

Donating Safe and Nutritious Food to Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens

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Introduction

The United States has an abundance of food; yet many people in the U.S. still suffer from food insecurity and use food assistance such as food pantries and soup kitchens. Much of the food in the U.S. food supply is wasted but some of it could be utilized by hungry families. In fact, it is estimated that 30 to 40 percent of the food supply is wasted (not available for human consumption) in the U.S., with 31 percent food loss at the retail and consumer levels. Donations of safe and healthy food by food retailers and consumers to entities such as food pantries and soup kitchens can help provide food to hungry families and also reduce food waste.

Some groups may be reluctant to donate food that would otherwise be wasted because of the fear of liability if the food they donate makes someone sick. Therefore, in 1996, the U.S. Congress passed the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act to reduce potential donor liability if donations are made in good faith. In particular, this act can help grocery stores, restaurants, and similar retail organizations feel more comfortable donating food rather than needlessly sending food to the landfill.

However, it is critical that the food donated to such entities is as safe and nutritious as possible so that more people have access to safe and healthy food, rather than just whatever food has been in the back of someone's cupboard too long. This lesson provides food safety tips for people who are donating food to such entities, as well as for groups organizing food drives.

Donating Food to a Food Bank or Pantry

When donating food to a food bank or food pantry, it is important to not just “clean out your



cupboard” and donate the foods that you don't want or can't use anymore. Food pantries also do not want to waste food, but do not want to provide unsafe or unhealthy food to their customers either. Cash donations are also greatly appreciated by food banks and food pantries.

In order to help people maintain the balance of not wasting food but also providing safe and healthy food to food banks and food pantries, here are some answers to frequently asked questions on the topic:

Can I donate “expired” food? **NO**

- Do NOT donate food that is past its “best by,” “use by,” or “sell by” date. More information on these dates on food product labels is available from Kansas State University Research and Extension¹.

- It is considered safe for food pantries to distribute some foods² and for consumers to use some foods³ for certain amounts of time past these dates, which varies by the type of food. Note that baby food and baby formula should never be used past their expiration date. However, the best practice is to not donate any food past these dates because it may take a while for the food to actually get on the food pantry shelf and then to the consumer.
- Do NOT donate any foods that are spoiled or rotten (or starting to look that way) because the food will likely not make it to the beneficiary while it is still safe and/or enjoyable to eat and the food pantry would needlessly have to throw away and possibly clean up after the food.

Can I donate damaged packages? **In general, NO**

- If a canned food has a sharp dent, a dent deep enough to rest a finger in, severe rust pits, swollen or bulging ends, or any evidence of leaking, the food is unsafe to eat and should be discarded. If canned FRUIT has a small dent, is not leaking, rusty, or swollen and smells OK, it should be safe to eat. (Canned vegetables or other canned foods with any size of dent should be thrown away.)
- Any glass jars that have a damaged tamper-resistant seal or cracks or chips should also be discarded because the contained food may not be safe.
- Plastic or paperboard containers that have a damaged tamper-resistant seal should be discarded.
- The University of Wisconsin Safe Food Pantries project⁴ has excellent resources listing signs that foods may be unsafe to eat and should be discarded. North Carolina State University⁵ also has a flowchart poster showing when it is safe to use dented cans.

Can I donate home-canned or home-prepared foods?

NO

- Because of the risk of botulism in improperly canned foods and the large variation in the level of safety of the methods used by home canners, food banks, and food pantries should

not accept any home-canned items.

- Home baked items may have a shorter shelf life than commercially prepared baked goods and present other food safety risks, so food pantries should only accept food baked at a licensed establishment.

Can I donate re-packaged food? **NO**

- Donate food that is in its original packages with the label still intact. Packaging should be unopened and not damaged due to the risk of the food getting contaminated during re-packaging or if the packaging is damaged.

Can I donate things other than shelf-stable (non-perishable) foods? **It depends**

- Contact the food pantry or food bank to confirm if they can accept perishable items. They need to have adequate refrigeration available to be able to accept and safely keep perishable foods. Be sure to check with them before donating.
- Perishable foods should be in their unopened original packaging with the label intact.
- Milk and juice must be pasteurized.
- Meat and poultry must be processed under inspection and bear the mark of inspection. Hunted deer must be donated through a KDA-approved process that meets several requirements to limit the food safety risks. Donated eggs must follow the requirements as specified in K-State Research and Extension publication MF3138⁶.
- Be sure that perishable foods have been kept below 41°F and arrive at the pantry with an internal temperature of below 41°F
- Be sure that frozen foods have not thawed and been re-frozen. Check to be sure that frozen foods do not have large ice crystals (which indicates it may have thawed and re-frozen) or are soft to the touch or leaking.

Can I donate fresh produce? **It depends**

- First, contact the food pantry or food bank to confirm they can accept fresh produce.
- Be sure to use good gardening practices or ensure that the person who raised the produce



used such practices. For example, do not use fresh, uncomposted manure for fertilizer. K-State Research and Extension has more information on food safety in growing produce.⁷

- If possible, produce should be picked in the morning and delivered to the food pantry or food bank for distribution that same day.
- Some produce items should be picked before they are fully ripe to extend their shelf life.
- Handle produce gently to prevent bruises, nicks, and cuts, which can all cause produce to spoil faster.
- For many types of produce, it is best NOT to wash them before distribution because the extra moisture can promote spoilage. However, if produce such as potatoes are dirty, they could be rinsed with potable (drinkable) water and allowed to dry completely before storing.
- Keep fresh produce as cool as possible, but do not freeze.
- Donate produce that has a remaining shelf life of at least 3 to 5 days.
- The University of Missouri has additional useful tips on Safely Harvesting and Handling Produce for Donation to Food Pantries and Food Banks⁸ and on Donating Produce from Farms and Gardens⁹.

What should I donate?

- When donating, try to donate foods that would fill a healthy and safe plate for the consumer, based on MyPlate recommendations.
- Cash donations are also very useful to food banks and food pantries as they can generally buy food in bulk much more cheaply than consumers. Also, they can buy the items most needed by their clients and will not have to take the time to sort and move donated items.
- The University of Wisconsin also has resources providing more information on good foods to donate¹⁰ and foods not wanted in donations¹¹.

Organizing a food drive?

A community food drive is an excellent opportunity for donors to participate in a local

Food Group	Suggested Non-Perishable Items
 Fruits	Canned in light syrup or juice; dried: - peaches - fruit cocktail - oranges - pears - applesauce - apples - cranberries (canned/dried) - raisins - pineapple - 100% fruit juice
 Vegetables	Low sodium canned: - corn - peas - carrots - beets - green & wax beans - mixed vegetables - sweet potatoes/yams - tomatoes and tomato sauces - soup
 Grains	Healthful Grains: - whole-grain crackers - brown rice - whole grain pasta - whole-grain breakfast cereal - whole wheat flour - cornmeal - oatmeal - granola bars
 Protein	Protein Foods: - canned or dried beans: kidney, navy, garbanzo, pinto, great northern, black - canned tuna or salmon (water packed) - canned chicken - nuts: walnuts, pecans, peanuts, almonds - nut butters
 Dairy	Dairy: - nonfat dry milk - evaporated milk - shelf-stable (UHT) milk
For individuals with limited kitchen access: - single-serve, canned pull-tab foods such as fruits, vegetables, pastas, stews, chili, beanie-weenies, ravioli, meats such as Vienna sausages, chicken and noodles, pasta with meat, etc. - individual 100% juice boxes	
Contact your local food pantry to find out what other items they may need. Consider gluten-free, dairy-free, nut free items as well.	

service project and for recipients to obtain safe and nutritious food. However, it is important when organizing a food drive to encourage people to donate safe and healthy foods and foods that the food bank or pantry needs. Potential donors should be provided with the list of suggested nutritious and safe items that the food bank or pantry needs. Organizers could also make specific suggestions of food types to donate on different days of the week or another method to get a variety of healthy and safe foods that will benefit food pantry clients. The University of Missouri has further tips available on organizing healthy food drives, including a list of nutritious foods to donate¹².

Donating to a Soup Kitchen/Prepared Foods

Many times, after a large fundraising meal, festival, or other event where large amounts of food are prepared, there may also be large amounts of food left over. Donating the leftover food to soup kitchens, homeless shelters, or similar facilities may help feed people in need and avoid wasting the food, but it is always important to check with the relevant food safety agency (in Kansas, the Kansas Department of Agriculture) to ensure that relevant regulations are followed and that the food is as safe as possible when donating.



Donating Safe and Nutritious Food

The Kansas Department of Agriculture (food safety inspection authority for Kansas) is developing a formal policy on donations of prepared foods to soup kitchens and similar entities. Until that is developed, it is advised to follow all the best practices listed below.

Best Practices

- Although there is currently no formal regulatory policy on this matter in Kansas, it currently is a best practice to only donate food that was prepared by a licensed food establishment (such as a restaurant or caterer).
- The food must have been handled throughout its preparation, serving, and clean-up using good food safety practices, such as those outlined in a K-State Research and Extension publication on *Volunteer Quantity Cooking Safety*¹³ (MF3213).
 - Do NOT donate food that has been served, such as put out on a buffet or put on a plate at a table. The only foods that can be donated are those that were prepared but not served (not put out on a buffet line or put on a plate at a table) to reduce the likelihood that the food was contaminated during serving.
 - The food must have been kept either above 135°F or below 41°F. If the product was cooled after cooking, the internal product temperature must get from 135°F to 41°F or below within a total of six hours, but must get to below 70°F within the first two hours. Upon arrival at the food pantry/soup kitchen, its internal temperature must be measured with a food thermometer to be either above 135°F or below 41°F. Insulated containers may be needed to keep the food at the proper temperature.
 - Foods must be stored and transported in a food-safe container. For example, food must NOT be stored in a garbage bag.
 - The food should be clearly labeled with the name of the food, date of preparation, and the donor of the food.



- Everyone handling the food must follow good hygienic practices such as regular hand washing.
- Any donated prepared food should be used within 1 to 2 days. The maximum time prepared food can be held before serving is 7 days at 41°F or less.

Next Steps

Based on the information above, develop a list of the top three points that you will consider the next time you donate to a food bank or soup kitchen or organize a food drive:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



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- ¹ Available from: www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/MF3204.pdf
- ² University of Wisconsin Safe Food Pantries project. Available from: <http://fyi.uwex.edu/safehealthypantries/files/2015/05/Tool-10b.pdf>
- ³ More information on safe food storage times in the cupboard: www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/MF3131.pdf, and in the refrigerator and freezer: www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/MF3130.pdf
- ⁴ University of Wisconsin Safe Food Pantries project. Available from: <http://fyi.uwex.edu/safehealthypantries/food-safety-in-your-pantry/put-safe-food-on-the-shelf/>
- ⁵ North Carolina State University Food Pantries and Food Banks materials: <https://foodsafety.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Can-I-use-this-can.pdf?fwd=no>
- ⁶ KSU/Kansas Department of Agriculture publication on Food Safety for Kansas Farmers Market Vendors: Regulations and Best Practices. Available from: www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/MF3138.pdf
- ⁷ KSU Publication on “Garden to Plate: Food Safety for School and Community Gardens” www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/MF3152.pdf; KSU produce safety website for growers selling produce: www.ksre.k-state.edu/foodsafety/produce/index.html
- ⁸ Available from: <http://foodsecurity.missouri.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Harvesting-and-Handling.pdf>
- ⁹ Available from: <http://foodsecurity.missouri.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Donating.pdf>
- ¹⁰ Available at: <http://fyi.uwex.edu/safehealthypantries/files/2015/05/Tool-4b.pdf>
- ¹¹ Available at: <http://fyi.uwex.edu/safehealthypantries/files/2015/05/Tool-3b.pdf>
- ¹² Available from: <http://foodsecurity.missouri.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Healthy-Food-Drive-Tips.pdf>
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