



Best Food Safety Practices for Hunger Relief Organizations When Accepting, Sorting, and Storing Donated Foods

Authored by Cyril A. Etaka, Ph.D. Student, Department of Food Science and Technology, Virginia Tech; H. Lester Schonberger, Associate Extension Specialist, Department of Food Science and Technology, Virginia Tech; Laura K. Strawn, Associate Professor and Extension Specialist, Department of Food Science and Technology, Virginia Tech

Introduction

It is important for food handlers in hunger relief organizations – like food banks, food pantries, and meal kitchens - to safely accept, sort, and store food(s) to prevent unintentional contamination. This is because hunger relief organizations are often serving vulnerable populations; for example, individuals that lack healthcare access, and or individuals who are immunocompromised (Chaifetz and Chapman 2015; Feeding America 2017).

This publication summarizes food safety best practices for hunger relief organizations when accepting, sorting, and storing food(s).

This publication was created using information from:

- Association of Food and Drug Officials, 2019
- Brandt and Driessen, 2021
- Butz, 2021
- Feeding America, 2022
- Makenzie, Holston, and Xu, 2021
- Minnesota Department of Agriculture, 2019
- Nwadike, 2015
- Nwadike, 2018
- Schonberger, Boyer, and Chase, 2018

Best practices for accepting donated food(s)

Hunger relief organizations typically will accept donations throughout the year. It should be a safe, quality food that is free of contamination. Most often, donated foods will be non-perishable, shelf-stable foods like dry and canned goods.

Perishable foods like fruits, vegetables, and refrigerated foods can also be donated. However, special care needs to be taken when accepting these foods due to the potential for these foods to be improperly stored and/or contaminated. For example, you should only accept refrigerated/frozen foods have been kept appropriately cold (refrigerated foods at or below 41°F or frozen foods at or below 0°F), or fresh produce that is free of rot or signs of pests.

Reject food(s) that meet any of the following conditions or criteria:

- Opened, punctured, deeply dented, rusted, or bloated cans, lids, and packages
- Visibly spoiled, rotten, or moldy foods
- Foods that require refrigeration (e.g., dairy, meats, prepared foods) but have not been stored or transported appropriately
- Homemade prepared foods
- Items with visible signs of pest/insect damage or infestation
- Items with noticeably off-odors, which may be a sign of spoilage

Best practices for sorting donated food(s)

Now that you have inspected the donated food, it is time to sort what you have accepted for storage. This may be the best time for you to organize the donations and update your inventory of foods.

Considerations when sorting include:

- Start with the foods that require cold storage so they can go back into the refrigerator or freezer as quickly as possible

- Sort foods in a space where you can best organize all of the donations you have received. We recommend sorting by kind of food (i.e., all of the peanut butters together, all of the canned mixed vegetables together, etc.)
- Organize the foods in each of those groups based on their “sell-by,” “use-by,” and/or “best by” dates (if they have one)
- You may break down larger donations, for example bulk quantities of pasta into smaller portions. If you do this, you should:
 - Clean and sanitize any food contact surfaces before re-packing foods.
 - Re-package foods into food-safe containers
 - Do not use any broken or leaking utensils (e.g., containers, scoops, cups, or funnels).
 - Avoid using sorting utensils made of glass, ceramic, or brittle plastics.
 - Re-package foods in an area away from cleaning compounds, sanitizing agents, and other chemicals from food, food contact surfaces, or food packaging materials.
 - Label the containers with the name of the food, an ingredients list and the nutrition facts panel, cooking directions, an allergen statement (if needed), the name and address of the group repackaging the food, the net weight of the package, a unique tracking number, and the “best-by,” “sell-by,” or “use-by” date of the food.
- Keep personal items (e.g., phones, earbuds, etc.) away from areas where food is being handled.
- If you have pest problems, use insecticides and rodenticides according to the manufacturer's instructions, and in a way that will protect against the contamination of food, food contact surfaces, and packaging material, or consult a professional pest management company
- Clean and sanitize reusable packaging material and carrier boxes
- Label packaging material and carrier boxes on the outside with accurate labels including date received, date of expiration, and ingredients/name of food
- Use the first-in, first-out method. Be sure food is used or distributed before or as close to the “expiration”, “use by” or “sell-by” date
- Monitor stored food continuously to identify and discard moldy, rotten, or spoiled items and to clean and sanitize the area
- Separate food storage areas from areas where chemicals and other nonfood items (like equipment and utensils) are stored
- Organize food items for easy access

Best practices for storing donated food(s)

Now that you have sorted the foods you've accepted, you will need to store them until they can be distributed. Some considerations when storing include:

General food storage conditions

- Store food in a clean, dry location where it is not exposed to dripping, dust, or other contamination. This is at least 6 inches above the floor and away from the ceiling, and walls.
- Store food away from sunlight
- Keep insects, rodents, birds, or other animals from areas where food is stored

Cold Storage

- Promptly place foods requiring refrigeration in a monitored cooler or freezer upon receiving them
- Use ice made from potable (drinkable) water as a cooling medium
- Refrigerate foods at 41 °F or below and freeze food items at 0 °F or below
- Add temperature monitoring devices in freezers and refrigerators to monitor air temperature.
- Designate a person to keep records from temperature monitoring devices
- Reduce temperature fluctuations by keeping freezer and cooler doors shut as much as possible
- Do not overload coolers or freezers. This will limit airflow resulting in difficulties in maintaining refrigeration or freezing temperature
- Avoid lining shelves with materials (e.g., aluminum foil and plastic wraps) that may restrict airflow
- Regularly defrost units to prevent frost build-up. This keeps units working efficiently

Dry storage

- Keep the storage area dry and free of excessive moisture
- Store dry foods at 50 to 70 °F (less than 85 °F)

- Dry storage equipment and the facility should be easy to clean
- Storage equipment should be made with corrosion-resistant metal or food-grade plastic

Additional resources

Food Safety and Inspection Services. 2007. A Guide to Federal Food Labeling Requirements for Meat, Poultry, and Egg Products. <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/guidelines/2007-0001>. Accessed 08 August 2022.

Boyer, Renee R. 2020. “Wash Hands: Fight Disease-Causing Germs.” *VCE Publications / 348 / 348-965*, February. https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs_ext_vt_edu/en/348/348-965/348-965.html. Accessed 03 August 2022

United States Food and Drug Administration. 2022. Food Labeling & Nutrition. <https://www.fda.gov/food/food-labeling-nutrition>. Accessed 03 August 2022.

References

Association of Food and Drug Officials. 2019. “Bulk Repacking of Non-Ready-to-Eat Dry Product for Charitable Distribution Guidance.” <https://www.afdo.org/product/bulk-repacking-of-non-ready-to-eat-dry-product-for-charitable-distribution-guidance/>. Accessed 28 July 2022.

Brandt, Kathy, and Suzanne Driessen. 2021. “Keep Food Safe with Time and Temperature Control.” <https://extension.umn.edu/food-service-industry/keep-food-safe-time-and-temperature-control>. Accessed 5 April 2022.

Butz, Leah. 2021. “Expiration” Dates: Can You Donate Past-Date Packaged Foods?” <https://www.nycfoodpolicy.org/expiration-dates-can-you-donate-past-date-packaged-foods/>. Accessed 29 July 2022.

Chaifetz, Ashley, and Benjamin Chapman. 2015. “Evaluating North Carolina Food Pantry Food Safety-Related Operating Procedures.” *Journal of Food Protection* 78 (11): 2033–42. <https://doi.org/10.4315/0362-028X.JFP-15-084>.

Feeding America. 2017. “How Feeding America Ends Hunger.” <https://www.feedingamerica.org/our-work>. Accessed 20 March 2022.

Feeding America 2022. “What to Donate to a Food Bank and What to Avoid.” <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-blog/what-donate-food-bank-and-what-avoid>. Accessed 29 July 2022.

Makenzie, Miller, Denise Holston, and Wenqing Xu. 2021. “Safe Food Handling and Storage in Food Pantries.” <https://www.lsuagcenter.com/profiles/aiverson/articles/page1617218705849>.

Minnesota Department of Agriculture. 2019. “Temperature and Time Requirements for Food.” <https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/environment/food/docs/fs/timetempfs.pdf>. Accessed 4 April 2022.

Nwadike, Londa. 2015. “Food Product Dating: What Do Those Dates Mean?” <https://bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/MF3204.pdf>. Accessed 4 April 2022.

Nwadike, Londa. 2018. “Donating Safe and Nutritious Food to Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens.” <https://bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/Item.aspx?catId=201&pubId=20420>. Accessed 4 April 2022.

Schonberger, H. Lester, Renee R. Boyer, and Melissa W. Chase. 2018. “Food-Handling Behaviors of Student Volunteers in a University Food Recovery Program.” *Food Protection Trends* 38 (4): 284–94. <http://www.foodprotection.org/publications/food-protection-trends/archive/2018-07-food-handling-behaviors-of-student-volunteers-in-a-university-food-recovery-program/>.

Visit Virginia Cooperative Extension: ext.vt.edu.

Virginia Cooperative Extension is a partnership of Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and local governments. Its programs and employment are open to all, regardless of age, color, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, military status, or any other basis protected by law.