



## Food Access & Literacy Work Group Meeting Notes

Fairfax Food Council

July 23, 2025

10:30 – 11:30 am

### Intro to Food Distribution Choice Models

#### Gillian Kimura, FALWG Co-Chair, Capital Area Food Bank

Gillian discussed client choice pantry models, which allow clients to select their own food rather than receive pre-packed bags. This approach reduces stigma, supports individual dietary needs, and encourages clients to try new foods. Pantries benefit as well, streamlining operations, minimizing food waste, and tailoring procurement to actual demand. Her presentation outlined four models suited to different physical spaces and capacity levels: Table, Supermarket, Window, and Inventory. Guidance was provided for pantry setup, emphasizing volunteer engagement, clear food labeling, and offering variety.

Even if pantries aren't prepared to adopt a full choice model, Gillian explained that simply allowing clients to decline certain items is a meaningful starting point. It offers valuable insight into preferences and reveals which foods are consistently unpopular. Just as importantly, it helps reduce waste and fosters a sense of respect for individual choice.

Bundling pantry staples with simple recipe cards is an effective way to promote available items and spark quick, easy meal ideas. It helps recipients see new possibilities in what they receive. For inspiration, the Greater Boston Food Bank shares [recipes](#) online, and CAFB also offers downloadable [recipe cards](#) through their website.

[Click here to view Gillian's slides about choice models.](#)

### Rising Hope's Choice Model

#### Raquel Burbano and Heather Marshall, Rising Hope Mission Church

Rising Hope's pantry accommodates 100–150 individuals and operates in a relatively small area, using an appointment system to avoid long lines and promote a respectful, equitable experience during distribution hours. Volunteers are encouraged to restock consistently so the final client sees the same abundance and variety as the first.

The pantry uses a client choice model, beginning with labeled food stations. Guests select meat first, since it often shapes other choices, followed by produce, with at least two different fruit and vegetable options available weekly. The entire market is TEFAP-supported, with fruits and veggies from the program, and eggs provided by a wholesaler. Volunteers are trained to guide rather than police quantities, encouraging clients to be courteous and consider others who will come later. However, they're also asked to show compassion: if a large family truly needs more, it's okay to make exceptions. Staff should avoid pushing items that clients have declined, as this can make clients feel pressured to take them and ultimately lead to unnecessary waste. The guiding mentality is: "What can we help you get today?" This respectful approach encourages meaningful engagement and a sense of community.

There's an emphasis on logical flow and visibility: food should be easy to access, front-facing, and neatly arranged to reduce confusion and highlight patterns in inventory. Raquel also advises against rearranging items, as it can cause confusion and frustration. Plus, consistent arrangements help clients notice when items are simply out of stock or not offered at all, making the request process more effective. When filling requests, consider asking consistent and reliable donors to contribute specific items so the pantry can stretch and redirect funds toward other essentials. To accommodate families with dietary restrictions or chronic health conditions, the pantry uses surveys to collect client input and tailor offerings accordingly. This data also strengthens donor education by showing actual needs when donors assume preferences that don't match reality.

When transitioning a pantry to a choice model, staff and volunteers will likely need training to help them shift from simply bagging food to actively greeting and walking with clients. At Rising Hope, some volunteers were resistant to change, so their market was designed to keep familiar roles intact, while giving each person a tangible job (e.g., stocking staple items, unloading the truck, arranging bread and pastries, facing cans forward). Doing this helped orient task-driven volunteers and created space for their feedback. Raquel and Heather found that staff are more likely to get on board with changes when they know that dignity and genuine care for others are at the center of the changes.

It is critical that food pantries be thought of in a holistic way. They do not just address food insecurity. They address chronic disease, first-time experiences, the travel it takes to get there, financial stressors, and more. Therefore, it is important to create a space that not only feeds bellies but also addresses the backstory.

If anyone is interested in touring their space, email [hmarshall@risinghopeumc.org](mailto:hmarshall@risinghopeumc.org).

## Other Experiences

### Western Fairfax Christian Ministries

Western Fairfax Christian Ministries shared that many donors are eager to pack kits, a well-meaning gesture that highlights the need for thoughtful donor education. The organization

emphasizes the importance of dignity and advocating for client choice rather than pre-packed food bundles. It's a delicate balance: welcoming offers of help while prioritizing the lived experience of those receiving it. The challenge lies in the fact that generosity, when shaped solely by donor preference, may unintentionally limit what's most supportive for clients. That's why the team works to help volunteers and donors step into their clients' shoes. After all, while packing food may feel good, receiving a pack without choice often does not.

### Food For Others

Food For Others transitioned to a choice-based pantry model and emphasizes to volunteers that their role is to support, not to police, clients' selections. They're working to strengthen volunteer training across several areas, including customer service, allergy and dietary accommodations, and strategies for offering nutrition education. The pantry operates on a walk-in basis with no appointments, and a volunteer greets and assists clients as needed upon arrival. They've also created a welcoming touch for families by placing children's books in the entryway, available for kids to take home through the ['Books Are Food for Your Brain'](#) program.

### Quick Reminder about Food Safety in the Summer Heat

#### Gillian

Gillian covered essential food safety practices, including maintaining the cold chain, preventing cross-contamination, and promoting personal hygiene among pantry staff and volunteers. Her presentation clarified date labeling on food packaging to reduce unnecessary waste, and it highlights the USDA's FoodKeeper app, a tool for optimizing storage and freshness of food items. Together, these practices promote client dignity while ensuring food distribution remains safe, efficient, and responsive to community needs. Gillian also provided the following resources on Food Safety:

- [Guidance on how to use the dates on food packaging \(English\)](#)
- [Guidance on how to use the dates on food packaging \(Spanish\)](#)
- [Downloadable Food Safe Handling Posters](#)

[Click here and skip to Slide 11 to view Gillian's slides on food safety](#)

**[Next Food Access & Literacy Work Group Meeting:](#)** No meeting in August. Next meeting will be September 24, 2025, 10:30 – 11:30 a.m.