

Promising Practices for Creating Nutrition-Focused Food Shelves and Meal Programs

The MFAN Hunger Action Team recognizes that food shelves and meal programs are a major part of our food system and that they have an important role to play in improving access to healthy food for people in need. As low-income community members increasingly rely on these agencies to provide food for themselves and their families, the need for nutritious options at food shelves and meal programs becomes even more critical.

The Hunger Action Team also recognizes that many food shelves and meal programs across the metro are interested in creating a nutrition-focused organization that is responsive to their clients' serious chronic health issues. However, given limited capacity and budgets, it is often difficult for food shelves and meal programs to make sustainable and effective changes without support and guidance from other health and hunger relief experts.

As part of MFAN's mission to "advance equitable access to healthy food for all Twin Cities metro residents", the Hunger Action Team endorses the strategies outlined in this document: "Promising Practices for Creating Nutrition-Focused Food Shelves and Meal Programs". When used together, these five Promising Practices, and the recommended action steps that follow, provide a roadmap to help organizations create a healthier food environment for their clients. Suggested resources are also included to help food shelves identify partner organizations that can help them plan and implement each strategy. These Promising Practices align closely with the recommendations found within the Minnesota Food Charter – healthy food availability, food accessibility, and food skills sections.

The MFAN Hunger Action Team strongly encourages metro-area food shelves and meal programs to focus their efforts on these Promising Practices when considering how best to improve the availability of nutritious foods for the people they serve.

Promising Practices for Food Shelves

Promising Practice 1: Build a healthy inventory

- Purchase from healthy food outlets (e.g. food banks that prioritize healthy foods; local farmers).
- Analyze purchasing patterns to identify highly processed items that can be reduced/eliminated in order to accommodate the purchase of healthier items (pancake syrup example).
- Increase your food storage capacity to take advantage of healthy bulk buys or donations.

Promising Practice 2: Communicate proactively with donors/suppliers

- Create a “wish list” for donors to request healthy items (and identify unwanted items).
- Host healthy food drives with local schools, businesses, and organizations.
- Use positive, client-focused language to say ‘no’ to unhealthy donations.
- Provide feedback on food bank inventory (e.g. request healthier versions of popular items).
- Stop purchasing or accepting donations of items with no nutritional value (e.g. candy, soda).
- Coordinate with other food shelves to request changes from food banks, retailers, and donors.

Promising Practice 3: Make healthy foods visible and appealing

- Create a clean, well-organized food shelf with good foot traffic flow – just like a grocery store.
- Place healthy foods in prominent, easily accessible locations.
- Use colorful posters, shelf tags, or banners to highlight healthy choices.
- Place healthy items at eye- or hip-level (the “sweet spot”) where clients are likely to look first.
- Increase shelf space devoted to healthy foods; minimize shelf space for unhealthy items.

Promising Practice 4: Increase client awareness of/demand for healthy foods

- Survey clients to gather feedback on their preferred healthy foods and health issues.
- Provide nutrition education services and programs (e.g. cooking demos, recipes, dietitian).
- Make it easy for clients to find healthy options (e.g. ‘Go, Slow, Whoa’ tags on food items).
- Train staff/volunteers to talk with clients about healthy choices, meal ideas, and nutrition.

Promising Practice 5: Adopt a nutrition-focused philosophy

- Set clear nutrition standards for food purchases and donations (e.g. US Dietary Guidelines).
- Document your commitment to healthy foods by creating a written nutrition policy, guidelines, or strategic plan; provide stakeholder orientation to the new guidelines.
- Generate excitement and buy-in for a nutrition-focused philosophy by involving staff, volunteers, and clients at the beginning of the development process.

Promising Practices for Meal Programs

Promising Practice 1: Build a healthy inventory and recipe database

- Analyze purchasing patterns to identify highly processed items that can be reduced or eliminated in order to accommodate the purchase of healthier items.
- Establish relationships with healthy food suppliers such as farmers, local food producers, and food banks that offer a wide selection of healthy foods.
- Start a garden or small farm on-site or nearby to provide fresh produce and culinary herbs during the growing season.
- Increase food storage capacity (especially refrigerator/freezer space) to take advantage of healthy bulk foods and donations.
- Create a database of healthy recipes that meet established nutrition standards and include a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins.

Promising Practice 2: Communicate proactively with donors, suppliers, staff, and volunteers

- Provide specific feedback to, and request healthy options from, food banks and retail rescue outlets.
- Send a strong message to food suppliers by not purchasing soda, chips, candy or other foods with no nutritional value.
- Create a “wish list” for donors to request healthier items (and identify unwanted items).
- Host a healthy food drive with a local organization, school, and/or business to collect items that are culturally specific or difficult to source.
- Educate staff and volunteers about the need to serve healthy meals using positive, guest-focused language; encourage them to select nutritious and culturally appropriate recipes from a recommended recipe database.

Promising Practice 3: Modify how food is prepared, served, and displayed

- Establish a monthly or quarterly menu rotation schedule to ensure that guests receive a variety of nutritious meals.
- Provide training to staff and volunteers on healthy cooking and food preparation techniques.
- Place healthy options like fruits and vegetables first in the serving line or in highly visible places.
- Make pitchers of plain or natural fruit-infused water available at all meals.
- Remove vending machines, shelves of baked goods, or other unhealthy food sources from the dining room.

Promising Practice 4: Increase client awareness of, and demand for, healthy foods

- Survey guests to gather feedback on preferred healthy foods and personal health issues; share feedback with volunteers and staff to help guide menu planning.
- Incorporate nutrition education into volunteer and staff orientations or regular meetings.

- Provide guests with training and job opportunities in healthy food service/meal preparation.
- Employ a dietitian to counsel guests and coordinate nutrition education programs and activities.
- Use colorful posters, signage, and banners to highlight healthy options available at each meal.

Promising Practice 5: Adopt a nutrition-focused philosophy

- Set clear nutrition standards, with input from key stakeholders, to guide food purchases, donations, and meal preparation.
- Document your commitment to healthy foods by creating a written nutrition policy, guidelines, or strategic plan; orient staff, volunteers, guests, and other stakeholders to the new guidelines.
- Include health and nutrition within the meal program's vision/mission statement.

Resources

- [Open Your Heart grants](#)
- [SuperFood Drive materials](#)
- [Minneapolis Healthy Food Shelf Network](#)
- [Minneapolis Health Department](#)
- [Second Harvest Heartland Agency Zone](#)
- [Feeding America Healthy Food Bank Hub](#)
- [The Food Group Produce Toolkit](#) and [Healthy food shelf policy](#)
- [Institute of Medicine, Nutrition Focused Food Banking:](#)
- [New Hampshire Obesity Prevention Program quantity recipes](#)
- [Harvard Public Health Food Service Resources](#)
- [Loaves and Fishes Healthy Menu Guide](#)
- [Ramsey County Healthier Meals Coalition Volunteer Training Guide and PowerPoint](#)
- [Behavioral economics training](#)
- [UC Berkeley Center for Weight and Health](#)
- [Developing Food Bank Nutrition Policy to Procure Healthful Foods](#)