

# Food Pantry Enhancements Encourage Healthy Choices by Customers

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## Summary

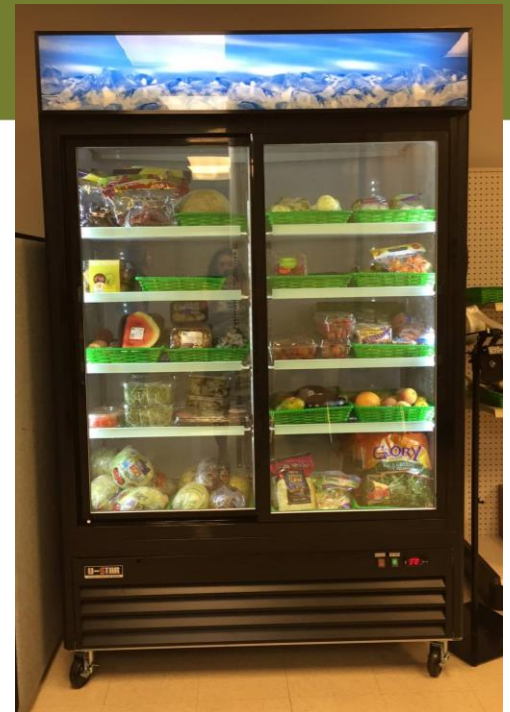
Rates of obesity and food insecurity have been on the rise and a major concern in Cabarrus County for many years. The food pantry enhancement initiative aimed to encourage clients to make healthier food choices while shopping at Cooperative Christian Ministry (CCM). By incorporating a variety of evidence based strategies, including shelf labeling and point-of-decision prompts, staff have seen a positive change in the items client's place in their carts. These efforts along with volunteer nutrition trainings highlight CCM's commitment to their client's health.

## Challenge

According to the 2016 Cabarrus Community Needs Assessment, 40% of adults aged 18 and older are overweight, while 30% of adults aged 20 and older are obese. In addition to concerns surrounding growing obesity rates, according to Feeding America, roughly 1 in 8 Cabarrus County residents are facing food insecurity and are not able to access healthy and nutritious foods. Lacking constant access to healthy food is related to negative health outcomes such as weight gain and premature mortality, particularly among residents who are unemployed, working poor, or on a fixed income. CCM works daily with some of the most at risk populations in the county, giving them the platform to educate and promote healthy behaviors among those that need it most. For some individuals, receiving assistance at CCM may be their only exposure to healthy food and nutrition information.

## Solution

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recommends that food pantries implementing healthy food initiatives use a client choice model and tailor messaging, recipes, and food tips to the target population. By using best practices and feedback from clients, volunteers and CCM staff, the REACH team was able to develop an innovative program plan. By using merchandising techniques, healthier food items were given a prominent place up front and at eye level. Since many clients at the CCM food pantry report shopping at local corner stores, messaging materials were adapted from the Cabarrus Healthy Corner Store Initiative, as a way to reinforce messages that customers have already seen.



## Your Involvement Is Key

**Next time you participate in a food drive or donate non-perishable food items to your local food pantry, consider donating some healthier options. You can also advocate for your local pantry to only accept healthy items or to decline items such as sugar sweetened beverages. Some suggestions of healthier items include: low sodium canned goods, low sugar canned goods, whole wheat or whole grain items, and low fat or reduced fat dairy items.**

## Results

After renovations, of the 58 clients surveyed that said environmental prompts were helpful, 90% said fresh produce was easy to find, 80% said low sodium items were easy to find and 94% said whole grain items were easy to find. Clients choosing whole grain items increased by 430% and clients choosing fruits and vegetables increased by 800%. Additionally, 89% of clients reported that volunteers pointed out healthy items to them during their shopping experience. As a result of the changes, 50,000 clients, 14,050 of which are minority residents are now empowered to choose healthier foods and beverages for themselves and their families. CCM now serves as a model pantry for others looking to assist low- income populations in making healthier choices.

### Contact

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*"Elected officials, we're always talking about quality of life. Sometimes people measure that in buildings or bridges, but this is really where you've got to measure it. This is really what it is all about; it's about the people."*

**- Scott Padgett, Mayor of Concord**

## Sustaining Success

Some projects have an end date, due to funding or limited partner support, but because CCM has truly embraced the pantry enhancements, clients will continue to be influenced to make healthier choices moving forward. By training staff and volunteers on merchandising techniques and behavioral economics, food pantry staff will be able to independently implement strategies when new food donations are received. All materials were created in a format that food pantry staff can modify and edit as necessary, including the volunteer nutrition education handbook, recipe cards, food labels, etc. The volunteer job description and explanation of procedures were updated to accurately reflect additional roles and responsibilities, ensuring sustainability.

