

Giving people choice is the secret ingredient to a healthier community

By Becca Carpenter

The River Food Pantry

Imagine someone else choosing groceries for you. You might get food you don't like, can't eat, or don't know how to prepare. There's a good chance you wouldn't get your favorite items and that some of it would go to waste.

When someone uses a food pantry, they like to have choices, just like anyone else. Allowing people to choose at least some of their own groceries can:

- give a sense of dignity and control,
- limit food waste, and
- build confidence and trust between clients, staff and volunteers.

Overall, our community is healthier with client-choice pantries because people don't have to take items they already have, don't like, or can't eat for health or personal reasons. People feel respected and self-empowered to eat in ways that are healthiest for them.

The River Food Pantry is on a mission to restore and expand its client-choice model, which was significantly limited by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Although it was necessary to move pantry sessions outdoors for health and

safety reasons, it took away something that our clients value greatly: choice," said Rhonda Adams, executive director of The River. "Our team continues to explore ways to empower households to choose their own groceries again, even if it's not inside our building."

One of the newest changes in The

River's curbside distribution is providing a grocery list for households to fill out inside their vehicles. Volunteers take the lists inside to assemble each grocery order and then load the groceries into people's vehicles.

"We appreciate everything The River is doing to keep our family safe," said

a client recently. "Seeing fresh produce on the tables and getting to pick what we want from our car is great. The River volunteers and staff are wonderful too."

Another level of choice The River started offering this summer is a new online ordering system called ePantry. Once a month, households have the option to order their groceries online. Families select from a variety of nutritious food, including fresh produce, meat, dairy, culturally inclusive offerings, and special dietary options such as vegetarian and gluten-free items.

After using ePantry, one client said, "This is extraordinary. As a household of one, I often re-boxed half of what I received to go to other families and friends. It also brings back dignity to having to use the food pantry."

As The River continues to distribute groceries outdoors, implementing ways to expand client choice is better not only for clients but also for the organization. Staff can tailor food procurement by learning what items are most popular. Volunteers and staff can work more efficiently so they can engage more with clients.

Learn more about The River's services and opportunities to get involved at riverfoodpantry.org.



Photo by Rebecca Carpenter