

# CREATING A

# CHOICE PANTRY



A GUIDE  
TO HOW  
WE DID  
IT



# Who are we?

## South Louisville Community Ministries

Founded in 1975, South Louisville Community Ministries (SLCM) is one of the thirteen Community Ministries located in Louisville. Our mission is to provide emergency assistance and compassionate advocacy to our neighbors in crisis, addressing immediate needs of hunger and stable housing while creating lasting community. Partnered with Dare to Care Food Pantry, a Feeding America organization, we operate an immediate needs pantry providing over 10,000 pantry services annually to over 3500 families and 10,600 individuals). Additionally, we coordinate a network of care navigation, emergency financial assistance, Meals-on-Wheels and senior services, and resource sharing.

# What is this guide?

As we celebrate 50 years of service to our community, this guide shares the story of our major transformation in our food distribution efforts. For much of our history, our pantry followed a traditional model—volunteers packed and distributed pre-packed boxes of food based solely on family size. But in 2023, seeking to increase dignity and choice for those we serve, we transitioned to a Full Choice Model.

This guide offers an honest and practical look at that shift. It covers the steps we took, the challenges we faced, the benefits we've seen, and the resources that supported us. You'll find lessons learned-tips and tricks from our journey that we hope may be helpful as you embark on yours. Additionally, as one of several community ministries considering and developing choice, we reached out to our partner ministries to explore their experiences, and we will share the results of those conversations here.



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# Why Choice?

Lines of cars stood waiting with trunks opened wide for a pre-made box of food to be placed inside by a masked volunteer—the neighbors inside waving through a closed window. This was the scene of our food distribution during the pandemic. During that time, we made sure that hungry families got food, but connections were not made, resources were not extensively shared, and our neighbors were unable to provide any input about their needs and wants about the food they received. We wanted to change that process and hoped that providing, even a small amount of choice, would:

1. Ensure that neighbors felt their opinions were valued and needs were listened to—providing a process grounded in dignity.
2. Gently nudge neighbors to healthy options and provide a wider range of healthy selections. Since opening our choice pantry, we have conducted a survey and 50% of those coming to the pantry said that they are eating healthier thanks to the program.
3. Accommodate dietary restrictions and medically necessary food choices and provide a range of culturally appropriate food options. 43% of our neighbors shared that this program has allowed them to pick food items that fit into their specific dietary needs.
4. Allow for relationship building between neighbors, volunteers and agency staff
5. Encourage neighbors to try new foods
6. Reduce food waste. 20% of our neighbors reflected that selecting their own items was reducing how much they discarded.
7. Give time and space for more intentional and extensive resource sharing and connecting to internal programming and external partners
8. Be a physical, tangible expression of our mission and values



# Our Mission And Values

## ● Our mission:

1. Providing our neighbors with their most basic needs when they are faced with a crisis
2. Listening and trusting our neighbors' realities and telling that story to create more accessible, equitable, and dignified solutions
3. Building community power by organizing and enabling neighbors' dreams for a sustainable, local financial ecosystem

## ● Our Values

1. We begin with unconditional positive regard
2. We follow the front line and act collectively
3. We learn through deep compassion and radical curiosity
4. Trauma informs us, human connection heals us



# What questions did we have?

So we had a vision, but we also had a **WHOLE** lot of questions, concerns and challenges:

- Space: We receive over 200,000 lbs of food a year that is stored in multiple rooms, so how could we fit food, fridges, freezers, volunteers, AND neighbors with carts all in this shared space.
- Having enough variations in food (and enough food!): Our monthly deliveries provided pallets of food but little variation within each category. Often we only had two types of canned vegetables, one type of juice, two types of cereal, one type of soup, etc.. so how could we build “choice” from that?
- Volunteers/staff: our amazing, hard-working volunteers had signed up to simply organize shelves and pre-pack orders—not provide hospitality and guidance to a diverse mix of neighbors—so would they be willing and able to do that? Our limited staff members’ days were already filled with daily tasks, big projects, and long to-do lists so how would they have time to redesign an entire process/program?
- Time and capacity: Knowing that allowing selections from a room full of items, engaging in deeper conversations, and wandering through the pantry takes more time than packing and handing someone a box or a few bags, how are we going to still have time to feed all the neighbors in need? What will “waiting” look like? Will folks be willing to wait?
- Language barriers: located in a very diverse area where the first language of many of our neighbors is not English, how could we discuss choices, and explain this process?



# ● Where did we start? ●

● **Daunted by our list of questions but determined to embark on this journey of change, we intentionally developed a project that was slow and deliberate and that involved input from all of our stakeholders. Baby steps were the only way we would feel confident to brave this adventure.**

## ● Stage one: Seed Money and Staffing

- We began by securing grants that enabled us to hire a part-time team member to focus on making this transition a reality. These grants also provided additional resources for the project.

## ● Stage two: Research

- We called in long-term supporters who own a local grocery store to provide insight on our space, equipment, shelving, and possible sourcing of healthy/diverse food options.
- We read up—literally! Our entire team read Katie S. Martin's *Reinventing Food Banks and Pantries* and researched choice model variations across the country.
- We visited partner sites that already had developed choice programming (and took an abundance of photos and notes!)

## ● Stage three: Logistics

- We connected with local partners, such as General Electric, who provided a large group of volunteers, as well as funds and materials, for the redevelopment of the space. They also provided their engineering logistics team to reinvision/redesign our space.
- We used grant funds to purchase additional equipment and supplies.



# Where did we start? (cont)

## Stage four: Training, training, training

- Our entire staff team, and a significant number of our volunteers, participated in a six-week Trauma Resilient Communities Training.
- We conducted several additional conversations and trainings with our volunteers (that involved lunch to ensure attendance!)
- The week before opening, we trained the entire staff team (all departments) on the processes/procedures for the new process.

## Stage five: Resources

- We increased the number of team members scheduled for our open choice shifts. We accomplished this through volunteer recruitment, partnerships with workforce training programs such as PowertoWork and ReadytoWork, as well as Bachelor and Masters' student internships.
- In order to build capacity and staff support, we rewrote job descriptions and cross-trained the team so that all team members could jump into help in the pantry when needed.
- Leveraging all the partnerships and connections with local businesses, community gardens, schools, churches, partner agencies and individuals that we had built over years in the community, we reached out to increase donations and the variety provided in those donations. We discovered that donors were excited by the emphasis on dignified choice, healthy options, and a diverse selection of items.



# Where did we start? (cont)

## Stage six: Before we opened

- Our first “pilot” program for Choice was our weekly drop-in distribution where neighbors lined up to select fruit and vegetables from tables.
- We then started small by offering a single choice with our monthly orders: “Which frozen meat option would your family like?”.
- Knowing that we wanted and needed to have deeper conversations with our neighbors we developed a process to move our intake from neighbors completing a form when they entered, to a face-to-face conversation with a team member.
- We redesigned our waiting room into a hub of information and hospitality, family-friendly waiting, and shared space with team members.
- Neighbor input and communication was vital, and so we started intentional conversations and surveys to determine community needs and interests. We began communicating the transition plan to neighbors (in multiple languages) as soon as we had a timeframe in place.
- Because healthy food was a key part of our plan, we developed a Food Nutrition Policy.
- We tested processes and procedures with willing neighbors, volunteers and staff to tweak everything before opening.
- And finally, we closed our building for services for a full week to reorganize, hang signage, train the team, and ensure we were ready.



# What we learned?

## Space:

- Reach out to your connections to find those individuals who are organizational and logistics gurus have that passion and skill-set. Their insights are invaluable.
- Remember that offering some element of choice, even if small, is valuable, once you evaluate your capacity and limitations/opportunities with space, you can determine which form of choice will work for you:
  - Limited Choice: choice of a few select items that are added to a pre-packed order or two types of pre-packed orders
  - Modified Choice: choice of items from a printed/displayed menu that are packed to order by volunteers
  - Full Choice: choice of items by neighbors who can select their own choices, like a “free” grocery store.
- Use what you already have (basic tables can work just fine!). We started with just boxes of fresh produce in boxes on top of rows of tables lined up in a church gym and neighbors could simply walk around and choose items.
- Wheels can be your best friend! We are able to use hallways and extra rooms for distribution because we have so many display and selection carts on wheels—even a refrigerator. They can be stored in our climate-controlled, tight-spaced store room or the middle of our waiting room and rolled out each morning for our neighbors. One busy morning, we were short-staffed due to illness but our volunteers still wanted to make sure our neighbors were fed, so we rolled EVERYTHING outside into our front yard and gave neighbors access to the items that we had.
- Some funders really enjoy providing funding for tangible items such as equipment. Kentucky Colonels is one such group.
- Recruit volunteers for the heavy-lifting, assembly, painting and moving! Organizing, building, painting, and moving are tangible, one-time volunteer opportunities that groups love. Do you have a church group, Scout Troop, or local business with employee incentives for volunteering?



# What we learned?

## ● Volunteers/staff:

- We developed new roles for team members based on this new design and determined who had the passion, willingness, and skill-set for each. We established levels of training required for each and determine which are best handled by agency staff:
- Stockers, sorters, organizers: team members who simply want to handle donations, organize shelves, and set up for distribution beforehand
- Intake: Team members who gather required information about the household, discusses available on-site services, completed required pantry paperwork, and provides information and referrals.
- Selection support: trauma-informed individuals who escort neighbors through the pantry and assist with item selection.
- Additional roles when we have more team members available include assisting neighbors to vehicles and providing hospitality in our waiting room.
- Even when the pantry is open for choice we find that volunteers are needed to restock the “distribution space” as food is selected as well.
- We use additional team members for donation pickups throughout the community.
- This may be a BIG change for some volunteers so don't forget to show your appreciation.



# What we learned?

## Having enough variations in food (and enough food!):

- Talk to your current sources of food and funding and tell the exciting story of what you want to accomplish with this program and see how much ability they have to increase or diversify what they supply you with.
- Remember: some choice is still valuable, and being able to simply choose whether or not to take an item is “choice” and helps avoid food waste.
- Shout from the rooftops what you are doing: tell stories and gather data to illustrate the value of the program and its successes but ALSO what unmet needs and barriers are there.
- Get creative about who you seek donations from—both food and financial. In addition to our Feeding America and church support, over the summer we have local home gardeners dropping off bags of their gardening excess, and bags of collard greens and tomatoes fill our grocery carts thanks to a community garden. We receive boxes of soon to expire items from local Krogers two days a week. A local delivery company warehouse sets aside a car load of snacks and beverages for us each week too. We’ve even put in raised beds at our entrance to demonstrate the ease of container gardening while providing a few items to add to the pantry. We’ve also talked to local healthcare and Medicaid providers about the social determinants of health and the concept of Food as Medicine growing their support.
- Encourage donations of items that “make a meal”: spices, condiments, sauces, etc.
- Selection helps you make specific donation requisitions because you will have a better understanding of what your neighbors like, need, and will use so you can focus “asks” on those items.
- Limits are okay! Although neighbors can select items from every category we limit how many items they can select from each category based on family size. These selection amounts change daily—and sometimes during the day—as our inventory allows.



# What we learned?

## Time and capacity:

- While we allow limited drop-in opportunities to ensure access, the majority of our Choice Pantry visits are by required appointments. As we have gotten used to this new system, enlarged volunteer teams, and honed the efficiency of the process, we have been able to add more appointments to each day. This allows us to ensure that we have enough time and team members to spend quality time with each neighbor.
- Because we know that we may not be able to serve everyone who requests food on a specific day, we have an extensive list of other nearby pantries and meals sites available to anyone that we have to turn away when we reach capacity.
- We use the “waiting time” and the “waiting space” We:
  - Conduct a face-to-face intake with each neighbor every visit to check in, gather information, and share any resources that they may need
  - Provide recipes and more resources in the waiting area that they can go through while waiting—our walls are covered with cork and white boards!
  - Have snacks, drinks and coffee available (all donations from area partners!)
  - Created a play area for the kids! (used play sets, tables, books etc. from donors)
  - Set up a couple of computers with internet access so neighbors can sign up for benefits, take Financial Empowerment classes, and get appointments for other services. (started with used ones from a local school)
  - Fill a “Free Table” with extra donations: baby clothes, books, etc. for neighbors to visit while they wait
  - Invite partner agencies such as Medicaid providers, counselors, and Kynectors to have “office areas” to be available in the waiting room to talk to neighbors with questions. We’ve even had the Kentucky Extension office visit with cooking demonstrations.
  - Have fun! We give out stickers. We’ve had bubble blowing parties in the entranceway, and thrown random donations of popsicles into one of our Meals-On-Wheels cooler to give out to folks while they waited. We even ran outside with all those interested and shared viewing glasses during the solar eclipse.



# What we learned?

## ● Language/literacy barriers:

- Signage that involves images or color coding is key: we place clipart images of animals on each freezer to indicate which form of frozen meat they hold, and our family size designations are illustrated on signs and volunteer instructions based on color.
- We created volunteer cheat sheets in Spanish that include numbers, types of food, etc. that can be used to point out items. (NOTE: we are happy to share if helpful)
- Our face-to-face intake helps, not only our international neighbors, but any of our neighbors who struggle with completing written paperwork since we write/type everything for them. When we were having neighbors complete their own paperwork, we learned that we needed to have a team member available to assist folks fill it in when needed.
- While we have connections with Catholic Charities for interpretation support, we use Google Translate on phones for a huge amount of our interpretation needs.
- We hired 2 team members who were fluent Spanish speakers.

## ● Other insights:

- Tracking inventory can be a time drain if you do not have software or a designated person to keep track of all the incoming and outgoing. We spent a lot of time and energy at the beginning tracking every item. If you have capacity for that, great, but we found that a fluid system that allows us to simply edit our selection limits based on real-time availability was more efficient and realistic for our team.
- Substitutions: if you have selection limits per food category (i.e. a family of 4 can select 2 frozen meat items) ensure your team members know what substitutions can be made to accommodate special diets. For example, we often have extra beans and lentils that can be substituted to provide protein for our vegetarian neighbors who would not select any meat options.
- Neighbor insights are crucial!
  - We found out that one neighbor was not taking several items because he did not have a working stove or microwave. We were able to connect him with one.
  - Supporting our neighbors facing homelessness has always involved creative considerations, and we quickly discovered that having a choice pantry allowed those neighbors to truly access items that they could and would use. For example, we thought our neighbors without kitchens would be unable to prepare our frozen meat selections, however, one gentleman explained that he had rigged an amazing pit-fire set-up at the local encampment and would love to take one of the whole chickens back to cook and share with others at the camp. He soon returned with camp neighbors to show them what we had to offer.

# Pathways to Choice: Use-Cases from Louisville Community Pantries



Association of  
Community Ministries

Through interviews with seven Community Ministries and the Sister Visitor Center in Louisville, we explored both the promise and the complexity of client-choice food pantry models. These conversations shed light on the practical realities of providing neighbors with dignity and agency in food selection, while also revealing the organizational constraints that shape what is possible. Although not all 11 ministry pantries participated, each was invited. The findings that follow highlight why some organizations have embraced client-choice, why others have not, and what supports, challenges, and lessons can guide ministries as they chart their own path forward.

## Sarah Langmeyer, Executive Director, Southwest Community Ministries

*“We’re not going to help anyone fix anything by just passing out food...there’s some dignity that comes with being able to walk around and choose things yourself.”*

## Marlon Cummings, Executive Director, Jeffersontown Area Ministries

*“You gotta have space. You gotta have people power. And then you have to have coordination.”*



## United Crescent Hill Ministries (UCHM)

United Crescent Hill Ministries (UCHM), located at 150 State Street in Louisville, has operated a food pantry since its founding in 1976. The pantry primarily serves residents of the 40206 ZIP code and has grown from being a source of emergency assistance to becoming a staple resource for families navigating the high costs of food, rent, and utilities. As Executive Director Stephanie Henry-Floyd explained, many neighbors now “piece together what they can afford at Kroger with what they can get here.”

UCHM transitioned to a client-choice model under Henry-Floyd’s leadership after she became Executive Director in 2022. Motivated by a desire to restore dignity and reduce waste, the pantry now operates like a small grocery store, complete with carts donated by Kroger. “It’s hard to come to a food pantry—that can really take a stab at someone’s pride and dignity,” Henry-Floyd noted. “So the opportunity of being able to pick your own foods for yourself and for your family creates a much better experience.” Neighbors have responded positively, reporting greater satisfaction and less waste as they take only what they know they will use. UCHM operates with a small but dedicated staff: the executive director, an associate director, and three part-time employees including a janitor. Volunteers play a critical role in supporting pantry operations, though inconsistency sometimes requires staff to step in. Adapting to the choice model initially met some uncertainty from a few volunteers who were used to the pre-packed system. As Henry-Floyd recalled, “Oftentimes people say, this is the way we’ve always done it, but sometimes the way we’ve always done it isn’t always best.” Over time, however, buy-in has grown and volunteers now assist in guiding families through the shopping experience.

Demand at UCHM has increased dramatically. What was once an average of 30 families served per week has become the daily norm, with peak days reaching as many as 54 families. This growth has stretched pantry capacity, especially given the challenge of maintaining a reliable stock of fresh produce and culturally appropriate foods. Many neighbors, especially immigrant neighbors, request items such as rice, beans, plantains, and fresh produce, while canned foods are less popular due to health concerns and unfamiliarity.

Additionally, sometimes items aren’t chosen despite having a high nutrition value because people don’t know how to prepare them. Lentils was one example given. To address this, UCHM is going to start providing recipe cards in partnership with the 4-H Extension. For UCHM, success remains rooted in its mission: ensuring families are fed and no one goes hungry. While methods have evolved, the goal has stayed constant. “The goal is to ensure that families are eating. To me, that’s always the goal.”



## Jeffersontown Area Ministries (JAM)

Jeffersontown Area Ministries (JAM), located at 10617 Taylorsville Road in Louisville, has provided food support to families in the Jeffersontown area since 1995. Executive Director Marlon Cummings has led operations from the very beginning. The program serves a diverse population that includes immigrant families, vegetarians, and many households with children and elders.

JAM operates a hybrid model that combines pre-packed emergency food boxes with choice-based distribution for fresh, frozen, and perishable items. Mondays through Wednesdays, neighbors receive their emergency food box while also accessing the “walkthrough,” which offers bread, produce, frozen meat, and other items collected from retail partners. The choice-based walkthrough is structured with signage such as “limit one” or “limit four,” depending on inventory. On Thursdays, Dare to Care brings fresh produce for distribution. On these days, JAM usually serves between 100 and 140 people.

The decision not to transition fully to a choice model is rooted in logistics and liability concerns. Cummings explained, “A choice model requires oversight, which requires a lot of personnel...to me, it is also a liability issue if you have a glass jar sitting on a shelf where they have to reach and grab it.” Managing high demand with limited staff and volunteers has made it more feasible to retain a hybrid choice-model. Volunteers assemble emergency boxes and assist with stocking, while staff handle special requests for items such as diapers, detergent, or pet food. JAM also provides homebound deliveries to 30–35 households, ensuring access for families who cannot visit in person. Neighbors have responded positively to the hybrid system. Families are able to select produce, breads, and meats that align with their dietary and cultural needs. Cummings noted that immigrant families in particular appreciate being able to access fish and vegetarian options, and that repeated visits allow staff to get to know families and anticipate their preferences. “We do have a Muslim population.... and others who don't want pork products, you know, they want fish,” he said, noting that JAM staff and volunteers are purposeful about trying to keep enough of these alternatives set aside for them.

Demand for JAM's services has risen sharply in recent years. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the pantry served around 25 families in a week; now, it often serves that number in a single day. On a recent afternoon, JAM distributed 30 emergency food orders and facilitated 45 walkthroughs. To meet this increased need, JAM hired a staff-person to manage daily restocking and logistics. Still, challenges remain in keeping enough food in stock, covering volunteer shifts, and managing the growing demand. “The challenge is trying to meet the demand...We can't keep enough in stock.”

For other organizations considering a transition to client-choice, Cummings offers straightforward advice: “You gotta have space. You gotta have people power. And then you have to have coordination.” His perspective reflects the practical realities of managing a busy pantry, as well as the importance of tailoring operations to available resources



## Eastern Area Community Ministries (EACM)

Eastern Area Community Ministries (EACM), located at 9104 Westport Road in Louisville, has provided food pantry services for more than 50 years, serving residents across eastern Jefferson County. The pantry is integrated into EACM's broader wraparound approach through its Helping Hands Partnership Program, which connects families not only to food assistance but also to case management, classes, and other resources aimed at building long-term stability.

Executive Director Carrie Gerard, who has been with the organization for 17 years, oversaw the pantry's transition to a client-choice model in 2016. The decision to shift was intentional and values-driven, designed to align food distribution with EACM's philosophy of empowerment. The pantry now distinguishes between emergency food, which is still provided in pre-packed boxes, and the choice model, which is reserved for program participants. However, Gerard said that they make a concerted effort to get people to enroll in that program, especially if they've come to get food more than once.

Support for the transition came through community and corporate partnerships. A banking partner and Kroger provided funding for grocery-style shelving, and a board member affiliated with Kroger helped coordinate the redesign of the pantry layout to mimic a small store. These investments allowed EACM to create a welcoming environment where neighbors shop alongside a volunteer "companion" who helps explain items, manage substitutions, and build rapport.

Significant logistical renovations were required to reorganize shelving, redesign traffic flow, and rethink inventory management. Volunteers had to adjust to new roles, but the transition was smooth overall, with many embracing the opportunity to serve as shopping companions rather than box distributors.

The choice system has greatly reduced food waste while increasing satisfaction. Gerard shared, "We're not giving peanut butter to people with peanut allergies, and we're not giving tuna to people who hate it. Because when you do that, you just lose that peanut butter and tuna. It just gets thrown away or whatever. So what we experienced was some people might have thought, 'Well, oh my gosh, people just take everything they can.' That is not the case at all. People choose what they want to eat, and the left is rest for other people who want to eat it. And so it's just been wonderful in terms of inventory. I think we're having a lot less food waste."



Eastern Area  
Community  
Ministries



## Eastern Area Community Ministries (EACM)-cont

EACM serves about 120–130 families per month—roughly 32 per week, 8 per day—through its appointment-based system, which runs Monday through Thursday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., and one evening distribution each month. Each shopper is paired with a volunteer, ensuring personal attention and smooth flow. In addition to food staples, the pantry has personal care items like soap, diapers, and feminine products, which families often struggle to afford.

Language barriers limit full participation for some immigrant and refugee families, and the pantry struggles to stock culturally diverse staples such as rice, tortillas, and a sufficient variety of beans. Gerard and her team are exploring partnerships with local resettlement agencies to develop culturally appropriate grocery lists for donor drives, as well as creative volunteer engagement such as youth “scavenger hunts” to source foods from international markets.

For Gerard, success is measured by efficiency, dignity, and reduced waste, alongside the ability to help families stretch their household budgets. Looking back, she reflected that greater participant input during the planning stages would have strengthened the model, and she encourages other ministries considering a transition to engage their neighbors early and often in the planning process: “I don't think we got enough participant investment and engagement with the process. Everybody shops. So it makes sense to bring folks in and say, ‘Hey, what would work well for you? What is helpful? What doesn't feel right?’ I think it would have been good if we had done a little more of that.”

## Ministries United of South Central Louisville (MUSCL)

Ministries United of South Central Louisville (MUSCL), located at 1207 Hart Avenue, has provided food assistance since 1984, when the organization was first established. From the very beginning, MUSCL has operated as a client-choice pantry, guided by the principle that dignity and safety are as important as food itself. Co-Executive Directors Gina Hellems and Suzanne Baker, who have both been with MUSCL for nearly 20 years and have shared leadership since 2015, emphasized, “We've never been a pantry that just hands someone a bag of food...we've been a choice food pantry since day one.”



## Ministries United of South Central Louisville (MUSCL) cont.

The pantry is appointment-based, allowing families to shop twice per year due to limited capacity. Unlike many ministries, MUSCL is not a Dare to Care partner; instead, it relies on donations and small grants to provide food, toiletries, and cleaning supplies. This independence enables flexibility, but also means the pantry is constrained by space and inventory. The food pantry operates out of a converted garage on the MUSCL campus, while other services—including a clothing closet, senior commodities distribution, and a senior wellness center—are offered at partner sites in the surrounding community.

Volunteers help organize inventory and support neighbors as they select items for their households. Hellems and Baker explained that choice avoids the risks and indignities of pre-packed boxes: “The last thing we would want to do is throw somebody into anaphylactic shock by giving them peanut butter. It’s important to give folks a bit of dignity.” Families often appreciate being able to personalize their selections in meaningful ways, from requesting favorite vegetables to choosing cake mix and icing for a child’s birthday. As one co-director reflected, “Let the mommy tell you, ‘Hey, my kids absolutely love peas, but they don’t like green beans, so I want four cans of peas. Or when you have a mommy walk through the food pantry and all she’s concerned with is making sure that her kids have a box cake and a can of icing to make them a birthday cake next week, that’s a hell of a thing. That’s important. That box cake is priceless.”

Beyond food, MUSCL places strong emphasis on hygiene items—toilet paper, shampoo, razors, diapers, feminine hygiene products, and soap—which cannot be purchased with SNAP benefits. The co-directors describe this work as essential to dignity: “You don’t want to be hungry and go to school dirty.”

MUSCL also adapts to the needs of children and working families. During summer and school breaks, the pantry prioritizes ready-to-eat items like microwaveable mac and cheese or popcorn, ensuring kids have snacks when parents are away. The directors acknowledged that capacity remains their biggest barrier: space limitations restrict refrigeration and freezer capacity, and reliance on volunteers requires not only willing helpers but also access to trucks and other vehicles to collect a high volume of donations. “It can all be boiled back down to two things—funding and capacity,” they explained.

Despite the challenges, MUSCL’s commitment to dignity is unwavering. The co-directors define success as meeting needs with compassion, never turning families away, and building strong relationships with neighbors, businesses, and volunteers. “We work outside of our working hours. We give from our own pockets. That’s what we do. It’s the song of our people. The one thing we don’t want to have to do is tell somebody ‘no.’ We don’t do that very often.”



## St. Matthews Area Ministries (St. MAM)

St. Matthews Area Ministries (St. MAM), located at 319 Browns Lane in Louisville, has hosted a food pantry since its founding in 1972. Serving residents of the St. Matthews area, the pantry supports a wide range of families and individuals facing food insecurity and other emergencies.

Executive Director Julie Abbott and staff person Suzanne DeGregorio described St. MAM's food pantry as a partial choice pantry, combining structured selection with volunteer-packed items. Neighbors access food assistance by appointment on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Upon arrival, families complete paperwork at the check-in desk and are given three shopping lists—one for St. MAM's dedicated pantry, one for Dare to Care, and one for USDA items—along with a separate meat list. Families indicate the types of meat they are willing to eat, so that volunteers can make substitutions when inventory runs low. While volunteers assemble orders in the back rooms, neighbors move through the “big room” to select their bread, produce, and any other items available that week. This system allows families to exercise some level of choice without requiring a full grocery-store style setup, which the organization's space cannot currently accommodate. According to Abbot and DeGregorio, while giving people full choice by shopping aisle-by-aisle with a cart seems ideal, in practice it can create conflicts related to product limits per family, and is simply unworkable given St.MAM's space constraints—so they don't think it's a viable model for their pantry at this time.

The decision to offer partial choice was motivated by a desire to reduce food waste and preserve dignity. Staff noted that families are more satisfied when they can choose food they will actually use, and volunteers find it rewarding to build relationships with neighbors through repeated visits. While some elderly neighbors have shared that they miss the social aspect of waiting in line under the old system, the overall response has been strongly positive. St. MAM operates with a small staff team of (3 or 4), supported by a long-standing network of volunteers who are deeply woven into pantry operations. Leadership emphasized that retaining volunteers requires keeping them engaged and busy, even on slow days, when tasks such as sorting grocery bags help maintain a sense of purpose. They reflected on how important volunteers are to the functionality and effectiveness of the pantry: “It is relational because the volunteers create those relations with the residents who are coming in and there's a trust and a rapport when they come in month after month.”



## St. Matthews Area Ministries (St. MAM) -cont.

On average, the pantry serves about 32 families per week, with each household able to come once per month. Staff reported that the work is highly relational, built on trust and familiarity. At the same time, they acknowledged challenges in managing “quadruple dipping,” where some neighbors access multiple pantries in a single month. They discussed the challenge of balancing a policy of ‘openness’ with making sure distribution is truly fair: “It’s not fair to those who cannot get to other locations, or seniors who are homebound. We are still doing things very cautiously that way. We’re not going to turn somebody away, per se, but we are still doing as much screening as we can because it’s just not realistic to have those fully open boundaries. Then we’ll run out of meat and then maybe the client who lives right behind us here and doesn’t drive anymore gets no meat.”

The pantry continues to face capacity challenges. Its physical space does not allow for a full choice, cart-based model, and maintaining adequate food supply remains a concern amid rising demand and tighter resources. Financial donations and food drives have slowed compared to pandemic-era levels, straining pantry inventory. Staff also identified translation support as a major need, noting that language barriers can make it difficult for some families to fully participate.

At the same time, they also emphasized that their pantry has always collaborated by sharing surplus food with other agencies, with St.MAM volunteers delivering it themselves, because they don’t want food to go to waste. They see their role as a kind of “mini-Dare to Care warehouse” at times because they support others who have higher demand or may lack volunteer capacity.

## Fern Creek/Highview United Ministries (FCHUM)

Fern Creek/Highview United Ministries (FCHUM), located at 9300 Beulah Church Road, has operated a food pantry since the organization’s founding in 1988. Executive Director Renee Bryant, who has led the ministry for 28 years, oversees pantry operations that serve a wide range of families, including a growing number of immigrant and refugee households who speak Spanish, Arabic, French, Swahili, Russian, and Lithuanian, to name a handful.



## Fern Creek/Highview United Ministries (FCHUM)-cont

FCHUM does not operate a full client-choice model. Instead, the pantry distributes prepacked food boxes supplemented by weekly bread, produce, and sweets distributions. The pantry is open Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Families may receive a full food order once per month, while bread, produce, and sweets are available weekly. Food orders are assembled using prefilled carts and supplemented with frozen meats, bread, and fresh produce. Volunteers make note of dietary or religious/cultural needs—such as avoiding pork for Muslim families—and families sometimes swap items with each other after receiving their boxes or place unwanted foods in FCHUM’s on-site “little pantry” for redistribution.

Demand has risen dramatically. What once averaged 20–25 families per day has now grown to 50–80 families daily, with about 700 households per month receiving full food orders, and another 1,400–1,800 households each month accessing bread, produce, and sweets. Meeting this demand requires significant volunteer labor: between 50 and 70 volunteers work each week, though availability fluctuates. Bryant noted that managing such high volume with limited space rules out the possibility of adopting a full choice model: “There’s just not a space to do it based on the volume we’re seeing.”

FCHUM strives to balance nutrition priorities with household preferences by following Dare to Care’s “universal box” guidelines, while also offering substitutions when possible. Immigrant and refugee families often request fresh produce, rice, and dried beans, but donations of these staples are inconsistent. Protein remains especially difficult to source, with the pantry relying heavily on food drives and retail partnerships to supplement its supply. Staff have conducted taste tests for items like macaroni and cheese to help families unfamiliar with certain foods decide whether to take them.

The pantry is attentive to the needs of neighbors experiencing homelessness or without full kitchens. FCHUM maintains dedicated shelves of ready-to-eat items such as pop-top canned goods and pre-made sandwiches and salads from retail partners. Volunteers also take into account transportation barriers, offering lighter items and sturdier bags for clients who arrive by bus or on foot.

While FCHUM does not plan to transition to a choice pantry in the near future, the organization has a strong commitment to serving families with respect and care. For Bryant, success is defined by the ability to sustain supply and meet diverse family needs without running out of food. She noted that this goal is supported through relationships, becoming familiar with the families that visit over and over again, “Once families have been to us two or three times, you kind of know, one that’s allergic to chocolate, you know, just little quirky things, and we can make those notes on the ticket. So, they don’t get the chocolate cake, they get the donuts.”

She also highlighted how volunteers ensure orders are varied, even within the prepacked system: “Our volunteers are very generous with food orders; they make sure people get a nice variety of things.”



## Southwest Community Ministries (SWCM)

Southwest Community Ministries (SWCM), located at 8504 Terry Road, has operated a food pantry for 41 years. The pantry predates SWCM's establishment as a nonprofit and continues to be a cornerstone of its work, alongside utilities assistance, wraparound supports, and the CSFP senior commodities program.

The pantry currently operates with a pre-packed cart system, supplemented by scheduled appointments and walk-in opportunities. Families call between 9 and 11 a.m. Monday through Thursday to schedule an appointment, and food is distributed from 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., averaging about 10 appointments per day. On the first Friday of each month, SWCM hosts a walk-in day that serves 10–15 households. In addition, the third Friday of each month is designated for senior commodities distribution (pick-up and home delivery).

Each appointment includes an intake process where staff not only confirm family size and dietary restrictions but also explore opportunities to connect households to other resources such as transportation, job supports, or hygiene items, pet food, etc.

Executive Director, Sarah Langmeyer, is committed to making the transition within the organization's three-year strategic plan. The motivation is rooted in dignity and relationship-building. Langmeyer explained, "We're not going to help anyone fix anything by just passing out food...there's some dignity that comes with being able to walk around and choose things yourself." She sees choice as a way to foster deeper engagement and reduce the mismatch between foods provided and foods families will actually use.

At present, the pantry faces significant capacity challenges. Operations are split across two buildings with an awkward layout, and facility repairs—including roof leaks, sewage issues, and freezer replacement—have strained resources. Volunteer capacity is also a barrier: SWCM often struggles to maintain coverage for Meals on Wheels, making it difficult to imagine recruiting the additional volunteers needed for a full choice model.

As Langmeyer candidly put it, "I have said since the beginning I won't do a choice pantry. It's too much work. I don't have the staff. I don't have the layout...But after reading the first chapter of Reinventing Food Banks and Pantries, I was ready to flip our bank."

Langmeyer believes a choice model will ultimately help SWCM build stronger relationships with families and volunteers. She anticipates that one-on-one volunteer roles in a choice setting may be easier to recruit for, since they involve less lifting and more personal connection. However, the transition will require funding for structural renovations and re-design which she currently does not have.

For SWCM, success is defined not only by providing food but also by creating opportunities for deeper support. As Langmeyer summarized, the vision for a choice pantry is about "care work"—a model that connects people to resources, builds rapport, and helps families feel respected in moments of need: "Helping connect people to additional resources, to provide more services. There's opportunity that comes from more contact with clientele, to hear their story, to do 'care work.' Because volunteers are not case workers. They're people who actually just give a damn."

## Sister Visitor Center (Catholic Charities)

The Sister Visitor Center, a program of Catholic Charities located at 2235 West Market Street in Louisville, has operated a food pantry since the late 1960s. Originally serving three neighborhoods, the pantry now maintains open borders, welcoming families from more than 40 ZIP codes across Jefferson County. Under the leadership of Sister Paris, who has directed the center for the past four years, the pantry has grown into one of the largest full-choice models in the region.

Sister Visitor transitioned to a full client-choice pantry in 2021, supported by a large Dare to Care grant that funded renovations, shelving, and layout redesign. The former director also consulted with peer pantries outside of Louisville to inform best practices. Today, neighbors shop in a grocery-store style environment using a point-based system, guided by the Supporting Wellness at Pantries (SWAP) labeling framework that highlights healthier food options. Families may come once per month for a “big shop” (including USDA food and point-based shopping) and up to three additional times each month for supplemental bread, produce, and “extras.”

Operations rely on a small core staff of two full-time employees and a large volunteer base who guide families through the shopping process. Volunteers are trained to accompany clients, explain the SWAP system, and pick up on unmet needs. Sister Paris noted that volunteers often identify issues that clients may not voice directly—such as the absence of a can opener or refrigerator—allowing the pantry to tailor support or refer households to additional services within Catholic Charities. Operating hours are Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

The transition has transformed the pantry’s scale and reach. In the first year of choice, the center served about 8,000 people; today it serves more than 25,000 annually, distributing an estimated \$1.4 million worth of food products each year. Monthly food purchases alone average \$9,000, supplemented by significant in-kind donations and retail partnerships. The program also provides pet food, hygiene items, and household goods when available.

Neighbors have responded enthusiastically, often remarking that they have “never seen a pantry like this.” Satisfaction has increased, though wait times can be lengthy—often one to two hours—because of the slower pace of choice shopping and the pantry’s popularity. Sister Paris acknowledged the tension between dignity and efficiency: “Choice, just by design, is slower. But that’s, in some respects, the point. It is about building relationships and knowing the people that you serve.”

Challenges remain around space limitations, storage capacity, and volunteer management. The large numbers of families served test the building’s flow and infrastructure. Leaders are considering adjustments, such as grab bags for “extras,” to reduce wait times while still preserving dignity.

For Sister Visitor, success is defined by providing a dignified, positive experience that builds relationships. Sister Paris advises other organizations considering a choice model to start small, plan for long-term costs and space needs, and build broad partnerships.



## ● Discussion ●

Across ministries, the move toward client-choice was driven by a shared commitment to dignity, agency, and respect. Leaders emphasized that allowing families to select food reduces waste and strengthens trust, with choice framed as both a values-based practice and an efficiency measure. Support came through grants, partnerships, and training, which enabled physical redesigns and helped volunteers adapt to new roles. Even so, pantries reported challenges in rethinking traffic flow, retraining long-time volunteers, and maintaining consistent food supplies to make choice viable. Communication—especially with neighbors, donors, and volunteers—was essential to building buy-in and framing choice as a dignified, effective use of resources.

Other ministries cited practical barriers: limited space, high demand, and volunteer shortages made the logistics of a full-choice model unworkable. Leaders worried about equity if popular foods ran out, or about the additional staffing needed to guide families through a shopping-style system. For these organizations, pre-packed or hybrid models remain the most realistic way to balance fairness and efficiency within existing capacity.

Regardless of model, all ministries described efforts to adapt food distribution to neighbors' circumstances. Many stock ready-to-eat items for families without kitchens, integrate culturally familiar foods when possible, and balance nutrition priorities with familiar staples to maintain trust while introducing healthier options. These strategies highlight the ongoing tension between capacity limits and responsiveness to diverse needs.

Where implemented, choice has led to higher satisfaction, less waste, and stronger relationships between volunteers and neighbors. Yet it also slows distribution and requires ongoing inventory management. Leaders advised starting small—offering choice in a few categories, piloting partial models, and adjusting space and traffic flow before scaling up. Volunteer retraining was seen as crucial, shifting roles from distribution toward hospitality.

## ● Conclusion ●

The interviews reveal that there is no one-size-fits-all pantry model. Each ministry's path is shaped by space, staffing, food supply, and community context. What unites them is a shared commitment to dignity and responsiveness. Still, persistent challenges—including shortages of culturally appropriate foods, limited storage and refrigeration, volunteer gaps, language barriers, and rising demand—shape how far choice can be expanded. With technical assistance, resource sharing, and peer learning, pantries can find sustainable ways to grow choice—whether through full transitions, hybrid systems, or incremental steps. Volunteer retraining was seen as crucial, shifting roles from distribution toward hospitality.



# Resources and Links





Martin, Katie S. *Reinventing Food Banks and Pantries, New Tools to End Hunger*. IslandPress. 2021



<https://daretocare.org/partner-agencies/>

<https://www.feedingamerica.org/our-work/nutrition-health>

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