vehicle.

Be sure to clean and sanitize the place in your vehicle where you plan to put the food (truck of a car, in a truck bed, etc.).

Distributing past-date food

Check your organization's policy on whether you are permitted to distribute past-date foods. With few exceptions, dates printed on food labels are about the quality and not the safety of the product.

One of those exceptions is infant formula. Do not distribute infant formula that is past the printed date.

When considering the date while distributing foods, use the first-in, first-out method. Prioritize distributing foods that are closest to the dates printed on their label. For more information, please review our [factsheet which addressed date labels on donated foods](#).

Additional resources

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