



Building Belonging Course Guide

# Best Practices for Inclusive Food Pantries

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# Best Practices for Inclusive Food Pantries

At Food Bank of the Rockies and Food Bank of Wyoming, we celebrate the diversity of our service area, including cultural diversity, immigrant and refugee communities, and communities of color. We also recognize that societal inequities mean food pantry users from different cultures or races may experience additional barriers when accessing food services. In response, we've developed the Building Belonging course for our partners as a guide to reducing these barriers and becoming more culturally responsive.

The Building Belonging Program assists Hunger Relief Partners in understanding and addressing the barriers to access that our neighbors may experience. Topics include: methods to learn about your community, cultural and religious food preferences, language barriers, ensuring simple access, culturally responsive outreach, and building trust and respect. These practices aim to support you in creating spaces of belonging and increasing equity in your distributions.

This guidance was developed with feedback from over 700 food pantry users, 100+ food pantries, and 12 community organizations through surveys, interviews, and focus groups. After reviewing this material, we invite you to consider the Next Steps opportunities and complete a self-reflection exercise. Whether your organization is just beginning this journey or are already well on your way, we hope you will find this guide to be valuable.

## Introduction

### How to Use this Course Guide

This course guide can be paired with the Building Belonging online course or used as a standalone resource. This guide provides a summary of feedback we have received through conversations with food pantry users, partners, and community organizations. The Building Belonging course outlines common barriers experienced when accessing emergency food assistance; however, every community is different and may experience these barriers to varying degrees, or not at all. We provide practical recommendations for ways to identify and address these barriers. We encourage all partners to use this guide as a starting point for informing your organization's self-reflection.

### Reduce Othering & Build More Belonging

This course supports you to reflect on the experience your community members have interacting with your organization. Not just the facts of showing up and leaving with food, but on a deeper level. How do your community members feel before they arrive, during their visit, and after they leave? We want to work toward all community members feeling safe and that they belong.

The experience of **belonging** can involve being accepted and invited to participate; being part of something and having the opportunity to show up as yourself. It includes being able to raise issues and confront harsh truths as a full member of a community.

The act of **othering** can involve treating people from another group as essentially different from and generally inferior to the group you belong to.

### Intercultural Competence Enables Cultural Responsiveness

Although belonging includes many factors, the primary lens our hunger relief work focuses on is intercultural competence, which is what enables our cultural response. Feeding America defines cultural competence as "the ability to meet the needs of clients from different cultures in a way that everyone feels valued. It is an understanding and appreciation of the values, norms, and traditions within different cultures."

## What is Cultural Response?

Being culturally responsive means recognizing that not everyone coming to the table faces the same barriers or challenges to get there. We must recognize that it is not our client's responsibility to change – instead, it is our responsibility to learn, collaborate, and adapt to reduce these barriers.

To be culturally responsive, we must take active, ever-evolving steps to recognize and value each food pantry user's unique needs and perspectives as well as work to reduce barriers that create systemic inequities. Taking an honest look at these tough issues influences how we think about day-to-day emergency food operations and how we interact with our community.

*“Cultural responsiveness in food provision can manifest itself in various ways: the provision of culture-specific foods, culturally responsive distribution methods, or even culture-specific education around food.”*

- United Way

## Acknowledge Power, Privilege, and Inequity

As food bank workers and volunteers, we must recognize that we are in a position of privilege and the people we support may have different levels of privilege and therefore different experiences or interpretations of situations. Food pantry users may also come with some level of experienced trauma that may influence their interactions. We therefore must foster a culture of compassion that seeks to not pre-judge based on appearance or behavior and does not use our position of power to mandate solutions based only on our own experiences. Creating a welcoming and inclusive environment starts with committing to a level of self-reflection and awareness that may be personally challenging or uncomfortable.

Food Bank of the Rockies and Food Bank of Wyoming are here to support our partners in learning more about topics like trauma-informed practice, racial inequities in food insecurity, and the immigrant experience. We are committed to working on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at all levels of programs and operations.

### Recommended Reading: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

For additional reading, podcasts, and webinars on equity in nonprofit organizations, we encourage you visit the Nonprofit Learning Lab at [nonprofitlearninglab.org/dei](https://nonprofitlearninglab.org/dei).

## Common Barriers

 [Follow Along in Video Chapter 3](#)

Food pantry users from different cultural backgrounds may experience additional barriers when accessing emergency food services. These may include feeling unwelcomed visiting food pantries that **don't understand their culture** or not having their **cultural or religious food preferences** met, making them less likely to return. Another major barrier includes **language access**. Not being able to communicate with staff or volunteers or read information on the food pantry's website about availability can reduce their likelihood of accessing services. In addition, food pantries may use **outreach efforts that are not culturally appropriate** and are therefore less effective at reaching certain communities.

These communities may also encounter a variety of **simple access barriers**. For example, immigrants and communities of color may be more impacted by limited transportation and more likely to work in the service industry, which may mean that hours of pantry operations are difficult to attend. Another major barrier, particularly among some immigrant communities, are concerns over immigration status and the required documentation impacting eligibility for food services.

Finally, there are some barriers that are a little less tangible but still very impactful. Those include feeling unwelcomed or stigmatized, not feeling comfortable, and a **lack of trust** built up for institutions due to historic injustices.

The following sections will take a deeper look into these common barriers and provide practical recommendations on how to identify and address them. After reviewing this guide, we encourage organizations to complete our self-reflection exercise to identify where your organization is on the journey to becoming culturally responsive.



## Understand your Community

You may recognize that some of your food pantry users speak Arabic. But that does not mean they share the same culture, religion or food preferences. Around the world, there are over 25 countries and/or cultural groups that speak Arabic, including in North Africa, the Middle East, Central and Western Asia, and parts of China.<sup>1</sup>

As you can see, having the same race or language does not necessarily imply the same culture or religion. Even two people from the same country may have very different food preferences based off of regional or religious differences. In addition, immigrants who have lived in the United States for several years may be more accustomed to Western foods.

Therefore, it is important to not only understand your community from a broad demographic perspective but also to understand the nuances within your community. In the following section, we highlight ways to find both types of information.

### Basic Demographic Information

Understanding basic demographic information about your community and food pantry users will help you gain perspective on who you are reaching and who you are not. Examples of basic demographic information include race, country of origin, and language. Many local and state governments already have public databases with this information based on census data. You can search census data by ZIP code by visiting the following websites:

- Colorado: <https://statisticalatlas.com/state/Colorado/Overview>
- Wyoming: <https://statisticalatlas.com/state/Wyoming/Overview>

Once you understand the demographics of your surrounding area, you should compare that with your food pantry user demographics. One way to collect that information is to survey your clients asking them to voluntarily share basic demographic information on a one-time basis. In addition, you can also include demographic questions during your client intake process. Food Bank of the Rockies offers a Link2Feed intake system that can help you efficiently collect this information during intake.

For more information about setting up Link2Feed at your site, contact [L2F@foodbankrockies.org](mailto:L2F@foodbankrockies.org).

Please recognize that some clients may not feel comfortable sharing this type of information or have language barriers that prevent them from understanding the reasoning behind being asked for this information.

### Comparing Census Data with Client Usage

The demographics of your surrounding community may be very different than the demographics of who actually uses your food pantry. Immigrants and communities of color are statistically more likely to experience food insecurity because of inequities in society.<sup>2</sup> You may see this reflected in your food pantry usage. For example, the census data may indicate that only 10% of the population identifies as African American but you may see that 30% of your food pantry users identify as African American.

However, some communities, particularly immigrant communities, may be experiencing barriers that prevent them from utilizing your services. In these cases, you'll likely see the opposite trend. For example, the census data may indicate that 30% of the population identifies as Hispanic but you may see that only 10% of your food pantry users identify as Hispanic. Remember, just because they are not utilizing your food pantry does not mean their needs are being fully met. Instead, this trend may indicate that this group is experiencing barriers to accessing your services. Comparing census data with your user data may help you understand who you are reaching and, most importantly, who you are not.

### Engage on a Deeper Level

Once you know the basic demographic information, the next step is to learn about the nuances for your particular clients. This includes learning about specific food preferences, cultural holidays, and unique barriers that your community may be experiencing. There are several ways to do this and they all include an element of human connection.

## Engage with your Clients

The best way to understand your clients is to get to know them on a personal level. Build a relationship with them so they feel comfortable sharing more about themselves. Try asking them what food they like or dislike and if there are any foods they need for holidays. Recognize that some clients may not be comfortable sharing this type of information or have language barriers.

## Establish Client Advisory Boards

Some partners have established client advisory boards to receive guidance directly from clients on a regular basis. These advisory boards can advise on a wide range of topics, from type of food and quantity to effective outreach methods. You can also give your advisory board voting rights so your clients have a voice during important decisions.

## Develop a Promotora Model

Promotoras, or community representatives, are trusted community members who receive special training to act as a liaison with the community, communicating in their native language and with a deep understanding of the culture. Promotoras provide valuable insight and should be compensated fairly. The model was first developed among the Hispanic/Latino community but a similar model could be used with other cultures.

For an example of an effective Promotora model, visit: <https://www.revision.coop/promotora-model>

## Hire Staff or Recruit Volunteers from Bicultural Backgrounds

Bicultural staff and volunteers will be able to give you valuable insight into their community. Their hiring can also show your commitment to being inclusive, which can build trust within your community.

## Connect with Cultural Community Organizations

If language is an issue, you may consider reaching out to a local community group for guidance. The ideal community group should have a focus on the cultural group you are trying to serve and have staff or volunteers with heritage from that cultural group that can give you candid insight. Recognize that their time is valuable and their engagement with you is optional.

## Connect with Other Partners Serving Similar Clients

There are likely other partners within the Food Bank of the Rockies and Food Bank of Wyoming network that serve a similar client base. You can connect with these partners by attending one of our Building Belonging Lunch & Learns or reaching out to our Culturally Responsive Team at [CRFI@foodbankrockies.org](mailto:CRFI@foodbankrockies.org).

You can also search for other pantries to connect within your area by using our pantry locator:

- Colorado Pantry Locator: <https://www.foodbankrockies.org/find-food/>
- Wyoming Pantry Locator: <https://wyomingfoodbank.org/find-food/>

## What other forms of Equitable Access might you consider?

▶ Follow Along in  
Video Chapter 6

An important component to engaging with your clients is to learn about their stories. Beyond cultural competence there may be additional forms of equitable access you can respond to.

Consider the following neighbors:



Raymon



Henry



Kim & Anh



Elaine & John



Yonas

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### Raymon

- Grandparents emigrated from Mexico
- Raymon's mother would like him to eat more nutritious food, but gets home late from work and therefore has difficulty finding time to cook more nutrient-rich meals
- Perhaps members of a shared cultural background have food preference differences because they have been in the U.S. for different amounts of time or even generations.

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### Henry

- Currently unhoused without access to cooking facilities or food storage options
- Difficult to collect large quantities of food at infrequent distributions
- Maybe your community would benefit from recipes to support their cooking, or perhaps need prepared meals because they don't have access to cooking or food storage facilities.

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### Kim & Anh

- Prefer fresh, whole ingredients to make favorite dishes
- Speak Vietnamese
- Would like to celebrate Lunar New Year with their family
- Maybe there are language barriers or transportation challenges you can work to address.
- Perhaps there is an upcoming cultural celebration your organization can embrace.

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### Elaine & John

- Medical bills affecting food budget
- Transportation is a challenge
- Follow a diabetic-friendly diet
- Perhaps your neighbors are facing health challenges and need to stick to a specific diet.

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### Yonas

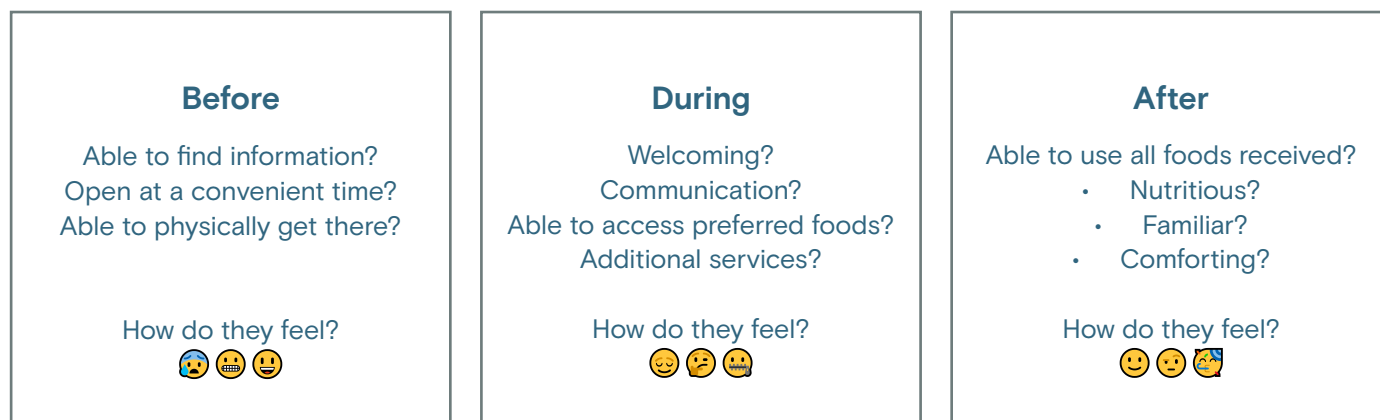
- University student from Ethiopia
- Lives in student housing without access to cooking facilities or sufficient food storage options
- Perhaps others in your community could benefit from your services but don't yet know about them.

## Journey Map

Another way to engage with your clients' experience is to put yourself in their shoes through a Journey Map. This can be a great exercise in starting to design for belonging.

What is the step-by-step experience of your different community members? What do they experience before showing up at your organization? What is their experience at your organization and interacting with your staff, volunteers, and other community members? What is their experience when they walk or drive away?

How do they feel throughout their experience?



Are they anxious or nervous before getting there? Or are they a regular client who is looking forward to seeing familiar faces? Are they confused or content while receiving services? Were they asked for information they didn't feel comfortable sharing? Are they happy or dissatisfied afterwards? Did they not only feel acknowledged but celebrated?

This can be a helpful first step to brainstorm with your team in order to understand what your assumptions or perceptions are and the opportunities or gaps you have already noticed in your day-to-day work. You can then engage with your clients through surveys or focus groups to further fill this in with their true experiences and enable folks to tell their own stories.

*"We order with Promotoras' and community volunteers' [guidance] every day in the system. They cherry-pick what they believe the community will be receptive [to] very well."*  
– Thai, Kaizen Food Share

# Cultural & Religious Food Preferences

 [Follow Along in Video Chapter 7](#)

Imagine you are living abroad and you want to celebrate Thanksgiving with your family. You go to the grocery store but they give you a chicken instead of a turkey. While a chicken will feed your family, it does not have the same meaning as having turkey for Thanksgiving.

The food we eat is more than just sustenance. It is linked with our cultural identity and is an integral part of what brings us joy and a sense of togetherness. Immigrants are statistically more likely to experience food insecurity in the United States and yet food pantries generally only offer Western-style food. Even making small changes in what types of foods you offer can go a long way for creating a meaningful connection with your clients and ensuring them dignity throughout the experience.

Diversifying food options can be more than just a matter of taste. Many cultures have religious or dietary restrictions that may make some food unusable. For example, the Vietnamese culture often avoids the use of dairy, so including shredded cheese with their food box will be less useful for them and may go to waste. Understanding these differences can help identify alternative foods.

## Religious Dietary Restrictions

 [Follow Along in Video Chapter 8](#)

Some individuals and cultures express their faith through their diet. Eating or avoiding certain foods has spiritual significance for them, as does practicing fasting and feasting during different ceremonies and holidays. If neighbors are limited to foods that do not meet their religious dietary restrictions, this can lead to inequitable access to hunger relief. One example is neighbors who require halal meat potentially not being able to utilize any of the proteins provided at a distribution. Many members of the same faith may implement their religious expression differently, so it is important to seek to learn directly from your neighbors.

Additional resources from Food Bank of the Rockies and Food Bank of Wyoming are available to better understand the intricacies of sourcing, storing, distributing, and preparing foods in accordance with different dietary requirements.

## Suggested Food Lists

Our Hunger Relief Partners serve clients from many different cultures. To help our partners make informed choices when customizing their food orders to reflect the communities they serve, we have collected feedback about food preferences by culture. The food lists include information about preferred staples, foods to avoid, and cultural holidays that involve important food items. This can help you identify priority foods as well as alternative foods to provide. There is also guidance on quantity and timing. At the top of every list, we also note the top-five shelf-stable items; if fridge space is limited, these items are a little easier to store.

Our intention for providing these lists is not to encourage partners, or even ourselves, to stock every single one of these items. But instead, we hope that providing these lists will help partners make more informed choices. We work with our sourcing team to increase the availability of these items on Partner Express for our community partners.

Culinary traditions, customs, and preferences are nuanced and rich, with a sense of place and identity that is impossible to capture in a summary. Food preferences within a culture may vary greatly by individual, age, religion, region or the length of time the person has lived in the United States. Therefore, these food lists should not replace engaging with your community to understand your food pantry users' individual preferences. However, these lists can help as a starting point to inform your ordering decisions.

## Holiday Calendar

 [Follow Along in Video Chapter 9](#)

Another available resource is a holiday calendar that includes the major holidays for common cultures in our service area and brief descriptions of the type of foods used during that holiday.

This calendar is not all inclusive; these recommendations are meant to be used as a starting point on your journey to becoming more inclusive.

## Top 15 Foods Popular Across Cultures

To help narrow down these lists even further, we identified the top 15 items that are popular across most cultures in our network. As you can see, all of these items are pretty standard items you may receive through donations or on Agency Express, but now that we confirmed that they have wide popularity, we can prioritize sourcing and distributing them.

- All-Purpose Flour
- Beef (any)
- Cabbage (green)
- Carrots
- Chicken (any)
- Garlic
- Lime
- Eggs
- Milk (cow)
- Onions
- Pasta (any, plain)
- Peppers (bell/sweet)
- Sugar (white)
- Tomato
- Cucumber

## Six Tips for Culturally Responsive Food

Offering culturally responsive foods may seem overwhelming, but small changes can make a big impact in the inclusivity of your food distributions. Here are some trends that are common across cultures.

**Customize by culture when you can.** We have developed a suggested food list for common cultures in our service area. While you may not be able to provide all these foods, having a better understanding of food preferences can help you make informed choices when you are ordering food.

**Focus on fresh produce.** The number one requested food category is fresh produce.

**Avoid canned foods** (in most cases). Many immigrant families may not have had canned foods in their home country and therefore consider them unhealthy and will not use them.

**Avoid pre-seasoned or pre-packaged meats or pastas.** This will allow more flexibility to customize the flavor of the meals to fit with cultural preferences.

**Provide whole foods.** An example of a whole food would be offering a fresh tomato or canned whole tomatoes instead of pasta sauce. Offering whole ingredients provides more flexibility on how that item can be used or seasoned.

**Holidays may change food preferences.** A seasonal or religious holiday may change what foods are used and the quantity needed. A Western example would be serving turkey for Thanksgiving. Please see our Holiday Calendar resource for more information about holidays that may impact your clients' food needs.

## Visual Food Preference Survey

 [Follow Along in Video Chapter 10](#)

We have developed a visual food preference survey to support our partners in collecting information directly from their community. On completion of the Building Belonging course, one of the further learning paths you can take is to be supported to implement this survey in your own community.

This will support you to:

- Generate a customized food preference list for your community
- Provide insight into your communities' range of preferences while still being able to “zoom in” on specific self-identified cultural groups
- Prioritize your orders to reduce non-preferred items and maximize preferred items
- Reduce language barriers and decrease surveying time to get data on many food items
- Support Food Bank of the Rockies and Food Bank of Wyoming to know what foods to source and where certain foods will be most meaningful

The survey is available both in a digital format and as a hands-on interactive “card sort” activity to engage with smaller focus groups. The current version of the survey is in English and Spanish. When utilizing the digital version, the survey can be instantly translated to a neighbor's preferred language utilizing the Google Translate tool in a Chrome browser.

By creating a community food preference list utilizing our survey, you can also check your distributions for equity across cultural groups. In the Community Food Preference Learning Path, our team will support you to explore data-informed insights into your distributions such as:

- Are you meeting the preferences of your Latino neighbors as well as your non-Latino neighbors?
- Are there specific food items you can introduce or foods that should be avoided that would assist in shifting the equity of your food distribution?

By having insights from your neighbors, you can more effectively respond to their preferences.

## Tips for Sourcing Culturally Responsive Foods



Food Bank of the Rockies and Food Bank of Wyoming are committed to increasing the availability of culturally responsive food in Partner Express. Our sourcing team works with multiple local and national vendors to source cultural foods in bulk to make it easier for our partners to source.

What does all of this look like when you go on Partner Express to order food through us?

- Have your food preference lists on hand — either one provided by us or one you've created based on your own community members' feedback.
- If you serve several cultures, use the list you've created outlining cross-cultural items to prioritize.
- Next, look up what foods are available from your list; some items on Partner Express are flagged as "Culturally Responsive," which is primarily an indicator that our team specifically sourced the item to respond to food preferences. However, as we've discussed, many foods your community prefers may not have a special tag.

You may then have other considerations you keep in mind, too, such as: Can a household create a meal from what is being provided? Are you offering the type of nutritional balance you would like to receive if you were in need of food?

We also want to acknowledge that this is not an exact science and is an ongoing learning process. There may be many factors that affect your ability to be as culturally responsive as you'd like to be, such as budget and food availability.

Additionally, there may be foods your clients request that we do not currently carry. In these cases, you may want to source these items locally from international markets. (International markets refer to stores that cater their products toward a specific culture; for example, Hispanic food or Middle-Eastern food.) These types of stores are often operated by persons with heritage from that culture and carry brands, spices, and products that are not offered at a traditional American grocery store. International markets are most common in large urban areas such as Denver and less common in rural communities.

While you could do an internet search for these types of stores, you may have more success asking your clients where they are currently shopping for food from their culture. If you only need a few items, you can visit the store and purchase the items as needed. Some partners have also explored offering their clients a gift card to a local international market in lieu of sourcing the products.

*"Their face literally lights up and we know we're doing the right thing when that happens. Even if you only do it for one person, it's well worth it when you see their smile because you have something they recognize."*  
- Diana, Colorado Health Network Denver

# Overcoming Language Barriers

In a 2020 partner survey, language barriers were the most reported challenge of partners when serving food pantry users from different cultures. We recognize that partners have a wide range of resources, so we have gathered a variety of recommendations that can help you address language barriers.

*“I think that there's a sense of respect there that we're making an effort to communicate to our families in their own language.”* – Carolina, Children's Hospital Colorado

## **Practice patience and be kind.**

This person has come for help and they may be worried that their language skills will prevent them from receiving help. Recognize that seeking help can be a difficult experience, especially when you have additional barriers.

## **Focus on building a relationship rather than being efficient.**

When there are language barriers, it may seem easier to focus on the transaction than the human connection – for example, asking for their ID rather than asking about their day. This transactional approach may make them feel rushed and confused, especially if they do not understand why you are asking for specific information. Find non-verbal ways to create a relationship, like taking the time to share a warm smile. These small gestures may make the clients feel more comfortable with asking questions – even if they have limited English skills.

## **Offer written translations of important information.**

Many partners have found it helpful to offer translated materials such as a welcome statement, FAQ sheets, important forms, or cheat sheets of common words. In some cases, partners have even laminated these translated forms and included an English version on the back page as a reference for volunteers when pointing out information on the translated version. While you can use Google Translate, the translation may not be accurate. Using a native speaker, such as a bilingual volunteer or professional translator, will produce a more accurate document. The average cost for a professional translation is 12-20 cents per translated word, but it can vary depending on the language. See language resources for details.

## **Use descriptive images and simple text.**

Some clients may not be able to read in any language. Using descriptive images and simple text will help them understand what is needed. Try to avoid using jargon or colloquial sayings that may not translate well and cause confusion.

## **Actively recruit bilingual volunteers/staff.**

If you do not already have bilingual volunteers/staff, you may need to actively recruit them. Consider recruiting from your bilingual food pantry users, local high school, local community groups, or local religious organizations that serve a culture with the language you are seeking. You may also consider posting a bilingual volunteer request directly on your social media sites/website. Some partners have also had success using an on-call subscription to a live interpreter. See language resources for details.

## **Place bilingual volunteers/staff in public-facing roles.**

If you have bilingual volunteers/staff, assign them roles that are public facing; for example, the check-in table. You may also consider giving them a name tag identifying the language they speak. Having a bilingual volunteer readily available rather than having to locate as-needed will make food pantry users feel more welcomed and less alienated.

## **Consider your online presence.**

Clients with language barriers may find it difficult to learn about resources if your website or social media does not offer a translation in their language. Consider dedicating a page on your website to key information translated into the language(s) of the communities you are seeking to reach. Information may include the hours of operation, what services you provide, what information they should bring, and what to expect when they arrive. Make sure to highlight this page prevalently on your website and link to it often on social media. Larger organizations may also choose to install a live translation tool through Google Cloud Translation API or establish a translated sister-site dedicated to that community.

## Language Resources

Please see below for a list of recommended vendors for translation, interpretation and language grants.

- **Community Language Cooperative:** <https://communitylanguagecoop.com/>

Denver-based organization that offers written translation services as well as live interpreters for events and Zoom calls. Can source most major languages with a 48-hour notice; prices average about 20 cents per translated word.

- **Voiance:** <https://interpret.voiance.com/language-services/>

A subscription service that offers on-call live interpretation with staff who speak over 240 languages through their video app. Pricing begins at .99 cents per minute, with the first 25 minutes included with the \$25 monthly subscription fee.

- **Language Justice Grants:**

The local, state, and federal government may offer small grants for translation or interpretation services. We often include notices about these opportunities in our monthly partner newsletter.

## Language Justice Training

On completion of the Building Belonging course, one of the further learning paths you can take is to be enrolled in Community Language Cooperative's Language Justice Training. This training provides an overview of language justice, explores the historical implications of language oppression, and teaches how to use practical tools and practices for supporting linguistically diverse community members. We have added this in-depth focus on language justice to the program as language continues to be the most significant barrier our partners experience in connecting with their communities. You will also be supported by our Culturally Responsive Team to implement some of the above best practices in language justice in your organization.



## Ensuring Simple Access

Immigrants, refugees, and communities of color are more likely to encounter a variety of simple access barriers to food and services. A simple access barrier impacts the practicality of receiving services and is often physical or procedural in nature. You may be able to recognize a simple access barrier if you see trends on who is successful in applying and receiving services and who is not. However, sometimes these barriers may not be so easy to recognize. Some partners have been successful in recognizing barriers through focus groups, surveys or simply asking food pantry users if there is anything else they can do to make things easier.

Once you identify these types of barriers, they can often be resolved by implementing simple changes that can have a significant impact on who is successful in receiving services. In the following section, we outline some common simple access barriers. Keep in mind, though, that each community is unique, so solutions to these barriers may vary.

### Accessible Hours of Operation

Immigrants and communities of color are more likely to be employed in the service industry with non-traditional hours, which may make certain hours of operation difficult for them to attend. It is important to consult with your food pantry users on what the best hours of operation would be and place a priority on accessibility.

### Transportation

Many communities may experience transportation issues that make it difficult to travel to your pantry. These issues include having limited access to a car, bring unsure how to navigate the local public transit system, or having extremely long commute times. Some approaches to solve transportation issues include offering a delivery option, checking that the hours of operation fall during non-work hours, ensuring your pantry is near a bus stop, or setting up a pop-up pantry at more accessible locations.

### Equal Access to Information

Pantry users may not have equal access to learning about what resources you offer. Some key questions to ask: Are your hours of operation and resources translated on your website? Are you posting this information in locations that are accessible to all community members? Refer to the culturally responsive outreach section for more information.

### Situational Awareness of Unwelcoming External Factors

**Police presence:** If you use police officers for traffic control or your neighborhood is near a police presence, please be aware that this may make some immigrants or communities of color uncomfortable due to the current climate of police violence as well as previous ICE immigration practices. If you find that this is the case, you may consider moving your pantry to a more neutral location, using plain clothes traffic control volunteers, or communicating to pantry users that your location is a safe space regardless of immigration status.

**Religious presence:** If you are a religious organization, communities who practice a different religion may not feel comfortable coming to your pantry. If you find that this is the case, you may consider moving your pantry to a non-religious location or prominently displaying inclusive messages. Requiring prayer or other proselytizing efforts is in violation of Food Bank of the Rockies, Food Bank of Wyoming, and Feeding America partner agreements.

### Less Invasive Intake Methods

Immigrant communities may be uncomfortable sharing identifiable information because of fears that it can impact their immigration status. While some government food assistance programs still require identification documentation, your organization may have other programs that do not have as strict regulations. When possible, try and collect as little identifiable information as possible. For example, for eligible programs, you may consider not requiring an ID, proof of income, current address or asking for immigration status. It is also important to make sure your clients know with whom and when their information might be shared

# Culturally Responsive Outreach

Imagine you are in another country and you get sick. You are not sure if your insurance will be accepted and all the information about the doctor is in a language you don't understand. You decide to not go to the doctor. After you return home, you learn that the country you were in has a free health care system and you could have registered for it at any government building.

Many immigrants or refugees experience similar hurdles for receiving emergency food services. They may be unaware that food pantries are available in the U.S. because they were not available in their home country. They may have difficulty searching for resources online because of language barriers, not having easy access to the internet, or not having a personal email address. They may not visit the same types of locations as the rest of the community and therefore miss physical flyers or pamphlets about resources. And once they learn about resources, they still may think they are not eligible because of their immigration status.

In the following section, we'll discuss ways to develop culturally responsive outreach not only for your online presence, but also for identifying alternative channels for reaching communities.

## Communicate Through the Right Channels

It is important to understand where your neighbors receive their information. It may not be the same place that you would receive information. While many immigrant communities have access to the internet, they may still get their information from their community through word of mouth. In these cases, it is important to **meet them where they are**. If you know they use laundromats, try posting translated flyers at those locations or have a bilingual staff do outreach at those locations. You could also post flyers in local international markets or corner stores. You may be able to find these locations by doing a Google search, however, a more effective way to identify these locations would be to ask your clients where they recommend.

Another way to reach these communities, is to **find organizations or groups that are already trusted by the community** you are looking to connect with. Examples may be partnering with a community organization, cultural center, or religious organization that specifically serves that community. Partnering with these organizations could be as simple as having an informational meeting to share what resources you offer so they can help communicate that to their community. You could ask them to post a printed flyer at their location or share information about the resources on their social media.

Another outreach alternative is doing **radio, podcast or newspaper outreach in the native language** of the community. Many migrant communities listen to radio stations in their native language. Some radio stations will agree to share information about resources at no cost if it serves a public good. If radio stations are not available, some immigrant communities have developed local podcasts in their native language to share local news and information. You could ask your clients if they are aware of any of these types of podcasts in your local area. Similarly, there may be a local newspaper written in the native language. You may be able to find the newspaper distributed at a local international market.

And finally, some communities may use **social media platforms** like Facebook as their primary source of information and communication. However, they may not be following your organization on Facebook. It is therefore important to identify and partner with trusted community organizations, groups or religious organizations that already have a strong social media presence with the community that you want to connect with. Ask if they can share information about your food pantry with their followers, preferably in their native language.

Each community is unique and it may take some time to identify the right channels for reaching your neighbors. However, reducing information barriers can help increase food equity and make sure that everyone in your community has equal access to resources.

## Ways to Create a Welcoming Online Presence

Your website and social media are still good places to share information with the wider community. However, it is important to make sure that these platforms offer a welcoming and inclusive experience to help build trust and reduce access barriers. Is your website and social media friendly and accessible to community members from all backgrounds? Here are some helpful considerations.

### Offer Translations of Important Information

Do you have important information translated into the common languages of your pantry users? You may consider dedicating a page on your website to include translations of key information. Information may include the hours of operation, what services you provide, what information they should bring, and what to expect when they arrive. Make sure to highlight this page prevalently on your website and link to it often on social media.

### Use Descriptive Images

Some community members may have limited English language skills. Having descriptive images of the food you distribute as well as accurate photos of how your distribution works can help people understand what to expect when they come to your pantry. If you have already started offering customized food options, make sure you highlight them on your website! Additionally, you should make sure to choose inclusive photos that show the diversity of your staff, volunteers, and clients.

### Recognize Important Holidays Across Cultures

Recognizing important holidays across cultures and religions is a wonderful way to make your neighbors feel welcomed and included. To help you with this, we've developed an annual holiday calendar of important dates across many cultures to help you plan your social media content. As always, you'll still want to make sure to do your own research to ensure your post is culturally appropriate. Additionally, if you offer special foods during certain holidays, make sure to share that information.

### Explain What Information You Will Collect and Why

Some immigrant communities may be uncomfortable sharing identifiable information because of their immigration status. For this reason, it is important to share and explain your policy about what information is needed to receive services so they understand your policy before they arrive. If your pantry requires an ID or collects other personal information, consider adding language that explains why it is necessary and exactly how it will and won't be used to alleviate safety and privacy concerns. Additionally, if you have food assistance options that do not require an ID or proof of income, make sure to explain that option as well.

### Be Explicit About the Steps You are Taking to be More Culturally Responsive

Promoting your efforts to be culturally responsive on your website and social media is a great way to show your commitment to creating a welcoming and safe environment for all. For example, have you brought in new cultural food options? Share some photos. Do you have new bilingual staff? Introduce them on social media!

## Trust & Respect



Many immigrant and refugee communities, in addition to communities of color, experience a distrust of institutions or other communities. It is important to remember that feelings of distrust among some communities toward institutions have been built up over many centuries due to historic injustices and discrimination. These feelings of distrust are justified and it is our responsibility to demonstrate our commitment to equity while also acknowledging the impact of previous injustices. Building this trust will take time and require consistently demonstrating respect and accountability.

Implementing best practices from the previous sections will show a commitment to accountability and a genuine desire to connect in inclusive ways that can help break down the emotional barrier of feeling unwelcomed or stigmatized. In addition, your organization can take a number of steps to empower your neighbors to not only feel good about the food they receive, but also exercise autonomy and choice so that the food that is taken is culturally and dietarily appropriate for that individual.

## Client Choice Model

To create a dignified experience, many pantries have adopted a client-choice model. A client-choice model is often similar to a grocery store, where pantry users can select the food items that they prefer instead of offering pre-sorted boxes. This allows pantry users to choose more of the foods they like and avoid the foods they will not use. This model is especially helpful when catering to cultural clients that may have different food preferences. Client-choice models sometimes implement a points system for ensuring all pantry users receive the same amount of food, but how they choose to “spend” those points is up to the pantry user.

While the grocery store style is most common, the client-choice model can be implemented in other ways as well. For example, some food pantries may still offer pre-sorted boxes but also offer a client-choice table where clients can select additional items of their choosing. Additionally, some food pantries offer different types of pre-sorted boxes that pantry users can choose from, for example, a box with a Hispanic-food theme.

## Tips for Creating Positive Food Pantry Experiences

There are several techniques your organization can use to empower pantry users during visits. We’ve summarized some great examples from Dani Gilmour’s article, “Ensuring a Dignified Experience at Emergency Food Programs.”

- Allow community members to choose what they need and decline what they don’t. Trust that your clients know what is best for them and their families.
- Allow participants to physically choose their food rather than have volunteers select and hand out food on their behalf.
- Avoid phrases like, “You can have X amount of X.” Instead, choose language and tone that promote autonomy such as, “Please choose X amount of X.”
- Describe and explain food products if asked, but do not seek to sway choice. Ideas over what is healthy, safe, and quality vary widely across cultures.
- Consider offering recipes or translated ingredient labels for items you commonly distribute but are unfamiliar to community members.

For more examples and training exercises from the Gilmour article, visit: <https://www.hungercenter.org/publications/ensuring-a-dignified-experience-at-emergency-food-programs-why-and-how/>



## A Final Thought

The most important thing you and your organization can do is to listen with empathy and be willing to continually grow and make changes. No organization is going to have the perfect solutions every time because the questions you are seeking to answer are inherently human. Even with the best of intentions, there will still be things you don't consider or people you don't reach because the variables are complex and change over time. However, that should not discourage you from this work. Even imperfect solutions can have enormously positive impacts on people's lives and can bring us closer to a more equitable world. We look forward to continuing to be partners on our shared journey of becoming inclusive and culturally responsive organizations.

For this reason, Food Bank of the Rockies and Food Bank of Wyoming would like to set an example by requesting continued feedback on this training. Are there things we did not consider? Are there elements that we should revisit? Please let us know by emailing [CRFI@foodbankrockies.org](mailto:CRFI@foodbankrockies.org)

## Next Steps: Further Trainings and Resources

### Building Belonging Library

By completing the Building Belonging course, your organization gains access to the Building Belonging Library. We have additional equipment and resources available at each of our distribution centers for you to borrow in support of your organization's implementation of these best practices

#### Equipment:

- iPads\* – available for neighbor surveys, focus groups, and engagement activities
  - Pocketalk Translation Devices\*- available to support your organization address language barriers
- \*These devices are available when not in use by other programs

#### Books:

- Reinventing Food Banks and Pantries – New Tools to End Hunger by Katie Martin
- Design for Belonging – How to Build Inclusion and Collaboration in Your Communities by Susie Wise
- Design Social Change – Take Action, Work Toward Equity, and Challenge the Status Quo by Lesley-Ann Noel

### Building Belonging Lunch & Learns

By completing the Building Belonging course your organization is invited to our quarterly Building Belonging Lunch & Learn sessions. These interactive sessions provide a space for deeper dives into these topics and feature innovative approaches from our Hunger Relief Network and other organizations.

### Extended Learning Path: Language Justice Training

On completion of the Building Belonging course, one of the further learning paths you can take is to be enrolled in Community Language Cooperative's Language Justice Training. This training will provide an overview of language justice, explores the historical implications of language oppression, and teach how to use practical tools and practices for supporting linguistically diverse community members. We have added this in-depth focus on language justice to the program as language continues to be the most significant barrier our partners experience in connecting with their communities. You will also be supported by our Culturally Responsive Team to implement some of the above best practices in language justice in your organization.

If you are interested in this opportunity, please send an email [CRFI@foodbankrockies.org](mailto:CRFI@foodbankrockies.org)

## Extended Learning Path: Visual Food Preference Survey

We have developed a visual food preference survey to support our partners in collecting information directly from their community. On completion of the Building Belonging course, one of the further learning paths you can take is to be supported to implement this survey in your own community.

This will support you to:

- Generate a customized food preference list for your community
- Provide insight into your communities' range of preferences while still being able to "zoom in" on specific self-identified cultural groups
- Prioritize your orders to reduce non-preferred items and maximize preferred items
- Reduce language barriers and decrease surveying time to get data on many food items
- Support Food Bank of the Rockies and Food Bank of Wyoming to know what foods to source and where certain foods will be most meaningful

If you are interested in this opportunity, please send an email to [CRFI@foodbankrockies.org](mailto:CRFI@foodbankrockies.org)

## Trauma-Sensitive Basics for the Charitable Food Network Training

Feeding America and Leah's Pantry invite you to explore ways to bring a trauma-sensitive approach to your food distribution programs for families with children. Feeding America has partnered with Leah's Pantry, a national leader in trauma-informed nutrition, to provide this learning opportunity, detailed below. There is no financial cost to you to join.

### **Trauma-Sensitive Basics for the Charitable Food Network:**

A 90-minute, self-paced training that includes videos, readings, and reflection activities. Spots may be filled by organizational staff and/or partner agency representatives.

Participants will:

- Develop an understanding of how positive and adverse experiences affect individual and community relationships to food.
- Explore implications for the charitable food system, especially for reaching families with children.

If you are interested in this opportunity, please send an email [CRFI@foodbankrockies.org](mailto:CRFI@foodbankrockies.org)

## Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Training

Are your volunteers and staff offering the same level of hospitality and kindness to all community members? Unconscious biases, power dynamics, and lack of awareness of cultural norms can all drastically impact how comfortable someone feels at your pantry. Even if you think you are doing a good job at serving all clients equitably, you and your staff may still have unconscious bias.

In addition to completing this culturally responsive training, we encourage organizations to invest in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) trainings. These trainings are often conducted by a third-party professional and may include webinars, readings or helpful exercises that can help you and your staff identify unconscious biases and understand power dynamics.

For more information and resources on DEI training, visit <https://www.nonprofitlearninglab.org/dei>

## Self-Reflection Exercise

Now that you have a better understanding of the additional barriers experienced by your clients, we encourage you to self-reflect on where your organization is on the journey of cultural responsiveness. Take a moment to document your plan for how to address these barriers within your own organization.

Please write a brief reflection of where your organization is on the following:

- After reading this document, where do you think your organization is on the journey to becoming culturally responsive? Are you just beginning or have you already started implementing some of these ideas? If so, what are you already doing in this area?
- What cultures are in your community and are they reflected in your food pantry? If you are unsure, how will you learn more about your neighbors and pantry users?
- How well do you think the food you offer aligns with what people in your community want? What steps have you already taken or plan to take to make your food more inclusive?
- To what degree is your food pantry impacted by language barriers with your clients? What are some steps you can take or are already taking to overcome these language barriers?
- After learning about simple access barriers, do you think there are any simple access barriers at your pantry? If so, what are they and how can you address them?
- Are your outreach efforts to your neighbors culturally responsive? What are some ways that you can learn about and engage with your neighbors and clients?
- Why is trust-building so important with your cultural clients? How will you continue to build trust?
- How will you share this information with your staff and volunteers?

Please submit this form to our Culturally Responsive Team at [CRFI@foodbankrockies.org](mailto:CRFI@foodbankrockies.org)

## Recommended Reading

Interested in additional resources on this topic? We have collected an assortment of additional readings. These readings are from third-party organizations sharing their own opinions.

Have you found additional helpful resources that you would like to share with partners? Feel free to share these resources with our team at [CRFI@foodbankrockies.org](mailto:CRFI@foodbankrockies.org) and we will review to incorporate them in future versions of this training.

**Denver Office of Immigrant & Refugee Affairs (DOIRA).** (2019) Denver Immigrant and Refugee Community Neighborhood Assessment Report. <https://www.denvergov.org/content/dam/denvergov/Portals/643/documents/Office%20of%20Immigrant%20and%20Refugee%20Affairs/2020/2019%20Neighborhood%20Assessment.pdf>

**Gilmour, Dani.** (2016) Ensuring a Dignified Experience at Emergency Food Programs: Why and How. Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona. <https://www.hungercenter.org/publications/ensuring-a-dignified-experience-at-emergency-food-programs-why-and-how/>

**Nonprofit Learning Lab: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion** <https://www.nonprofitlearninglab.org/dei>

**Reinventing Food Banks and Pantries: New Tools to End Hunger.** (2021) By Katie Martin

- Available from our Building Belonging Library

**Design for Belonging: How to Build Inclusion and Collaboration in Your Communities.** (2022) By Susie Wise

- Available from our Building Belonging Library