

## **Recipe Demonstrations at People's Choice Pantry: A Best Practice**

For many people the words "Food Pantry" evoke an experience where you show up at a church, stand in line, and receive a bag of food. It doesn't matter if you actually like what you get in the bag. You're hungry, so you'll eat anything...right? Although this experience still exists in places, many pantries are in the process of switching to a choice model. With the choice model, pantry clients are able to pick the food that best suits their needs. It is a model that allows hungry people to receive food with a greater amount of dignity. The Wellness360 team was lucky enough to start out working with a choice model pantry. But since AmeriCorps is all about "Getting Things Done!" our team wanted to find ways to take our pantry to the next level.

One of our successful pantry projects during the 2010-2011 Wellness360 year was implementing food demos during pantry hours. We utilized pantry ingredients and produce donations to create recipes for pantry clients. We then published the recipes in our monthly newsletter and offered samples during pantry.

Our goals for this project were:

- 1. Introduce pantry clients to new foods**
- 2. Encourage cooking at home**
- 3. Use as a tool to promote our monthly newsletter**

We were able to successfully complete all of these goals.

Early in the project, we received a generous donation of pots and pans from Local Roots, a fresh food co-op in Wooster, OH. This initial donation gave us the idea to continually seek out donations of pots and pans to offer in pantry. We realized that a potential barrier to cooking meals at home could be lack of the proper tools. By offering pots, pans, and other tools we were able to eliminate one barrier.

In developing the recipes we tried to use the 2010 USDA nutritional guidelines whenever possible. This could mean looking for ways to add more vegetables, reduce sodium, or include more whole grains. It is worth noting that many food pantries, including ours, rely heavily upon processed food. This fact made following nutritional guidelines difficult at times. However, it gave us an honest look at the challenges facing those who rely on food assistance.

Some of our demos included:

- Spinach Chickpea Curry (Gave out curry powder packets to accompany newsletter)
- Corn chowder
- Pea-camole
- Roasted Carrots
- Chicken Peanut Butter Stew
- Tomato Soup with White Beans and Homemade Croutons (Gave out dried basil packets)
- Lamb Cheesy Mac

- Thai Peanut Noodles
- Arugula
- Tuna Mac
- Chicken Broccoli Salad on Whole Wheat Crackers
- Cheese Quesadillas
- Butternut squash, corn, rice, and smoked sausage stew
- Sweet Potato Fries
- Cheddar Cheese, Corn, and Chicken Stew

So what was the reaction? Anecdotal data suggests that our project was a success. Some positive stories that came from the food demos include:

- One woman tried the Spinach Chickpea Curry, and came back a few months later asking if we had any more curry powder packets.
- When sampling Arugula, one client declined a sample. Another client told this client “You’re not going to try it? You should! It’s really good.” The client then accepted an arugula sample and liked it
- One woman was very excited about the Chicken Peanut Butter Stew. She said her kids loved it, and she had a hard time getting them to eat anything. She came back the next month and told us that she had made the stew at home at it had been a hit.
- We had several people request the ingredients for a demo while shopping in the pantry
- When we sampled the Thai Peanut Noodles before the recipe appeared in the newsletter we had one man follow up the next month and ask if the recipe was in the newsletter
- Several times a great conversation was started when a client didn’t like the sample. They would say something like “I didn’t really like it...here is how I would have done it.” This was the lead in to a conversation about food and cooking.
- Several pantry regulars seemed to be excited by the demos. They would say things like “What did you cook up for us this week?”

Our clients enjoyed having the opportunity to try new foods, and it gave the AmeriCorps team a chance to reach out and get to know the clients. By doing this we were able to get a better idea of what our clients liked to eat, and what cooking skills they already possessed. The project could be furthered by the next AmeriCorps team by offering basic cooking classes. It could also be furthered by partnering with a local EFNEP educator. In this situation the EFNEP educator would provide nutritional education and the AmeriCorps team would provide samples of EFNEP approved recipes during pantry.