

Increasing Food Access while Reducing Food Waste- Free Little Pantries

In Feeding America's most recent Epidemiology report, it was identified that Solano County has "63,390 food-insecure people," with more than 45% of residents living in areas with limited access to nutritious and affordable food. This staggering statistic becomes even more impactful when considering the USDA's report that more than 42% of all food waste is attributable to households. At Catholic Charities Yolo-Solano (CCYS), we recognized the need to extend our food access efforts beyond our on-site Client-Choice food pantry to reach families throughout the county living in food deserts, while also addressing the challenge of reducing household food waste. The Free Little Pantry project offers communities a vital safety net, where food is available outside of regular distribution hours, and operates on a "Take what you need, leave what you can" basis. Not only does this initiative increase access to food, but it also serves as a hub for surplus items from community members' pantries. Many traditional food distribution efforts in the county provide pre-packed food bags, often containing items that may not be useful for every recipient. The Free Little Pantries—small pantry boxes placed in accessible, community-facing spaces—allow participants to easily pick up or drop off items as needed. This project fosters a sense of community engagement, enabling residents to both receive and provide assistance to their neighbors.

The project could not have come to fruition without the impactful partnerships CCYS has cultivated throughout the county. The Fairfield-Suisun Adult School Carpentry program agreed to build all seven of the Free Little Pantry boxes during their evening carpentry class. When speaking with the students building the boxes, many expressed a sense of accomplishment in creating a meaningful resource for their community, adding value to their educational experience. Scott Knull, head of the Career and Technical Education Department, noted that "for our students, it's given them a good sense of direction in what they are learning from the class, and how they can use it—not only to benefit their own lives but to positively impact the community at large." From its inception, the Free Little Pantry project has been a community-focused effort, built by the community, for the community.

Furthermore, we have an array of dedicated site coordinators who have significantly contributed to this project. These coordinators represent a diverse range of sites, from after-school programs and public housing complexes to senior living facilities and Early Childhood Education preschools. Despite the additional responsibilities, they have committed to providing their communities access to this service. To ensure the pantries are well-maintained and donations are appropriate, CCYS created a list of "Site Agreements" and "Donation Item Guidelines." Our goal is to prioritize the nutrition and health of our communities, and these agreements outline which items are acceptable for the pantries, how often they need to be cleaned, and the importance of prioritizing nutritious donations. We also incorporated nutrition messaging into the boxes to reinforce healthy eating habits and sustain the project's impact.

Sustainability has been a key priority for CCYS from the start of this initiative. We are committed to providing routine donation support to each pantry for the first three months of their operation. After this initial period, we will conduct a rollout check-in to assess the level of support needed

and help connect sites to local food pantries as necessary. To further ensure community health, each site coordinator is encouraged to complete a food safety training course sponsored by CCYS. This training aligns with our “Donation Item Guidelines” and helps site coordinators anticipate potential safety concerns. While this training is not mandatory before hosting a pantry, we will check in on its completion during the three-month rollout review. Additionally, our valued partners have pledged to share highlights and testimonials from pantry users, which further strengthens community bonds and brings visibility to the project's impact.

While this level of collaboration has been immensely fulfilling, it has also posed its own set of challenges, requiring extensive communication and persistence from all partners involved. The Free Little Pantry project is a testament to the power of community-driven solutions, and it serves as a model for how local partnerships can effectively address food insecurity and waste. We are excited to see the continued growth and positive impact of this initiative in the months and years to come.