INTRODUCTION

As more food banks and partner agencies work to expand their distribution of Foods to Encourage (F2E), leaders of these organizations are faced with important decisions on how to maximize client selection of these foods. While one-on-one and group based nutrition education is a common and beneficial approach, it is not always a viable option for resource-limited or high-volume organizations. Through subtle changes in the food pantry environment, nudges can encourage client selection of F2E and may serve as either a stand-alone or complementary strategy for balancing the plates of food-insecure families while also minimizing food waste. As fully described in The Power of Nudges: Making the Healthy Choice the Easy Choice in Food Pantries, nudges involve the application of basic modifications to the distribution environment that require little or no investment costs. In 2015, Feeding America partnered with Cornell University researchers to evaluate the effect of nudges at ten food pantry sites affiliated with three Feeding America food banks, including the Food Bank for Larimer County, The Community FoodBank of New Jersey, and the North Texas Food Bank. Using online survey data and perspectives from individual staff interviews, the goal of this cross-site summary is to describe commonalities and unique experiences at food banks and agency pantries when implementing nutrition-based policies and practices, including nudges. These findings highlight considerations for implementing nudges that can inform the success of future nudge interventions at food banks across the broader network.
DEFINING NUDGES

Nudges are strategies designed to leverage cues in the environment that influence consumers’ decisions. Adapted from the for-profit grocery sector and school lunchrooms, these approaches can also be applied by food pantries to increase client selection of F2E. Nudges can be particularly beneficial for food pantries that do not have the capacity to incorporate traditional nutrition education strategies, such as classes or workshops. For pantries that currently provide nutrition education, nudges can complement these efforts by offering positive environmental reinforcements for making healthy choices. Nudging perishable F2E items with traditionally low take rates can be especially helpful for reducing potential food waste.

As shown in Figure 1, implementation of different nudge strategies at pantries led to an overall increase in average take rates of F2E, especially when compared to take rates at the control sites (sites without nudges), although rates varied by the type of nudge implemented. The F2E selected for nudges included whole wheat bread, oatmeal, brown rice, cabbage, carrots, and onions. The effect of nudges was determined by observing and analyzing pre and post-intervention data about nudged items. For complete details, refer to The Power of Nudges full report (Nutrition Nudge Research Methodology section, page 23).

As a strategy to promote healthy food selection, nudges offer an advantage to food pantries wishing to distribute more F2E. The main prerequisite for a successful nudge intervention is for a food pantry to follow a client choice distribution style. Other requirements for nudges should be considered before implementing nudge strategies, such as staff knowledge, attitudes and willingness to correctly implement nudges. The baseline level of readiness for nudges will vary from pantry to pantry and can be developed over time.

**Figure 1. Overview of Pre and Post-Intervention Average F2E Take Rates, by Nudge Type**
PROMOTING HEALTHY FOOD POLICIES AND COLLABORATION

Organizational cultures within food banks supporting nutrition initiatives work best when there is cohesion in policies across multiple departments that proactively work in unison towards sourcing and distributing F2E. Within food pantries, the same cohesion of policy and personnel is necessary due to their direct relationships and interactions with clients seeking food.

When food banks have buy-in from leadership and management staff about nutrition as a priority for food distribution and education, then this culture is passed on to food pantries. Food pantry programs often heavily rely on a Feeding America member food bank to provide F2E products. Thus, cooperative relationships between food banks and pantries are essential for implementing large scale F2E distribution. Coordination within food banks among different departments, from food sourcing, nutrition education, agency relations, ordering, to warehouse operations, is a complex procedure which relies on multi-level dedication and commitment.

In addition, efforts to increase education among food bank and pantry staff regarding health disparities pantry clients may face can lead to greater awareness about the relationship between food, diet and disease which, in turn, supports the promotion of F2E. In many of the food pantries either staff or volunteers may help clients through the grocery area and have influence in what clients may choose. Since food pantry staff assist with ordering, stocking, and escorting clients in pantries, they have valuable information about client behavior and preferences. Therefore, including pantry staff in decision-making processes regarding procurement of F2E is vital. Another consideration is that staff who assist clients with making healthier selections may also be affected by nutrition-related health conditions, such as diabetes. At the Community FoodBank of New Jersey, food bank and pantry staff are included as beneficiaries of nutrition education initiatives too.

“...to have staff buy-in, they need education too... learning about the health disparities of our clients and their actual needs and wants based on other research. If my own peers were educated about that, I think that they would be accepting to the Foods to Encourage policy and providing more Foods to Encourage to our clients.”

—Management Pantry Staff, New Jersey

At food bank and pantry sites participating in the nudge research experiments, policies and guidelines for F2E have evolved over time, but some have been implemented more recently; a majority of pantry survey respondents noticed that their food bank partners have made noticeable changes in distributing healthier foods and offering nutrition education in the past two years. However, at the Food Bank for Larimer County, nutrition-based policies and initiatives have been in place for over a decade.

Moreover, among pantry survey respondents, staff reported that they communicate with food banks frequently, typically on a daily and weekly basis. Although communication is generally geared towards ordering or picking up food, it is also an appropriate time for reinforcing the movement of available F2E into food pantries. Direct lines of communication between food bank personnel and pantry staff can empower the promotion of F2E items.

GAINING STAFF AND VOLUNTEER BUY-IN FOR NUDGES

Based on conversations and surveys with staff, achieving collective buy-in and support for nudges was easier due to prior efforts to promote sourcing and distribution of F2E. Each of the food banks involved in the nudge research experiment, North Texas Food Bank, the Community FoodBank of New Jersey, and the Food Bank for Larimer County in Colorado, are dedicated to improving the quantity and quality of healthy foods they distribute, including fruit, vegetables (including the hard seven—potatoes, apples, onions, cabbage, carrots, sweet potatoes, and oranges), whole grains, lean protein and low-fat dairy. In fact, these food banks sourced between 51% - 75% F2E during Fiscal Year 2015. Additionally, each of the three food banks has a nutritionist on staff who is creating and implementing nutrition education strategies and programs for clients, as well as developing trainings and general communication pamphlets for food bank and pantry
Feeding America
The Power of Nudges: Peer Insights and Perspectives

staff. These are good examples of how food banks are building an organizational culture that leads to buy-in for improving the distribution of food with higher nutritional value for people they serve.

“**I had a woman the other day who wouldn’t take a bag of white potatoes because she didn’t know how to cook it. And so that was really eye-opening for me in the sense that... we need to provide some really basic information. We’ve gotten an influx of... kale and potatoes... and I found that putting someone... behind that table and talking about the things makes such a huge difference in how many... clients will take.”**

—Food Pantry Staff, New Jersey

Furthermore, food bank staff reported that most internal stakeholders (clients, staff, and management) and external stakeholders (board members, local politicians, and community members) are supportive of increasing procurement and distribution of F2E and implementing nutrition education. **Across all survey respondents, programmatic staff were identified as the most active players in nutrition/F2E education among stakeholder groups, demonstrating the high level of buy-in from these sites.** However, despite buy-in, there were staff at a pantry site who were hesitant to implement a nudge during the research experiment. This hesitance may occur even when the organization is supportive of promoting F2E, which is why training and continual communication about new initiatives with staff is important. Additionally, it is imperative to reach the volunteers who assist with pantry management, as they, according to pantry staff, are usually receptive to change and want what is best for clients. Overall, all pantry staff survey respondents wanted to learn more about low-cost, easy to implement distribution techniques that might increase clients’ uptake of healthier food. In most cases, food pantry staff were supportive of increasing F2E through nudges.

“They (volunteers) are the heart of the organization; they are very much the heart of the pantry. So they help us with accounting, they help us with sorting, they help us with gleaning, and just customer contact, that’s probably the biggest part of our role here is to uplift and put a smile on our face and on the faces of our clients. I like to involve my volunteers and make them feel like it’s their pantry so I solicit their ideas and their suggestions.”

—Pantry Staff, New Jersey

**DETERMINING READINESS FACTORS FOR NUDGE SUCCESS**

The goals of nudges in food pantry settings are two-fold: to positively influence client selection of F2E, and in doing so, possibly reduce the waste of perishable and nutritious foods. For any nudge implementation, several readiness factors should be considered to improve the success of nudge interventions. After considering each of the factors, staff and management may realize that they need to better prepare for nudge implementation, or change intervention strategies, or source different F2E.

Furthermore, by discussing these readiness factors across departments and between food banks and pantries, staff and management may discover other operational areas that could be strengthened in order to support organizational goals and objectives for promoting healthier food environments and choices.
NUDGE READINESS FACTORS CHECKLIST

- Does the food pantry have a client choice distribution style?
- Is there a reliable supply of the food item to be nudged?
- Is there sufficient client demand for healthier foods?
- Is there an opportunity to nudge perishable healthy foods?
- Is the cultural appropriateness of the food or the nudge being taken into account?
- Is there interest in nutrition education but limited funding available?
- Are different staff or volunteers within the organization aligned on nudges?
- Are the organization’s policies supportive of using nudges to move healthy foods?

SUPPORTING CLIENT CHOICE DISTRIBUTION

The client choice pantry model allows clients to select groceries on their own, providing a level of autonomy not achieved in traditional pre-boxed or pre-bagged food pantry models. Client choice pantries can assess changes in inventory to tailor ordering to match client needs while reducing the amount of foods distributed that may not be consumed. *Food pantries using the client choice model have the ability to apply nudges and marketing strategies that are often seen in grocery stores or other consumer-driven food environments.*

All partner agencies participating in the nudge research employed some variation of the client choice distribution model, which contributed to the effectiveness of nudges in these settings.

“The idea of choice is really to empower the client to be more a part of the decision as opposed to having it made for them. And the clients seem to really like that aspect. And I think it really makes [the clients] feel better. We see a lot of big smiles.”
—Pantry Staff, New Jersey

“It’s more dignified. It gives somebody some control and some choice over what they’re coming in and getting because you’ve got people with a choice, sit there, can look, think about it. So to me, client choice is so much better, because that way, the clients are actually choosing something that they will eat, versus getting something that they won’t, think it’s a more efficient use of our funding because we can see what people are actually wanting to eat and can work to try to provide those items instead of just giving them what comes in and we can tailor it that way.”
—Management Pantry Staff, Texas
At the time of the nudge research experiments, the client choice model had been implemented at participating pantry sites for varying lengths of time, from less than one year to over 10 years. Although food bank and pantry staff interviewees all stated that a client choice pantry model is highly preferred, staff did acknowledge that there may be additional costs incurred to accommodate this model including more refrigeration, more storage, or possibly more volunteers, depending on the pantry location.

**SUPPLYING F2E AND SUSTAINING CAPACITY FOR DISTRIBUTION**

It is important to have ample supply and appropriate storage for many F2E items that are perishable, such as lean protein, low-fat dairy, and fresh produce. While most of these foods are usually available at food banks, pantries can often have a difficult time accepting large volumes of these products due to limitations in cold storage. As illustrated through the survey findings from food bank staff, more than half of the personnel across all three sites reported doing as much as possible within their facilities to procure and store F2E but they still need more capacity to increase F2E distribution and support nutrition education programs. During the nudge research experiments which lasted between 14-17 weeks at pantry sites, several experienced some inconsistency in their supply of nudged F2E and had to substitute items. In some cases, substitution of nudged F2E items may have affected overall take rates by clients. Since the nudge research experiments occurred between two seasons, summer and early fall, seasonality may have also played a role in availability of F2E. Additionally, it bears mentioning that products such as lean protein and dairy are quite popular and may not require nudging. That said, there should also be sufficient cooling capacity for perishable F2E to be nudged so that they are kept in optimal condition and will thus appeal to client selection.

**ASSESSING AND RESPONDING TO CLIENT DEMAND FOR NUDGED F2E**

Building sufficient client demand for F2E can be initiated by nutrition education initiatives and further cultivated through nudges. Clients, like the general population, will have different levels of nutrition literacy, including skills and knowledge regarding food identification, selection, and preparation of F2E. For popular F2E, nudges may be the only strategy required to successfully increase take rates. On the other hand, sampling and taste testing was considered more essential than nudges when distributing unfamiliar produce and it may require more than one exposure or pantry visit before clients choose a new item. For example, at a pantry site in Colorado, staff deliver a highly successful program 1-2 times a week that allows clients to sample a variety of perishable F2E that are in high supply for that week and receive a healthy recipe for that F2E. Many of the staff interviewees mentioned that taste tests were the best way to encourage people to try and select new F2E. In other instances, it is just a matter of time; staff at a pantry in Texas observed that after putting out whole wheat spaghetti it took time for clients to try it, but they eventually did. In addition, the resources required to offer this form of nutrition education and its potential benefits should be compared and weighed against the lower resource requirements associated with nudges.

"While the Food Share sites are client choice, staff do not necessarily encourage partner agencies to offer a client choice distribution style because they are smaller and tend to be less resourced. Staff indicated that this may change as they are beginning to think about tiering agencies. Currently, staff felt that nudges are great for high volume pantries, such as Food Share."

—Management Pantry Staff, Colorado

In cases when a nudge is seemingly less effective, this may be due to the fact that there is already pre-existing popularity for the nudged F2E item. For example, at a pantry site in Texas where onions were being nudged the take rates were very high before the nudge was implemented, there was minimal increase in clients taking more onions after nudge implementation.
In addition, food pantries should be attuned to the demographics of their clientele and food preferences based on culture and customs before selecting foods to nudge. While nudges are considered universal strategies for influencing human behavior, staff should select items that reflect the cultural values, literacy, and food preparation capacity of clients served.

Finally, in cases when there is high demand for a less healthy option of food and there is an alternative, then pantry staff may consider making the decision to transition to only offering the healthier option. All of the food pantries implementing nudges during the research experiments claimed that they had narrowed or fully eliminated the distribution of less healthy options when possible. For instance, following the implementation of nudges for whole wheat bread, the take rates showed that nearly all clients were willing to select whole wheat bread over white bread. These findings suggest the discontinuation of offering white bread all together may be a possibility that could save time and money.

**I think anything in print would be very challenging simply because we have clients who speak so many different languages... English, Spanish, Russian, and Chinese (Mandarin). We had a volunteer who spoke fluent Mandarin and she would volunteer on Thursday nights. And it was amazing to me the difference in what some of our agency clients would take when she was there and talking with them versus when she wasn’t. It was very interesting to watch how having her there impacted the things that they were doing or the choices that they were making.**

—Pantry Staff, New Jersey

**NUDGING PERISHABLE F2E**

When F2E are perishable, food banks and pantries may encounter challenges with efficient distribution. To address this issue, food pantries can consider combining different nudge strategies for a single F2E item to boost the likelihood that clients will take the item. For example, if a perishable product is excessive in supply and needs to be moved quickly, then the multiple exposures nudge may be most appropriate because the goal is to distribute maximum product; however, other nudge strategies such as convenience and order could be applied too. In cases when client demand for an F2E item has been historically low, then nudge strategies such as signage could be used as a way to communicate the value of the food item in combination with another complementary nudge such as priming. Finally, it is important to consider nutrition education strategies in conjunction with nudges to increase the number of clients who take an item.

| **Convenience:** | Lowering the effort required to select an item. The idea is to minimize the distance between an item and the hands of clients who could select it. |
| **Multiple Exposures:** | Increasing the number of times and/or locations that a food item is offered, thereby increasing the likelihood of item selection. |
| **Order:** | Giving food items preferential placement in the food pantry. This could be to list an item first in a list of options, or first in a row of choices. |
| **Priming:** | Exposing clients to environmental cues about specific food items, often at a very subtle or subconscious level, prior to the client’s moment of choice |

—Nutrition Program Management Staff, New Jersey
FEEDING AMERICA FOOD BANKS ARE PAVING THE WAY TO BETTER HEALTH

The implementation of nudges within food pantries involves the manipulation of the existing environment, usually requiring little to no additional costs to start or maintain. Additionally, collaboration between food pantries and food banks to source low-cost fruits, vegetables, and other perishable F2E, can result in a long-lasting, healthy initiative with minimal expense and improved collaboration. The nudges research experiment implemented at food pantries in partnership with food banks has shown that small changes can make a big difference in clients’ selection of food. These changes can add up to healthier lives for Americans experiencing food insecurity, as together we lead the way to a healthier future.

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“"If it's front and center at Feeding America and they're making a big deal of it, other food banks start to follow. Everybody wants to be a leader in a new initiative, so it gives us the opportunity to do some good things with nutrition with Feeding America's support and resources.”
—Nutrition Program Management Staff, New Jersey
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