

Customer Service

Treating customers with dignity is a key best practice for emergency food providers. In speaking with food banks and meal programs around the state, many expressed the importance of having a strong customer service orientation and “good attitude,” and some talked about how their faith or values guide the way they do business. Many agencies have taken customer service beyond the basics as well, stretching themselves to make their services more accessible and convenient, more personalized, and more culturally competent. Others are going beyond food to provide other needed services. General best practices in the area of customer service are:

- Ensuring that all staff and volunteers treat customers with respect
- Maximizing customer choice through a shopping or self-select format or other mechanisms
- Listening to customer input and adapting services and food available to meet the specific needs of your customer base
- Recruiting volunteers from key demographic groups so that your volunteer base is reflective of the customers served
- Having good signage and clear guidelines for customers, available in multiple languages if needed
- Establishing hours of operations based on customer rather than volunteer convenience, such as weekend and evening hours for working individuals and families

The customer service profiles below are divided into the following categories: meeting customers where they are, increasing access and convenience, hospitality, beyond food, going the extra mile for kids, and more good ideas.

MEETING CUSTOMERS WHERE THEY ARE

Door to Door: Delivery Service St. Mary's Food Bank - Seattle



St. Mary's Food Bank (SMFB) offers a home delivery service for customers who are homebound. “We noticed with our walk-in customers coming in that some elderly and disabled people were struggling. Sometimes we would get a call from a case worker who knew someone who needed food,” says Kate Maughan, Food Bank Director. SMFB delivers to several hundred people each week, which Smith says is the “tip of the iceberg” in relation to need. The program is made possible by volunteers who agree to cover a route with a number of deliveries once a week, using their own cars to deliver the food. SMFB does background checks and sets the bar high regarding whom they send out, since customers are vulnerable and alone. The service is intended for people who cannot leave their homes without assistance. Customers self-identify as needing the service, and given the demand, they are always asked whether there is someone in their

lives who they can send to pick up their food. Once registered, customers are added to a delivery route.

SMFB has route sheets that they print every week. The volunteers see the same 10-12 people each week, so they get acquainted. In many cases, several customers are clustered in one building. They rely on volunteer drivers to assist with adjusting the contents of food bags to meet the special dietary needs of their customers – these restrictions are notated on the route sheet. SMFB delivers only once a week, so they bring a lot of groceries since they know customers can't get out. How long the route takes depends in part on how chatty the volunteers are, but usually 45 minutes to two hours. They need to balance visiting with the need to get perishable food out to folks, and may also vary the length of their visits depending on how isolated the customer is.

What it Takes: “This program is hard. You really need to have your ducks in a row because these people need their food every week. If you can’t do that, don’t start it.” says Maughan. Be prepared to screen and manage volunteers, and have a “Plan B” for when a volunteer is sick or on vacation. She also notes that people are needed to pack bags, handle logistics, and make volunteers feel appreciated. At SMFB, some people share routes, alternating weekly or monthly. In some cases, children ride along with their parents, seniors appreciate the children’s visits. It is very important to establish geographic parameters and limits on the number of customers served, although it can be difficult to say no to people in need. SMFB has benefited from a volunteer who created a customized Access database system for them. However, route assignments are determined by staff, and could be done using a simpler tracking system if needed.

TV Info Screens Marysville Community Food Bank - Marysville



Marysville Community Food Bank utilizes a best practices that has to do with how they get information to our customers. They have a large flat panel TV screen visible to customers while they wait in line. They run a laptop in the office through that TV to run PowerPoint slides that provide food safety info, other resource info (like local places for clothes, medical, etc), thanks to our donors, what’s “hot” for food available at the food bank (“lots of onions today”), and many other types of info. Much of the info is available on flyers as well so that folks can take these for more details.

“I find that the slide shows are really helping to get information to our customers.”

– Dell Deierling, Director of Marysville Food Bank

Drive Through CSFP Community Services of Moses Lake - Moses Lake



Community Services of Moses Lake (CSML) has designed a “drive-through” style distribution. This comes in response that most of their CSFP customers are elderly and it takes extra effort for them to park their car, walk to the food bank, get their distribution, and carry it back to their car (which in most cases would be with the assistance of one of the CSML staff). The whole process was very time-consuming for both the customers and the volunteers.

The drive-through distribution is set up with two lanes around the back of the warehouse organized using cones and signs. Customers will drive up, and two volunteers will approach them with the sign-in sheet, cheese, and the other CSFP commodities. Upon signing in, the commodities are then loaded into the customer’s vehicle. Taped to the

cheese is the next month’s distribution dates written in both English and Spanish. The customer then drives forward making way for the next customer to move forward.

Customer feedback has been extremely positive noting that the distribution for the elderly is far easier using this method. Results of this distribution process is that the customers never need to leave their vehicles, they never need to back up into a busy parking lot, and time is saved for both customers and volunteers. This method would also help the process for the

women, infants, and children participating in CSFP as it can be difficult for a parent to park the car, get all the children out, get everything, and bring all the children back.

Linkages: Pairing Fresh Meals with Groceries

Lifelong AIDS Alliance and Greenwood Food Bank - Seattle



Lifelong AIDS Alliance (LAA)'s food program, Chicken Soup Brigade, works to improve the nutritional health of people living with HIV/AIDS and other life-challenging illnesses. When they expanded their mission to include seniors, LLA teamed up with Seattle's Greenwood Food Bank (GFB), operated by Volunteers of American Western Washington, to deliver meals to homebound seniors in GFB's service area. LLA delivers packaged, frozen meals once a week to GFB. GFB then delivers the meals along with groceries to qualified customers (currently, about 10-15 people) at their homes. GFB helps identify people in need of meals, and also takes responsibility for completing intake paperwork for LLA and documenting the customers' nutritional needs. LLA cooks and packs quality meals and brings them to GFB weekly for distribution. This partnership works well for both organizations: LLA is able to send meals to seniors, and GFB is able to provide both groceries and meals (double the nutrition!) to their elderly, homebound customers. Mike Cox, Grocery/Delivery Coordinator of LLA comments, "It has been a benefit for us to show collaboration to our funders, a feather in both of our caps." LLA already had a satellite system for meal delivery, so this partnership was a natural extension.

What it Takes: Cox found it easy to establish this partnership – since he is active with the Seattle Food Committee, he already knew many food bank coordinators around the city. A formal memorandum of understanding between partners outlining roles and responsibilities is recommended.

"We believe that by giving food we would eat ourselves – nutritious and varied – we are helping our neighbors in need."

– WFC Emergency Food Provider Survey respondent

On the Road: Mobile Food Bank

St. Leo's Food Connection - Tacoma & Lakewood



St. Leo's Food Connection (SLFC) is expanding access through a mobile food bank. The mobile food bank started after the Lakewood Collaborative Hunger Task Force, a group of city officials, civic leaders and social service providers, identified three neighborhoods in Lakewood which were extremely low-income, and had significant transportation challenges and were without grocery stores. SLFC stepped up to serve one of the neighborhoods, Springbrook. "Because we already had a truck and we package food, this was a natural fit for us," commented Director Kevin Glackin-Coley. "The Hilltop neighborhood of Tacoma, where we are based, is gentrifying, so our customers are moving outside the center city. Now we have to go to them." St. Leo's Food Connection packages the food at their office, stores it temporarily at the Emergency Food Network, and transports it on Saturday to four different locations serving 125-150 households each week. SLFC divided the neighborhood into quadrants and picked four main intersections as mobile food bank sites, so customers wouldn't have to walk too far. Their truck, loaded with bags of food, pulls up to each corner at an appointed time and distributes food bags from out of the rear of the truck. They have made small changes to the schedule and procedures over time. "If we waited until we knew how to do it, we probably still wouldn't be doing it," says Glackin-Coley. "There are hungry people who aren't being served by the system as it currently exists. We are trying to think outside the box to reach them." They know the program is making a difference because they've heard from a local elementary school teacher who says she noticed a big difference for some of her students, who were no longer coming to school famished on Monday mornings.

What it Takes: A truck, good data about where emergency food is needed, partners (St. Leo's Food Connection works with Centro Latino volunteers for translation), flexibility of volunteers and staff.

DEFINING SERVICE WITH DIGNITY

Many food banks share a commitment to service with dignity. What do we really mean by that? Below are some “ingredients” to move us toward a shared definition, generated by participants in a conference session at the 2007 Food Lifeline Agency Conference.

- ...> Removal of barriers
- ...> Generous spirit
- ...> Increased customer/customer choice
- ...> Commitment to customer service
- ...> Personalization
- ...> Consideration and respect
- ...> Understanding
- ...> Valuing customers' time
- ...> Respect for privacy

Oregon Food Bank has taken the concept of a shared definition further and developed the following statement of “Customer Rights and Responsibilities” which is posted in all their member food banks.

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES We recognize the basic rights of individuals who seek food assistance. Concern for personal dignity is of great importance. At the same time, staff and volunteers expect responsible behavior from you.

You can expect from us:

- ...> Respect, Consideration, Cooperation, Patience - Opportunity to participate in Surveys & Evaluations
- ...> Access to Services for which you are eligible - A Safe Environment
- ...> Personal information kept Confidential

Our expectations of you:

- ...> Respect, Consideration, Cooperation, Patience
- ...> Accurate Information to establish eligibility for services
- ...> A Safe Environment

Making it Easy: Satellite Food Banks

Thurston County Food Bank - Olympia



Thurston County Food Bank (TCFB) was motivated to establish satellite food banks in order to increase access. All the satellite programs they have established depend on partnerships with a hosting agency, and have been developed strategically to reduce known barriers to access. They have established 10 satellites so far, targeted to serve low-income families, seniors and geographically isolated communities. TCFB began its satellite program at two housing complexes with a high percentage of low-income families, working with the on-site after-school programs. This allows working parents to pick up

food once a month when they pick up their kids. Before, many of these parents had trouble making it to TCFB's downtown location during the workday. The next step was serving the frail elderly who have trouble traveling downtown and carrying their groceries home. By bringing food to two senior centers, the seniors have a comfortable place to wait for the food and for a "Dial a Lift" ride home afterward. Other goals of the satellites have been to extend hours of operation, providing evening and weekend food bank hours, and bringing food into geographically isolated communities.

TCFB offers satellites in partnership with host agencies that provide volunteers, a site, and reporting of program statistics. TCFB delivers food and offers technical assistance to get the satellite up and running. Partners benefit because they don't have to do food drives or package up bags of food. Basic bagged food is provided, and TCFB is glad to add on produce, bread or other items if the site has the capacity to receive, store and distribute the food. Customers are also still welcome to visit the downtown location to access a greater variety of foods.

What it Takes: Operating satellites requires selecting and recruiting appropriate partners. TCFB requires their satellites to be credible, able to track and report statistics, able to meet a high standard for volunteer screening, and to carry their own liability insurance. You must also have the ability to distribute food. Executive Director Robert Coit advises, "Don't roll out too fast! You will be successful, and you will need more food and resources to support the satellites. Be sure you can accommodate an increase in your customer base." Be strategic in your planning, and remember that your success hinges on the reputation of the host agencies. Think about your own capacity, and how to handle the logistics on your end. TCFB went "old school" with prepared grocery bags because they have the volunteer capacity to prep the bags, and can even pack them a few days ahead when there is a slow day. Finally, develop a clear, written memorandum of understanding between the two agencies. TCFB always requires such an agreement, and has developed written policies for the satellite program as well.

Getting Creative to Bridge the Gap on Customer Screening

The Vashon Maury Community Food Bank - Vashon



The Vashon Maury Community Food Bank launched a new program to bridge the limitations of State support agencies in reaching our community. There are no DSHS Offices or Public Health Service Offices in our community. People seeking help had to travel, by ferry, incurring what has increasingly become a very costly trip for low income folks, to sign up and qualify for even the most common governmental safety net programs. Oftentimes applicants were required to make multiple trips to a DSHS office to complete qualification requirements for their benefits or to maintain benefits. We embarked on an innovative collaboration with the nearest Public Health Office to provide ready access to at least the most basic governmental support programs right here in our community, without the costly trip. Our commitment was to recruit and work with a team of volunteers that would be present and available at all of our Food Bank distribution times. Public Health's commitment was to come out to our community to train these volunteers in taking people through applications for the State Basic Health and Basic Food programs to begin with, more being added to the repertoire over time. The Public Health Office we are working with has also committed to doing all the follow up with our applications, acting as strong and knowledgeable advocates for our customers. Through these efforts, members of our community, very much including but not limited to our customers, can finally access the help and support they qualify for without facing a huge financial and time burden to apply. We are able to educate and help people understand their ability to request phone interviews in lieu of DSHS office visits, and provide support for their application processes. For the first time, our customers can ask questions and find answers, right here at the food bank, as to whether they might qualify, and what kind of benefit amounts or costs they might be looking at. This accessibility is exactly what is needed to create the link between those in need and the resources available to help. Our success in launching this program makes a huge difference for our customers and our community.

We started with a dream. We wanted our customers to be able to sign up for basic programs they were not accessing due to transportation and cost of transportation out of our community to get to a DSHS office to go through the application processes. Our local public health nurse heard our dream. She worked with the Public Health office in White Center, and found someone who was willing to come out to us and train volunteers in taking people through the applications (for Basic Health, Basic Food, Medical Vouchers). Meanwhile we worked with our landlords to come up with an agreement to build out office space on-site that would accommodate not only our administrative needs, but this kind of program as well. Upon completion of the office space, we recruited a team of volunteers and scheduled a few 3 hour training sessions with the representative from Public

Health. Public Health supplied us all the forms, as well as release forms that would allow them to advocate and follow up for our customers as their applications went through the qualifying systems at DSHS. We wrote articles for our local papers announcing the new office space and new services available, with income guideline tables included. We worked with Public Health to come up with ideas for reaching out to our customers, educating them about what benefits they could qualify for, and that they could qualify without having to leave the Island. We continue to engage in outreach and education. And we continue to coordinate periodic trainings to keep our volunteers up to date to best help our food bank customers.

Our program objective was to create easier access to basic government assistance programs for our customers right here at the food bank. The only real choice prior to this program for our customers, and our community, involved a \$15-\$19 ferry trip to a DSHS office in Seattle. We wanted to create a friendly and open atmosphere, matching that in our food bank distribution, in which one can openly ask questions and get answers about qualifying, applying and even going through the application process right here, with help. We wanted a private enough setting for working with people's personal financial and family information in a comfortably confidential manner. We wanted volunteers trained to handle all inquiries so that we are not diverting our limited staff from all their regular duties which keep the Food Bank running optimally. We live in a small community where person to person, face to face outreach can make all the difference in program interest and participation. Numbers were not as important to us, as we know for many of our customers, trust and familiarity is a prerequisite for sharing private information, and that takes time. We have however taken at least one person, per distribution day, on average, through the complete application process for either Basic Health, Basic Food, or both. We have provided many more with answers to questions or applications to take home and complete. We continue to look at and fine tune our outreach, making sure that our customers, and the community, know this program is here, at our Food Bank, and available, especially during these tough times. We feel that our efforts have been successful. We have achieved our goals and are always, as with every program here at the Food Bank, fine tuning at every step to continue to improve our services for our customers.

Our outreach program helps people of our community who are already struggling, many of whom are already using the food bank. Their limited resources are slipping away just trying to cover the very basics each month. Nutrition becomes a secondary choice to eating cheaply, and Health Care is relegated to emergencies only. Helping get people on the Basic Health program, those that qualify, at least can get preventative care when and as needed. Helping people access Basic Food helps people in our community stretch their dollars just that little bit farther to access enough food, or more nutritional food in an economy where food prices have skyrocketed, and in a community where traveling to a Costco or Trader Joe's is cost prohibitive. With the new Basic Food program income guidelines, our customers' children are getting enrolled in the free school lunch program, one that has been severely underutilized in our community, and one that can help many families provide the nutrition their growing children need right now to become all they can be. This program helps our customers take care of themselves, enables them to make positive choices for the health and nutrition of themselves and their families, while helping stretch their limited dollars further each month.

What It Takes: From the beginning we knew that we had limited resources if any to make this program happen. It has been a miracle of collaborations that has made it all possible. We were in a situation that demanded that we build or somehow acquire adequate office and filing space for our simple administrative needs. It made sense, if at all possible, to come up with a solution that would also allow us to start a program facilitating outreach to other services as the need has been so great, and access so limited, for our food bank customers. If ever we were going to achieve this goal, now, while we were securing basic office space, was the time. The successful collaboration with our landlords and a local contractor gave us the space we needed, and the space we dreamed of. We were very clear from the start that we did not have the budget to support staff carrying out this program. Again, this is where collaboration made it all possible. DSHS offices tend not to have the staffing ability to commit someone to being at our facility, and even Public Health couldn't commit someone. However, Public Health was willing to send someone out to us to train people. And, they were willing to commit to all the follow up with our customers. We could easily recruit a team of volunteers eager and willing to learn the ins and outs of what can be pretty harrowing forms, in the name of helping others in our community. Thus, with little expenditure of agency resources and time outside of our normal routines, we were able to institute a new program, one that creates access to government assistance programs and engages in outreach where there had been none, not just at our Food Bank, but in our community. We created not only an asset, a resource for our customers, but one for our community as well.

Excellence is stepping up in the best way one can to help our community. Through our collaborations, we have provided a readily accessible avenue to reach government assistance programs that otherwise had been cost prohibitive and inaccessible due to transportation limitations. These programs help people ride out hard times. These programs were designed as an important safety net for our society. No food bank can cover all the needs of all their customers. As a food bank we do the best we can to provide basic food supplies, but we don't, and cannot have everything. We can however put people in touch with other resources

that are available, that can supplement what we are able to provide every week. We saw a flaw, a hole in the safety net that is supposed to be there for us, for our community. We worked together with our community and other agencies to repair that hole, provide more comprehensive help to our customers, and to make our community a better place because of it.

INCREASING ACCESS AND CONVENIENCE

Eliminating the Line: Appointments

Hopelink - Redmond



Hopelink assigns its food bank customers specific appointment times to reduce customer wait time. This gives customers a specific time to aim for so they spend less time waiting for service, and it alleviates parking problems as well. Appointments are scheduled at 15 minute intervals, and the number given out is based on their calculation of how many families they can serve in each fifteen minute period. They have a lottery style system so people aren't always stuck with the last appointment and the system is perceived as fair. Each week when a customer visits, either they or a staff members draw a slip of paper for them that lists the food bank location, appointment date and time for the following week. The customer holds onto the slip, which serves as proof that they have an appointment. People without appointments and new customers can come through during the last fifteen minutes of open hours. "It works for us," comments Teresa Andrade, Food Bank Coordinator, Kirkland/Northshore Hopelink. "It takes the strain off of the customers. No matter what you say about having enough for everyone, people still have the mentality that they need to get in first. This makes it workable." She observes that this system is inherently less flexible, and Hopelink has developed guidelines for specific exceptions. Each food bank adopting an appointment system might have different exceptions depending on the community served.

What it Takes: First, decide to make a change and explain the upcoming change to customers (better yet—ask them if they feel appointments would be beneficial). Set up a template for printing slips (Hopelink uses a Microsoft Word label template to create slips each week with the correct date). Think through what your policies will be for people who lose their slips and under what circumstances you might make exceptions to the system. Train volunteers regarding the change and the rationale.

What's Cookin': Resource Hotline

Anti-Hunger Coalition Whatcom County - Bellingham



Everyday, Tutu Iverson, Board Vice President of Bellingham Community Meal (BCM), updates a Community Voice Mail (CVM) box message with information about which food banks are open and where to find free meals that day as part of her work with Whatcom County's Anti-Hunger Coalition. Food banks and meal programs send updates on their open hours, and she also reaches out to them to make sure the information she puts out is accurate. The coalition advertises their resource line via a card and inclusion in a resource guide. Social service providers have been especially appreciative of having a number to give customers.

What it Takes: Iverson says maintaining the voicemail is "not a lot of work, but you have to keep it up all the time." She has even called in while out of town to do daily updates of the information. At this point, her basic script is memorized. Interns or student volunteers could also be involved in updating the messages, or it could be done in various languages if volunteer interpreters are available. Of course, the most basic requirement is to set up a voicemail box. These are available from the phone company, or free of charge through your local Community Voice Mail provider or from several online services. To hear today's message, dial 360-788-7EAT.

No Questions Asked: Self-Serve Food

Helpline House - Bainbridge Island



Bainbridge Island's Helpline House (HH) offers a variety of community services, including a food bank, a clothing bank, a medical equipment loan program, and counseling. One reception lobby serves all the programs, and HH has installed bread racks, a display freezer and refrigerator in the lobby area. This allows all customers – even those visiting another program – to access food, and there is no limit on the number of visits. The refrigerator features fresh produce donations from the grocery store and their community garden. Marilyn Gremse, Volunteer Manager, comments, “We have produce that comes in and we need to move it right away. This way, it’s on view, people see it, and they take it.” They also use the front fridge and freezer for bulk things, like specialty flavors of ice cream, that people wouldn’t think to ask for. Having this accessible food helps serve people with dignity, and they are finding that even people reluctant to use a food bank may come and access the front area. Check-in is needed to access the food bank.

What it Takes: Space in the waiting area, display refrigeration and/or freezer. HH’s lobby is monitored by a volunteer at the check-in desk.

Resource Access Project Resource Access Project (RAP)



Connecting customers with a social services professional to increase access to referrals and information

Food Banks are often the first place people turn to when they are in need. Increasing access to information and referral is one important step to improving stability in our customer's lives. The Resource Access Project (RAP) is a brief focused intervention to provide access specific resources regarding customer needs such as state food assistance, housing stability, referrals to health clinics, legal support, or to address any other need. Food Bank visitors are able to meet with a staff person without needing to make an appointment during food bank hours.

Participants are given specific resource information to address a problem, provided directions or phone contact for the resource, bus tickets if needed to make the trip, and a follow-up visit is encouraged. As an incentive, Food Bank customers can access the Food Bank an “extra” visit if they participate in a follow up visit or call. The follow-up visit is important as it provides helpful feedback for evaluation of the project. Those standing in our Food Bank line have more needs than food. While we may not be able to provide the financial resources needed, we might be able to provide one more idea or one more resource that someone did not previously know about. By offering this one-to-one service we can provide the Information and Referral (I&R) and support a customer may need to achieve greater stability.

What is Takes:

RAP has three basic components; recruitment, space and a social services professional.

1. We have found it very helpful to have an intern or trained volunteer speak with customers in line and screen them for RAP. Volunteers and interns increase the visibility of the program.
2. A private meeting space with convenient access to the Food Bank distribution area ensures that customers’ privacy is maintained.
3. A case manager blocks off time for each food bank shift to be available for RAP.

The project requires a skilled staff (or volunteer) who can set boundaries and focus on the task of providing necessary and useful information.

HOSPITALITY

Redefining the Food Bank: Adding Services

My Sister's Pantry - Tacoma



My Sister's Pantry (MSP) serves up a hot meal and provides groceries and clothing to low-income community members three times a month, working out of First Congregational Church in Tacoma until their new home at First Methodist is complete. They serve on average 250-300 families per month representing 1,000-1,500 individuals. The vision to provide a quality meal experience came from their founder, a woman who had been in need of the food bank at one time in her life, and felt there was no dignity for the people in line. Instead, she wanted the MSP experience to be like going to a friend's house for dinner. On entry, people can receive a number for service at the food bank and/or clothing bank. Then, they receive a meal. All services are provided during a two hour period.

The meal is served on dishes, with silverware and tablecloths on the tables. People eat family style at large tables. About half of the people served are Eastern European, and many families dine together. The food is generally cooked by professional chefs who donate their time. "A local restaurant owner comes with his family and co-workers," says Martha Curwen, Executive Director. "We jokingly call it Iron Chef Pantry – they don't know what they are cooking in advance, but come in on Monday afternoons and prepare everything (using donated and purchased food). Because of his commitment, I have had other cooks approach me, and they either handle Saturdays or substitute as needed on Mondays." The experience is almost like dining at a restaurant – without the bill. Diners often take an interest in the meal and ask for recipes, so it shows them what they can do with the food from the food bank. MSP makes an effort to offer things that can easily be made with food bank items, for example, a salsa made with canned corn, black beans, diced tomatoes, and onions, served at a sample table with chips.

The food bank asks customers to fill out a grocery list indicating items they would like to take home – the list is printed with English and Russian side by side. These lists are used by a corps of volunteers who bag up food while people are eating, in the order indicated by their assigned number. Customers can also visit a produce and bread station while they are there. Clothing bank customers enter a designated area, arranged like a clothing store, and have 10 minutes to choose 10 items.

What it Takes: Curwen stresses that MSP has chosen their hours to accommodate the individuals and families served – evenings and weekends. She recommends assessing the customers' needs and planning around this. The operation is very volunteer intensive, utilizing 40-50 volunteers each time they are open. She draws heavily on church groups, college and high school students. Naturally, a facility with a kitchen, dining space, and room to accommodate the food bank and any other activities is needed as well.

Taking Hospitality to a New Level: Offering Take-Out

Women's & Children's Free Restaurant - Spokane



By its very name, the Women's & Children's Free Restaurant (WCFR) strives to set itself apart from a standard soup kitchen. While they did serve soup in their early years beginning in 1988, they have always placed an equal importance on hospitality. WCFR provides two made-from-scratch dinners each week in the basement of St. Paul's United Methodist Church. Since 2000, WCFR has been led by Executive Director Marlene Alford, a former caterer. In March 2004, to better meet the needs of families and provide something for the weekend when they were closed, they added Friday Take-Out. While Alford and her Board first thought they were just going to do another entrée, Friday Take-Out has become much more. In addition to offering an entrée to serve at least two, WCFR sets up a small "farmers market" with produce, bread, and a limited selection of dairy items – and serves lunch beginning at 12:30 p.m. A crew of volunteers spends Friday morning getting ready to open their "market" at 1 p.m. Before opening they make up the day's shopping list to distribute to their diners. "We would never choose for them," says Alford. Upon entering the program on Friday afternoons, the women are handed the shopping list of available items for their review and selection.

WCFR staff and volunteers work to think of everything, including portioning salad dressings from commercial size jars or washing and cutting whole watermelon to ensure that there's enough to go around and that diners can carry it home. They've also been adding recipes and continue to build their nutrition education resources.

What it Takes: Alford's food service industry experience has been valuable in launching the take-out service. To offer meals to go, you'll need to pursue a Class II Complex license from the health department. After that Alford acknowledges that you'll need a "huge amount of creativeness," food service knowledge, and the ability to be flexible, recognizing the ever-changing donation stream.

BEYOND FOOD

The Doctor's In: On-site Health Clinic North Helpline - Seattle



North Helpline (NH) started as a call-in/drop-in resource center. They started the Lake City Food Bank in 2001, precipitated by a crisis when a food bank in a neighboring community outside the city limits said it would no longer be able to serve Seattle residents (North Helpline was referring its customers there). Now, Lake City Food Bank serves 1,000 people per week. Many food bank customers present with medical needs, and NH knew that most were using the emergency room at nearby Northwest Hospital & Medical Center as their primary care provider. NH had been working with Rotary and learned about RotaCare Clinics. They worked hard to bring the program to Lake City, partnering with Rotary and the hospital as a source of volunteer medical personnel and back-up for urgent care. NH now has a clinic on-site that is open Saturdays, with two exams rooms, a triage area and a pharmacy. A mobile dental van also visits monthly. The hospital is supportive because without the clinic present, they would see many of these patients in their emergency room at an increased cost. Bartell Drugs provides prescription drugs at cost to NH, who passes them on free of charge to patients. Executive Director Rita Anderson comments, "It's cheap insurance to support our programs. No one knows when they may need assistance."

What it Takes: Anderson advises making the connections and doing the legwork beforehand. Make sure you have partners, because it takes a lot of money and effort to operate a clinic. NH fundraises for the project, has received equipment donations, and engaged skilled medical volunteers. The clinic has been a welcome addition to the community.

GOING THE EXTRA MILE FOR KIDS

Bringing it Home: Backpack Meals Des Moines Area Food Bank - Des Moines



The Des Moines Area Food Bank (DMAFB) started their Backpack Project to meet the needs of low-income children and their families. Children identified by the school administrators as at risk of weekend hunger are provided with backpacks of food to take home each Friday. DMAFB started the program when they realized that 60% of area children qualified for free and reduced lunch, and that the income guidelines for that program are the same as the guidelines for receiving USDA commodities. They began a partnership with Midway Elementary in Des Moines and have now expanded to serve six local schools as well, distributing about 400 backpacks each week. Kids take home full backpacks from school on Friday and return them on Monday – or, being kids, Tuesday. DMAFB volunteers pickup the backpacks from the school, refill them and deliver them back to the school by Friday. Two days worth of foods geared to kids is provided such as instant oatmeal or a breakfast bar with fruit for breakfast, microwavable macaroni and cheese or chili with chips, a cookie and juice for lunch and something similar for dinner, plus one or two snack items per day. They pay attention to nutritional density as much as possible. In order to offer appropriate foods, DMAFB does purchase some items, primarily single serve main meals, juice and fruit.

What it Takes: Backpacks, preferably ones that won't make the kids noticeable (DMAFB received a donation of a large number of backpacks from Washington Mutual), people to sort food and fill backpacks with appropriate food items, funds to purchase some items that are needed that may not be available regularly through the donation stream.

More than a Meal: Recognizing Other Needs

Sky Valley Food Bank - Monroe



Sky Valley Food Bank (SVFB) has expanded their services to include back-to-school supplies for kids as well as toys during the holiday season. They conduct a community drive that brings in donations and also increases their community visibility, stressing that supplies will go to the community's neediest children. Their goal is to provide the school supplies prior to school starting, so the children are able to fit in and be confident like the other children that have more resources on the first day of school. Supplies collected match school requirements, and are organized at the food bank by grade level. Neil Watkins, Executive Director, says, "If the parents can't even afford food, how can they get them through school? Items are expensive! If they are in need of food, they're also probably really worried, concerned and stressed about school supplies and toys for Christmas. Those are the two programs we chose to add for our

families in need, and they are both feel-good programs for the community as well." He adds, "The additional programs make your food bank look extensive. It can seem cumbersome when added to everything else, but it's such a great public relations tool as well as making a difference in the lives of people."

What it Takes: One or more volunteers will need to organize supplies by grade, and designated gifts will need to be tracked for the program. The drive is run by soliciting community partners such as the Chamber of Commerce, the Fire Department, Rotary Club and local businesses. Cash donations are used to buy backpacks or fill gaps in supplies. Before getting started, make sure your staff, board and volunteers support the effort.

"The additional programs make your food bank look extensive. It can seem cumbersome when added to everything else, but it's such a great public relations tool as well as making a difference in the lives of people."

- Neil Watkins, Executive Director Sky Valley Food Bank

It's in the Bag! Making Celebrations Possible

Maltby Food Bank - Maltby



Knowing that children's birthdays can be expensive for parents, Maltby Food Bank (MFB) decided to start offering child's birthday bags to families. A typical bag contains cake mix, frosting, birthday candles, disposable plates and napkins, and party favors. Gender appropriate bags are available for boys and girls. Donations of party goods are solicited from community groups. So far, Scouts, 4-H clubs, bible study groups and schools have assembled and donated bags. MFB is currently well-stocked as the local Montessori school recently donated 60 bags. The bags have been a big hit with customers, who indicate that they may have been

unable to throw a party without the assistance. Fran Walster, Director, indicates that she started the program primarily because “I needed an idea to get the community to help us. People want to help, they just don’t know how. Once you tell them how to give, they’re willing.” She also has groups that assemble and donate gift bags for seniors with toiletries and gift cards.

What it Takes: This is an excellent community service project for a service club, scout troop or other outside group looking to make a specific contribution to your food bank. MFB publicizes the need, offers basic guidelines, and donors do the rest.

Beyond the Box: Summer Meal Program

Copalis Community Church Food Bank - Copalis Beach



Ten years ago, Copalis Community Church Food Bank (CCCFB) saw the need for a summer free lunch program in their community. They applied to OSPI (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction) to become a sponsor for the Summer Feeding Program (In Washington State, OSPI is the state agency that administers the federal money from USDA for this program). After operating at a single site in the first year, the program has expanded each year and now serves over 8,960 lunches each summer all over the north beach community. Meals are served at fourteen sites, including the school district’s summer reading program, parks and recreation programs, and central community locations. Recently, the program was expanded to include three mobile sites at places where low-income children are concentrated. “The mobile program is our shining star,” comments former Board Co-Chairman Phyllis Shaughnessy. “We look for pockets of kids, like a modular home park, set out portable picnic tables and serve lunch. We’ve even incorporated a reading program where we take books and give them to the kids.” Shaughnessy reports that a faithful group of volunteers keep the program running. She also notes that it makes sense to have a food bank involved in this program, since they can use food from the food bank to lower the cost of making the lunches. Food banks considering running a similar program are invited to visit Copalis to see this operation in action. “It is something to behold. We deliver to many sites each day, and it goes like machine work.”

What it Takes: Startup funding to cover the costs of food until USDA reimbursement is received (CCCFB gets theirs from individuals and the county), volunteers to prepare and deliver sack lunches, a kitchen space for food preparation (they use their church kitchen), and a strong organizer to get out in public and encourage interest.

Beyond the Box, Take 2: Summer Lunch Camp

South Kitsap Helpline - Port Orchard



The South Kitsap Helpline (SKH)’s Summer Lunch Camp began in the summer of 2006 as an alternative to USDA’s Summer Feeding Program. This free, drop-in lunch program is designed to assist low-income families in the community in need of additional help feeding their children in the summer when free and reduced price meals are not offered because school is not in session. Children from pre-school to age 18 are invited to attend and receive a nutritious lunch and snack three days per week. If children are unable to stay, they pack lunches for them to take home. Extra food is also sent home with the children on Fridays for weekend meals. Parents are invited to stay with the children, or take a two-hour break for themselves. In addition to receiving food, children socialize, participate in an arts and craft project, read books, play games and receive one-on-one attention from staff and volunteers. SKH worked to create a summer camp atmosphere with “lunch camp counselors” who take kids’ orders. During the first year, the Summer Lunch Camp operated all summer long on a budget of just \$3,000.

What it Takes: Reliable group of staff and volunteers, building space during lunchtime hours, and lunches. SKH was able to partner with the First Lutheran Church who provided space in their centrally located church, which also had an appropriate kitchen space for meal preparation. When the program started, SKH did significant community outreach through the local schools, their food bank, posters at local community centers, laundromats and other community gathering places, and press releases to the local newspapers. They created parental consent/emergency contact forms, medical treatment and liability release forms and basic rules for parents and children, modeled on other summer camp programs.

Beyond the Box, Take 3: Mobile Summer Meals Program Des Moines Area Food Bank - Des Moines



The food bank is proud to showcase how our community came together around the food bank's mobile summer meals program. As a result of this collaboration, over 14,000 nutritious summer lunches and snacks were provided for children in the heart of low-income neighborhoods, together with activities and special events. Community collaborators included state and city government, United Way, Food Lifeline and other emergency food programs, the school district, local churches, the YMCA, the local farmer's market, and Lions Club International. Each of these partners played a unique role in serving children at risk of hunger.

It takes initial capital investment to begin a new program and the food bank received this start-up support from United Way to fund the purchase of necessary equipment such as tables, signs, coolers, tents, etc. On-going funding was also critical to pay for summer meals staff, food, and transportation. The state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) summer meals program provided reimbursement for each meal or snack served while also providing invaluable training, meal planning expertise and oversight of the program.

State support is not sufficient to pay for all program costs, so the food bank relied on increased food donations to supplement its own spending. Food Lifeline support included single-serving food items such as yogurt, fruits and vegetables. Neighboring food banks and the school district also shared extra milk. This allowed the food bank to support its summer meals program with in-kind food without reducing its regular food distribution.

State-wide experience with summer meals programs has shown that more children participate in summer meals when activities are also offered. While food bank staff considered providing activities, we determined that our forte was food service and it was more efficient to involve experts in children's programming. Consequently, we invited the city's Parks and Recreation department to host our summer meals in conjunction with its summer camp program at one city park and to provide staffing for activities at another park. In addition, the local YMCA provided staff for one elementary school site to lead age-appropriate activities such as sidewalk drawing for young children and sports for older children. The food bank reciprocated by providing summer meals at two YMCA's for the weeks when their regular meal provider was not offering service.

Providing summer meals outdoors requires sheltered space. The food bank partnered with local elementary schools, city parks and recreation programs, the farmers market and two YMCA's, all of whom provided free space. Of course, space and manpower is also needed to make hundreds of meals daily. One church provided its kitchen five days per week at no charge while many community volunteers provided the labor to make meals.

The Farmers Market is the center of our community on Saturday mornings in the summer. In support of the summer meals program, the market gave the food bank free booth space to provide fun activities focusing on nutritional education for children while summer meals were offered. To provide additional access to nutritious foods, market tokens were offered to low-income families, allowing them to leverage every \$5 used from their Basic Food EBT cards with an additional \$5.

It was a special day when the Lions Club hosted their "Giving Library" at two summer meal sites. Each child received two books (in either English or Spanish) to take home for their permanent collection. According to a recent study, "Home library size has a very substantial effect on educational attainment (and) having books in the home has a greater impact on children from the least educated families. It is at the bottom, where books are rare, that each additional book matters most." Katie Brewell of the Lions Club was excited about the partnership, saying enthusiastically, "Kids walk away with a lunch and something to feed their minds!"

The food bank's summer meals program is at the center of a successful, community-wide effort to see that the most vulnerable children have increased access to highly nutritious, culturally relevant food and activities, providing them with a better chance to succeed.

What It Takes: This program is very replicable in high-need areas; planning must begin early in the year. First, we knew we needed more resources (funding, equipment, staffing and food) to support this program. The food bank immediately **approached a potential funder** to solicit their support and apply for funding.

Next, we had to **consider potential meal site locations** in our area, including schools, parks, churches, YMCA's, apartments, etc. (Locations in which over 50% of students qualify for the federal meals program are ideal because participants in these areas do not need to be prequalified on the basis of their family income.) After identifying potential school sites, we first approached school staff to **engage their support** and then went through an **application process** to receive school district approval. Likewise, for city park sites, we met with the Parks & Recreation director and applied for a use permit from our local city. The food bank made similar connections with the farmers' market and received permission from a church to utilize their kitchen at no cost. (Each of these relationships was an outgrowth of food bank participation in the local community; agencies do not need to work with this many partners in order to have a successful collaboration.)

As soon as site locations were finalized, we **hired additional staff** and **applied for the state OSPI program**, whose reimbursement for meals served would cover many of the on-going costs of the program. OSPI support required site **visits and trainings**.

Because we wanted to **add activities** to our meals, we approached several providers of children's programs, including the parks department and the local YMCA, both of whom were excited to provide activities on-site.

In order to ensure that its program was community based, the food bank **surveyed families** through the local schools regarding potential sites, meals and activities. A final list of meal sites was **advertised to the public** in numerous ways including flyers that went out with report cards through the local schools.

Finally, we **approached Food Lifeline** to become qualified as a meal program so that the food bank could place a separate food order for its summer meals.

Any food program interested in addressing childhood hunger should attend **peer-based trainings** throughout the year (including Washington Food Coalition's annual conference session on summer meals). Our own agency stands ready to assist any food program who wants to better serve hungry children by providing summer meals.

Taking Care of Teens

Teen Feed - Seattle



Teen Feed's mission is to work with the community and people from all walks of life to offer basic needs, build strong relationships, and ally with homeless youth as they meet their future off the streets.

For 25 years, Teen Feed has been the University District's only provider of dinner to street-involved youth and young adults, ages 13-25. We are open seven nights a week, every week of the year. Teen Feed addresses basic needs first: a hot meal, a referral to an overnight shelter, a few personal care items, socks, clothing, bus tokens, or crisis intervention. We recognize that a hot, nutritious meal on a cold and rainy night may get homeless youth in the door, but motivating a youth to move towards secure housing or a stable job usually requires a trusting relationship with a mature adult. Counselors and trained volunteers are present at every Teen Feed meal to help rebuild the trust that has often disappeared when youth have experienced family trauma. In 2011 Teen Feed served over 650 individual youth over 365 nights. We literally break bread together, and then we help street youth take control of their lives and help them to find a way off of the streets.

On May 25, 2011, Teen Feed sponsored Count Us In, the first point-in-time count of homeless youth and young adults in Washington State. Eight host sites provided meals, incentives, and activities during a two to three hour period in which trained staff and volunteers counted and surveyed youth in attendance. Survey results provide insight into the lives of the youth that we see every night at Teen Feed:

- Youth reported that they spent the previous night at: a homeless shelter, outside, at a friend's house, in jail, at home;
- 44% did not complete high school (last grade completed: 11th grade - 50%, 10th grade - 25%, 9th grade - 8%, 17% - 8th grade);
- 53% reported having a disabling condition (serious health condition; substance abuse; psychiatric illness);
- 33% reported having a coexisting condition (depression, ADHD, autism, bipolar, epilepsy, HIV+, temporal lobe disorder);
- Youth spent an average of 25.58 months coming to the University District for services; and 67% were unemployed.

Youth also had the opportunity to provide their thoughts and opinions on what they valued about Teen Feed:

- Teen Feed is awesome! It's daily. I like how it's very consistent. It's really supportive.
- It's mainly their attitudes. They create a welcoming environment and see what they can do to help.
- They are always concerned about my health and well being. I can't think of a single thing. It's more of a cumulative thing. You come in and someone says, "hello" or "hi."
- They listen. "Hey what's going on"? They see you on the street and wave. They ask me my opinion on stuff. They treat me like a human being. They smile.
- They treat us like equals. Most service people treat you as if you are insignificant.

We believe these comments are as valuable as the numbers because they reflect that Teen Feed provides what is most important and, sadly, lacking in the youth's daily lives—consistency, safety, and respect.

We are in the process of replicating the Teen Feed meal program right now as part of our Five Year Strategic Plan (2012-2016). We are in the early stages of this plan, which involves three basic steps:

- Determine where the need is greatest and where the program is replicable and sustainable.
- Implement Teen Feed's presence to establish and support ongoing collaborative efforts and support the movement toward countywide coordinated entry of homeless youth to identified social services in their neighborhood.
- Identify, train and support volunteer meal teams and advocates.

Perhaps the best measure of our effectiveness is the fact that we have food on the table 365 nights a year, trained staff and volunteers who help and support youth each of these nights, and a record of successfully helping youth obtain safe housing and a way off the streets (50 youth in 2011). We also evaluate the program by:

- collecting data on a monthly basis to evaluate and track program metrics including: whether a participant is new to the program, age, gender, outreach hours, volunteer hours and contributions;
- Performing subjective evaluations of programs through staff assessments and youth surveys; and
- Collaborating with Street Youth Ministries and the University of Washington to develop a database that tracks data relevant to individual youth's experience and evaluates the clinical services provided by our programs.

The Teen Feed meal program maximizes agency resources through a program design that relies heavily on volunteers and donations:

- Local churches and community organizations donate kitchens and eating areas every week to make Teen Feed possible;
- Meal team volunteers and others donate food for meals. The value of these donations totaled over \$66,015 in 2011;
- These same meal teams donated over 9,700 volunteer hours last year—buying the food, preparing it, serving it, and cleaning up;
- Another 3,800 volunteer hours were donated by our dedicated Advocates—trained community members who attend Teen Feed meals and sit down with youth, lending a sympathetic ear and directing them to appropriate community resources;
- A small but expert staff coordinates all meals and helps run our two other programs: a case management program for youth who are ready to take steps that will lead to a productive life off the street and a street outreach program that targets high risk youth who tend to avoid traditional social service agencies.

As the threshold program for many of the street-involved youth in Seattle, Teen Feed has identified a set of best practices and strategies to ensure that basic needs are met first (nutrition), and longer-term outcomes such as housing or a GED are achievable when youth are ready:

- We set very low barriers to participation: When a youth signs in to Teen Feed, we require three pieces of information:

name, age, and whether this is their first Teen Feed meal. We believe this has contributed to our consistently high utilization rates.

- We emphasize relationship-building: Research has shown that when street youth are given an opportunity to build rapport and trust with a mature adult, they begin to identify goals and develop a strategy to exit street life. Many of the youth we see have a difficult time reaching out for help from traditional social service agencies. Our staff and volunteers are skilled at building trust and rapport without alienating youth.
- We engage in an integrated, proactive team approach: We seek to reduce the time youth remain without support, reduce their exposure to harm and addiction, and fill a gap in the continuum of care offered by other agencies.

We rely heavily on volunteers: Teams from corporations, faith communities, schools and other businesses assume responsibility for buying, preparing, and serving hot, nutritious meals. With every meal served, community is built within the volunteer group, awareness of our larger community increases, and stereotypes are eroded

LISTENING TO CUSTOMERS

Survey Says: Customer Interviews Walla Walla Salvation Army - Walla Walla



Walla Walla Salvation Army (WWSA) appreciates the importance of hearing from customers regularly in order to provide the best possible service. They conduct customer surveys twice a year through one-on-one interviews. Questions they ask include: How long does the food you receive last? Are you on food stamps? What other foods would you like to receive? What isn't useful? How would you rate the atmosphere at our food bank? The answers are used to figure out if WWSA is meeting the needs of their customers and how they can improve. The survey is conducted on a single day, and they typically get about 25 responses each time. They use a visual scale with happy and sad faces, and provide interpreters to non-English speakers. Feedback is reviewed at a special staff and board meeting, and indicated changes are implemented. "Treating people with respect – that's primary, that's the goal. Knowing your customer base, serving your customer base – that's what it's about," says Reinikka.

What it Takes: Personable volunteers are needed to conduct the survey, and it will take time to develop a survey with well-worded questions that get at the information you need. Start with a short survey with five or six key questions. To show customers you are serious about respecting their opinions, make some level of change based on their input, and let them know it made a difference in how you run the food bank. This kind of input can be used to make incremental changes, and it is also great to collect information to inform a larger strategic planning process.

Another Survey Says: Take Two on Customer Interviews FamilyWorks Food Bank - Seattle



FamilyWorks food bank values the opinions of our customers to ensure that we are providing the best possible service to meet their food requirements.

Some of the highlights that we received from a recent customer survey include the following responses:

- Thanks for everything
- Treated with respect and dignity
- It's a good food bank
- Lots of resources
- It is truly a blessing
- Friendly people make you feel like we are one

- This is a good place to come
- Jovial, congenial attitude, therapeutic
- Humble attitude
- The people who help us were nice to me
- That you are here to help us
- It's always open when it says it will be
- How they greet you and make you feel comfortable
- The services that are offered
- The assistance in reducing food expenses and out of pocket expenses
- Food Bank management and staff
- The people who help you care what you say
- It's a lovely place
- It's nice to see the volunteers interact with each other and us and talk to us
- A place to come and forget about my problems for a bit
- It leaves me feeling good and I have some food to eat
- God Bless you for all your hard work
- I feel like everyone is the same here, the staff is wonderful, even the police officer tries to relate to you
- The people (staff & volunteers), are very friendly non-judgmental
- A life saver!
- Runs excellent
- Great food: salads and fruit
- Treated kindly and with dignity from all

What it Takes: Each customer that walks through FamilyWorks food bank doors is treated with human dignity and respect. FamilyWorks is an open and welcoming place that empowers people and families who might not otherwise have access to healthy, fresh food. Staff and customers interact together in relationships based on equality and respect.

In regards to the methods for administering the survey, FamilyWorks is required by United Way to get 200 surveys every year to their customers. They do the surveying in April. Board members & staff sit tables in the lobby and/or reserve a conference room. They usual get 200+ customers within a 2 week period. Most of their customers know the drill & don't need any interpreters, but they do provide the survey in English, Spanish and Russian. They are more than willing to share their surveys with others if you ask!

Translating Hunger: Meeting Community Needs

Hopelink - Redmond



In 2006, a team of volunteers from Leadership Eastside (LE) worked with Hopelink to conduct a series of focus groups with food bank customers, particularly non-English speaking immigrants. The research objective was to provide Hopelink with detailed information about the staple foods their ethnically diverse customer base would most benefit from receiving. LE organized five language-specific focus groups and two English language focus groups, scheduled at food bank locations. Outreach to customers to invite participation was done via phone calls by volunteer interpreters, and participants were given a \$20 gift card in appreciation of their input. The cultural/language groups covered were Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian, Eastern European, and Spanish-speaking. The following are selected comments from the report's executive summary:

- Food bank customers know what good foods are and would like to have the resources to eat well every day. But good food is expensive and then need what little money they have for nonnegotiable expenses like rent.
- It's not about quick and easy, but about making good, healthy food (soups, breads, meals) from scratch—they need ingredients, not convenience foods. This is not so much about maintaining and passing on traditions as it is about

focusing on healthy food.

- Often “lunch” is the main meal of the day and even kids who go to school prefer to come home to eat this meal (after school) rather than eat the free or reduced price lunch at school.
- Customers would like to be able to get more of the following items from the food bank: fresh or frozen meat, poultry and fish; fresh vegetables; dairy products, especially milk and cheese; fresh fruits; rice; flour; dried beans; tortillas; cooking oil; and sugar.
- The following items are less desirable: stale, moldy or expired dairy products, meat and bread; canned, boxed or processed foods. Acceptance of packaged foods could be increased if there was a way to get the labels translated into appropriate languages. Some of the reluctance is because the customers don’t know exactly what is in the can or box, or how to prepare it.

“The research has helped us to adjust some of our produce ordering for the populations we serve. For example, at our evening food banks in Redmond, we have a high number of Hispanics. In preparation for those nights, we stock jalapenos and other desired foods when our budget and availability permits,” says Scott Milne, Food Program Manager/Redmond Center Manager. “We also use this information when conducting food drives and purchasing other perishable and non-perishable food items.”

What it Takes: If your organization is interested in conducting market research with customers, you should seek out a person with relevant expertise to help you design an effective inquiry process. You may find that for-profit businesses in your community are willing to share their expertise in this area. Consider what incentives you can offer participants, and how to make them feel appreciated for their contribution to your learning. Also, make sure your organization’s leadership is committed to making changes based on the information they receive.

More good ideas...

- Recognizing that food bank customers also shop in grocery stores, the Pantry Shelf established a coupon exchange in their waiting area. “Price is important to our customers, and we can’t provide everything, so why not give them coupons?” comments Tom Galloway, Director. A sign on the coupon exchange box encourages customers to both bring and take coupons, and the coupons are being used.
- To better serve its diverse customer base, Tri-Cities Food Bank provides a multilingual fact sheet with instructions for registering and using their food bank in Vietnamese, Thai, Ukrainian, Russian, and Spanish. Rules about going through the food bank, an explanation of how the amount of food based on family size, and other basic information is outlined. “It’s important that people go through in a timely manner if we are busy, and we try to stay in the background so people don’t feel watched. This helps them be independent,” comments John Neill, Director.
- Hopelink noticed that some of their senior food bank customers have mobility problems, and had difficulty carrying their groceries home. At one point to solve the problem, Hopelink loaned rolling hand carts (like those used to carry a suitcase) to senior customers. They asked customers to sign them out just like a library book.