



DIY School Food Pantries

For Okanogan County High Schools

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**SUSTAINABILITY
PATHWAYS**





Artwork courtesy of Ellie Carney

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Executive Summary

Food insecurity is often amplified in rural communities. This resounds in Okanogan County, with 24.8% of children struggling with food insecurity (Feeding America, 2022). The rural, low-density nature of the county creates barriers for ample, equitable food access and distribution. Couple that with the limited distribution hours of existing food banks and pantries—it is clear that working individuals and families in need of free food may fall through the cracks and be unable to access limited resources available to the public.

This document outlines how high school food pantries can act as supplemental food distribution points that can reach students and families who would be otherwise unable to access those resources. It outlines our research methods, findings, and contains a stand-alone sub-document that can be distributed to parties interested in creating a food pantry at their high school. This document is tailored to the needs we identified in Okanogan County, and is set up for the food pantries to be in collaboration with the Okanogan County Community Action Council (OCCAC), but could act as a guide for high schools elsewhere in the nation.

Sustainability is the foundation from which this project grows. Sustainable communities must feed all their people, but particularly those individuals and families facing barriers to affordable, nutritious, and desirable food. The development of high school food pantries can address the pressing needs of vulnerable children and families experiencing rural food insecurity and simultaneously further sustainability goals in Okanogan County. Beyond this, our proposal for pantries creates pathways for schools to integrate their creation and operation into curriculum or extra-curricular activities. This strategy aims to deepen our mission of sustainability by making it possible for pantries to be led “by and for” students, which aims to center their agency and leadership capacity, creates real-world, hands-on educational opportunities, and locates a service where it is most needed.

The OCCAC is the organization we are collaborating with on this urgent project. Their mission is to fight poverty in Okanogan County, and they identified a need in the community for increased access to free food. They invited us to research high school food pantries and create how-to handbooks for local schools as a supplementary solution to their food security work. Stasia Hazelwood, OCCAC’s Food and Nutrition Manager, is the project sponsor who has guided and generously supported our work.

It is our hope that this document illuminates a pathway through the seemingly daunting process of setting up a school food pantry. The following report and handbook guides Okanogan County school pantry-makers through the bureaucracy of accessing food, describes the operational variables of running a pantry out of a high school, and offers innovative ways to make the pantry process rewarding and instructive for students who want to support the food security needs of their communities. We are certain of the capacity each school community possesses to create, maintain, and learn from on-campus food pantries. It is our hope that this document offers ease to this process.

Introduction

Statement of need

Feeding America (2022) estimates that 24.8% of children in Okanogan County struggle with food insecurity. Households are “food insecure” if at any time during the year, household members experience an uncertainty of possessing, or an inability to acquire, enough food for every household member because of a lack of money or other resources (USDA Economic Research Service, 2022). This definition reflects that food insecurity is widely considered to be a “symptom of poverty”; poverty is the cause; food insecurity is the effect (Feeding America, 2024). The organization behind this project—Okanogan County Community Action Council (OCCAC)—works within this reality. Formed in the 1960’s as part of President Johnson’s “War on Poverty” 60 years later they are still “leading a revolt on poverty” by offering services like rental/energy/utility assistance, emergency shelter, youth and veteran-specific services, and related education services to address the subsequent conditions that poverty often produces (OCCAC, 2022).

Okanogan County’s rural quality further complicates the problem of food insecurity. It’s the largest county in Washington, but the 26th most populated, and is one of two counties in Washington identified by the USDA as a “persistent poverty” area (USDA 2015). Feeding America (2024) finds higher rates of food insecurity in rural communities: they identify a lack of transportation, low wages, underemployment, racism, and discrimination as central explanations for this disproportionate reality.

Installing food pantries in local high schools may help address the food insecurity that students and their families are experiencing. Since a lack of transportation is a major barrier to food access, and high schoolers must physically attend school, having these resources on campus could streamline this challenge.

Project goals

The goal of this project is to create a “handbook” document that can be distributed to high schools across Okanogan County (and potentially beyond) which provides comprehensive instructions on how to set up a student-led high school food pantry in collaboration with the Okanogan County Community Action Council. Sustainability sits at the heart of this project. Certainly, the central goal is to increase food security and therefore sustainability in Okanogan County, however this project goes deeper with goals to instill sustainability practices in each stage of the pantry process. For example, our handbook offers a way to integrate the creation and ongoing operation of a pantry into high school curriculum. By engaging students in this hands-on work, their education is made more robust, a succession strategy can be planned for, and a local community can take charge of how they want to best support their community’s needs.

FOOD INSECURITY IN OKANOGAN COUNTY

18.9% POVERTY RATE

The US has a poverty rate of 10%, Okanogan county is nearly double that.



CHILDHOOD FOOD INSECURITY

24.8% of children in Okanogan County struggle with food insecurity.

RURAL COMPLICATIONS

Okanogan County has a population density of about ~8 people per square mile. This makes efficient food distribution very difficult.



Infographic courtesy of the authors

Background Research

Okanogan County has 43,127 residents (2020 US census) distributed across 5,315 square miles, which works out to a population density of ~8 people per square mile. In contrast, King County, which has a robust food pantry system, has a population density of 980 people per square mile. But these number fails to capture the remoteness of many communities in the county. Residents are not evenly distributed across the county, population clusters dot land that is otherwise dominated by national forests, agricultural fields, and range land. Distance is often a barrier in distributing resources to people in need; long travel times can prevent people from accessing food banks with limited hours.

According to the Census Bureau, 18.9% of Okanogan County residents are living in poverty. This figure is much higher than the state of Washington's poverty rate of 10% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). This report previously established that folks experiencing poverty are at a higher risk of food insecurity; considering this, 18.9% of Okanogan county residents are experiencing the same risk. More specifically, our report previously established that 24.8% of children in Okanogan County are experiencing food insecurity (Feeding America, 2022). This context cements the need for supplemental food pantries sited in the places residents are already traveling to, like school.

Our research demonstrates that educational institutions are prime locations for food pantries. We identified pantries operating in lower and higher educational institutions primarily in the United States' Pacific Northwest. All of the reviewed precedents revealed that these resources are incredibly useful to student populations—pantries are in constant need for food to successfully meet the needs of the student population. Regardless of a community's socioeconomic status, on-campus food pantries can supplement students' food and nutrition needs during their school day and when they return home. Giving children consistent access to nutritional food makes learning easier—students must be fed in order to engage. Success in education is a key component in elevating people out of poverty, but it's hard to focus on math when you don't know if you'll have dinner. These food pantries can be part of the resources that break the cycles of poverty.

Methodology

Stasia pointed us to resources and stakeholders to speak with while conducting our research, which localized our approach and made the potential for the creation of pantries more feasible. We attempted outreach with parties across the county at several high schools, but did not hear back from many because this report was created during the summer. Our successful communications include:

- Liam Daily, Sustainability Educator in the Methow Valley School District
- Jennifer Steinshouer, Middle School Counselor in the Tonasket School District

The approach behind our research methodology aims to capture best practices and tailor them to the specific area and demographic of Okanogan County. Our two methods were benchmarking, where we located precedents of existing food pantries, and interviews, where we conducted informal interviews with local stakeholders. The combination of these methods strengthens our research and guides our recommendations. We used benchmarking to create a diverse foundational understanding of food pantry projects that pre-date this one. This way we can identify the best practices, patterns, and innovations that arise from research on campus food pantries. It then became necessary to conduct interviews to fine tune our recommendations. The day-to-day needs, capacity, and culture of schools in Okanogan County cannot be identified with online research alone, so interviews provided such insight.

Benchmarking is the process of conducting research and evaluating or checking each example against specific categorical standards that one generates. Doing this helps to establish what accepted best practices are, what the research generally agrees on, and where there is still uncertainty. Benchmarking allows us to understand the norms and expectations around setting up a food pantry, and we can, in turn, impart that information to the users of our document. On a more meta level, we can use benchmarking to make a successful resource. By looking at other handbooks we can come to understand what is expected or needed in a resource like the one we are seeking to make, and use that to inform what literature we use, and how we structure our document.

Interviews helped us to go from the general, to the specific. If benchmarking gives us an idea of how this should go on the broad scale, interviews with community members and administrators will help us to understand the fine details. The qualitative data gained in these interviews helped us to fine tune our suggestions, so they fit the specific context of Okanogan County. Our interviews took a variety of forms, from zoom calls to emails, we sought to get in contact with anyone who might have a useful perspective on running a food pantry. None of the interviews had the same questions every time, but broadly we were interested in the needs employees identified in their school, resources that are already utilized, how interested clubs and electives might be in getting involved, and any concerns or insights they might otherwise have on the project.



Findings

Benchmarking

We examined 8 different programs and food pantries that had different elements of what we are trying to accomplish. We looked at programs that supported in-school food pantries, as well as a couple examples of how those pantries operate. We also examined food pantries at the college level that were started/are led by college students, to better understand how student led/run organizations can build momentum and stability. The organizations we looked at were, Central Harvest, the Central Washington University Food Pantry, the Bellingham Food Bank, the Clark County Schools Food Pantry Program, the Vandal Food Pantry at University of Idaho, the Redwood Free Market at University of Santa Cruz, the food pantry at Bellingham Technical College, and the food pantry at Parkrose High School in Portland, OR.

In examining such a broad spectrum of organizations, we chose benchmarks to help us understand how different factors play out at different scales. Below we have laid out our findings in 4 general categories.

Funding Sources/Sources of Food

Many of the organizations we looked at cited donations as a major source of funding. This may be due to the fact that they were trying to prompt visitors to the website to donate to them, but it is also understandable that all of these organizations depend on donations. The smaller food pantries that we looked at tended to cite donations as the majority, or only, source of funding. The region wide food banks that we examined had a much more diverse array of sources such as grants, or state and federal programs.

Sources of food followed a similar pattern. The college food pantries relied on gleanings and donations from local sources, buying food with donated money, and the direct donation of food. In contrast, the larger food banks that support many smaller food pantries received much of their food from state and federal programs, and were less reliant on individual relationships with local organizations.

Scale/Food Distribution Strategy (Hours of Operation) Continuity/Succession Strategy

Scale of food pantries varied greatly across our research. The low end was 10–15 “regular visits” at Parkrose High School in Portland, OR, to higher ends at universities: UC Santa Cruz’s Redwood Free Market saw 8,161 visits in the 2021–2022 academic year. The scale of our proposed model would be comparable to that of the Parkrose scale as the food pantries would also be operating out of high schools.

Of the smaller scale food pantries we examined, many had somewhat limited hours, operating once a week, or even once or twice a month. In operating a small food pantry within a high school, it may be wise to adopt a similar strategy. Students could spend the week organizing donations and cleaning the space, before opening it up to the rest of the school for distribution. This would also help to limit the number of volunteers necessary to operate the pantry. Long term, having a steam-lined operation should help to keep student momentum even as students graduate and move on, and new students step in. There is also room for change as the program evolves and community needs become clearer.

Student Facilitation Strategy/Division of Operational Responsibility

The food pantries we collected information on had diverse means of facilitating and dividing their operational responsibilities. Most of the examples identified at college institutions had paid staff members. Some had only one paid employee who oversaw the whole pantry, like at the Central Washington University and Parkrose High School food pantries, but the rest paid their student staff. Multiple pantries also supplemented their need for labor with volunteers. Responsibilities divided between staff/volunteer members included stocking, maintaining cleanliness, tracking demand for data analysis, developing strategies for engagement such as posting recipes, and even grant writing. The model we propose will not include any paid staff. It will rely on the integration of operational responsibilities into student curriculum, student clubs, or other structures already built into the school environment. Classes centered around sustainability, career and technical education, leadership, business, etc could be the place where food pantry work lives. Instilling the work into an existing vessel at the school is the strategy because it will more likely allow the pantry to hold itself up.

Proof of Need

Of all the food pantries we examined, none of them required proof of need. One required an intake form to gather general data about the people using the resource. Many of the food banks had no process that people had to go through before getting access to food. This may be due to the fact that many of the food banks we examined are donation based, rather than receiving federal support or grants, so they do not have to limit their services, or track data. As a way to mitigate shame and stigma, as well as reducing the burden on administrators, we suggest that these high school food pantries require no proof of need to access them. We do, however, understand the importance of tracking certain pieces of information to insure access to the OCCAC's resources, because of that, we would propose using students ID numbers/ID cards as a way to track data about food pantry usage. We will go into more detail about the logistics of this in our recommendations, but we believe that this will minimize administrative work, while giving every student equal access to these resources. All students deserve access to a resource like an on-campus food pantry, regardless of their food (in)security status. Following a tracking system with student IDs will allow for the necessary data collection and simultaneously support all students' health and learning by keeping them well-nourished.

Interviews

In addition to examining different organizations, we reached out to several people who work for schools across Okanogan County for their input on the project. We wanted everything from intricate details about how to get shop class involved, to the types of need they see in their communities, to broad scale concerns about the project. Doing this gave us an "on-the-ground" perspective of what is happening in these schools and these communities. That perspective allowed us to better understand how our broad scale findings could be applied to the specific circumstances of Okanogan County. As we gathered input, we saw certain themes cropping up across our different conversations. We have distilled these themes into four categories, and we will go in depth with each one.

Observed Needs/Current Resources

Many students struggle with food insecurity throughout the day. This can present as lethargy, disruptive behavior, or even just informing the staff person of how hungry they are. One interviewee said that, at their school, children from Spanish speaking families, many of them farm workers, struggle with food insecurity at a higher level than the rest of the school. Keeping cultural preferences and knowledge in mind is important when deciding what food to distribute to make the most of resources in a culturally relevant way.

Families in the community do utilize the food banks supported by the OCCAC, but many parents are unable to access them due to limited hours of operation. We were told about a few smaller food pantries run out of local churches that also supported students, but it does not appear that these resources are enough to meet need. We learned that the Tonasket school district has a program at their schools to support students over breaks, such as Thanksgiving or Winter break. Boxes are sent home to support students who rely on free school lunches. The schools now offer two boxes, one with a selection of traditions American holiday fare, and another with ingredients that are prominent in Mexican/Latin American cuisine. Cultural relevancy was identified as an important consideration in food offered at a food pantry. Food is more likely to be effectively used and support families if it is food they enjoy and know how to cook.

Curriculum Integration

The people we connected with were very excited about the opportunity to give students some real-world experience in the operation of a food pantry. Many of them thought it would be useful for students to experience the realities of an ongoing project and thought that there were classes or clubs that would be excited to get involved with the operation of a food pantry. Some of the groups that were identified were...

- Garden class/club
- Entrepreneurship class
- Shop class
- Leadership/AVID classes
- Key club/National Junior Honor Society
- Business/Marketing class
- Sustainability class

The process of integrating pantry operation into a schools' academic fabric is school-specific. An educator we communicated with saw great connections between the project and sustainability curriculum existing on their campus. Successfully weaving this project into existing school structures would require interest and advocacy from students or staff on-campus. Unfortunately, this report cannot appraise the best pathway to do this for each school in the county. Certainly, though, a commitment from people on the ground at schools is necessary to form connections and pitch ideas that would result in a tangible pantry students can run and learn from.

Concerns

Community members expressed the greatest concern around peer stigma. The educator we spoke to made it clear that protecting student confidentiality must be prominent when developing this project. Students know that being food insecure is often stigmatized, so any related fear they hold may create barriers to food access. Our recommendations aim to balance protecting student confidentiality with the tracking needs of schools/the OCCAC to ensure that pantries stay stocked.

Stakeholders were also concerned with a lack of sustained support from the school community. Worried that the pantry's burden would fall on teachers, a couple interviewees support the pantries being student-led and operated. As previously expressed, creating student-forward pantries can happen through curriculum or club integration.

Physical availability of space for a pantry is also a concern for some. An on-campus pantry would require space and materials for cold and room-temperature storage, distribution space, and a space to check-in, at the very least. Space to do pantry-related computer work or group work (whether it be a class, a club, etc.) would be ideal, too. Care needs to be taken to keep the space clean, to stay in compliance with food safety laws.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The OCCAC's mission is to work themselves out of a job fighting poverty, with the hope that, eventually, no one will depend on the resources they offer to maintain their stability. In connection with that mission, the goal of any high school food pantry is, in the short term, the alleviation of nutritional needs, and in the long term, the elimination of poverty. Looking to see if and how poverty and food insecurity measures change in areas that have a food bank can provide key insights into how the food pantry is benefiting the community, and what more may need to be done.

At this stage, these projects are mostly theoretical. We have provided strategies for how pantries can self audit and evaluate in the "handbook" portion of the document, but that only addresses operations once a school has committed to this project. On a larger, organization wide scale, a metric of success to consider with the project is engagement with the community and stakeholders. Keeping track of who has been approached about the topic and in what medium, are valuable metrics when determining how to raise awareness for this project.

Once a school has committed to creating a food pantry, the usual metrics of families served, pounds of food distributed, etc, are important to keep track of. It is also important to look at the more intangible elements, such as director turnover or community involvement to judge the long term success and stability of the pantry.

Conclusion

Across our research, the most pertinent finding was that providing food to students, in any format, is beneficial for their health and learning. From snack stations to grocery-store style food pantries, a student's education benefits when they have consistent access to food. It is for that reason, along with a high level of childhood food insecurity in Okanogan County, that some form of a high school food pantry is worth pursuing. Our research lays out a diversity of approaches to food pantries, all with benefits and drawbacks. We cannot recommend one system over another without having a more precise understanding of a specific schools needs and capacities, but we believe that there is enough variety to fit almost any situation, provided the school has the capacity and engagement to run the program.

In our interviews with school district employees, we found many potential points of curriculum integration and community engagement within schools. It is our belief that this is the most vital point in the long-term stability of the food pantry. It might be wise to focus outreach on teachers who have clubs or classes that could be tapped to run the pantry. Securing the support of the teacher is critical in such a time intensive project. The people we spoke to were excited by the idea, and saw a need for it within their schools. All told, there is a lot of potential in putting food pantries in Okanogan County high schools.



A HANDBOOK FOR
OKANOGAN COUNTY HIGH
SCHOOLS

DIY FOOD PANTRIES

Prepared For :
The Okanogan County
Community Action
Council



Introduction

This document seeks to serve as a road map for administrators, teachers, and students who are looking to establish a student-led food pantry at their high school. In it, we will cover different food distribution methods, logistics for food storage, curriculum integration, and more. It is our hope that this document empowers you to support your community by meeting the nutritional needs you see around you. No solution is one size fits all, but based on the information outlined in this paper, we hope that you will be able to tailor a food pantry to the needs and culture of your school, while involving and uplifting your peers and community members.

Is a high school food pantry right for your circumstance?

Setting up a food pantry can be an effective way to help fight food insecurity, but it is a very involved process that requires long term support and engagement to be successful. If you see food insecurity in your community, and particularly the families of people who attend your school, a school-based food pantry can be an effective way to distribute food to families who might otherwise not be able to get access to similar resources. If the need you see is not among families, but perhaps the elderly, or people experiencing homelessness, a school food pantry may not be the most effective solution to those needs. Instead, it may be more practical to mobilize your student body to support already existing programs, by volunteering at the local food pantry, or running a food drive.

In order to decide what is best for your situation, take a look at the resources that are already available in your community. If there are already multiple food pantries with accessible hours, a high school-based food pantry probably does not meet a need that is going unfilled. Look at other community resources as well, such as family health centers, social service organizations, or other institutions might help people receive aid or apply for assistance, which in some instances may be more beneficial than a food pantry. Finally, make sure that there is a true need in your area. If food insecurity is a mostly isolated issue within your community, there could be more effective ways to spend your time than creating a food distribution center. You can gain insight about the state of your community by using resources like the USDA Economic Research Survey's interactive charts that examine multiple facets of food insecurity. By looking at the specific needs of your area, and comparing that to the resources that already exist, you can determine if a High School Food Pantry meets an unmet need. Specifically, if there is a large proportion of families facing food insecurity, that may not be eligible for government assistance, that cannot easily access a food pantry (due to hours of operation, distance, or something else) a high school food pantry could be the right choice.

Beyond meeting a need, it is also important to consider if your school has the capacity and resources to successfully run a food pantry. A food pantry takes space, near daily management, coordination for receiving food and managing donations, many volunteers, and sustained commitment. It is not an easy thing to keep a food pantry running, so part of your consideration should be if there are enough interested parties to get it off the ground, and if long term there will be people to fill in as students graduate and teachers retire. This is not an easy thing to quantify, and there is nothing to guarantee that a project will always have the support and interest needed to keep it going but take a hard look at the resources and people available to you to make this happen.

If, after all of that, you believe your school has a need, as well as the physical space to house the operation, and a student body that could be engaged in running the pantry, it could be a good fit for your school!

Sustainability

We created this handbook as part of the Sustainability Pathways Fellowship. The goal of our fellowship is to connect and implement sustainability in every aspect of community involvement. We used the 17 United Nations Goals for Sustainable development to guide us in making our recommendations for this document. While on some level all of the goals could be considered, we felt that the first three were the most relevant to our project.



#1 No Poverty: The overarching goal of the OCCAC is “Leading a revolt on poverty through education, empowerment, and engagement.” Food pantries can help to alleviate some of the instability brought on by poverty, by providing people with enough food to focus on education, or working, without the fear of going hungry.

#2 Zero Hunger: Food pantries can bridge the gap between what people have, and what they need to meet their nutritional needs.



#3 Good Health and Well-being: In the same way that food pantries work to eliminate hunger, they can also give people access to fresh and nutrient rich foods that they otherwise be unable to get. In rural America, many people do not have access the to fresh fruits and vegetables they need to achieve a balanced diet. Food pantries can be a critical asset in connecting people with the food they are otherwise missing.

Where should we locate our pantry?

Your food pantry can go just about anywhere available on campus. At the least, it must provide space for the storage of dry goods. Beyond that, it could provide for refrigerated and frozen storage. It must be a physically navigable space for both people who are operating the pantry and receiving food from the pantry. With this in mind, an ideal place would be somewhere indoors, with ample shelving or cabinetry, with room for volunteer-only and client-only sections. Remember: everything in this handbook is scalable. If you have a space, but no cabinets, there are options. These flexibilities will be further described in the “Budget” section.

How will we feed the pantry?

Working With the OCCAC

The Okanogan County Community Action Council (OCCAC) is an organization willing to work with schools to provide food for pantries. OCCAC runs nine food pantries, and they receive much of their food from The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). If you want the OCCAC to support your school's food pantry, you will have to become a "subcontractor" with the OCCAC as "contractor". There are eligibility requirements to qualify as a subcontractor, which can be accessed [here](#). Get in contact with the OCCAC if you think you qualify and hope to move forward with this process. As a partner of the OCCAC, you are required to track food usage, as the amount of food that they receive is dependent on those statistics, we will cover later in this document how to set that system up.

Local Farmers and Grocers

You can also work with local farmers or grocers to collect food that would otherwise go to waste. Under the 1996 Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donations Act donations by farmers, gleaners, and grocers are explicitly covered from liability as long as they "donate in good faith apparently wholesome food or apparently fit grocery products to a nonprofit organization for ultimate distribution to needy individuals." Your food pantry could approach local farmers or grocery stores to see if they would be willing to donate unsold food or items that are somewhat close to their best-by day but are otherwise fine. Don't accept food that is expired or damaged, but your school could help to distribute food that is nutritious, but would probably go bad before it's sold, to people in need. When approaching these organizations, make sure you explain the liability to them, and work with them to create a partnership that benefits both parties. Coordinate how food will be picked up or delivered and be prepared to process and organize that food as soon as you acquire it to keep everything clean, organized and running smoothly.

Food drives

Finally, there is the classic, the food drive. Food drives not only help get nutritious food to people in need, but they create awareness and engagement with food insecurity. A successful food pantry relies on being well promoted, getting the word out and whipping up excitement. In a school setting this could materialize as posters in the hall, school announcements, or even competitions between classes/grades to see who can bring in the most food. However you choose to promote the food drive, education should be a key part of it. Education takes a food drive from an abstract issue that people may not care about to an immediate reality that effects people in their community. Emphasize points about what food/nutritional insecurity is like to live with, and how food pantries can intercede to support people.

Once you have generated engagement, the food drive can begin! At this stage the most important thing is clear communication. Food drop off locations, what sort of food is accepted, what condition the food should be in, and the duration of the drive should all be information that is explicitly stated and easy to find. Sending out an email and putting up posters with this information allows for students to refer back to it regularly.

After the drive is over, keep the community engaged by promoting the success of the drive. Statistics like how many packages of food were donated, or total pounds of food can create excitement and a feeling of

accomplishment and pride. Hopefully this excitement can then be transformed into volunteering, or some other form of engagement, and can create momentum for the next food drive.

Monetary Donations

Monetary donations are a great help because they are flexible. They can be used for any imminent needs—costs of building a pantry, buying food, etc. They are also volatile and unreliable. You cannot guarantee a consistent amount of donations on a week to week or month to month basis, and relying on those donations for regular operation could put you in an unfortunate spot if they dry up.

Safe Food Storage

Once you have your food, how are you going to store it? Storing food is an important logistical question that should be considered early in the process of setting up a food bank. Proper storage of food is a matter of state law. The standards for safe food storage are outlined in Washington Administrative Code 170-297-7800, we have included them in the appendix for easy reference. It may be wise to create some form of print-out or poster that can be put up in the food pantry so student volunteers can always refer to the standards. Your school may not receive/distribute certain types of food, so take time to understand what standards are relevant to your situation, and what doesn't apply to you. In general, food must be stored in a clean area, elevated off of the floor. All food must be in-date, and anything that requires refrigeration must be refrigerated at all times. Food storage presents an exciting opportunity to get wood working or shop classes involved, and we will go into depth with that more later.

First-In-First-Out

Abiding by the legal standards is just the start to organizing your food. Most of us have had food go bad. Whether we left it at the back of the fridge, didn't realize the expiration date, or bought too much of it, it can be all too easy to let food go bad. That is where the First-In-First-Out (FIFO) system comes into play. FIFO makes sure that food that is the closest to its expiration date, or has been there for the longest, is the first food to be distributed. This minimizes the amount of waste, as hopefully food can be distributed and used before it expires.

You will have to work with the volunteers that will be running your food pantry to tailor your system to your space and needs, but we will outline a couple of important points to keep in mind and offer some suggestions. FIFO is easier when things are clearly labeled. Not everything comes with an expiration date. It is easy to forget how long fresh produce has been sitting around, especially on a large scale, being diligent about labeling everything with the day it is received is a helpful way to make sure you keep track of everything. Once your food is dated, distribution is relatively simple. By positioning the oldest food at the front of the shelf, and the newest food at the back, distribution can flow easily as food is grabbed from the front.

Organizational Structure

A food pantry can't do much without people to run it. A thoughtful delegation of responsibilities can ensure that nothing is being forgotten and will help things to run smoothly. Once again, this will vary

based on your school's capacity and pantry style, and you should work to come up with a system that most effectively address your needs, but we will offer a couple points of consideration.

Establishing responsibilities

There are a lot of moving parts that keep a food pantry running. Defining clear roles for the people involved in operating it helps to make sure that nothing goes overlooked or forgotten. We would suggest having the most important roles staffed by the same person for a long period of time. For example, if an AVID class takes on the operation of the food pantry, one student could be tasked with organizing food drop offs from the local grocery store for the whole school year. This doesn't mean that other students couldn't help with the process, but putting one person in charge of facilitating that task reduces the risk that it will be forgotten, and helps that person establish specific skills.

Below is a list of potential roles that could be taken on by students and involved staff. The positions would likely be given to multiple volunteers to distribute work shares.

- **Operations Manager** (oversees general pantry operations)
- **Volunteer Coordination** (delegates tasks to involved parties)
- **Supply Organizer** (food sorters after an influx of food supplies)
- **Event Coordinator** (running events like food drives)
- **Outreach Lead / Fundraiser** (conduct research on funding opportunities)
- **Supply Researcher** (researches local opportunities to collect unused food from farms and retailers)
- **Bookkeeper** (responsible for tracking and reporting duties)
- **Food Distributor** (*only for volunteer-ran pantries. We recommend that this position be held by a school staff member to ensure student confidentiality, breaking down social barriers to access. See "Supporting Access" section below for more information)

Volunteer Management

A food pantry is a wonderful way for students to serve their community and gain volunteer hours. If your school has a requirement for volunteer hours to graduate, students want to make themselves look good on a college application, or just support their community, a school food pantry is a convenient and exciting opportunity.

Once you have established your critical rolls and who will be filling them, you can start to incorporate volunteers. Figure out what tasks will be on going, and how many people will be necessary. Perhaps your food organizer decides to do a deep clean of all of the food every Monday and thinks it would be most efficient with three people helping. An on-going sign-up sheet could be created electronically that allows students to see what slots are open and sign up for that shift. This sign-up sheet could encompass all the daily/weekly tasks that require volunteers, such as cleaning, organizing, food preparation. This sign-up document could be as simple as a google form, or a shared excel sheet. For special events separate sign up sheets could be created, to keep things from becoming overwhelming or confusing.

Logistics

Hours of Operation

Schools should consider remaining open during times when students can best access them—before school, during lunch/break, and after school. This would give opportunity for students to access the pantry at the best time for them...if they take the bus right after school, they could grab food at lunch. If a parent drives them to school, they could go to the pantry, take what they need, and their parent could take it home. Consider remaining open during lunch, so hungry students can eat on-campus, too. It may not be realistic for pantries to stay open throughout the school day if they are staffed by volunteers, so consider having unstaffed hours where students can grab food.

Pantry Style / Method of Distribution

- **Self-serve:** This method would have clients come through the food pantry space, sign in, and take what they need. It would be a hands-off approach that could operate without a volunteer to “staff” the pantry, but would require diligent management. Someone, or a switching off of a group, would need to check on the pantry daily, restock food as needed, and collect then report necessary data for the OCCAC as needed (as mentioned above).
- **Volunteer-run:** This method would be more demanding of students and school staff involved in operating the food pantry. This method would have a volunteer present to assist checking clients in, assisting them while they are inside the pantry, restocking, cleaning, and tracking of information. For this method, we do not recommend students be the physical staff person. This is due to the inherent stigma of food insecurity. Even if students were trained in confidentiality, the lingering fear of stigma may create a barrier for students, and this handbook aims to break those barriers down. Students would help with the pantry’s operation from a distance; see the curricular integration section for more details.
- **Backpack / Pre-packaged:** With backpack distribution, there is no physical pantry for folks to visit. Rather, volunteers pre-pack bags or backpacks to send home with students. Families who feel they would benefit from this resource could self-register, so there would be a roster of students/families receiving bags or backpacks, and the information needed by OCCAC would be tracked and able to be reported. This method is likely less resource-intensive than the other ones, and would guarantee confidentiality protection. Students could help pack the backpacks and learn about the operation of the system (finances, coordinating with the OCCAC, etc.) and someone like a counselor could do the actual distribution.

Monetary Donations

Monetary donations are a great help because they are flexible. They can be used for any imminent needs—costs of building a pantry, buying food, etc. They are also volatile and unreliable. You cannot guarantee a consistent amount of donations on a week to week or month to month basis, and relying on those donations for regular operation could put you in an unfortunate spot if they dry up.

Access/Tracking Usage

There is a difficult balance to strike between collecting data on food pantry patrons and preserving dignity and privacy. These issues are magnified in a school setting where students may fear stigma from their

peers. But data is crucial, not only to understand how the food pantry is functioning, but to continue to receive food from government programs. As a sub-contractor with the OCCAC your pantry would be required to track how much food was distributed, and the household size of the students the food is being distributed to. At their other food banks, the OCCAC issues cards which contain all the necessary data, and are scanned before receiving food. A similar system could be set up where students have assigned numbers that link to their data and can be used to track how often they are utilizing the food pantry. This could potentially be the same as a student's ID number, which would allow for data collection with the swipe of a student ID, or by typing in an already memorized number.

How you will collect data depends on the method of distribution you choose. Self-serve could require kids to sign in with their student ID card before accessing the space. A volunteer staffed pantry would be easiest as they could ensure all of the data was being collected. A backpack/pre-packaged system could require that families register for a bag/box in advance, and part of that registration process could be data collection.

The OCCAC has a software system called PantrySoft that they use to collect and organize this data. As a subcontractor you would be required to use this software to collect data, the OCCAC uses that information when receiving food from governmental programs.

Curricular Integration & Student Engagement

In the name of sustainability, this handbook is built from the notion that students can lead their own pantry. Students have the capacity to kickstart it, operate it, and pass the responsibility along as they graduate and phase out. A way to ensure that students have a venue to express their power in addressing community needs would be through integrating the food pantry in school curricula. Sustainability, business/entrepreneurship/finance, AVID, leadership, gardening, career & technical training, wood shop, and other related curricula could house the food pantry project. Student clubs and the need for volunteer hours or extracurriculars are viable options, too. Existing student clubs related to the previous disciplines could take this on, or a new club could be formed. Gardening club could grow food for the pantry, a marketing class could organize a food drive, or a sports team could volunteer together.

Supporting Access

Stigma: Reducing Social Barriers To Access

School pantries run by student volunteers are at higher risk of creating barriers to access for students needing food. Food insecurity is highly stigmatized; this is amplified when a pantry is housed in a school where young students are subject to the perception of their peers. Throughout the school, work should be done to emphasize the importance of good nutrition and the impact that food insecurity has on schooling. This could be accomplished through a campaign headed by a marketing class, or a club. The goal of the campaign would be to destigmatize the use of resources, hopefully creating a community that values and supports uplifting those in need. But even the best messaging is not full proof, and students may feel uncomfortable, or face persecution from their peers. As previously noted, we recommend that Food Distributor positions are held by a trusted staff member, like a counselor. Certainly, students can receive confidentiality training. However, this would be more time and resource intensive for pantry leaders. It

may be easier to give the responsibility of physical food distribution to an adult employed at the school who is legally bound to protect student confidentiality.

Increasing Awareness

Your food pantry needs the support and engagement of your community to be successful. If nobody knows that a resource exists, and if nobody knows they have the opportunity to volunteer, the pantry can't function. Awareness campaigns about the state of poverty and food insecurity can make people aware of issues, prompting them to get involved. These campaigns can take the form of posters, presentations to other classes, videos shown in class, school announcements, posts on social media, and more.

Highlighting the state of food insecurity in your community, as well as the causes, gives people an understanding of how their contribution directly helps those around them.

It's also important to make people aware of the resource you offer, and how to access it. These efforts can be similar to, and even simulations with, awareness campaigns. Make sure to make the information needed to access the food pantry easily and repeatedly accessible. Details like location, operating hours, and method of distribution should all be known before hand to help people best utilize the resource.

Measuring Success

The goal of the OCCAC is to support the people of Okanogan County in ways that reduce poverty. Food banks can offer people the stability they need to get them out of tight spots or support them through a hard time without having to compromise on other necessities. The ultimate success of any OCCAC backed project would be that these resources are no longer needed. But that's a pretty hefty burden to place on a high school food pantry. The immediate goal of any food pantry is to distribute nutritious food to those who need it. In the service of that, there are some metrics that are worth keeping track of that will let you evaluate how you are doing. Some of these metrics are...

- Amount of food received
- Amount of food donated
- Amount of food that spoils/goes bad
- Number of people who utilized the pantry
- Number of people/families who receive food from the pantry
- Amount of food received from a food drive
- Volunteer hours accumulated
- Number of classes/extracurriculars involved

As mentioned above, as a subcontractor of the OCCAC you would be required to track certain pieces of information. You may choose to collect more based on how you are trying to tailor your operation. Once you have that data, pay attention to the picture it is painting. Are you regularly running out of food completely? Are there specific items that often go bad? Are the same people visiting every time? How many one-off visits do you receive? All of this can help you better understand the needs of the community.

Budget

The budget for your food pantry will vary. The scale of costs is based on your school's physical and organizational capacity for running a pantry. The pantry's style/method of distribution you choose will increase or decrease net cost. We estimate that a backpack "pantry" will be the lowest cost, volunteer-run pantries will be the highest cost, and the numbers for self-serve pantries will fall somewhere in between the two. Identifying an existing place on your school's campus for a pantry should be the first step: for example, if you have an unused classroom or closet, the space may already have dry food storage, office and cleaning supplies.

Below, we will address expected materials and correlated costs that may or may not apply to your pantry, depending on its capacity, style, and the school's existing space. Many of costs are anticipated to be ongoing, but others are expected to be one-time purchases on materials that last with proper care.

Expense	Cost	
Shelving, Pallets, & Dry Food Storage	\$0-150	These materials exist to store dry food. It can be as simple as storing food on an old pallet, purchased secondhand shelves, or existing shelving in your on-campus pantry space. This is an opportunity to involve construction trade classes as a way to cut down on cost.
Refrigeration, Freezer, & Cold Food Storage	\$0-600	These appliances will hold your cold and frozen food. Since a free fridge score is unlikely, you will probably have to purchase a used or new fridge. Depending on how much food you must store, we recommend starting with a small appliance with a combined fridge and freezer compartment and build on it from there.
Packaging	\$0-100, Ongoing	Packaging the food you distribute will depend, again, on the style of your pantry. For volunteer-ran and self-serve pantries, you should have boxes and bags on hand for clients to utilize. For a backpack or pre-packaged style, these resources would likely be more utilized: students could have a backpack assigned to them that they bring every time they visit, or there could be disposable bags that hold take-home food for students.
Signage	\$0-50	Signage is estimated to be a minor cost. You will want to physically identify your food pantry on campus, which can be done with a few signs. These can be made from wood, cardboard, or paper scraps and cheap markers or paint.
Repairs & Tools	\$0-500	As one can imagine, there are minor repairs and major repairs, so this cost is highly variable. Repairs to appliances will be more expensive, but repairs on tools or dry storage containers will be less expensive. Funds should be set aside for repairs to prevent emergency.

Office Supplies	\$0-1000 Ongoing	Office supplies will be necessary to ensure proper tracking and reporting of data for OCCAC, tracking of volunteer and student responsibilities and shifts, record keeping, and general note-taking during operation hours. These responsibilities could be satisfied using notepads or notebooks, pens, and folders. However, if on-paper tracking gets hectic, an in-house laptop or computer will be necessary, which is why the high end of this expense is so expensive.
Cleaning Supplies	\$0-300 Ongoing	Your pantry facility must be kept clean for everyone's safety. Cleaning supplies for surfaces, appliances, floors, waste and general sanitation are required, and will likely be purchased new.
Transportation	Ongoing	Transportation is an expected cost because pantry leaders will likely have to travel to pick up food and return it to campus. Transportation to acquire materials may also be necessary. No figure is reported for this expense because gas prices and trip frequencies vary.
Food	Ongoing	While the OCCAC has agreed to feed to your pantry, our research demonstrates that high need makes for rapid turnover on food supply. OCCAC's resources are limited, so it is a good idea to set aside funds dedicated to food purchases, if possible.

Tip: To keep costs down, we recommend that pantry leaders utilize low-cost or free options to satisfy the materials listed above. Search for shelving, pallets, boxes, refrigerators, tools, etc. at free sources like your school, campus grocery stores, farms, "free stuff" sites like Buy Nothing, FaceBook Marketplace, Craigslist, and low-cost thrift stores. You can also encourage donations beyond food. Get creative with what you already have and the places that may be able to meet your needs in the nearby community.

Remember: Even if your school doesn't have the financial capacity to devote funds to each of these categories, you can still start a food pantry! A pantry at any scale will foster food security in your community—even a simple pallet with canned goods in a hallway.

Final Note

The most critical take away from this handbook is that your school and greater community can collaborate in meeting food and nutrition needs in Okanogan County. Even a bookshelf stocked with canned goods and snacks can fill gaps for food insecure students and families. Establishing even a small pantry creates a foundation to be built on. From there, school community members can network and advocate for curricular integration, so the pantry is self-sustaining. The number of resources and people involved may grow with your project. Feeding neighbors in need, supporting the health and engagement of all students, sustainably weaving pantry responsibilities into the existing academic fabric...it is all possible. We are excited to witness your commitment and creativity at work!

Appendix

Food Storage Standards

Food must be stored:

- (a) In the original containers or in clean, labeled containers that are airtight and off the floor;
 - (b) In a manner that prevents contamination from other sources;
 - (c) In an area separate from toxic materials such as cleaning supplies, paint, or pesticides;
 - (d) With a date that is not past the manufacturer's expiration or freshness date; and
 - (e) In a working refrigerator, cooler, or freezer with sufficient space for proper storage and cooling of food, if cold holding is required. A calibrated and working food thermometer must be used to monitor food temperature. The thermometer must be either a metal stem-type thermometer or a digital thermometer.
 - (i) Foods requiring refrigeration must be stored at forty-one degrees Fahrenheit or less. Appropriate refrigeration is required to preserve food from spoiling. Foods that may be subject to spoiling include, but are not limited to, meats, cooked potatoes, cooked legumes, cooked rice, sprouts, cut melons, cut cantaloupes, milk and cheese.
 - (ii) Foods requiring freezing must be stored at ten degrees Fahrenheit or less. Foods required to be frozen must not be allowed to thaw until such food is being prepared for immediate consumption. Frozen food must be thawed in a refrigerator, under cool running water inside a pan placed in a sink with the drain plug removed; or in a microwave if the food is to be cooked immediately as part of the continuous cooking process.
- (2) Raw meat, poultry, or fish in the refrigerator must be stored below cooked or ready to eat foods.
 - (3) Foods not requiring refrigeration must be stored at least six inches above the floor in a clean dry storeroom, or in a closed cupboard or pantry.
 - (4) Dry bulk foods not in their original containers must be stored in containers with tight fitting covers. Containers must be labeled and dated.
 - (5) Prior to storing leftover food in a refrigerator, an early learning provider must label the container with the date and time when the leftover food was opened or cooked. The program may serve leftover food that originated from the program if:
 - (a) The food was not previously served; and
 - (b) It was stored at the proper temperature for less than forty-eight hours after preparation.

TITLE 42 - THE PUBLIC HEALTH AND WELFARE CHAPTER 13A - CHILD NUTRITION

(1) This section may be cited as the "good Samaritan food donation act."

(2) The definitions in this subsection apply throughout this section unless the context clearly requires otherwise.

(a) "Apparently fit grocery product" means a grocery product that meets safety and safety-related labeling standards imposed by federal, state, and local laws and regulations even though the product may not be readily marketable due to appearance, age, freshness, grade, size, surplus, passage of a date on a date label other than a safety or safety-related labeling of a date, or other conditions.

(b) "Apparently wholesome food" means food that meets safety and safety-related labeling standards imposed by federal, state, and local laws and regulations even though the food may not be readily marketable due to appearance, age, freshness, grade, size, surplus, passage of a date on a date label other than a safety or safety-related labeling of a date, or other conditions.

(c) "Donate" means to give without requiring anything of monetary value from the recipient, except that the term shall include giving by a nonprofit organization to another nonprofit organization, notwithstanding that the donor organization has charged a nominal fee to the donee organization, if the ultimate recipient or user is not required to give anything of monetary value.

(d) "Food" means a raw, cooked, processed, or prepared edible substance, ice, beverage, or ingredient used or intended for use in whole or in part for human consumption.

(e) "Gleaner" means a person who harvests for free distribution to the needy, or for donation to a nonprofit organization for ultimate distribution to the needy, an agricultural crop that has been donated by the owner.

(f) "Grocery product" means a nonfood grocery product, including a disposable paper or plastic product, household cleaning product, laundry detergent, cleaning product, or miscellaneous household item.

(g) "Gross negligence" means voluntary and conscious conduct by a person with knowledge, at the time of the conduct, that the conduct is likely to be harmful to the health or well-being of another person.

(h) "Intentional misconduct" means conduct by a person with knowledge, at the time of the conduct, that the conduct is harmful to the health or well-being of another person.

(i) "Nonprofit organization" means an incorporated or unincorporated entity that:

(i) Is operating for religious, charitable, or educational purposes; and

(ii) Does not provide net earnings to, or operate in any other manner that inures to the benefit of, any officer, employee, or shareholder of the entity.

(j) "Person" means an individual, corporation, partnership, organization, association, or governmental entity, including a retail grocer, wholesaler, hotel, motel, manufacturer, restaurant, caterer, farmer, and nonprofit food distributor or hospital. In the case of a corporation, partnership, organization, association, or governmental entity, the term includes an officer, director, partner, deacon, trustee, councilmember, or other elected or appointed individual responsible for the governance of the entity.

(k) "Qualified direct donor" means any person required to obtain a food establishment permit under chapter 246-215 WAC, as it existed as of January 1, 2022, including a retail grocer, wholesaler, agricultural producer, restaurant, caterer, school food authority, or institution of higher education as defined in RCW **28B.10.016**.

(l)(i) "Safety and safety-related labeling" means a marking intended to communicate information to a consumer related to a food product's safety. "Safety and safety-related labeling" includes any marking that federal or state law requires to be affixed to a food product including, but not limited to, markings placed on infant formula consistent with 21 C.F.R. Sec. 107.20, as that regulation existed as of January 1, 2021.

(ii) "Safety and safety-related labeling" does not include a pull date required to be placed on perishable packaged food under RCW **15.130.300** or a "best by," "best if used by," "use by," or "sell by"

date or similarly phrased date intended to communicate information to a consumer regarding the freshness or quality of a food product.

(3)(a) A person or gleaner is not subject to civil or criminal liability arising from the nature, age, packaging, or condition of apparently wholesome food or an apparently fit grocery product that the person or gleaner donates in good faith to a nonprofit organization for ultimate distribution to needy individuals, except that this subsection does not apply to an injury to or death of an ultimate user or recipient of the food or grocery product that results from an act or omission of the donor constituting gross negligence or intentional misconduct.

(b) A qualified direct donor may donate food directly to end recipients for consumption. A qualified direct donor is not subject to civil or criminal liability arising from the nature, age, packaging, or condition of apparently wholesome food or an apparently fit grocery product that the qualified direct donor donates in good faith to a needy individual. The donation of nonperishable food that is fit for human consumption, but that has exceeded the labeled shelf-life date recommended by the manufacturer, is an activity covered by the exclusion from civil or criminal liability under this section.

(c) The donation of perishable food that is fit for human consumption, but that has exceeded the labeled shelf-life date recommended by the manufacturer, is an activity covered by the exclusion from civil or criminal liability under this section if the person that distributes the food to the end recipient makes a good faith evaluation that the food to be donated is wholesome.

(4) A person who allows the collection or gleaning of donations on property owned or occupied by the person by gleaners, or paid or unpaid representatives of a nonprofit organization, for ultimate distribution to needy individuals is not subject to civil or criminal liability that arises due to the injury or death of the gleaner or representative, except that this subsection does not apply to an injury or death that results from an act or omission of the person constituting gross negligence or intentional misconduct.

(5) If some or all of the donated food and grocery products do not meet safety and safety-related labeling standards imposed by federal, state, and local laws and regulations, the person or gleaner who donates the food and grocery products is not subject to civil or criminal liability in accordance with this section if the nonprofit organization or other end recipient that receives the donated food or grocery products:

(a) Is informed by the donor of the distressed or defective condition of the donated food or grocery products;

(b) Agrees to recondition the donated food or grocery products to comply with all the safety and safety-related labeling standards prior to distribution; and

(c) Is knowledgeable of the standards to properly recondition the donated food or grocery product.

(6) This section may not be construed to create liability.

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