

Why Choice?

Imagine your family is in need of food. You have a few items at home, but not enough to prepare full meals. You visit a food pantry and are handed a pre-packed bag of groceries. Some of the items are foods you already have. Others are unfamiliar, and you're not sure how to cook them. A few aren't a good fit for your family's preferences, culture, or health needs. You feel frustrated, not ungrateful, but unseen.

Now imagine a different experience. One where you're able to hand-pick the items you know your family will use and enjoy. You feel more in control, more respected, and more likely to use what you've received. **This is the power of client choice.**

Spectrum of Choice

Client choice is often misunderstood as a binary decision: either you distribute standard bags or allow everyone to pick what they want. In reality, client choice exists on a spectrum. Even full choice doesn't mean unlimited access, it means clients can choose the foods that work best for them, within quantity limits set by the pantry.

Across our network, we've seen client choice work in many different ways whether it be through grocery store set ups, farmers market layouts, or mobile pantry setups. With creativity and commitment, pantries of all sizes can take meaningful steps toward more choice.

"I absolutely adore client choice! It's a wonderful way to let families pick the food they want to eat. I feel like this helps with food waste, and that's something we can all agree is important."

Maria D.

Westmont Elementary School

The diagram below outlines the **four levels** of client choice:



No Choice

Every client gets the same predetermined items. Volunteer/staff handle the food and prepare bags or boxes for clients.



Limited Choice

Clients can choose among a few types of boxes or receive a prepackaged box and can choose certain items from a table. Clients typically do not touch or handle the food directly.



Modified Choice

Clients may select from general food types such as soup or cereal by selecting items from a menu or telling volunteers what items they want by pointing. Volunteers/staff then pack the box for clients.



Full Choice

Clients may select from specific flavors or brands such as chicken noodle soup or Cheerios by shopping for food similar to a grocery store or ordering online for specific items. The site may set limits on quantity to select, but clients may freely handle and select foods.

