A FREE RESOURCE FROM PANTRY COMMONS

The Food Pantry Starter Guide

A practical guide to starting, operating, and growing a food pantry



For churches, nonprofits, mutual-aid groups, and community organizations.

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How to use this guide

You do not need a warehouse, a large grant, or specialized software to begin. Start with the people you hope to serve, a realistic distribution schedule, safe food handling, and a dependable team.

The guide follows the order most new pantries work in: understand the need, pick a model, get the organization and space ready, line up food, then open small and improve. Each chapter ends with questions to talk through as a team and a short checklist. The appendix has forms and email templates you can copy and adapt.

Along the way you will see short notes on where Pantry Commons can take work off your plate. They are optional. Everything in this guide can be done with paper, a spreadsheet, and a phone.

> ⚠ **BEFORE YOU RELY ON THIS GUIDE**
>
> This is general operational guidance, not legal, tax, or food-safety certification advice. Confirm local health, zoning, insurance, charitable registration, and food-program rules before you launch. Requirements tied to government food programs may differ from those for privately donated food.

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CHAPTER 1

Decide what problem you are solving

A pantry is one response to food insecurity, not the only one. Before buying shelves or collecting cans, talk with the people and organizations already working in your neighborhood.

Map the existing services

List nearby pantries, meal programs, school food supports, senior programs, and delivery options. Record hours, eligibility, transportation access, languages served, and whether fresh food is available. A pantry open at a different time or serving an overlooked neighborhood may fill a bigger gap than another pantry with identical hours.

Good starting points are 2-1-1, your regional food bank's agency list, and direct outreach. Confirm details with each organization before relying on any directory listing.

> **HOW PANTRY COMMONS CAN HELP**
>
> The **Pantry Commons resource directory** lists food pantries and community resources by county, with list, map, and weekly views. Use it to see who is open on which days before you choose your own hours.

Complement, don't compete

Before launching a new pantry, visit organizations already serving your community. Schedule tours, learn what they do well, and ask where they struggle. A new pantry can unintentionally compete for the same donations, volunteers, funding, and food supplies. Your goal is to improve the local food assistance network, not simply to increase the number of organizations in it.

Ask about unmet needs, operating hours, transportation, storage, refrigeration, volunteers, food supply, and households they cannot serve. Listen without judging their practices. Explore whether your team could help an existing pantry extend hours, run a satellite distribution, share transportation or storage, coordinate food pickups, or refer guests to complementary services.

Before committing to a separate pantry, visit at least three local providers, document service gaps, and explore at least one concrete partnership. Start independently when it fills a real gap that partnerships cannot reasonably address.

Questions to ask on a partner visit

- Who do you serve, and when?

- What needs are you unable to meet?
- What operational bottlenecks limit your work?
- What food donations are difficult to use or obtain?
- Could we share volunteers, storage, transportation, distribution hours, referrals, or food?
- What partnership would be most useful to you?

Appendix K has a one-page worksheet for recording each visit.

Talk with the people you hope to serve

Providers can tell you what they see. Only prospective guests can tell you what gets in their way. Ask a handful of people who use food assistance now, or who need it and don't: what days and times work, how they get around, what food they actually cook, and what has made other pantries hard to use. A few honest conversations at a laundromat, a school pickup line, or a senior center will shape your plan more than any statistic.

Choose a specific first-year goal

Examples: serve 20 households twice monthly; provide produce every Saturday; deliver groceries to 10 homebound residents. Make the goal achievable with committed volunteers and recurring food supply.

Decide who can visit

Consider whether you will serve anyone who comes, focus on a neighborhood, or use referral or program-specific criteria. Ask only for information you need. Public food programs may impose additional eligibility and recordkeeping requirements (see **chapter 5**).

Alternatives worth considering

A community meal, food rescue partnership, neighborhood refrigerator, school snack program, delivery route, or support for an existing pantry may be a better first step than opening a separate distribution site.

Discuss with your team

- What is unavailable today that we could reliably offer?
- How will people without a car reach us?
- If we did not open, who would go without, and when?

Action checklist

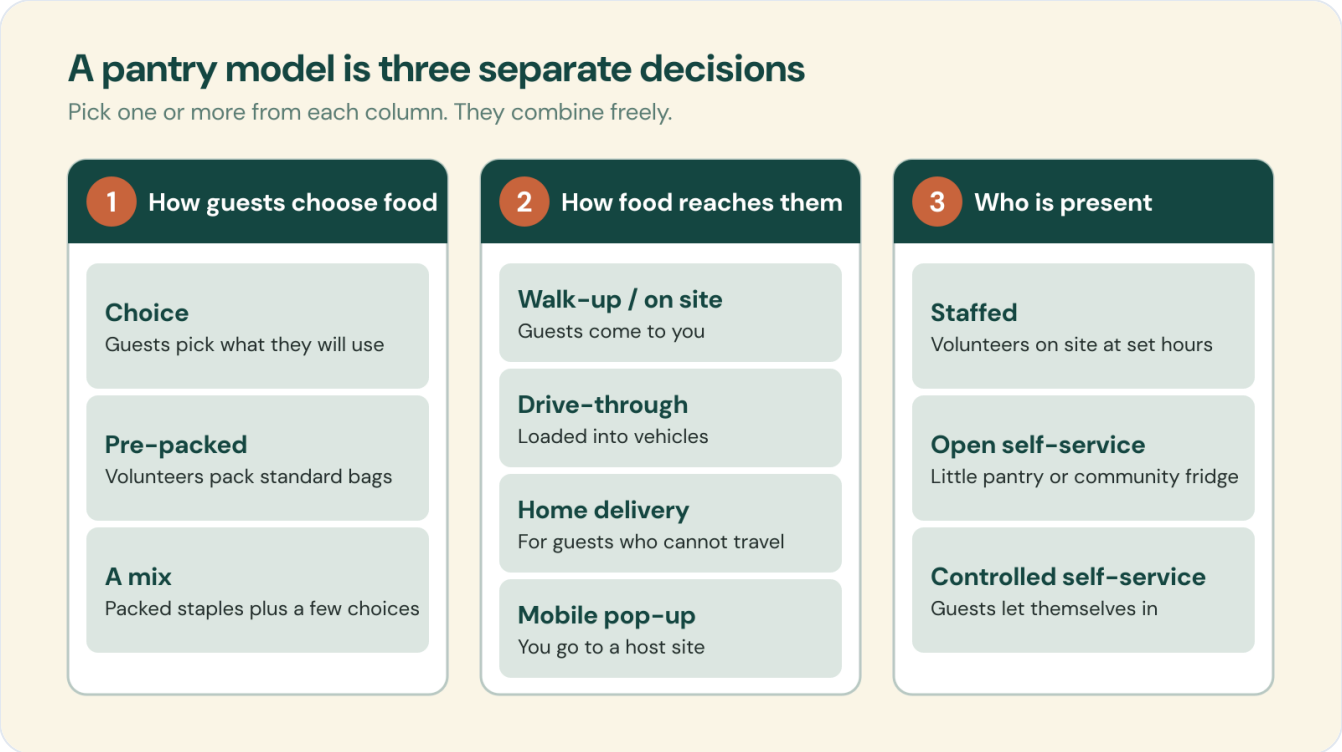
- [ ] Visit three existing service providers
- [ ] Talk with at least five prospective guests
- [ ] Choose an initial service goal

CHAPTER 2

Choose a distribution model

"Pantry model" bundles three different decisions: how guests select food, how food reaches them, and whether a volunteer is present when they get it.

These choices combine freely. A pantry can offer choice shopping without on-site staff, for example, or deliver pre-packed groceries to people at home.



How guests choose food

Choice pantry

Guests select from available items within any published quantity limits. **Strengths:** matches household preferences and reduces unwanted food. **Challenges:** needs shelf access, room to move, and a system to replenish stock. **Small-space version:** a volunteer brings a selection of products to a table, or guests order from a simple paper or online menu.

Pre-packed bags

Volunteers pack standard assortments ahead of time. **Strengths:** predictable labor and a quick handoff, especially in small rooms. **Challenges:** less control for guests and more food that goes unused. Improve it with a short preference question, a choice of protein, or a swap table.

How food reaches guests

Walk-up or on site

People arrive on foot, by transit, or by car and receive food at the site. **Strengths:** no vehicle required, and it is easier to get to know people. **Challenges:** managing the line, weather protection, and an accessible entrance.

Drive-through

Vehicles move through a controlled loading route. **Strengths:** serves many households quickly. **Challenges:** parking, traffic safety, volunteers to load, and no good answer for guests without vehicles unless you add a walk-up lane.

Home delivery

Food travels to guests who cannot reach a pantry. **Strengths:** serves homebound residents. **Challenges:** routing, reliable drivers, address privacy, missed deliveries, and keeping cold food cold.

Mobile pop-up

Food is transported to a temporary host site. **Strengths:** reaches neighborhoods without permanent pantry space. **Challenges:** vehicle capacity, setup, host permissions, weather, and temperature control.

Appointments and pickup windows

Any on-site model can run on appointments instead of a line. Guests book a time, and you cap how many households come in each window. **Strengths:** shorter waits, less crowding, steadier work for volunteers. **Challenges:** guests need a way to book that does not depend on internet access, and you need a plan for walk-ins.

Who is present

Staffed

Volunteers or staff are on site during set hours. This is the most common arrangement and the easiest to supervise. Its limit is the schedule: you are only open when people can work a shift.

Self-service

Self-service means guests can get food without a volunteer on site during the visit. It describes access and staffing, not whether people choose their food. It can be open to everyone or use controlled entry, and it does not by definition require technology, registration, or tracking.

Open-access self-service. A Little Free Pantry or community fridge lets anyone take what they need without an appointment, registration, ID, access code, or recorded visit. It is inexpensive and works in small spaces. Volunteers still need to inspect donations, replenish food, clean the area, keep paths accessible, and remove unsafe items. A community fridge also needs reliable electricity, temperature checks, and a plan for equipment failure.

Controlled-access self-service. Guests shop or collect food independently, but entry is managed through a key, combination, scheduled access, electronic lock, or another method that suits the site. An organization may choose to record visits or limit frequency, but individual tracking is an optional policy decision, not part of the definition. Make access workable for people without smartphones, and plan for lock, power, and connectivity failures.

> **EXAMPLE: A SELF-SERVICE PANTRY IN A SHIPPING CONTAINER**
>
> A small pantry runs self-service out of an 8 × 20-foot shipping container. Guests let themselves in electronically, by a tap on their phone or through an automated phone line, and shop the shelves on their own. The pantry is open seven days a week, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., without a volunteer at the door.
>
> Volunteers still do the work that keeps it safe: restocking, cleaning, checking dates, and responding when something goes wrong. Pantry Commons handles entry and visit records so the team can set visit-frequency rules without staffing every visit. This is one way to run controlled-access self-service, not the only one.

Self-service tradeoffs

Benefits can include flexible visiting hours, fewer staffed shifts, independent shopping, and better access for guests whose work or transportation schedules conflict with traditional distributions. Tradeoffs include less direct supervision, unpredictable demand, possible loss or misuse of food, and the need for clear signs, good lighting, safe entry and exits, accessible shelving, and an emergency contact.

Set a written schedule for inspecting food, replenishing shelves, cleaning, temperature monitoring where needed, pest prevention, and handling safety concerns. Open-access models may use refill logs and inventory counts instead of household-level visit data. Controlled-access models should collect only the information they need and explain any entry or visit tracking. Post instructions for what to do when the pantry is empty, entry fails, or food appears unsafe.

> **ASK YOUR FOOD BANK BEFORE YOU COMMIT TO SELF-SERVICE**
>
> Some regional food banks will not supply an unstaffed pantry, particularly with federal commodity food that requires someone to confirm household eligibility at registration. If food bank partnership matters to your plan, ask about their rules for self-service sites before you build around the model. A staffed distribution day alongside self-service hours is one way pantries bridge the gap.

Redistribution to other agencies

Some organizations do not serve households directly. They receive or rescue food and pass it to partner pantries and meal programs. **Strengths:** increases the reach of donated food. **Challenges:** transportation, traceability, written agreements, and storage capacity. This is rarely the right place to start, but it is worth knowing that the role exists.

Compare the models

Models in this table overlap: "choice" is about selection, "self-service" is about access without on-site staff. The effort a site without staff takes depends heavily on its food, location, and safety needs.

Model	Guest space	Operational complexity	Small-space fit
Choice pantry	Medium	Medium	Good with a menu or table
Pre-packed	Low	Low	Excellent
Walk-up	Low to medium	Low to medium	Excellent
Drive-through	Outdoor vehicle area	Medium	Depends on parking
Home delivery	Very low	High	Good
Mobile pop-up	Temporary host site	High	Excellent at home base
Open-access self-service	Small shelf or fridge area	Low to medium; frequent checks	Excellent with a safe location
Controlled-access self-service	Small guest area	Medium; entry and upkeep	Good with a suitable layout
Agency redistribution	Storage and dispatch	High	Limited without logistics

HOW PANTRY COMMONS CAN HELP

Pantry Commons is built to fit the model you choose instead of forcing one. It supports walk-in and scheduled visits with your own visit rules, pickup windows guests book themselves, an online ordering storefront built from your live stock for pickup or delivery, and self-service door access that issues one-time door codes for a smart lock, with no app for guests to download.

Discuss with your team

- Can guests choose at least some items?
- Where will guests wait during rain or extreme heat?
- If no one staffs the site, who inspects the food, stocks shelves, and responds to access problems?

Action checklist

- [ ] Select a primary model
- [ ] Choose one backup method for guests who cannot use the primary one
- [ ] Test the workflow with volunteers
- [ ] For self-service, assign restocking, safety-check, and emergency-response responsibilities
- [ ] Test access for guests without smartphones and guests with mobility needs

CHAPTER 3

Set up the organization

Decide early whose name is on the bank account, the insurance policy, and the food bank application. Food donors and funders will ask.

Choose a legal home

There are three common ways to give a new pantry a legal footing. None is better in the abstract; pick the one that matches how independent you need to be and how fast you want to open.

Option	How it works	Good fit when
A program of an existing church or nonprofit	The pantry operates under that organization's tax status, board, bank account, and insurance.	You have a willing host and want to open quickly. Put in writing who makes pantry decisions and how pantry funds are tracked.
Fiscal sponsorship	An established 501(c)(3) receives donations and holds funds on your behalf, usually for a percentage fee.	You need to accept tax-deductible gifts now but are not ready to run a separate nonprofit.
An independent nonprofit	You incorporate in your state, form a board, and apply to the IRS for 501(c)(3) recognition.	The pantry will outgrow any one host, or several groups are founding it together.

If you form your own nonprofit

- **Incorporate** as a nonprofit corporation with your state and adopt bylaws and a conflict-of-interest policy.
- **Get an EIN** from the IRS. It is free and you can apply online.
- **Apply for 501(c)(3) recognition.** Smaller organizations that pass the IRS eligibility worksheet can use the streamlined Form 1023-EZ; others file the full Form 1023. At the time of writing the IRS user fees are $275 and $600. Check **IRS.gov** for current forms and fees.
- **Check state requirements.** Many states require charities to register before asking the public for donations, and state sales or property tax exemptions are usually separate applications.
- **Open a bank account** in the organization's name, with at least two people able to see activity.

- **Calendar the annual filings.** Even very small nonprofits file a yearly notice with the IRS, and most states want an annual report.

Churches are generally treated as tax-exempt without applying, which is one reason many pantries start as a church ministry. A pantry that later wants its own grants and donor base often spins off into its own nonprofit.

Know the liability protections for donated food

Worry about being sued is the most common reason businesses hesitate to donate food, and it comes up with new volunteers too. Federal law addresses it directly. The Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act protects donors and the nonprofits that distribute donated food from civil and criminal liability when food is given in good faith, except in cases of gross negligence or intentional misconduct. A 2023 update extended the protection to more kinds of donation. States may add protection but cannot offer less.

The protection assumes you handle food responsibly, so it is a reason to follow **chapter 6**, not a substitute for it. USDA publishes a plain-language summary you can hand to a hesitant store manager: **USDA food donation guidance**.

Insurance

If you operate under a host organization, ask whether its policy covers pantry activities, volunteers, and the specific site, and get the answer in writing. If you are independent, talk with an agent who works with nonprofits about:

- General liability for the site and distribution days
- Property coverage for equipment and stored food, including spoilage after a power failure
- Coverage for volunteers who drive their own vehicles on pantry business
- Directors and officers coverage for the board
- Accident coverage for volunteers

Landlords, host sites, and food banks often ask for a certificate of insurance before you can begin.

Permits and local rules

Call your local health department and describe exactly what you plan to do. Rules for handing out packaged, shelf-stable groceries are usually lighter than rules for refrigerated food, repackaging bulk items, or serving meals. Also confirm zoning for the site, occupancy limits, and fire-safety requirements.

Discuss with your team

- Who legally owns the pantry's money, equipment, and food?
- If our host organization changed leadership, would the pantry survive?
- Which donors or food sources will ask for proof of nonprofit status?

Action checklist

- [ ] Choose and document the pantry's legal home
- [ ] Get an EIN or written confirmation that you operate under your host's
- [ ] Confirm insurance coverage in writing
- [ ] Call the health department and record what they tell you

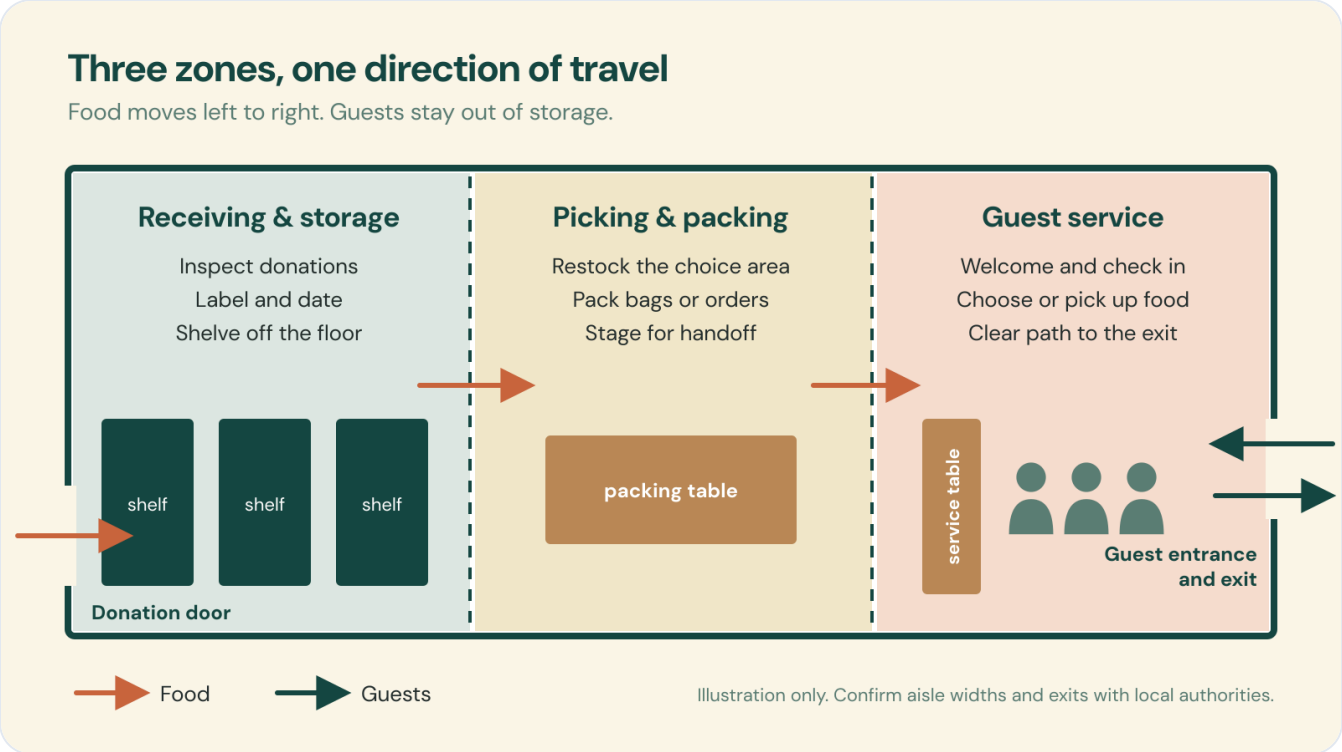
CHAPTER 4

Plan the space and equipment

A small room can support a useful pantry if food and people move predictably and safely.

Draw three zones

- **Receiving and storage.** Inspect incoming donations, then place accepted food on shelves.
- **Picking and packing.** Assemble orders or restock the choice area.
- **Guest service.** Check guests in and distribute food without bringing visitors into storage areas.



Start with the minimum

- Shelving, washable tables, bins, and labels
- Cleaning supplies, carts or dollies, and access to handwashing
- A basic receiving log, and a scale if you will report by weight
- A thermometer for any cold storage; add refrigeration only if someone can monitor it consistently
- Bags or boxes for guests who arrive without them

Think through the bottlenecks

- Measure door widths, turning space, and accessible pathways.
- Identify emergency exits and check restroom access.
- Plan for lines and waiting areas, with shade or shelter if guests wait outside.
- Avoid stacking heavy food overhead.
- Verify accessibility and fire-safety requirements with local authorities.

Check power before you accept a freezer

Donated refrigerators and freezers are easy to come by and easy to overload a circuit with. Before you say yes, find out what the room's wiring can carry, where the breaker is, and who gets the call if a unit fails overnight. A fridge nobody is watching is worse than no fridge.

Space example: a 10 × 10 ft room

Use the room mainly for storage and packing, with guest handoff outside the room. Keep a clear central aisle, reserve a receiving surface, and separate cleaning products from food. A full grocery-style walkthrough is unlikely to be comfortable in this footprint; a menu or table-service version of choice works better.

Discuss with your team

- Can two volunteers work without blocking exits?
- Where does food go before it is inspected?
- Where does a guest using a wheelchair or pushing a stroller get stuck?

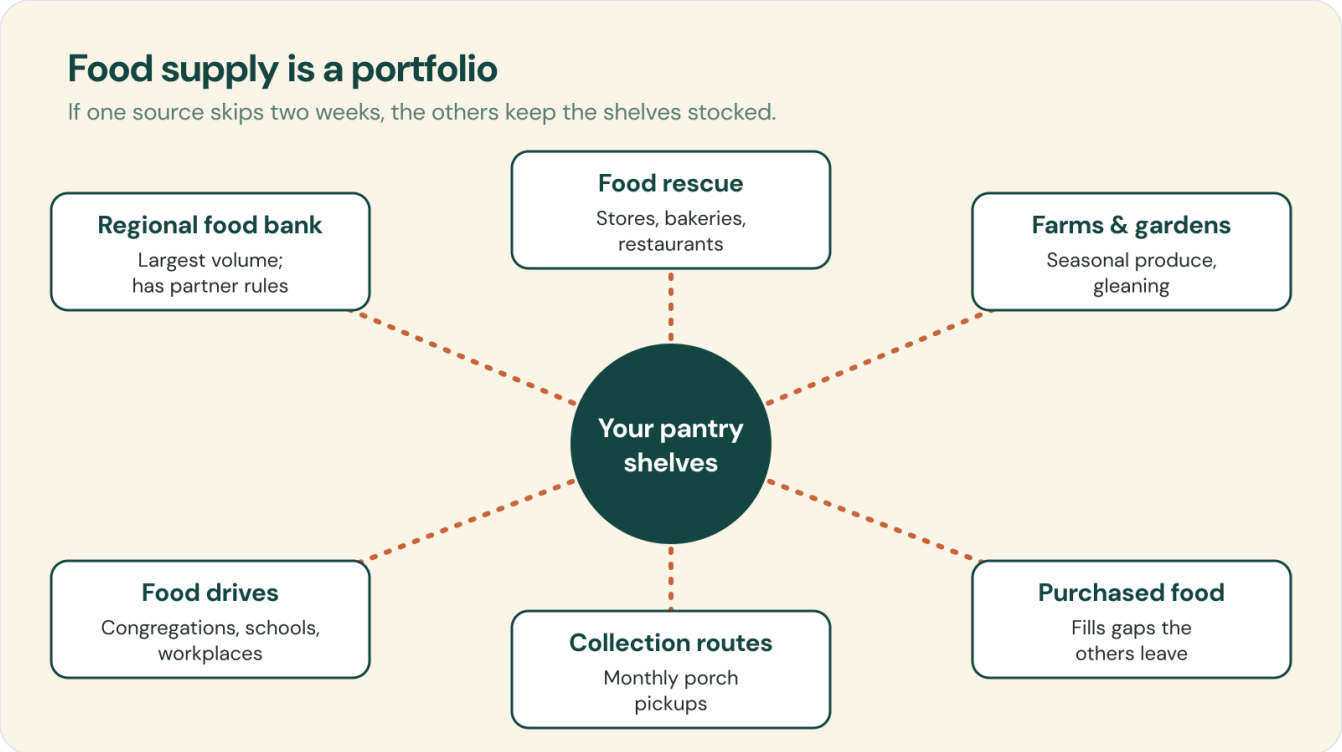
Action checklist

- [ ] Measure the available space
- [ ] Sketch zones and traffic flow
- [ ] Identify electrical and refrigeration limits
- [ ] Walk the guest path from the street to the exit

CHAPTER 5

Find reliable food sources

Food supply is usually a portfolio of relationships, not a single vendor. Build reliability before volume.



Your regional food bank

For most pantries the regional food bank is the largest and cheapest source of food. Ask about agency eligibility, waiting lists, delivery or pickup minimums, training, fees, and reporting. Some networks cannot accept new partners right away.

What food banks usually ask of partners

- Proof of 501(c)(3) status, or that you operate under a church or other qualifying organization
- A site visit, with food stored off the floor, pest control, and working thermometers
- Food-safety training for at least one lead
- Regular, published distribution hours and a minimum number of households served
- Monthly reports on households and people served
- Food given free of charge, with no requirement to attend a service or make a donation

Federal commodity food (TEFAP)

Much of what food banks distribute comes from The Emergency Food Assistance Program, and it carries its own rules. Expect to collect a signed household self-declaration of eligibility, give annual civil rights training to the volunteers who work with guests, display the required nondiscrimination poster, and keep distribution records. Federal rules do not require households to bring proof of income, though states set their own details. Your food bank will train you on your state's version.

If the answer is no, or not yet

A "no" is often about one specific requirement. Ask which one, and whether any of these are open to you: joining the waiting list, hosting the food bank's own mobile distribution at your site, receiving food through an existing partner agency nearby, or reapplying once you have a few months of service records. Meanwhile, build the rest of the portfolio.

Food rescue and retail partners

Approach supermarkets, independent grocers, bakeries, produce vendors, farms, wholesalers, and restaurants. Ask for a specific recurring donation or pickup window, not an open-ended promise. Large chains often route donations through the regional food bank or a corporate program, so ask the store manager how theirs works. **Appendix H** has three email templates you can adapt.

Farms and gardens

Farmers markets, community gardens, and backyard growers can supply fresh produce in season. Agree in advance on drop-off times, and only accept what you can distribute within a few days.

Congregation and neighborhood drives

Publish a short needs list based on what guests ask for. Monetary donations are often more flexible than mixed canned goods; explain both options and let donors choose.

Neighborhood collection routes

A monthly collection route can turn occasional gifts into a predictable supply. Invite households on a defined route to set out a bag of approved, nonperishable donations on a regular pickup day, such as the first Saturday of each month. A neighborhood coordinator collects the bags from porches and leaves an empty bag tagged with the next pickup date. Families can give without attending a separate food drive.



To launch a route, choose a manageable neighborhood, recruit a dependable coordinator and a backup, publish a simple list of needed items, and tell donors when and where to leave their bags. Ask households to keep food protected from rain, heat, animals, and pests. Set a clear pickup window and plan safe transportation, sorting, and receiving. Do not collect refrigerated or frozen donations unless the pantry has a reliable way to keep them cold. Begin with one route, track participation and food collected, and expand only when pickups are reliable.

Purchasing wisely

Prioritize foods that make usable meals. Compare cost per serving, storage life, nutrition, cultural fit, and whether households have cooking equipment. Do not assume bulk packaging is always appropriate. Several small pantries ordering together can often reach a price break none could reach alone.

Beyond food

Diapers, period products, soap, toothpaste, toilet paper, and pet food are among the most requested items at many pantries, and SNAP benefits cannot be used to buy them. They are also shelf-stable and easy for donors to give. Decide whether you will stock them and add them to your needs list.

Document each relationship

Record the contact, agreed pickup times, acceptable products, who provides containers, rejection rules, and emergency contacts. Confirm whether a donor requires reporting or proof of nonprofit status. Track outreach as you go: the store, contact name, date contacted, response, and date of the next follow-up.

HOW PANTRY COMMONS CAN HELP

Pantry Commons includes recurring neighborhood collection routes, so you can manage households, pickup days, and what each route brings in as your donor network grows.

The Pantry Commons network is free to join. Pantries use it to place group orders together, post surplus food before it goes to waste, and ask nearby pantries for volunteers.

Discuss with your team

- What happens if the primary donor skips two weeks?
- Can we accept refrigerated donations safely?
- Which three items do guests ask for that we never seem to have?

Action checklist

- [ ] Contact your regional food bank and ask about partnership requirements
- [ ] Contact at least five other potential sources
- [ ] Set acceptance rules
- [ ] Build a backup purchasing plan
- [ ] Pilot a monthly neighborhood collection route if it fits local donor capacity

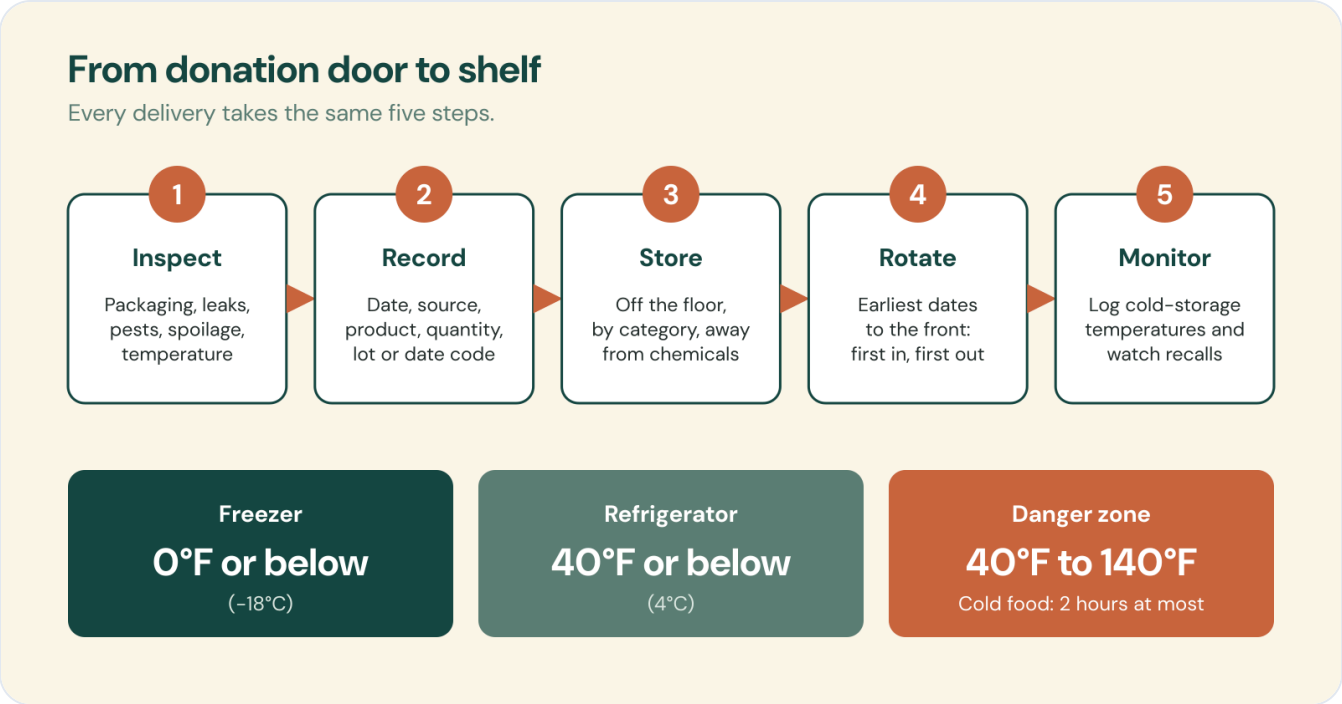
Starting points for finding partners

- **Feeding America food bank finder**
- **USDA information on TEFAP**
- **Food Rescue US**
- **AmpleHarvest.org**, which connects home and community gardeners with nearby pantries

CHAPTER 6

Food safety and inventory

A simple system is better than an elaborate one that no one follows.



At receiving

Inspect packaging and look for leaks, pests, signs of spoilage, and temperature-sensitive products. Record the date, source, product, quantity, and any lot or date details you would need to respond to a recall. Reject food that cannot be safely assessed. **Appendix D** has a receiving log.

Separate and rotate

Keep food off the floor and away from chemicals. Organize by category, label shelves, and move the earliest dates to the front so they go out first.

Read date labels correctly

Date labels do not all mean the same thing. With the exception of infant formula, the dates printed on packaged food are generally the manufacturer's estimate of peak quality, not a safety cutoff. Many shelf-stable foods are safe well past a "best if used by" date, and throwing them out wastes food guests could use. Use credible guidance, such as your food bank's date chart or the USDA FoodKeeper tool, instead of a blanket expiration rule, and never distribute infant formula past its date.

Cold storage

If you accept refrigerated or frozen food, keep refrigerators at 40°F or below and freezers at 0°F. Put an appliance thermometer in every unit, log temperatures on a schedule, and decide in advance what happens when a reading is out of range. Refrigerated food that has been above 40°F for more than two hours should be discarded. Train volunteers on safe handling and follow your health authority's requirements. **Appendix E** has a temperature log.

Allergens and repackaging

Keep food in its original labeled packaging wherever you can, so guests can read ingredients and allergen statements for themselves. If you break down bulk products into smaller portions, check with your health department first. Repackaged food usually needs a label with the product name, ingredients, allergens, and date.

Post clear food-safety and storage signs

Place simple signs where decisions happen: receiving tables (what can and cannot be accepted), storage shelves (food categories, rotation, and separation from chemicals), handwashing areas, and refrigerators or freezers (temperature-check steps and who to contact if readings are out of range). Post cleaning instructions and a reminder to report damaged packaging, signs of pests, or suspected recalls. Use plain language, readable type, and translations or pictures where helpful. Signs reinforce training; they do not replace it.

Consider food-handler training

Consider having the pantry lead and regular volunteers complete a basic food-handler course, even if it is not legally required. Training reinforces safe temperatures, handwashing, preventing cross-contamination, allergen awareness, and when a sick volunteer should stay home. Check with your local health department about whether a food-handler card, certified food protection manager, or other approval is required for what you do. Rules may differ for distributing donated groceries, handling refrigerated foods, and preparing or serving meals.

Recalls and incidents

Assign one person to monitor recall notices and create a way to find, hold, and remove affected stock. Record any safety complaint and who was notified.

How much inventory tracking you need

A small pantry can begin with a receiving log and a weekly count. As activity grows, track categories, locations, quantities distributed, waste, and stockouts. Technology should reduce duplicate entry, not add it.

Self-service locations

Self-service shelves and cabinets need assigned inspection and refill schedules, weather and pest protection, and a way for people to report unsafe food. Community fridges require dependable temperature monitoring, cleaning, and a plan for outages. Record stock removed for safety reasons and follow local food-handling requirements.

HOW PANTRY COMMONS CAN HELP

When counting by hand stops being practical, Pantry Commons tracks inventory by barcode scan from a phone, by a photo of a receipt or pallet, or by hand entry. It keeps shelf counts and history and flags items that fall below the low-stock level you set, so you know what to ask donors for before the shelf is empty.

Discuss with your team

- Who can decide to reject unsafe donations?
- What is our plan for a power outage?
- How would we find every can from a recalled lot?

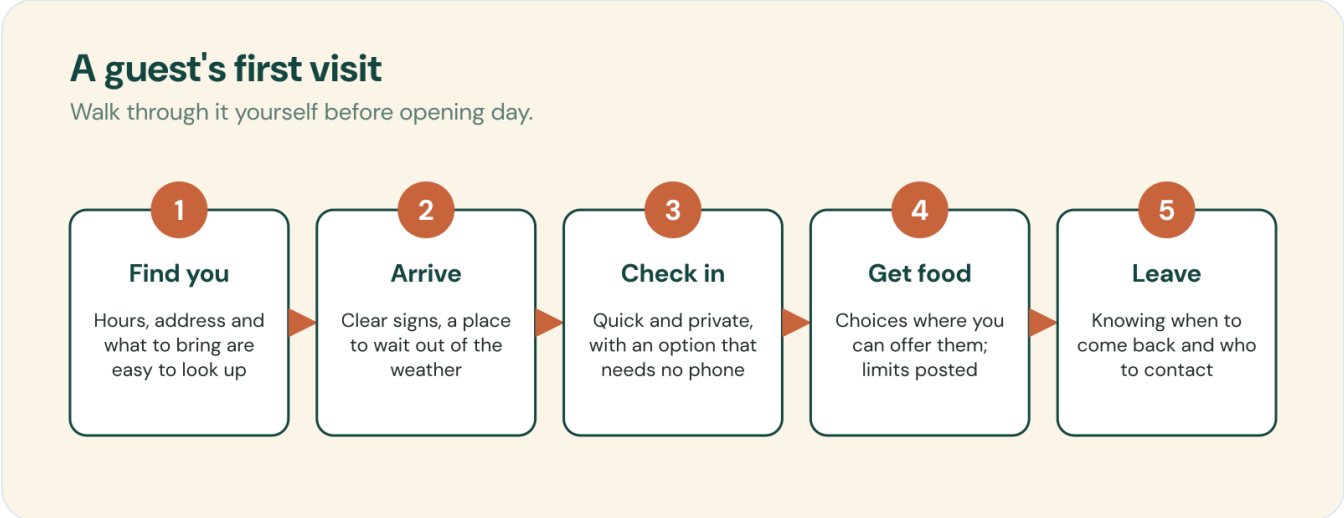
Action checklist

- [ ] Create a receiving log
- [ ] Post receiving, hygiene, storage, and temperature-response signs
- [ ] Put thermometers in every cold unit and start a temperature log
- [ ] Assign recall responsibility
- [ ] Check local food-handler training requirements and assign training

CHAPTER 7

Design the guest experience

The goal is a useful, predictable service that people can use without unnecessary hurdles. Treat guests the way a good grocery store treats its customers.



Make the first visit understandable

Publish your location, hours, what to expect, transit and parking details, whether appointments are needed, and any documentation requirements. Explain the process in plain language and in the languages your neighbors speak. **Appendix B** has a one-page guest information sheet.

Collect less information

Decide why each question is needed before asking it. Household size helps plan quantities; contact details support reminders; anything more sensitive needs a clear purpose and safeguards. Program-funded food may have mandatory registration rules, and it helps to tell guests which questions come from the program and which come from you. **Appendix C** has a short registration form to start from.

Keep check-in quick, and never require a smartphone

For pantries that track visits, a fast check-in shortens lines and spares guests from answering the same questions every time. Whatever method you use, keep a clear alternative for anyone who does not have a phone, prefers not to use one, or needs help. Avoid showing personal details on a screen other guests can see, and do not ask people to wear or display anything that marks them out in line.

Stock food people can use

Ask what guests cook and eat, then let that guide your needs list and purchasing. Think about households with no stove or refrigerator, people who cannot open a can without a can opener, small children, older adults, and common dietary needs such as low-sodium or diabetic-friendly options. Familiar staples for the cultures in your neighborhood matter more than variety for its own sake. A recipe card next to an unfamiliar item helps it go home instead of sitting on the shelf.

Offer choice wherever practical

Even a pre-packed model can let guests choose a protein, decline items, or request alternatives. Do not assume that every household has the same dietary needs or cooking equipment.

Set limits transparently

If visits or item quantities are limited, make the rules consistent, visible, and easy to understand. Create a clear process for exceptions and complaints.

Plan for access barriers

Consider limited mobility, hearing or vision differences, language, transportation, work schedules, and households without smartphones or email. Decide how a neighbor or family member can pick up for someone who cannot come in person. At controlled-access self-service sites, provide an alternative entry method and clear contact instructions if access fails.

Ask how it is going

Give guests an easy, anonymous way to tell you what is working: a comment box, a two-question card, or a short conversation on the way out. Ask whether the hours work, what food is useful, and what is missing. Then act on something you hear and tell people you did.

HOW PANTRY COMMONS CAN HELP

With Pantry Commons, each household registers once and gets a QR pass. A volunteer scans it at check-in to pull up the record in seconds, and guests without a phone can be looked up by name. Visit rules and limits apply automatically, so volunteers are not the ones saying no.

Food Companion gives guests storage guides, tips, and recipes for the foods you distribute.

Discuss with your team

- Which rules are truly necessary?
- What would a first-time guest find confusing?
- What do we ask guests to do that a grocery store would never ask a customer to do?

Action checklist

- [ ] Write a one-page guest information sheet
- [ ] Test check-in with and without a smartphone
- [ ] Walk through the whole visit with someone new to the pantry
- [ ] Create a privacy and complaint process
- [ ] Set up one way for guests to give feedback

CHAPTER 8

Recruit and manage volunteers

Dependability matters more than having a large volunteer list.

Define a small set of roles

Start with a pantry lead, receiving and stocking, guest welcome, packing or distribution, and cleanup. One person may fill several roles at first; name a backup for every essential task.

Train for the actual work

Teach safe lifting, food inspection, confidentiality, respectful communication, emergency procedures, and when to escalate a problem. Give volunteers written instructions they can use during a shift. **Appendix F** has a shift checklist.

Schedule for continuity

Use repeatable shifts, reminder messages, and a simple way to cancel. Keep an emergency contact and a plan for no-shows.

Where to find volunteers

Congregations, civic clubs, high school service programs, retirees, workplace volunteer days, and guests themselves are all good sources. Many guests want to give back, and they know the experience better than anyone. One-time groups are useful for big sorting days; the weekly work depends on a small core of regulars.

Keep the people you have

Most pantries lose volunteers to burnout, not to lack of interest. Rotate the heavy jobs, say thank you specifically and often, and tell volunteers what their shift made possible. Watch for the one person who has quietly become responsible for everything, and share that load before they leave. Track hours as you go: funders ask for them, and some volunteers need documented hours for school, work, or benefit requirements.

Protect guests and volunteers

Set rules for handling money, transporting food, photography, personal contact information, and working with vulnerable people. Decide when screening or background checks are appropriate, particularly for home delivery and any role that involves children.

HOW PANTRY COMMONS CAN HELP

Pantry Commons posts volunteer shifts, takes sign-ups, and sends reminders, so the schedule lives in one place instead of a group text.

Discuss with your team

- Who makes decisions when the pantry lead is absent?
- What tasks can a first-day volunteer safely perform?
- Who on the team is carrying too much?

Action checklist

- [ ] Create role descriptions
- [ ] Schedule a training session
- [ ] Name backup shift leads
- [ ] Decide how volunteer hours will be recorded

CHAPTER 9

Board governance and leadership

Not every pantry needs its own board. An independent nonprofit typically has a governing board; a pantry operating within an established church or nonprofit may be overseen by that organization. Requirements depend on legal structure and jurisdiction.

Governance versus management

The governing body sets the mission, approves budgets and major policies, oversees organizational risk, and evaluates leadership. A director or pantry manager handles scheduling, volunteers, donor relationships, and daily operating decisions within the authority they have been given.

Recruit for skills and commitment

Look for members who will attend, ask informed questions, and contribute relevant experience: finance, community knowledge, operations, fundraising, legal or compliance. Include at least one person who has used a food pantry. A mix of expertise is more useful than honorary titles.

Define authority in writing

Specify who can approve spending, enter agreements, change eligibility policies, accept restricted donations, and make urgent safety decisions. Avoid a system where every operational adjustment requires a board vote.

Sample decision-rights matrix

Decision	Board or governing body	Director or manager
Annual budget	Approves	Proposes and implements
Distribution schedule	Sets policy boundaries	Chooses within approved authority
Volunteer shifts	Receives updates	Manages
Major contracts	Approves above a set threshold	Negotiates and implements
Food safety incident	Oversees response	Acts immediately and reports
Changes to mission	Approves	Recommends

Illustrative only. Adjust to your bylaws, organizational policies, and applicable law.

Use basic financial controls

Review budgets and financial reports regularly. Where you can, have different people authorize a payment, make it, and reconcile the account. Document any transaction with a board member or their family, and adopt a conflict-of-interest procedure.

Plan for turnover

Set terms and succession practices that suit the organization. Keep records, shared access to critical accounts and passwords, and a clear onboarding packet so operations do not depend on one individual. **Appendix I** has a sample board agenda.

Discuss with your team

- What decisions are reserved for the board?
- Who supervises the pantry director?
- How would the organization function if its founder left?

Action checklist

- [ ] Document the legal structure
- [ ] Write a board and manager responsibility chart
- [ ] Adopt meeting and financial oversight practices
- [ ] Store logins and key documents where more than one person can reach them

CHAPTER 10

Money, policies, and accountability

A pantry can operate economically, but it still needs a sustainable plan for food, supplies, insurance, utilities, and people.

Build two budgets

Separate one-time setup costs (shelves, tables, refrigeration, signs) from monthly operating costs (food, transport, utilities, cleaning, software, insurance, and any paid labor). Include a contingency and a reserve for replacing equipment.

Startup budget worksheet

Category	Planning amount	Notes
Shelving and bins	$_____	Used or donated options
Tables, carts, scale	$_____	Match your distribution model
Refrigeration	$_____	Optional; include thermometers
Signs and printing	$_____	Hours, directions, food-safety signs
Cleaning and safety	$_____	Ongoing replenishment
Initial food purchase	$_____	Backup supply
Insurance and permits	$_____	Verify locally
Filing and registration fees	$_____	If forming a nonprofit
Phone, internet, software	$_____	Monthly; start with free tools
Contingency	$_____	Unexpected needs

Choose funding sources

Use recurring individual gifts, congregation support, business sponsors, grants, and in-kind donations. Small monthly gifts from many people are steadier than one large grant. Check restrictions before accepting

funding, and avoid promising services that depend on money you do not yet have.

Make it easy to give

Offer a way to give once or monthly, online and by check. Options to evaluate include Givebutter, Zeffy, Donorbox, and the donation tools available through PayPal or Stripe. Compare the full cost of collecting a gift, recurring-donation support, ease of use on phones, donor receipts, payout schedules, donor data exports, and how refunds are handled. Check whether supporters are prompted to cover fees or add a tip to the platform. Test the donation form yourself before sharing it.

Confirm current pricing, nonprofit eligibility, and receipt settings directly with each provider. If the pantry operates through a church or fiscal sponsor, make sure the legal recipient and tax acknowledgment details are correct.

Thank donors and keep the paperwork straight

Thank every donor promptly. For tax purposes, donors need a written acknowledgment from the charity for any single gift of $250 or more, and it is good practice to send one for every gift. For donated goods, describe what was given and let the donor assign the value.

Write essential policies

At a minimum, document eligibility and visits, privacy, volunteer conduct, food acceptance, emergency closure, financial controls, complaints, and safety response. Keep policies short enough to use.

Keep clean records

Track donations and expenses, restricted gifts, basic service counts, food received, and volunteer hours. Keep restricted and grant-funded money identifiable so you can show how it was spent. Report accurately; do not inflate food values or household counts.

HOW PANTRY COMMONS CAN HELP

Pantry Commons takes online donations through Stripe or PayPal and lets you publish a needs list so donors can see exactly what would help. Grant tracking ties activity to each funding source and produces TEFAP and Feeding America reports from the records you already keep.

Discuss with your team

- What is the monthly break-even amount?
- Which expenses continue if donations fall?
- Could we show a funder exactly how their gift was used?

Action checklist

- [ ] Build startup and 12-month budgets
- [ ] Approve essential policies
- [ ] Set a monthly financial review
- [ ] Choose and test a way to accept donations
- [ ] Write a standard thank-you and acknowledgment letter

CHAPTER 11

Get the word out

A pantry nobody can find helps no one. Guests, donors, volunteers, and referral partners each need different information, and all of it needs to stay current.

Give guests one reliable place to look

Pick one page that is always right, whether that is a simple website or a pinned social media post, and point everything else to it. It should answer, without scrolling: where you are, when you are open, who can come, what to bring, and how to reach someone. Post closures and schedule changes there first. Nothing costs trust faster than a guest spending bus fare to reach a locked door.

Get listed where people already search

- **2-1-1.** Contact your local 2-1-1 and ask to be added to their database.
- **Your regional food bank's pantry locator**, if you are a partner.
- **Google Business Profile.** A free listing puts your hours on Google Search and Maps. Update it for holidays.
- **Community resource directories** used by local social workers and clinics.
- **Referral partners.** Give a half-page flyer to school counselors, clinics, libraries, senior centers, WIC offices, and churches. They are asked every week where someone can get food.

Not everyone is online. Paper flyers in laundromats, apartment offices, and corner stores still reach people, especially in the languages spoken nearby.

Tell donors and volunteers exactly what you need

"We need food" gets a bag of whatever was in the cupboard. "We need peanut butter, canned chicken, and size 5 diapers this month" gets what guests are asking for. Keep a short, current needs list and share it everywhere you ask for help. Report back afterward: what came in, and what it made possible.

Share your story without spending anyone's privacy

Never photograph or name guests without their clear, written permission, and never make a photo or a testimonial a condition of getting food. You can tell a strong story with numbers, stocked shelves, and volunteers at work. If a guest wants to share their experience, let them decide how.

Keep it current

Assign one person to own public information. When hours or rules change, update every listing the same day, and review them all at least twice a year.

HOW PANTRY COMMONS CAN HELP

Every pantry on Pantry Commons gets a free hosted website, with three designs, a page builder, and your own web address. It needs no credit card and does not expire. The network and resource directory are free too, so neighbors and referral partners searching by county can find you.

Discuss with your team

- If someone searched for food help in our town tonight, would they find us, and would the hours be right?
- Who updates our listings when something changes?
- Which three organizations refer the most people to us, and do they have our current information?

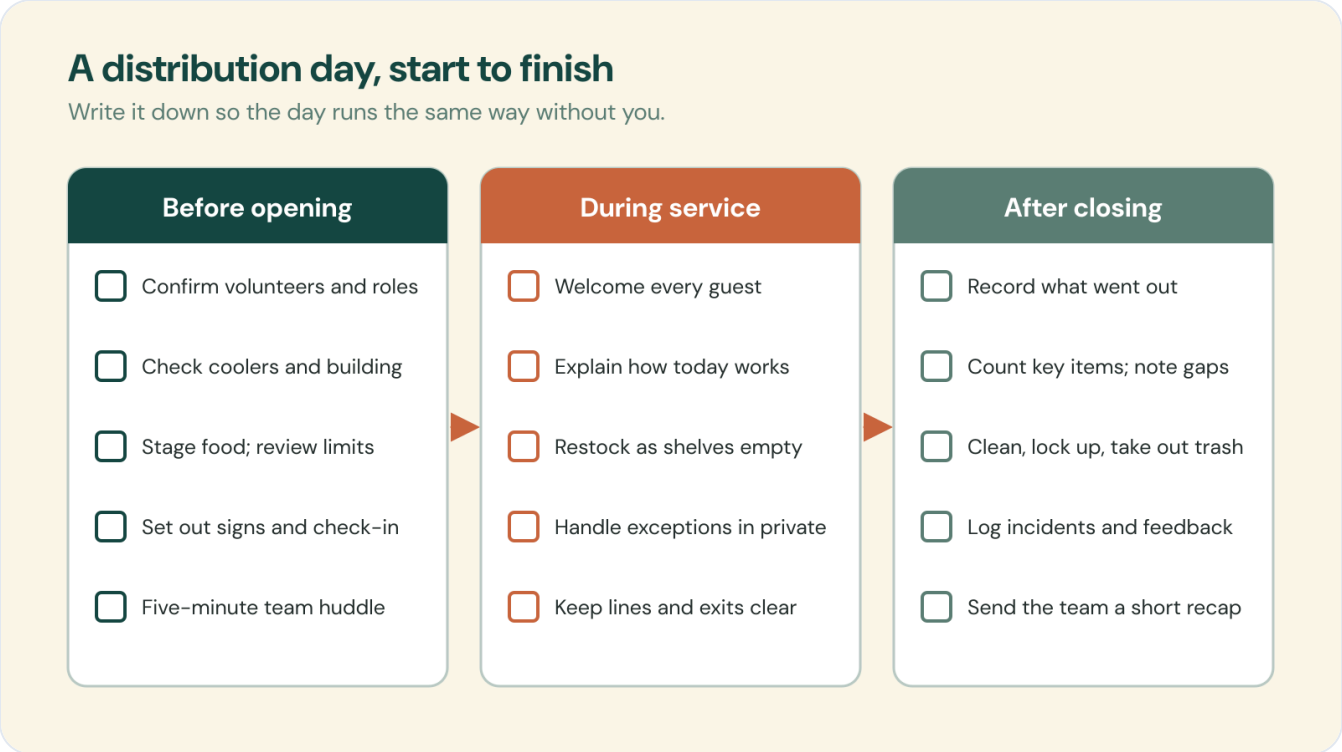
Action checklist

- [ ] Create one public page with hours, address, and what to expect
- [ ] Get listed with 2-1-1 and claim a Google Business Profile
- [ ] Give flyers to five referral partners
- [ ] Publish a needs list
- [ ] Adopt a photo and story permission policy

CHAPTER 12

Run a distribution day

Document the work as a repeatable sequence so the pantry can operate without its founder present.



Before opening

Confirm volunteers, check refrigeration and the condition of the building, stage food, review limits and substitutions, set out check-in materials, and post current instructions. A five-minute huddle to assign roles and flag anything unusual saves confusion later.

During service

Welcome guests, explain how the day works, use a consistent check-in method, replenish stock safely, handle exceptions privately, and keep lines and exits clear.

After closing

Record what was distributed, count key items, clean and secure the site, note incidents and stockouts, and send a brief recap to the team.

Plan for the hard days

- **More people than food.** Decide in advance whether you will reduce quantities, hand out vouchers for the next distribution, or refer guests to a partner, and who makes that call.
- **Bad weather or extreme heat.** Set the conditions that trigger a closure or a move indoors, and how guests will be told.
- **Power failure.** Know who checks the coolers and what gets discarded.
- **Medical emergency.** Keep a first-aid kit, know the site's street address for 911, and name who calls.
- **A tense moment.** Train volunteers to stay calm, lower their voice, offer to talk privately, and get the shift lead. No volunteer should handle a conflict alone.

Demand is rarely even. Many pantries see more visits late in the month, in summer when school meals stop, and before holidays. Watch your own numbers for a few months and plan food and volunteers around the pattern.

Discuss with your team

- What happens if twice as many people arrive?
- Who handles a guest complaint?
- How do guests find out we are closed today?

Action checklist

- [ ] Run a mock distribution
- [ ] Time the bottlenecks
- [ ] Revise the written workflow
- [ ] Write a one-page emergency and closure plan

CHAPTER 13

Measure results and grow

Measure enough to improve service, not just to create impressive numbers.

Start with meaningful measures

Track unique households, visits, people served (where collected), pounds or units distributed, volunteer hours, and stockouts. Avoid counting the same household twice when you report unique reach. **Appendix J** has a one-page monthly dashboard.

Listen to guests

Ask whether the hours work, what food is useful, what is missing, and which rules create obstacles. A short conversation often reveals more than another report.

Report back

Share a few honest numbers with donors, volunteers, your host organization, and funders at least quarterly. People keep giving to work they can see. If a number went down, say why.

Grow only after the basics work

Add refrigeration, choice options, delivery, satellite locations, or software when your food supply, volunteer capacity, and procedures can support them.

Technology is optional at the start

Paper logs and spreadsheets work for a small pantry. An open-access self-service pantry may intentionally allow anonymous visits, in which case refill records and stock counts are more meaningful than household totals you never collected. Consider software when you notice the same information being written down twice, when month-end reports take hours, or when only one person understands the spreadsheet.

Build a connected pantry network

Strong local partnerships should continue after launch. Create a shared contact list, coordinate distribution calendars, set up a simple way to share surplus food, and agree on how referrals will work. Each organization stays independent while cooperating where it benefits guests. Technology can support these relationships, but it cannot replace them.

HOW PANTRY COMMONS CAN HELP

Pantry Commons keeps guest records, inventory, volunteers, donations, and reporting in one system, so your monthly numbers come from the work you already did instead of a separate count. The website and network are free; the full system is priced by the number of households you actively serve, with no per-user fees. You can try it at **pantrycommons.com**.

Discuss with your team

- Are we serving more people or simply counting more visits?
- Which process creates the most friction?
- Who else in our county should we be coordinating with?

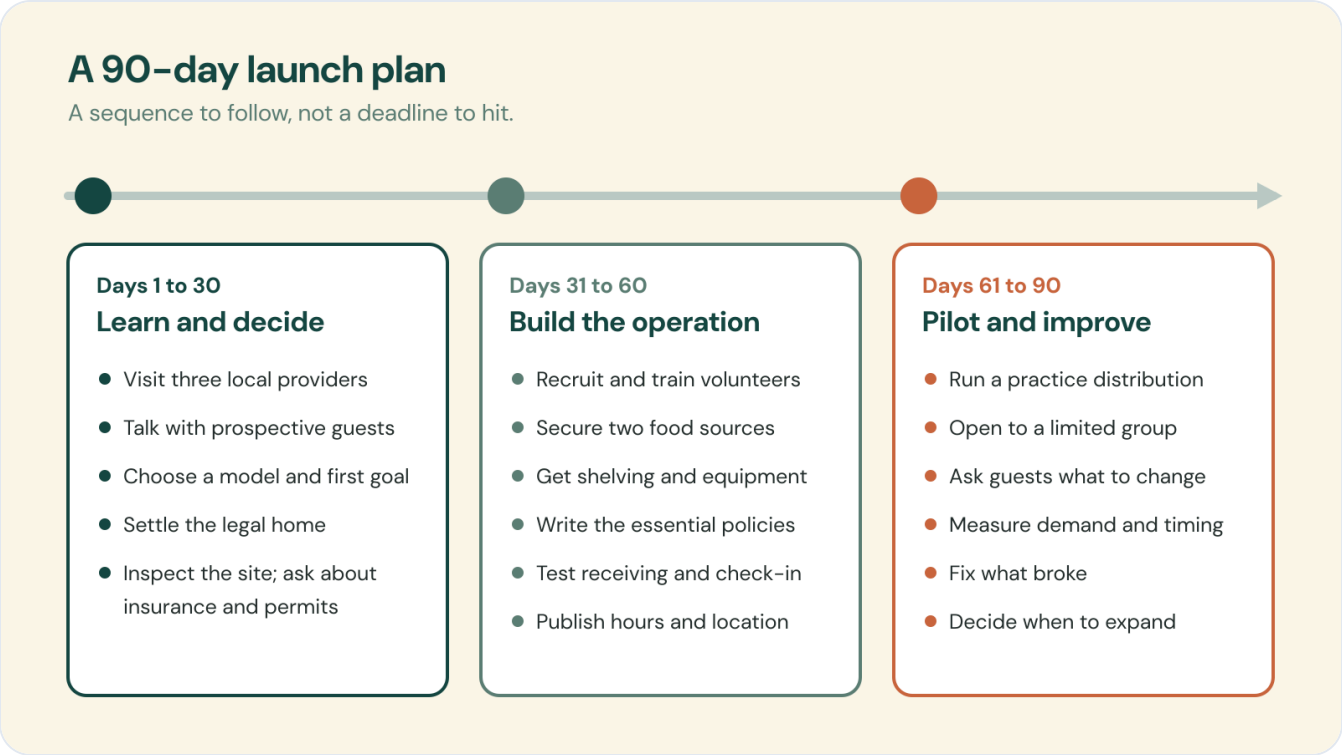
Action checklist

- [ ] Choose five core metrics
- [ ] Review guest feedback monthly
- [ ] Send a quarterly update to supporters
- [ ] Set a six-month improvement goal

CHAPTER 14

A 90-day launch plan

Use this as a flexible sequence, not a deadline that forces a pantry to open before it is ready.



Days 1 to 30: Learn and decide

Interview prospective guests and existing organizations. Choose a service model and the households you will start with. Settle the pantry's legal home and governing oversight. Inspect the proposed site and identify safety, permit, and insurance questions.

Days 31 to 60: Build the operation

Recruit and train volunteers. Secure at least two food sources. Acquire basic equipment. Write the essential policies. Test receiving, storage, and check-in. Publish accurate guest information and get listed where people search.

Days 61 to 90: Pilot and improve

Run a small practice distribution, then a limited public launch. Collect guest feedback, measure how long things take and how much food goes out, correct problems, and decide when to expand.

Discuss with your team

- What would cause us to postpone opening?
- How will we know the pilot worked?

Action checklist

- [ ] Schedule a pilot date
- [ ] Assign an owner to every open item
- [ ] Hold a post-launch review

WHEN YOU ARE READY

Start small, keep your promises, and let the pantry grow at the speed your food supply and volunteers can sustain. If a free website, a place in the pantry network, or a system to run the day would help, Pantry Commons is at **pantrycommons.com**.

APPENDIX

Ready-to-adapt templates

Forms, logs and email templates to copy, print and adapt for your pantry.

A. Pantry launch checklist

- [ ] Community need and service gap confirmed
- [ ] Primary distribution model selected
- [ ] Legal home, governance, and authority documented
- [ ] Site, accessibility, safety, permits, and insurance reviewed
- [ ] Food suppliers and backup sources contacted
- [ ] Receiving and food safety procedures written
- [ ] Volunteer lead and backups trained
- [ ] Guest information sheet published and listings created
- [ ] Registration and privacy procedures prepared
- [ ] Emergency and closure plan written
- [ ] Pilot distribution completed and reviewed

B. Guest information sheet

Pantry name:

Address and transit or parking:

Distribution days and hours:

Appointments or walk-ins:

What to bring (if anything):

Visit frequency and item limits:

Can someone pick up for you?

Accessibility or language assistance:

Contact for questions:

C. Household registration form

Ask only what you will use. Add program-required questions separately and label them as such.

Name:

Phone or email (optional, for reminders and closures):

Town or ZIP code:

Number of people in household: Adults ____ Children ____ Age 60+ ____

Preferred language:

Dietary needs or foods you cannot use:

Someone allowed to pick up for you (optional):

We keep this information private and use it only to plan food and report totals. We do not share names.

D. Receiving log

Date	Donor or source	Item and lot/date	Qty and unit	Condition / action

E. Cold-storage temperature log

Refrigerator: 40°F or below. Freezer: 0°F. If a reading is out of range, write what you did and who you told.

Date	Time	Unit	Temp (°F)	Initials	Action taken

F. Volunteer shift checklist

- [ ] Check in and review assignments
- [ ] Wash hands; inspect work area and safety conditions
- [ ] Verify product condition and cold-storage temperatures
- [ ] Set up guest signs and the service station
- [ ] Log distribution and exceptions
- [ ] Clean, secure, and report concerns

G. Monthly needs list

Publish this wherever you ask for donations. Keep it short and update it monthly.

Most needed this month	Always welcome	Please do not donate
		Opened packages, home-canned food, items without labels, alcohol

H. Retailer and grocery outreach emails

Copy these into an email and replace the bracketed details. Be specific about what your pantry can accept, how often you can pick up, and who handles questions. Do not promise pickups or refrigeration you cannot safely provide.

Introduction to a grocery store

Subject: Local food donation partnership with [Pantry Name]

> Hello [Manager or Community Relations Contact],
>
> My name is [Name], and I help coordinate [Pantry Name], a food pantry serving [Community]. We provide groceries to [brief description of who you serve] on [days or schedule].
>
> Would [Store Name] consider partnering with us by donating safe, usable surplus food? Depending on what is available, we can use [produce, bread, shelf-stable groceries, or other categories your pantry can safely handle]. We can arrange reliable pickup at an agreed time and follow your donation and food-safety procedures. Donations made in good faith to nonprofits like ours are protected under the federal Good Samaritan Food Donation Act.
>
> If another person manages charitable donations for your store, would you be able to connect us? I would appreciate a short conversation about what might be possible.
>
> Thank you,
>
> [Name] | [Role], [Pantry Name]
>
> [Phone] | [Email] | [Website]

Specific product or store-support request

Subject: Request for [Food Items or Gift Cards] for [Pantry Name]

> Hello [Name],
>
> I am reaching out from [Pantry Name] in [Community]. We are preparing for [regular pantry distributions or an upcoming event] and are seeking [specific products, quantities, or a store gift card] to help provide groceries to approximately [number] households.
>
> Would [Store Name] be willing to donate some of these items or offer an in-kind contribution? We can collect donations on [available days and times], provide information about our organization, and recognize your support [include only if you can actually offer recognition]. A smaller quantity would also be useful.
>
> Please let me know if you are the right person to ask or if your store uses a formal donation-request process. Thank you for considering it.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> [Name] | [Role], [Pantry Name]
>
> [Phone] | [Email] | [Website]

Polite follow-up

Subject: Following up: [Pantry Name] food donation request

> Hello [Name],
>
> I wanted to follow up on my message from [date] about a possible food donation partnership between [Store Name] and [Pantry Name]. I understand your team receives many requests.
>
> If this is something your store might consider, I would be glad to share our needs, pickup availability, and any organization information you require. If you already have a donation partner or use a different contact or application process, I would appreciate being pointed in the right direction.
>
> Thank you for your time,
>
> [Name] | [Pantry Name]
>
> [Phone] | [Email]

I. Sample board meeting agenda

1. Mission and service update
2. Financial statements and budget variances
3. Food safety, privacy, and operational risks
4. Director report and decisions requiring approval
5. Fundraising and partnership updates
6. Action items, owners, and deadlines

J. One-page monthly dashboard

Metric	This month	Previous month	Notes
Unique households			
Total visits			
People served			
Food distributed (lbs or units)			
Volunteer hours			
Stockouts			
Donations received ($)			

K. Community partner visit and collaboration worksheet

Organization:

Contact:

Date visited:

Services, location, hours:

Strengths and successful practices:

Current challenges and unmet needs:

Possible collaboration (hours, referrals, transport, storage, food, volunteers):

Next step, owner, follow-up date:

L. Additional resources

- **Feeding America**
- **USDA Food and Nutrition Service**
- **FoodSafety.gov, including the FoodKeeper storage guide**
- **USDA guidance on donating food and liability protection**
- **National Council of Nonprofits**
- **IRS: Charities and nonprofits**
- **Pantry Commons**

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