

2008 Food Lifeline Excellence Awards Application

Excellence in Client Service - \$5,000

Recognizing exemplary approaches to ending hunger by meeting client needs, making services accessible, and offering client choices.

Winner

University District Food Bank

Physical Address: 1413 NE 50th Street, Seattle, WA 98105

Mailing Address: 4731 15th Ave NE, Seattle, WA 98105

Joe Gruber, Director

Phone: 206-523-7060

Fax: 206-527-1990

Email: udfb@udistrictfoodbank.org

Provide a description of your program or project:

Supermarket-Style Shopping at the University District Food Bank

The University District Food Bank has served low income residents of northeast Seattle for 25 years. In 2007, we distributed almost 1.4 million pounds of food through nearly 40,000 visits by 4300 different households. This means, in an average week, we serve about 850 households and distribute 30,000 pounds of food from a small, basement space. Actually since November 2007 our average week has grown much busier and it now regularly exceeds 900 households. Our average household size is 2 persons although it ranges from one to eleven persons. 22% of our customers are infants and children, 10% are seniors and 68% are adults. More than 15% of our customers are homeless.

After 20 years of distributing premade bags of groceries and four years of a standard shopping system, we renovated our food bank last June to create a nutrition-based, supermarket-style shopping system for our customers with the goal of providing at least three days worth of healthy food to every household that visits us. And to make our food bank accessible to more customers, we doubled our distribution hours. We are now open Monday through Friday for five hours each day, more than most any other food bank in the City of Seattle.

With the renovation, our food bank now resembles a very small neighborhood market (only 800 square feet). We have multiple aisles of canned and dry goods, a refrigerated and frozen food section, a fresh produce area and a baked goods shelf - much like what you'd see at a grocery store. We even have small shopping carts and baskets and a checkout lane.

All our non-perishable foods are organized on shelves by the different nutritional categories of the USDA Food Pyramid (Fruits, Vegetables, Grains & Cereals, Dairy, and Meats & Beans plus a catchall Odds & Ends category) and these shelves are labeled/color-coded to correspond with the shopping budgets that we provide our customers at check-in.

Each household that comes to our food bank receives a shopping "budget" that is based on their family size and their family's nutritional needs for three days. Their budget lists how much a customer can collect each of our shopping aisles. With budget in hand, our customers grab a shopping cart and go shopping to pick out the specific items that they want or need. After our customers choose the foods they want (up to their budget limits), our volunteers help them check out and bag their groceries for them to take home.

How could this program be replicated? Describe the planning and implementation steps you followed to put this project or program into place.

Conceptualizing this new shopping model took time. Our staff:

Visited or spoke to staff at several supermarket-style model food banks across the United States, most notably the Westside Campaign Against Hunger (www.wscah.org) in New York City to talk about their experiences in this unique system;

Spent several hours with a nutrition expert at the University of Washington determining how much food we should offer our customers;
Interviewed key volunteers and customers to collect ideas and reactions to our new model before we implemented it;
Developed a floor plan, created customer marketing materials, developed shopping materials, determined staffing models and trained volunteers in their new roles; and
Estimated distribution amounts to assess the impact of this service change on our annual food budget.

While we dedicated a week to our physical conversion into a supermarket-style food bank, other food banks could do it in less time. Depending upon volunteer resources, the suitability of their space and equipment/shelving on-hand, the conversion could be done almost overnight. Planning and marketing, of course, take longer.

As a result of having gone through the redesign, we have a lot of key information available to share with other food banks like lists of suppliers, layouts/diagrams, and shopping cards. All this will help make replication easier by other agencies.

To date, we've hosted several tours, emailed planning documents, and talked on the phone with other agencies that were interested in our model. This attention has come in part because of a recent article in the Washington Food Coalition monthly newsletter.

What were your program or project objectives? How do you measure success? What have your outcomes been?

The primary driver for this redesign was increasing customer choice and access. Our customers, in a 2006 survey, valued the options they had but wanted more. While we had a client choice food bank like other Seattle food banks, we knew that choice was still limited by what ended up on the distribution tables. So, our staff and volunteers brainstormed and researched alternatives.

At the same time, we wanted to make sure that enough healthy food was being made available to our customers each and every week. So, we looked into ways to integrate the nutritional aspects of the Food Pyramid into our weekly food choices.

And finally, we wanted to be open more hours. We wanted customers to find it more convenient to collect food given that many had frequently changing and non-traditional work schedules. So we created more open hours during the day and in the evening.

Our success is measured in the overall satisfaction of our customers, volunteers and staff with the new system and our distribution of more healthy food each week. Last October, a survey specifically about the changes we made showed overwhelming customer support for the new shopping system. Our volunteers report greater enjoyment because they spend more time talking and helping customers and are not stuck in one spot all shift. Staff notice areas for improvement, but we are satisfied with the changes. And our \$80,000 food budget will be used up as we now regularly buy nutritious canned and fresh foods to keep the shelves full.

How do these activities enable you to better serve hungry people? What specific needs does this program or project address?

As food bank staff, we cannot presume to know what the food needs and preferences are for each of our many customers. We've tried to create a system that enables each customer with as much choice as possible so they can find the food they need themselves. No longer do our customers wonder whether the food they want is in the back storeroom. All our food options are in front of them. Our Jewish customers can find kosher options, our diabetic customers can select low-sugar options, celiacs choose gluten-free options and our homeless customers can take the ready-to-eat meals. Not to mention, customers who really like crunchy peanut butter won't get stuck with creamy.

This makes us infinitely more capable of meeting all our customers' specific needs. And, by subtly educating our customers about the Food Pyramid through their shopping budgets, we hope to increase the amount of healthy food they choose each week for their families.

Explain the steps you've taken to ensure that your activities make efficient and effective use of your agency's resources.

With 300% more shelf space in our supermarket style food bank when compared to our old system, we have a great deal more room for food to be displayed to customers for their selection. Less food is stored and more is available to our customers.

Importantly, since implementing this new shopping system, our average customer takes home five pounds more food each week. Since we've limited their unhealthy options, we feel better knowing that this increase is in more healthy food, including fresh fruits and vegetables. Sure we have to buy more food to help meet this increased need but this food is needed for three days of healthy eating and isn't just empty calories.

Adopting this shopping model has heightened our awareness of the nutritious food we have on-hand at the food bank and it means that we now seek donations and target our purchases to fill in specific nutritional gaps. Shelves with limited selections or empty nutritional areas draw our attention and elicit customer questions such as "do you only have yogurt for dairy this week?" or "where'd all the canned fruit go?" This attention means we need to keep healthy food on-hand. When community groups come to us to host food drives, we can immediately point out needs and target their food drives/fundraising. Or, as in a grocery store, when food goes out from the shelves, we can see what to buy next from Food Buying Services or what to order from Food Lifeline and Northwest Harvest.

How is this a "best practice"? How do these activities describe "excellence" to you?

This is a best practice because we are treating our customers with as much respect and dignity we can when they come to us for food each week, offering them as much choice as possible within the bounds of our food bank inventory (and small space), and providing them with the nutritious food choices they need to live healthy lives.

Healthy food is a right for all and we want to promote a dignified way of getting healthy food if you need to come to our food bank. We think that this supermarket-style system is one large step in the right direction. And when our customers tell us that "it's just like a grocery store," it reinforces for us that this change was well worth the effort. Removing the stigma of coming to the food bank represents best why this is client service excellence.