

Healthy Foods Policy: Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why should my organization develop a healthy foods policy?

A: There are several reasons why a healthy foods policy can benefit your organization. It can lead to good conversations with staff members, clients, and volunteers about what foods you want to prioritize. It can help you take credit for the good work you're already doing – many organizations already have great processes established to encourage healthy eating, but a written policy can be publicized to board members, donors, foundations, and other potential donors. It can also help clarify your organization's mission, helping you stand out from the crowd. From a broader perspective, a well implemented healthy foods policy can benefit your clients as well. There are countless studies that show the link between food insecurity and obesity. Many low income individuals experience higher rates of diet related diseases. Offering healthy food at the food shelf can help combat these statistics.

Q: How should we decide what is healthy?

A: There are different definitions of healthy foods, some that are quite complicated and others that are more basic. It is important that your organization selects a common definition that you will use throughout your policy development and implementation. EFN recommends the Dietary Guidelines for Americans as a basic definition and has put together a list of healthy foods to prioritize at a food shelf.

Q: What if clients don't like the healthy foods we decided to prioritize?

A: A good healthy foods policy takes client input very seriously. It is important to ask clients what they are looking for when they visit the food shelf. Many clients wish there were more fruits, vegetables, meat and dairy options – all foods that can be prioritized in a healthy foods policy.

Q: Should food shelves start acting like the "food police"?

A: No. Many food shelves have limited shelf and storage space, so healthy foods policies provide a way to limit some unhealthy food options in order to prioritize healthier choices. This process is not about dictating how clients should eat; instead, it is about finding ways to make healthy choices easier choices. Healthy foods are usually hardest to access on a limited budget, so having them available at the food shelf increases choice for clients.

Q: Doesn't everyone deserve a treat once in a while?

A: Of course. Some organizations may develop healthy foods policies that don't prohibit specific food items. That's fine. Other organizations may decide to limit/eliminate certain types of food with the understanding that clients are only getting a portion of the food their family consumes at the food shelf. It is important for that food to be high quality and nutritionally dense.

Q: What should we do with unhealthy foods we don't want to distribute?

A: That is the million dollar question! The best first step is to proactively seek out the donations that you do want. Host healthy food drives. Encourage cash donations. Reach out to organizations with similar values, like clinics, health foods stores, etc. If you do get a donation of product you don't feel comfortable giving away, have a conversation with that donor about the foods you want to prioritize. Also, if you take in a donation of something that isn't particularly healthy, you can always limit how many of that item each client is able to take home.

Q: Why would we want to limit what clients can take from the food shelf?

A: Healthy foods policies are a good way to ensure that a food shelf is providing more options, not fewer. Healthy foods, like fresh fruits and vegetables, are often very expensive at the store. If the food shelf provides these more expensive items, instead of cheaper unhealthy items, they are providing clients with the ability to use their limited income to purchase whatever they want elsewhere, while still ensuring that they get nutritious, high quality foods from the food shelf.

Q: What changes can we expect to see from implementing a healthy foods policy?

A: That is entirely dependent on what type of healthy foods policy your organization creates. Some agencies choose to create a policy that is reflective of the good work they are already doing to promote healthy eating – if this is the case, you might not see many drastic changes. Other organizations build more ambitious policies that necessitate implementing new procedures within their food shelf. Either way, providing healthy food for clients can lead to improved health outcomes and more food security in your community.

