

Ways to make food donations count

You may want to add food pantries to your list of organizations to donate to this during this time of year; I often make donations to food drives. You may just take older items from your pantry that you haven't found a use for, but you may also wonder if instead you should be buying new.

As long as the food is safe for human consumption, your local food pantry will likely be grateful for the donation, especially these days.

According to a U.S. Department of Agriculture report released in September, an estimated 14 percent of American households were food insecure at some point during 2014. That includes 5.6 percent experiencing "very low food security," which means that one or more household members went without food at times because they didn't have enough money or other resources for food. In Parker County, according to Feeding America, 18.2 percent of households experienced very low food security. This is higher than the national average. As a result, food pantries report increased demand and, of course, the need for increased donations.

Here are some ideas found on several organizations' websites to increase the chances that your donations are worthwhile:

- Consider focusing on shelf-stable sources of protein. Examples include peanut butter; beans, either canned or dried; trail mix or nuts; canned chili, soups or stews; and canned tuna, salmon or chicken.
- Pantry staples, such as rice, pasta, flour, cereal, canned vegetables, tomato sauce and cooking oils are always welcome. If you can spring for healthier options, such as whole-grain pasta, brown rice, high-fiber low-sugar cereal and low-sodium vegetables, is even better.
- At this time of year, think about items for holiday meals: canned yams, cranberry sauce, boxed stuffing, instant mashed potatoes — even green beans, mushroom soup and dried onion rings.
- Refrain from donating anything in glass jars, torn packages or in cans that are rusted, dented, or bulging. Food pantries generally can't accept foods that are past their expiration date, but they take foods less than a year past a "best by" date. If you're not certain, ask.
- Most pantries prefer not to distribute junk food such as candy, chips and soft drinks. Limit the donation of such foods.
- Some pantries also distribute personal care items, such as deodorant, shampoo and conditioner, bar soap, body wash, toilet paper, and toothpaste and toothbrushes.
- Finally, consider donating money instead of products. Food pantries can use monetary donations to purchase items from regional food banks, which in turn use donations for their own purchases. For example, the Tarrant Area Food Bank reports that it can turn \$1 in donated cash into the equivalent of 5 1.5 pound meals in food and groceries to feed the hungry. It may not feel as satisfying as clearing out your pantry, but monetary donations can go a long way to help alleviate the plight of those who need a helping hand.

There are many places in Parker County that will take food donations or cash to buy food. Manna, Center of Hope, Neighbors to Neighbors, and the Weatherford Senior Citizens Center. Many churches in Parker County also distribute food and will accept donations as well.