



Best Practices for Managing and Donating to Share Pantries

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What you will learn

- **Share pantries are small, local food pantries open to everyone** that are usually placed in public or visible locations.
- **Only shelf-stable, unopened, commercially packaged foods and fresh, whole produce should be donated**, with packaging and storage practices that protect against pests and weather.
- **Share pantry hosts should regularly inspect for spoiled food, cleanliness, pests, maintenance issues, and vandalism**, especially during extreme temperatures that may cause food to spoil or packaging to burst.
- **Share pantry donors and hosts should use good judgment**, as they are not explicitly protected by federal or Virginia food donation liability laws and should consult legal experts if needed.

You can help your community by hosting or donating to a share pantry. This guide offers best practices for providing safe and quality food to your neighbors who are experiencing hunger.

What is a share pantry and how does it work?

Share pantries are small food pantries open to anyone. Share pantries are usually unattended. Food donations come from members of a neighborhood, and users are encouraged to take what they need and leave what they can. These are generally unconnected to any other food pantry, and are often found in someone's front yard, outside of public buildings, or in parks.

A share pantry should have a host. The host is responsible for regularly checking it to make sure

the food is safe, of good quality, and protected from contamination.

What foods are best offered by a share pantry?

Share pantries should only offer:

- Shelf-stable, unopened, commercially packaged foods
 - Examples include rice, pasta, crackers, tomato sauce, canned foods, apple sauce, and peanut butter.
 - Store these foods in an enclosed area, with tight door seals and overhead protection (Figure 1)
- Fresh, whole produce
 - Store these foods in an open-air, covered environment

Donated food needs to be protected from pests and environmental contamination (like rain). We recommend that share pantries be:

- In a highly visible or public area to prevent tampering or vandalism
- At least 6 inches off the ground

How to maintain and monitor a share pantry

It is important that the host properly maintains and manages the share pantry. This would include regularly checking for:

- Foods that are suspected of being spoiled, or are otherwise not recommended for sharing through a share pantry
- Maintenance needs (e.g., checking the roof of a share pantry for leaks, cleaning)

- Pests
- Any signs of tampering



Figure 1. An example of a share pantry

Discard any foods that are suspected of having spoiled or been contaminated. Repairs should be made based on its maintenance needs and to keep pests out. The share pantry should be kept clean, especially if any of the foods have leaked or dirtied the shelves.

Share pantries may need to be checked more often during hot and cold weather. When the temperature is above 90°F, foods can quickly spoil. Some foods in your share pantry may be in packages that aren't designed to be frozen (i.e., canned goods) and can become damaged. That damage could expose the food inside to contamination.

We recommend having a sign on the share pantry detailing the type(s) of foods people should donate. We also recommend that the pantry host include their contact information somewhere in the shared pantry in case anyone has questions.

Legal and liability guidelines for share pantries

It is important that shared pantry hosts and donors operate with good judgment and diligence to ensure the available food is safe and wholesome.

The Federal Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act and Sections 3.2-5144 and 35.1-14.2 of the Code of Virginia specify criminal and civil exemptions from liability for food donors and organizations that distribute donated food. However, individuals providing direct donations through share pantries are not protected by these laws. Further questions about liability related to hosting a share pantry should be referred to a legal professional.

Acknowledgements

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References

[Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act, 42 U.S. Code § 1791](#) (2023)

[Donations of Food to Charitable Organizations, Code of Virginia § 35.1-14.2](#) (2022)

[Exemption from Civil and Criminal Liability in Certain Cases, Code of Virginia § 3.2-5144](#) (2022)

Washington State Department of Health. "Food Rescue Donation Guide – Share Pantry." Last modified February 2021.
<https://doh.wa.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/Documents/Pubs/333-257.pdf>

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