



Eat Smart Idaho's Simple Guide for Hosting a Healthy Food Drive

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Introduction

ONE-THIRD OF AMERICANS who experience **food insecurity** (lack of access to enough food to live an active, healthy life) do not qualify for government assistance programs (e.g., Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) (Feeding America 2024). As a result, individuals may rely upon food pantries or food banks to meet the nutritional needs of their families.

Many families who need the support of food banks want to eat a healthier diet. Fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, high-quality lean proteins, and low-fat dairy sources are options that may not be accessible at all food pantries.

It is not only important to provide food assistance, but also nutrition assistance. Following a few simple steps can take your food drive to the next level and help support not only **food security**, but also **nutrition security** (consistent and equitable access to healthy, safe, affordable foods essential to optimal health and well-being).

Know the Difference

Food security. Physical and economic access to a safe supply of nutritionally adequate food to support an active, healthy life.

Nutrition security. Consistent and equitable access to foods and beverages that promote optimal well-being and prevent or treat disease.

Basic Steps for Hosting a Healthy Food Drive

1. Identify a **distribution center**. A distribution center is a site where those in need can acquire food. This may be a local food pantry, food bank, or other community partner.
2. Identify a **donation site**. A donation site is a location where individuals can bring food to donate that will be transported to a distribution center.
 - Schools
 - » Collect food in individual classrooms.
 - » Collect food in a commons area, such as a cafeteria or foyer.
 - Business
 - » Collect food at the cash register or at the entrance or exit.
 - » Partner with a local business. Some might agree to offering a discount to people who donate food. For example, a local coffee shop might offer a \$1 drink discount to people who donate to the food drive.
 - » Ask a business for cash donations to support a food pantry.
 - Grocery store
 - » Inspire student groups, clubs, or other organizations to host a food drive at a local grocery store.
 - » Set up a donation table with a display outside the grocery store.
 - » Create complete-meal packages. Provide examples of \$5 meals whose ingredients shoppers can purchase and donate.
3. Develop a healthy donation list.
 - Work with the food pantry/bank director or community partner agency to decide what food items need to be on the list. Consider each food group.
 - Use language to support healthy options: whole grain, low or no sugar, low or no sodium, low fat.
 - Include the logos of collaborating groups.
4. Design a food-drive display that promotes specific food-item requests.
5. Publicize your food drive.
 - Make copies of a healthy donation list to distribute at the donation site.
 - Distribute the list electronically (e.g., parent list, school website, business customer list, donation site's social media).
 - Design posters or handouts to advertise the food drive and display them in high-traffic areas at the donation site. Include the logos of collaborating groups.
 - Develop social media content and post it a few weeks ahead of the event.

Frequently Asked Questions

- **When is a good time to host a food drive?**
Holidays, back-to-school events, before-school breaks, and entry into events such as sporting events or school dances.
- **How long should a food drive last?**
For school-based food drives or those hosted by other youth organizations (e.g., 4-H clubs, Boy/Girl Scout troops), two weeks works well. Including a weekend as part of a food drive's timeline can be helpful since many families visit grocery stores over the weekend. For those hosted in coffee shops or other similar businesses, one day may work better.
- **Who manages the day-to-day operations of a food drive?**
For school-based food drives, tap into a school's parent-teacher organization to help manage daily food collection. Another good option is a school's leadership or mentor group. If a club or other organization is holding a food drive in collaboration with a business, it is best if the organization's members take responsibility for the daily collection of food. If a business hosts a one-day food drive, it may be sufficient for employees to add this task to their regular job duties.
- **How should food be collected?**
For school-based food drives, set collection boxes outside each classroom. Typically, children or parents drop off their donation upon arriving at school in the morning.

For business-based food drives, place a collection box outside the business's entrance if it is supervised by a volunteer or employee. This may work best if a club or organization hosts the food drive in collaboration with a business. If a business is hosting a one-day food drive, however, it may be most successful to locate collection box(es) at the checkout counter or just inside the exit area.

- **How should you manage fresh produce donations?**

For school-based food drives, refrigeration units within the school may be available to store fresh produce. Apples, potatoes, carrots, and cauliflower are just some of the foods that transport well and are hard to damage.

- **Once the food drive is over, who disperses the donations?**

Call the pantry and have them pick up the food, if they have a food truck. A school's nutrition services director may also provide assistance if the food drive is large enough, since they often have sizeable trucks. You can also partner with UPS to deliver food. Other potential community partnerships to assist with food delivery include service groups, local fire departments, churches, and even high school students involved in service clubs like the Key Club or Rotary Club or those in other leadership-oriented ones, like the National Honor Society, who may be looking for ways to give back to their community.

Types of Food Drives

Hosting a food drive that is fun, engaging, and raises awareness of community food and nutrition insecurity helps to ensure its success. The following provides a few ideas to get you started.

MyPlate Food Drives

This type of food drive is organized around the United States Department of Agriculture's MyPlate (myplate.gov), which highlights the five food groups: fruits, vegetables, grains, protein, and dairy. The donation list for this type of food drive identifies items from each food group.

The more specific your requests, the more successful your food drive will be. Pictures of specific products or stating desired name brands may also be helpful.

Other tips:

- Don't list too many foods per food group; at most, include three or four items.
- Elementary age children may be more successful with a MyPlate Food Drive where each grade level brings in items from a different food group.
- Dairy items are often difficult to donate to a food drive. Consider asking for monetary donations to purchase dairy items. Often the term "Dairy Dollars" is used as a marketing tool for this type of donation. These funds can then be directly used at the food pantry to purchase dairy products. Dairy Dollars has been successful in the school setting.

Recipe Pack Food Drives

This type of food drive focuses on a specific recipe or theme. Request items that provide ingredients for the recipe or that align with the theme. This can be a good way to promote donations of specific food types that a pantry needs.

In the school setting, assign each grade level to bring in the ingredients to create a recipe or foods that complement a meal of the day (breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks). This can also be adapted for a business or workplace.

Examples of Recipe Pack Food Drives

Breakfast of Champions: whole grain oats, Cheerios, no-sugar-added mandarin oranges, whole grain breakfast bars

Reeling in Lunch: tuna and salmon (tear packs if for children), whole grain crackers, low-fat/high monounsaturated-fat mayonnaise (e.g., olive oil or avocado oil-based)

Family Chili Dinner: no-salt canned beans, no-salt canned tomatoes, fresh onion, and a chili-starter pack (off-set the sodium from the chili-starter pack with the no-salt-added canned products).

Snack Attack: whole grain snack bars, fresh apples, Cuties oranges, no-sugar-added peanut butter

PB & J Food Drive: low-sugar peanut butter and jelly and whole grain bread

Reverse Spaghetti Dinner: whole grain pasta, no-sugar-added spaghetti sauce, and canned low-sodium chicken

Competitive Food Drive

This type of food drive works well for school-based food drives with homerooms, particularly at middle and high schools. Marketing the food drive as a fun, creative competition between homerooms may help ensure its success. Students hosting the food drive could be on the school's leadership team, a sports team, or other club.

Work with your food distribution site to identify a list of foods in high demand. From that list, identify healthy donation options and set up a friendly competition between two homeroom classrooms for each item. Keep it simple by targeting only one food item for every two homerooms. The winning classroom donates the most of that in-demand food item.

Promotion

- Develop promotional materials for each homeroom, displaying teacher images and the specific food item.
- Create a take-home flyer that includes information on what makes the food a healthy choice and where it fits on MyPlate. Large posters with competing teachers and their food items can be displayed throughout the school.
- Formally present to the students hosting the food drive about food insecurity and the importance of their food donations. A good resource for food insecurity statistics is Map the Meal Gap (<https://map.feedingamerica.org>). Emphasize the benefits of healthy eating and its relationship to well-being, less absenteeism, and better test scores. Consider sharing the presentation to teachers during their staff meeting.
- Promote the food drive every day in the school's morning announcements.

Donation Day

Host a food drive for at least a week and a half. Collect food on the last day of the food drive as students enter their homeroom in the morning so that perishable items, like yogurt, fresh produce, eggs, or cheese can be safely donated. Scheduling the donation morning on a Wednesday may improve participation. Try to

avoid the donation morning to be a Monday after a weekend since many families need a few more reminders on Monday and Tuesday to bring food donations on Wednesday. Arrange for food pantry truck(s) to arrive the morning of the food drive. Each homeroom assigns the students who will bring their homeroom's donations out to the truck(s). This entire process—from the start of school, students arriving in their home room, and delivering food out to the trucks—typically takes twenty to thirty minutes for a school with seven hundred students. The quick donation method keeps perishables within the two-hour food-safety rule. Be prepared to assist the food pantry, if need be, to quickly get the food into refrigeration after its collection.

Have each homeroom count the number of items it donated and compare it to the other competing homeroom classroom. Provide the general weight of each food item to each classroom so they can calculate the overall weight of their donations.

Late Arrival

For late-arriving food items, assist the school during the rest of the week by picking up these items and delivering them to the food pantry. If they are perishable items, have the school store them in an onsite school refrigerator (e.g., the teacher's lounge refrigerator).

After the Food Drive

After all the food has been delivered to the food distribution site (food pantry/bank or community partner) for distribution, take some time to debrief with your food-drive team. Talk about what went well, what challenges you had, and ways to improve your efficiency in the future. Check with the manager at your food distribution site to see if the food drive met their needs and provided items to improve both the **food** and **nutrition security** of their clients. If you did this, then the food drive was a success!

Further Reading

Feeding America. 2024. "Map the Meal Gap." <https://map.feedingamerica.org/>.

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