

A look at how pantries work with the Food Bank

by Jennifer Bauman
for the Food Bank of Lincoln

Many of the products collected at the Food Bank of Lincoln go to pantries that distribute them to people in need. If you've donated to the Food Bank, some of that food undoubtedly went to hungry people via pantries in and around Lincoln.

If you haven't been to a pantry -- either as a volunteer or a client -- you may have wondered what the process is like.

There are many variations, but here are a couple of examples from pantries that work with the Food Bank.

• It's a sultry summer day in Arnold Heights and people are visiting in the shade of the elm tree by the Airfield Regimental Chapel, where Carol Yoakum Family Center holds its weekly pantry. Inside the chapel, the back pews have been moved aside for food distribution tables. Today's selection includes canned tuna, ham-

burger, brown rice, noodles, apple juice, canned vegetables, crackers, and peanut butter.

Clients check in at the first table, showing identification and signing a USDA form saying they earn below the government guidelines for a household of their size.

Some folks look at the numbers and shake their heads.

No problem: the official poverty figures are quite a bit more than most of them earn.

Members of the Carol Yoakum crew are regulars. As clients file by with baskets and carts, the volunteers hand out food and chat a bit, checking to see that canned juice doesn't land on top of crackers in the bag. Sometimes people decline an item. They're all stocked up on green beans but they know someone else needs them. Folks seem well aware that many other families share their



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struggle.

The last stop is a selection of baked goods on tables by the altar. Today, based on supply available, families are told they can select one bread item and one pasta. Parents and children negotiate about pies versus hamburger buns and then they're on their way to rush their food home in the heat.

• Pantry distribution at the Salvation Army, 2625 Potter St., works a little differently. Each family completes an application form and the USDA self-certification form. Then, one by one, they go into Charice Mackey's office to visit about their needs.

Do they need a fan? Help with utilities? Information on other resources? Charice knows many of these people and she understands the challenges they're facing.

Then the food: what could you

use today? Do you bake? Do you eat meat? What kinds of cereal do your kids like? How about cleaning and hygiene items? Do you need laundry detergent, shampoo, toothpaste? Diapers? What size? After making some notes, Charice goes to the back and fills a box and a few bags, which she brings out on a cart that folks can roll out to their cars.

A typical pantry will include flour, oil, cereal, juice, rice, canned vegetables, pasta, tuna, beans, peanut butter, possibly some pancake mix and syrup.

Depending on supply and individual needs, a family may also receive household items and frozen meat. Produce, dairy, baked goods, and other perishables have a separate distribution time at the Salvation Army.

Sometimes the line gets long. When business is too brisk to select items for each family, volunteers pre-pack the pantries. Receiving their pantry boxes, families occasionally hand back an

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

item or two they would not use. Someone else probably needs it more.

The Food Bank works with about 20 pantries in the city of Lincoln. Their operations are all designed to meet the challenge of distributing limited supplies to growing numbers of hungry people.

Just like in the economy at large, times are difficult in the pantry world but the people operating these agencies are doing their best to help our neighbors in need.

Pantry boxes do not fill cupboards for long, but they are one way to help families get by.

Jennifer Bauman is agency relations director at the Food Bank of Lincoln. The Food Bank serves pantries and other agencies that feed people in 16 southeast Nebraska counties.