

For Wisconsin Operators of the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)

Updated Food Pantry Protocols for Operating during Coronavirus COVID-19, Winter 2020-2021 (through April 30, 2021)

Updated October 22, 2020; replaces "Pantry Protocols for Operating during Coronavirus COVID-19" June 1, 2020"

You and your colleagues who serve as TEFAP food pantry operators have followed Wisconsin's "no contact" outdoor distribution instruction since March 18, 2020. You have performed extraordinary public service under very challenging conditions; TEFAP staff and your Emergency Feeding Organization (EFO) have deep appreciation for you and your team.

Regrettably, Wisconsin's COVID-19 threat levels are high, so continued "no contact" food distribution continues as best practice and aligns with recent food pantry guidance from the Centers for Disease Control. At the same time, Wisconsinites know that our winters can be formidable, and each pantry has unique space and personnel challenges that may or may not support safe distribution food outdoors. While *TEFAP strongly advises you continue "no contact" food*, the program also recognizes dangerously cold and inclement conditions are themselves a safety concern, and that pantry service protocols require some flexibility. For some pantries to remain open, this *may* include limited public use of indoor space. Your judgement of your pantry's particular options and limits is crucial to this public safety balancing challenge. Your EFO (which holds your pantry's TEFAP agreement) is your partner in problem solving. Therefore:

1. **If you are able to continue outdoor distribution in the cold weather**, we recommend you continue as long as you can. The TEFAP Advisory Council and the Division of Public Health will continually monitor COVID-19 activity statewide and at the county level. We will work with you to make distribution adjustments based on both COVID-19 and weather conditions. The situation remains dynamic – as will TEFAP protocols.
2. **If your pantry is unable to continue exclusive outdoor distribution**, and you wish to remain open, work with your EFO (the Emergency Feeding Organization that issued your pantry's TEFAP agreement) to develop a plan that fits your specific location to be as safely as possible. If you believe you **MUST** allow people indoors, you should develop a written description of how you plan to distribute with a hybrid of indoor and outdoor contact. You must:
 - a. **Put your plan on paper; share it with your EFO.** Keep it simple; use bullets to describe your process.
 - b. **Share your plan with your local health department and ask for feedback.** Follow their recommendations as closely as possible.
 - c. **Adjust your approach to food distribution as necessary.** Ebb and flow of transmission rates is a factor. Check the Wisconsin Department of Health Services web site to see your counties statistics and activity from adjoining counties. Pay attention to events in your community that could increase transmission.
 - d. **Your plan needs to specifically and definitively answer these questions:**
 - i. How many people at a time?
 - ii. What protective practices do you expect of them? Did you post it so folks know the rules?
 - iii. What protective practices do you expect of volunteers?
 - iv. How will you sanitize surfaces? Who will? How often?
 - v. How does air filtration or lack of it affect this plan?
 - vi. How will this affect the number of people you can serve in one day?
 - vii. How does this affect the number of volunteers you use? Their roles?
 - viii. Will this change your hours or days of service?
 - ix. Is it possible for your volunteers to operate in "pods" with no overlap among members – in case of COVID-19 exposure so the pantry can still operate?
 - x. Do you have agreement from your volunteers that they will cooperate in public health contact tracing in the event that some who works at the pantry is exposed to COVID-19? Unwilling volunteers are not suitable for work on-location at a food pantry during a pandemic.
3. **If you and your EFO disagree about whether a practice is safe and local public health consultation is not available**, use your EFO's appeals process as a first step to resolution. If you follow that process disagreement remains unresolved, you can ask DHs TEFAP program staff for review. We will give public safety concerns priority attention.
4. **Smaller pantries could allow people to preorder, schedule distribution appointments and/or make home deliveries** if they have the capacity. TEFAP pantries must also always allow "walk-up" or "drive-up" service during pantry hours even if they primarily use an appointment system.

5. **Temporary closure remains the final option.** If you believe this is your only safe option, we understand. Please be sure and discuss this with your EFO if you feel you must close.

The following guidance remains largely unchanged from previous instruction; highlighting shows new or amended information.

WORKFORCE STRATEGIES

- Follow advice from public health experts.** Handwashing and sanitation in food distribution is crucial. Continually sterilize exchange points (doorknobs, service counters, and restrooms) and avoid unnecessary physical contact within the pantry. Practice social distancing with a minimum of 6' between volunteers and with participants and wear masks covering noses and mouths while at the pantry or interacting with anyone who is not a member of your immediate household. Do not share food, lunch or snacks. Dispose of empty drinking bottles. Disposable gloves are recommended; dispose and re-glove after bathroom breaks; re-entering the pantry from outside. Avoid touching your face.
- Create and post a pantry "sick policy" for volunteers.** The message is simple: PLEASE DON'T VOLUNTEER IN THE PANTRY IF YOU ARE SICK OR ARE LIVING WITH SOMEONE WHO IS. Remind volunteers regularly. Ask for swift notice from volunteers if they exhibit symptoms (coughing, sneezing, and fever), become sick, have had large-scale social contact at an event or have been traveling. Do not return before the medically advised window for self-isolation. Volunteers who had large-scale social contact – with symptoms or not – should also avoid the pantry for the self-quarantine period recommended by experts.
- Remind participants that if they become ill, they should send a proxy to the pantry for their food.** Check proxy designations to be sure they are up-to-date. Flag participants with no proxy and consider what options (if any) you might have to get food to someone homebound who has no proxy. You may find volunteers who will make deliveries to homebound individuals. Make sure that volunteer drivers do so at their own expense and risk, which includes insurance liability.
- Assess your pantry's labor capacity.** Are there enough "back-up" volunteers to maintain the pantry's service hours if conditions reduce the size of your team? This may include operating trucks, trailers, forklifts, pallet jacks, hand trucks, loading and unloading, lifting, making runs to pick up food from Kwik Trip, Walmart and other suppliers) Do you have coverage for essential functions? If not, consider reassigning volunteers.
- Making your assigned pick-ups from big box stores is an essential function to keep food flowing to your food bank partners. Please do not cease Walmart, Target, Kwik Trip and other pick-ups unless forced.** Should this happen, immediately contact your food bank and talk about alternatives.
- Pantries can continue to accept food donations** if they have the workforce, space, protective gear and sanitizing considerations to process, sort and store them. Volunteer should either wear gloves or wait at least 24 hours from the time they receive donated foods before handling and sorting them.
- Agree that vulnerable volunteers will take a sabbatical.** Volunteers age 70 and older, those with chronic health conditions and those caring for vulnerable or sick family members or friends should avoid interpersonal contact with the public. Talk with volunteers about safeguarding their own health.
Insist this is a priority for all.

FOOD DISTRIBUTION STRATEGIES

COVID-19 continues to be a worldwide pandemic. Both federal and state governments have declared a State of Emergency, and the “safe” crowd size is no longer relevant. **Practices that put people in close contact raise the level of risk to you, your volunteers and your pantry participants.**

- Through April 30, 2021. TEFAP strongly recommends that pantries continue a “no contact” pre-pack system, adjusting for household size and adding frozen and refrigerated as the packages go out the door.** “Drive-up” is safest; advise people to stay in their vehicles. You can collect required information, view their ID and ask them to self-declare income *as they remain in their vehicles*. If you have volunteers to load, place groceries in the vehicle cargo area. If you cannot load a vehicle, set bags outside (on a bench or table; not the ground) to self-load.
- “Walk-up” is necessary** in some communities and neighborhoods. Keep people outside and 6’ apart. Speak loudly, slowly and clearly when you are talking to folks outside; we have participants with hearing issues and folks with hearing aids pick up ambient noises. Set packages down rather than handing them to participants; avoid contact.
- Pantries may change hours and/or switch to an appointment schedule** for most pickups with proper public notice and notice to your EFO. Follow communication strategies below.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

- Ask volunteer to update their emails and phone numbers.** Make sure your volunteers remain reachable.
- Update your pantry’s outgoing phone message at least weekly.** Even if you maintain current hours of service, people will seek to confirm that you are open before they come. It is particularly important to change your outgoing message if you are forced to change or reduce hours due to volunteer shortages.
- Advise participants to check the pantry’s phone message to confirm you’re open.** Their ability to verify this will reduce anxiety about food security. If you must close for any reason, make sure that you include that in your outgoing message and refer them to another pantry.
- Ensure your pantry’s after-hours, emergency phone number is current and posted on the front door.** You may now use 2-1-1 to satisfy this requirement.
- If your pantry takes phone messages, continue checking them regularly.** Participants who live alone might need assistance. Designate a reliable monitor for incoming messages and discuss what you will do if someone leaves a distress message.
- Ask local law-enforcement to hold pre-packed foods for households at their station.** Restock as needed.
- Notify 2-1-1 if your pantry must change hours or close temporarily.**

IF YOU DETERMINE YOU MUST TEMPORARILY CLOSE THE PANTRY OR MODIFY HOURS

- Make an independent decision about your pantry’s “open” and “closed” status.** In weather situations, many pantries close when schools close. However, with many schools operating virtually, school closures may not be the logical trigger for closing an emergency food pantry. Whether or not schools close, please remain open if you can do it safely.

- Immediately contact 2-1-1 as well as your Emergency Feeding Organization and the food bank that serves your pantry.** Update them as the situation changes.
- Immediately post public notice on your pantry's phone message, on the door, and by social media.**
- Make sure your EFO can still contact you -- whether or not your pantry remains open as planned.**
- Notify Wisconsin TEFAP Coordinator, Kitty Kocol at kittykocol@dhs.wisconsin.gov if you determine you must close or change hours temporarily.**

DATA COLLECTION AND ELIGIBILITY GUIDELINES

- Your pantry can continue using the COVID-19 data collection form that allows you to record information for multiple households on a single sheet. Your pantry can also choose to continue using a single form for each household. Either is acceptable.
- Your pantry has the option to suspend the practice of required annual verification of addresses and number of persons in the household. If you are able to continue and can do it safely, you can maintain the practice; if not, TEFAP will instruct you to restore the practice when safety conditions improve.

Questions about this instruction? Contact your EFO or email kitty.kocol@dhs.wisconsin.gov. Thank you for your public service and cooperation with public health safety protocols.