Making the Healthier Choice
the Easier Choice

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Why it matters:
Support Better Health by Making Healthy Choices More Convenient

A healthy diet is a key component of one’s overall health. Research suggests that improving access to healthy foods can lower the risk for obesity, diabetes, and many other chronic health conditions.

Accessing healthy foods is an especially big challenge for individuals who are food insecure. At the same time, while many food banks and food pantries are offering more healthful options, other barriers, such as cooking knowledge and experience, familiarity with ingredients, and time can affect participant acceptability and desirability of these offerings.

More convenient foods, which tend to be those that are highly processed, are often less healthy. Making healthier food options more convenient can promote an increased consumption of those foods that support better health.

Promoting these foods benefits your participants, and it also benefits your operation. Many of the healthier choices are also more perishable, so moving those foods off the shelves and out of the donation bins keeps this food from going to waste and requires less use of fridge and freezer space.
What Does “Healthy” Even Mean?

There is no one accepted definition of “healthy” or “nutritious” food. Many food banks and other organizations have developed tools to rank the nutritional quality of their foods. One such resource is the **Foods to Encourage (F2E) List** from Feeding America (see resources list for more info).

Foods that are less processed or have fewer ingredients added are often more nutrient-dense. This includes fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, beans and other legumes, and fresh or frozen meat, fish, and poultry.

Here are some basic guidelines:

- **In general**: Minimize sugars, salt(sodium), hydrogenated oils (trans fats), and saturated fats.
- **Fruits and Vegetables**: Aim for fresh or frozen. If canned or dried, minimize added sugars and sodium.
- **Whole Grains**: Offer 100% whole grain basics like oatmeal, brown rice, and barley. Provide whole grain breads, pastas, cereals, and crackers.
- **Animal Protein**: Highlight fresh eggs and meat, fish, and poultry that is fresh or frozen. Minimize sodium (less than 480 mg/serving) in canned and frozen protein options.
- **Vegetarian Protein**: Offer dried or low-sodium canned beans and other legumes. Nuts and seeds are also a healthy source of protein.
- **Dairy**: Provide nonfat or low-fat milk and yogurt that is unflavored and unsweetened.
- **Reduce Liquid Calories**: Emphasize 100% fruit juices, plain water, and milk. Minimize soda pop and other sugar-sweetened beverages.
Creating a Strong Foundation: Increasing Your Supply of Healthier Food Choices

The next big challenge is how to bring more of those healthful foods into your supply. Here are a few tips:

Using “Nudges” to Promote Healthy Foods

Behavioral economics looks at how psychological, social, cognitive, and emotional factors affect economic decisions of consumers. This field of study is being used to inform how school lunch programs and food banks can make changes to “nudge” students and participants to subconsciously make healthier food choices.

List foods you want more (and less) of on your website and at collection sites.

Make sure that healthy foods are on your bulk purchasing lists.

Consider declining donations of soda pop and other sugar-sweetened beverages.

Consider partnering with farms and gardens to increase fresh produce.
“Nudges” are no-cost and low-cost practices – such as using more appealing lighting, packaging, and signage – that can encourage your participants to choose the healthier options.

Below are suggestions for how to make the healthier choice the easier choice:

**Highlight Food with Good Lighting**
- Improving the lighting in your distribution areas is often one of the easiest changes you can make. It’s important that participants can see the food they’re choosing, and it also can affect their emotional state and other psychological factors that play into their food choices.
- Make sure there’s enough light where food is being handed out.
- Focus on the lighting in areas where healthier food is being provided.

**Promote Healthier Options With More Prominent Placement**
- Hand out healthier foods at the beginning of the line.
- If clients are choosing foods from shelves or bins, put the healthier option in front of or on top of their less healthy counterpart (ex: canned fruit in light syrup vs. canned fruit in heavy syrup; low-sodium soup vs. regular (high) sodium soup).
- Put healthy foods at eye level on shelves.
- Place the healthy items in two separate locations to increase desire to take that item.
- Pre-package a bundle of healthy ingredients to make them more convenient to grab.

**Make Healthier Options More Visually Appealing**
- Display healthier food in baskets, crates, or other containers that attract the eye.
- Use brightly colored tablecloths to make the display more appealing.
- If you pre-bag food, set up a display so people know what they are getting in their bag.
- Combine healthy ingredients that can be used to make a simple dish - like tomato sauce, onions, and vegetables for pasta sauce - and display them at the front of the line.
- Set up your food distribution like a grocery store.

**Use Signage and Literature to Promote Ingredients and Recipes**
- Use signage to familiarize people with foods, promote their health benefits, and provide preparation suggestions.
- Create signs for commonly distributed foods. Laminate and reuse them. Display them in plastic sign holders on the tables where food is distributed.
- Offer handouts that include health benefits, storage and serving suggestions, and simple recipes.
- Provide recipes--give your participants more confidence that they will be able to cook with healthy ingredients!
Promote Healthy Foods with Food Demos and Sampling!

**Tasting**
Taste testing can help increase people’s acceptability of healthy foods, which in-turn can be a helpful nudge to get them to take the healthier options.

**Cooking**
Demonstrations can make cooking look easier and more desirable to participants. They can also draw in participants by providing an interactive, engaging activity.

Using cooking and tasting demos is especially helpful for items that participants might be less familiar with, like winter squash, beets, jicama, etc. Figure out in advance what ingredients will be available in greater quantities and focus on those.

**Food Demos and Sampling**

**Tips and Suggestions:**
- Find a passionate volunteer to lead this effort.
- Place the demo where people are waiting in line / in waiting room – consider where demo is most visible!
- Make food ahead of time – like a pot of soup.
- Make the display look nice!
- Provide recipes for what you are sampling.
- Usually about one third to half of the people will actually sample, so you won’t need samples for everyone in line.
- Assemble a travel kitchen that can be used at more than one site. Some items to include are:
  - Folding table or rolling cart with shelf, recipes in accordion folder, napkin holder, electric skillet or stove, blender (for smoothies), cooler, knives, small portion cups for serving, small sample spoons, toothpicks, trays, measuring cups, whisks, spatulas, mixing bowls, a box with spices, oil, vinegars, vegetable bouillon, tomato paste, coconut milk, and gloves.
Additional Tips

1. Help people bring food to their car.
2. Provide shopping carts to get around the food bank.
3. Provide reusable bags.
4. Train volunteers on how to talk up healthier foods.

Resources

Recipe Resources
- Grow Happy Kids - http://growhappykids.org/recipes/
- WSU Eating Well for Less - http://nutrition.wsu.edu/recipes/
- WSU Food Sense Recipe Incentive Cards - http://nutrition.wsu.edu/incentive-recipes/
- Pittsburgh Food Bank Recipe Rainbow - https://www.pittsburghfoodbank.org/resources/recipe-rainbow/
- Oregon State University Recipes: http://oregonstate.edu/dept/kbrecrecipes
- Public Health Seattle & King County Recipes: http://kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/nutrition/recipes.aspx

Other resources
- Signs for 30+ fruits and vegetables, highlighting health benefits, storage tips, and more – http://Lancaster.unl.edu/nep/fruitveggie.shtml
- Food Hub http://healthyfoodbankhub.feedingamerica.org/ helpful resources and tools, including the Foods to Encourage List, recipes, and more information about healthy food distribution.
- Healthy food bank hub video from Feeding America on ‘The Power of Nudges’: https://youtu.be/aJmgN5wavNY?list=PLKWIHHYoS35gihjPY3fzQtfmfe4RfNTuw

Research
- Behavioral Economics in Nutrition Center – School lunch and child nutrition grant opportunities- http://ben.cornell.edu/