

Peer Learning

We asked several food banks who have already developed and implemented a nutrition policy about their experience. Grab a cup of coffee or tea and read through their processes, joys, challenges, and outcomes.

Interview

How many shoppers does your food pantry serve, on average, on a weekly basis?

2000

How did you begin the process of adopting a nutrition policy?

In 2016, Food Access staff began setting up a subjective method of diverting “unhealthy” food from market shelves. However, these items (mostly chips, soda, candy and baked goods) were still available for agency volunteers to take home. Realizing the double standard, we started to develop a nutrition policy with Food Access and Nutrition Teams, that ensured nutritious food items were prioritized throughout the entire organization.

Please share about the process of developing your policy. What were some of the key challenges and successes? How, if at all, was your board involved? How, if at all, were your volunteers involved? How, if at all, were your shoppers involved?

We held focus groups with shoppers to determine their input. Through surveys, we identified the most-requested food items (eggs, dairy, meat, fresh produce, etc) and those items high in sugar or sodium were not considered desirable, especially since approximately 50% of shoppers identify as having chronic health conditions related to nutrition and are seeking nutritious food.

Originally, we had sought to include specific items in each food group, as well as cut-off levels for specific nutrients as components of the policy. However, it was identified that sorting these food items in such detail would be too difficult for volunteers (especially since we often have volunteer groups who are new to our nutrition policy.) So, we chose to just focus on sodium and sugar. Later, the second version of the policy only included sugar guidelines.

Our board was involved in signing off in approval on the policy. Volunteers went through training but did not have an official avenue for giving feedback into the policy.



Please share about the process of implementing your policy. What were some of the key challenges and successes? How did you overcome your challenges?

A few volunteers were the most vocal opponents of the policy. They went directly to board members and our CEO at the time and expressed a lot of concern about “policing” shoppers’ food choices, even though shopper input had been used to develop the policy. Having individual meetings with volunteers, helping them understand the larger picture of food apartheid (deliberate, structural injustice that creates segregation in access to nutritious food) was a strategy we used to address volunteers’ concerns. In the end, we had to remove sodium from the policy due to a lack of board and leadership support, and our current policy only includes sugar.

Do you restrict or refuse any donations according to your policy? How did you approach this?

Yes, if items have 11 grams of added sugar or more we will direct those donations elsewhere, or, if they have arrived as part of another order we will have other organizations come and pick those items up from our building. We simply let organizations know before they drop-off that we do not distribute items that have over 11 grams of added sugar or more. Being explicit about this upfront saves a lot of time, energy and food miles for both organizations. Being knowledgeable of other organizations who accept items outside of our policy is also helpful as it provides the donor with other options.

Did you develop any tools or borrow any tools from others that you would recommend?

The Food Group’s Healthy Foods Policy: <https://thefoodgroupmn.org/>

The Denver Healthy Cornerstore Initiative has a food policy we also drew from: <https://www.denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/environmental-health/our-divisions/community-and-behavioral-health/food-system-policies/healthy-corner-stores>

How, if at all, do you track your policy?

We make sure that all volunteers are training and knowledgeable about our nutrition policy on their first day. We try and do our best to have the areas in which those items are located separated and intentional. There is also a level of general accountability that our staff tries to maintain as well as encourage volunteers to help each other out with maintaining our nutritional guidelines.



Have you employed any ways to measure or evaluate the impact of your policy on food offered or on your shoppers' health?

We collaborated with Metropolitan State University Denver in a research study that was published, analyzing the nutrition content of shopping carts going out of our doors. We have also conducted focus groups with shoppers to gain their feedback on the policy, and gathered data from surveys of those involved with cooking programs at our location who also shop in the market.

How, if at all, has your policy impacted the variety, quality, or type of food available?

Our shelf space now prioritizes fresh fruit and vegetables (approximately 34% according to last available data), and perishable food items (salads, sandwiches, dairy, etc.) in coolers, along with frozen meat and meat alternatives. Results of the 2016 study showed that shopping carts contained 2.1 cups of fruit and 3.0 cups of vegetables, on average, per person in each shopping household. This research also showed how nutrient dense the food is, specifically in protein, fiber, vitamin A, vitamin C, and iron per calorie. We also found that our average shopping cart contains less salt and sugar than the average American's intake.

How, if at all, has your policy impacted your donor base? Have you lost any donors or brought on any new donors because of your policy?

There is one food access organization that has had some concerns with our policy, but they continue to be a partner and it is really just one individual within that organization who has been upset with us. I am not aware of any donors that have been lost as a result of our policy, other than potential donors that we have turned away due to them only offering items high in added sugar.

