



Meeting Neighbor Needs with Culturally Connected Foods:

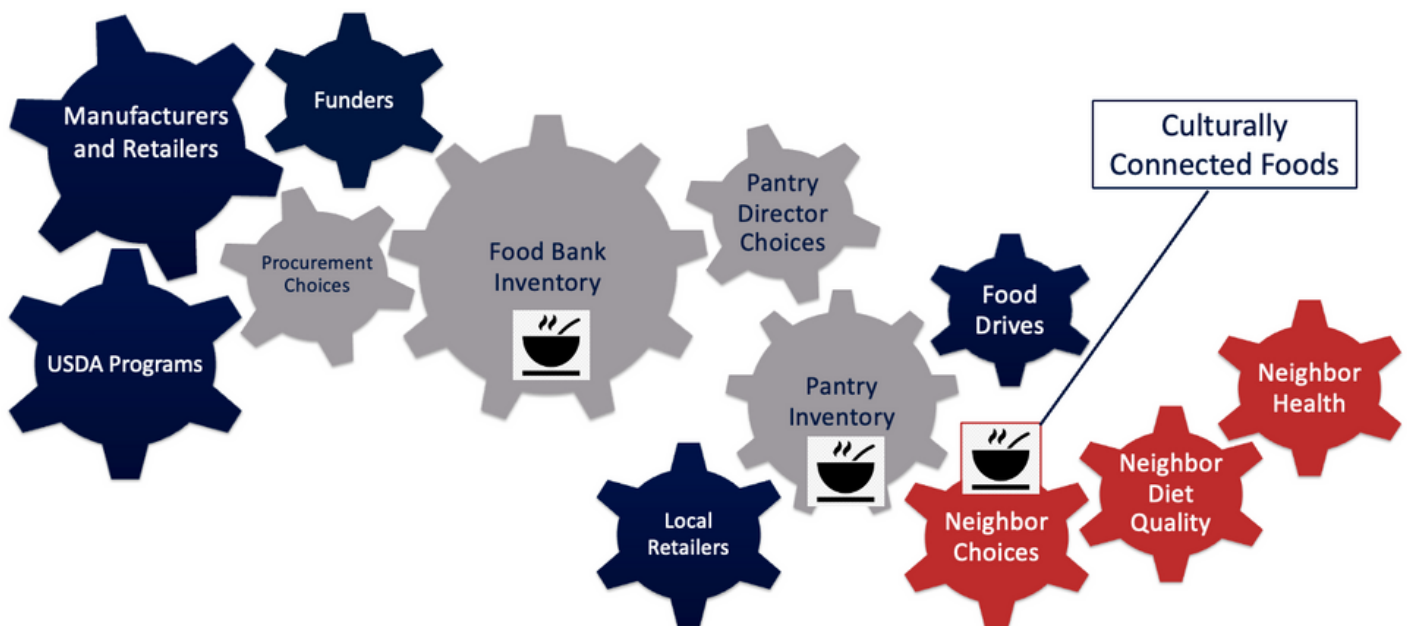
A guide for food pantries and food banks

Background

Historically, the main goal of the charitable food system was to limit food waste by moving food into the hands of people who need it. Success was primarily measured by the number of pounds distributed and the number of people served.

Over the past decade, however, many in the fields of public health, anti-hunger advocacy, and food banking have shifted away from a narrow focus on the quantity of foods distributed to a broader focus on the needs of the individuals who are served by this system.

New considerations include attending to the nutritional quality of the foods distributed; allowing neighbors to choose their food with dignity while shopping in a pantry; and meeting the cultural needs of specific communities. The aim of this guide is to provide ideas to help meet the cultural needs of neighbors within the charitable food system.



The charitable food system is complex, with many moving parts that interact like cogs in a machine. For neighbors to access culturally connected foods at pantries, these foods must be available. Both food pantries and food banks have a role to play in determining which foods to source to meet cultural preferences. This sourcing requires being intentional, with a focus on the needs of the neighbors and communities the charitable food system serves.

Terminology

There are multiple terms used to describe foods that are important for specific cultural groups, as well as different terms to describe the individuals who food pantries serve. We have listed these below. For the current guide, we have selected the terms “culturally connected foods” and “neighbors.” Survey users should feel free to change the terms to match your preferences.

Culturally Connected Foods Culturally Preferred Foods Culturally Appropriate Foods Culturally Relevant Foods Culturally Inclusive Foods Culturally Sensitive to Neighbors Culturally Universal Foods Neighbor Preferred Foods	*Neighbors* Clients Members Guests
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What are culturally connected foods?

What foods did your grandparents make for you growing up? What dishes do you prepare for important holidays and events? Foods that specific cultures or populations have a special connection to are considered culturally connected foods. We are leaving this definition intentionally broad to capture different cultures and experiences that people may identify with.

Learning about Your Neighbors' Needs



**Give Neighbors
a Voice**



**Look at
Intake Forms**



**Conduct a
Self-Assessment**



**Collaborate
with Partners**

About This Guide

To create this guide, we interviewed people working within the charitable food system to learn how they approached the process of learning about neighbors' needs. This guide is organized around the four themes we heard. We provide two surveys that we have tested in the field. The surveys are annotated with instructions for use:

- The first survey is for people who work or volunteer at food pantries. Food banks or food pantries may want to use this to gather guidance from within their staff.
- The second survey is designed for neighbors to gather information about the general and specific food items that are culturally important to them.



"If you show up somewhere and no one speaks your language, and they don't have the foods you eat, you're not going to show up again."

(Gillian Kimura, Capital Area Food Bank)

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Gifts of Love (Avon, CT)



Give Neighbors a Voice

The best way to understand your neighbors' cultural food needs is to give them a chance to describe their needs.

Suggestion boxes allow neighbors to share continuous feedback

Focus groups offer neighbors an opportunity to describe their needs in their own words

Surveys can be completed online, on paper, or through conversations with neighbors

"Sometimes, I've suggested a posterboard [where neighbors can] put a post-it of what you'd like to see, just so that pantries are getting that direct feedback."

(Aliza Ottenheimer, Capital Area Food Bank)

"Walk [neighbors] through the survey like a conversation instead of giving them a piece of paper... [Then you are] able to ask some more clarifying questions."

(Kristen Elliott, Atlanta Community Food Bank)

Ways to Start the Conversation:

- **Begin by expressing your desire to learn more about them and their culture in order to improve the pantry's offerings**
- **Acknowledge an upcoming cultural/religious holiday and ask about foods their family eats to celebrate**
- **Specifically ask about what foods they still need to buy after visiting the pantry**



Tips for Creating Surveys

Don't Overpromise

- Make sure the language in the survey doesn't promise anything you can't deliver.
- Make it clear that, while you value all input, not all suggestions can be implemented.

Use Simple Language or Pictures When Possible

- You can use the editing tools on Microsoft Word to check your survey's readability score and estimate the level of education needed to understand it.
- Many groups recommend aiming for an 8th-grade reading level or lower.
- You can use pictures of specific foods and store logos to help neighbors quickly identify their answers. This may be easier when creating online surveys.

Keep the Surveys Short

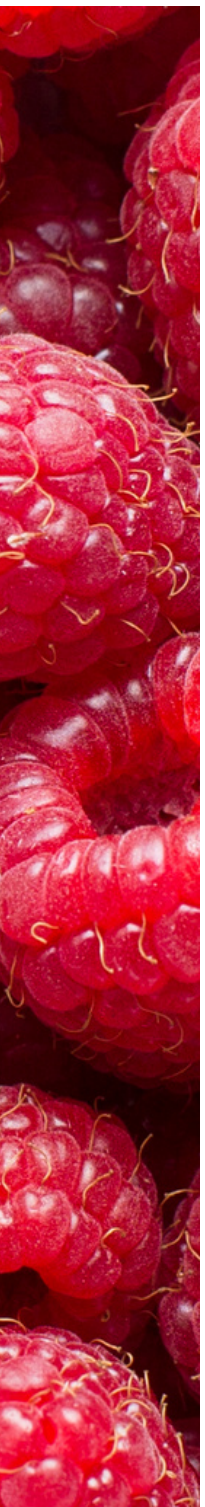
- Longer surveys (more than 10 minutes) are less likely to be completed. Consider distributing shorter surveys more frequently, instead.
- Longer surveys may be appropriate as part of the intake process. However, you still want to be mindful of the work you are requiring your neighbors to do.

Alphabetize Answer Choices

- This ensures that no group of people is implicitly prioritized or situated as the norm.
- It also makes it easier for neighbors to find the option they want to select.



Continued



Translate Your Surveys

- Use intake forms to see what languages your neighbors speak.
- If you do not have data on neighbors' languages, you can find many sources online for this information. For instance, the US Department of Justice's Limited English Proficiency (LEP) map, provides data on the languages most frequently spoken at state and county levels.
- Don't rely on online translation tools (such as Google Translate or ChatGPT). If possible, use a professional translation service. At a minimum, have a native speaker review the translation before you distribute it to make sure that it is accurate.

Consider How to Distribute

- Paper surveys – some neighbors find it easier to read off paper than a screen, but making copies can be expensive, and storing records or digitizing them can be expensive.
- Online surveys – other neighbors find it easier to use their own devices to take a survey online (personal devices might be set up to increase font sizes, which increases readability), but online surveys require time to set up.
- Reading surveys aloud to neighbors – helpful for neighbors with low literacy, vision problems, or problems holding a pen or device, but requires time from staff or volunteers.

Pilot Test Your Survey

- Have a small number of neighbors take the survey before you print all your copies. Neighbors might understand questions differently than you do.

The **Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN)** has guidelines for writing in a way that is easy to understand and tips for testing surveys that may be useful.



Look at Your Intake Forms

The data that you already collect about your neighbors can provide crucial insights into their needs.



1. Look at the data you already collect

Food pantry intake forms may have sections where neighbors can describe their backgrounds, including country of origin and language(s) spoken.

You can search for lists of foods common in the **countries of origin** of your neighbors. **Language** information can inform your translation of materials in the pantry.

2. Determine which questions to add

If your current intake form is missing questions that would help you better meet your neighbors' cultural food needs, add questions from the model surveys below.

If you are a food bank affiliated with Feeding America, consider using Service Insights, a data entry platform available to Feeding America member food banks. If you are a food pantry affiliated with a food bank in the Feeding America network, ask them about how you can use this platform to collect neighbor-level demographic data on intake, which can be used to help you understand basic information about the neighbors you serve, recommends **Maisie Campbell of More Than Food Consulting**.



Conduct a Self-Assessment

Food pantries (and the food banks that support them) should conduct a self-assessment to determine how to best meet their neighbors' cultural needs.

Here are some things to consider in your self-assessment:

Capacity

Determine what your pantry is capable of, given your resources, leadership, staffing capacity, and the cost necessary for any changes.

Neighbor-choice

Consider adopting a neighbor-choice pantry model that allows neighbors to choose their foods with dignity.

Staff and volunteer feedback

Food pantry staff spend the most time with your neighbors and are a great source of information about their preferences, backgrounds, and culturally connected food needs.

Pantry environment

Determine whether your pantry provides an environment that welcomes all neighbors equitably.

Commonalities across cultures

Consider which foods appeal to multiple cultures represented by the neighbors at your pantry. Many kinds of fresh produce and spices are used across many cultures' cuisines.

Community representation

Build a diverse team that is representative of your community and provide cultural competency training to staff.





Collaborate with Partners

Reach out to other organizations that work within your community.

Potential Partners:

- **Religious groups**
- **Service organizations**
- **Cultural groups**
- **Academic programs**
- **Community organizations**
- **Local international food retailers**

“The Atlanta Community Food Bank has a great relationship with the Latin American Association, so they’re often our first resource to reach our Spanish-speaking neighbors.”

(Kristen Elliott, Atlanta Community Food Bank)

Consider engaging universities and students to help with data collection:

FROM THE FIELD #1

Food Bank of Delaware

A collaboration between the Food Bank of Delaware and students in a graduate-level nutrition program planning and evaluation course at the University of Delaware conducted a community needs assessment to understand cultures and cultural preferences of neighbors in Delaware.

Students in the course analyzed census data, surveyed neighbors and volunteers working in the food pantry network, and mapped cultural grocery stores to better understand the cultural food preferences of their communities.

FROM THE FIELD #2

Atlanta Community Food Bank

MPH student Norma Guardado worked with the Atlanta Community Food Bank to complete her capstone project. Using census tract data and focus groups, she put together a one-page summary for each country of origin that included foods the groups will likely enjoy, foods they may pass up, common dishes, cultural considerations (such as languages and cultural influences on cuisine), and key traditions.

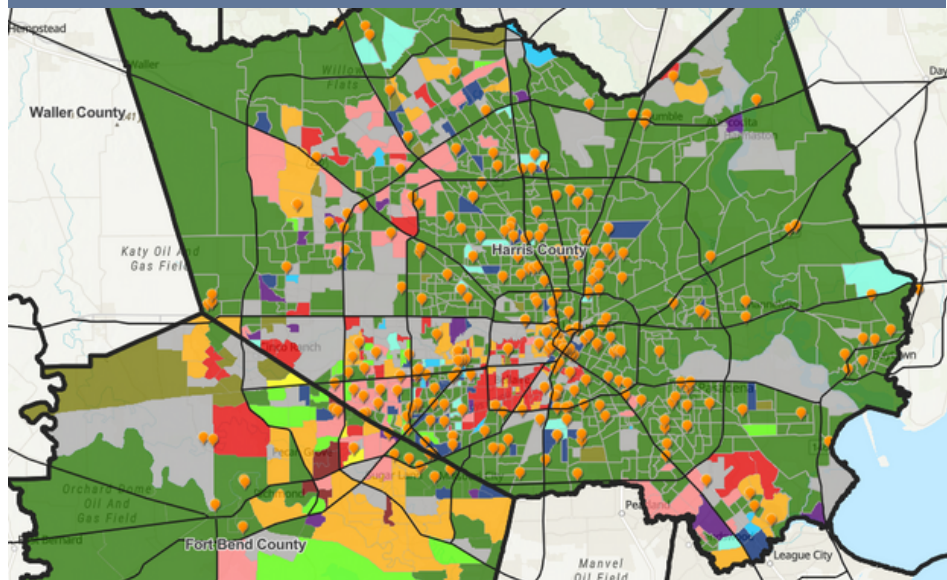




FROM THE FIELD #3

Houston Food Bank and UTHealth Fundamentals and Applications of GIS

Students in a Geographic Information System (GIS) course at UTHealth used census data to create a map of foreign-born populations. This map can be used by local food pantries to identify the most common countries of origin for the neighborhoods they serve, then focus on those cultures when sourcing culturally-connected foods.



Food Pantries:

Your food bank may have access to additional resources.

Work with them to conduct surveys, collect census data, and more!

"I posted a question in the Yammer space, and a ton of people had the same questions. So, we have been meeting almost every month for going on 3 years. There are a lot of food banks doing really fantastic work in this area."

(Kristen Elliott, Atlanta Community Food Bank)

Resources

- **Atlanta Community Food Bank**
 - [Nutrition Resources](#)
 - [Presentation on using focus groups to develop cultural food guides](#)
- **Food Bank of the Rockies**
 - [Culturally Responsive Food Initiative](#)
- **Houston Food Bank**
 - [Food and Culture Guide](#)
 - [GIS map](#)
- **Feeding America Resources**
 - Cultural Conversations Work Group
 - Contact Rickeya Smith for more information at rickeya.smith@feedingamerica.org
 - [Nutrition in Food Banking Toolkit](#)



“There are so many of these beautiful resources already available. If a pantry could identify the countries and regions where most of their client base is coming from, then they could access some of the lists that have already been developed. If you already know you’ve got folks that are primarily coming from Puerto Rico and from Jamaica, maybe you start there and say, ‘Which items would you most prefer?’”

(Katie Martin, More Than Food Consulting)



Have questions or stories from the field to share?



**Email us at:
ruddcenter@uconn.edu**

Model Surveys

The following pages contain survey questions for you to use. Please adapt to meet the needs of your food bank or food pantry. Directions for food banks and pantries about how to adapt the surveys are in blue boxes.

Editable versions of the surveys can be found on the [Rudd Center website](#). You can add these questions to another survey that you would like to distribute or use them as standalone surveys.

Volunteer/Staff Survey

This survey is intended to gather data from food pantries.

This survey uses the term neighbors to refer to the people who are served by a food pantry. Your food bank or pantry may use different language, such as clients or guests.

We want to know more about the cultural identities and cultural food preferences of the neighbors we serve. Your responses will help us make decisions about what to offer so that we can meet the needs of the communities we serve. This survey should take about 5 to 10 minutes to complete. You can skip any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering.

Decide whether you want to collect data from volunteers and staff anonymously. Anonymous surveying allows some respondents to feel more comfortable being open and honest about perceived shortcomings in their food pantries or food banks. However, you may have reasons for wanting to gather identifying information. If you do opt to administer the survey anonymously, include:

This survey is anonymous. We will not collect your name or contact information.

Tell us about yourself.

1. What is the name of your food pantry or organization?

Questions 2-4 allow you to determine the extent to which the person completing the survey is familiar with neighbors at their pantry via regular interactions.

2. How are you affiliated with this food pantry or organization?

3. How much time do you spend at the pantry?

4. What proportion of your work involves interacting directly with neighbors at the pantry? ____%

Tell us about the neighbors you serve.

5. What **counties/towns/neighborhoods** does your pantry serve?

Adapt this question by choosing “counties,” “towns,” or “neighborhoods.” Use whichever word will give you the most useful information. Consider: Using “counties” might make more sense if you’re in a rural area where pantries might cover an entire county—or multiple counties. Using “towns” might make sense if you’re in a suburban area that covers multiple towns. Using “neighborhoods” might make more sense if you’re in an urban area where pantries might only cover a few neighborhoods.

6. What is the approximate racial and ethnic composition of your neighbors?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> % American Indian or Alaska Native | <input type="checkbox"/> % Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander |
| <input type="checkbox"/> % Asian or Asian American | <input type="checkbox"/> % White or Caucasian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> % Black or African American | <input type="checkbox"/> % Another Race (_____) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> % Hispanic or Latino | <input type="checkbox"/> Don't Know |

7. What are the most common cultural backgrounds of your neighbors?

This question lets you start with the broader data on race/ethnicity from question 6, then dig down into more detailed cultural backgrounds. The racial and ethnic categories in Question 6 do not differentiate between the many different cultural backgrounds that make up each category, but they may still provide useful information.

8. What are the most common languages spoken by your neighbors? (Choose all that apply)

- | | |
|--------------------|----------------|
| a. Arabic | i. Mandarin |
| b. Cantonese | j. Polish |
| c. English | k. Portuguese |
| d. French | l. Russian |
| e. Haitian Creole | m. Spanish |
| f. Hindi | n. Ukrainian |
| g. Italian | o. Other _____ |
| h. Jamaican Patois | p. Don't Know |

Note: Change this list depending on the languages frequently spoken in the area your food bank serves. Be sure to consider languages both from other countries and indigenous languages. List languages alphabetically.

This question can allow you to identify the languages into which pantries may need to translate written materials, or for which they may need to provide translation services.

9. Does the food pantry have enough bi/multi-lingual staff to speak with all of your neighbors?

- a. Yes
- b. No – Please describe: _____
- c. Sometimes – Please describe: _____
- d. I don't know

This question assesses the need for staff that speak languages other than English.

10. Do you feel like the food available on the food bank's ordering platform is culturally inclusive or representative of the communities that you serve? (Choose one)

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Sometimes
- d. I don't know
- e. I do not use the food bank's ordering platform

11. (If No, Sometimes, or I don't know to previous question) How does the food available on the food bank's ordering platform need to change to be more culturally inclusive or representative of the communities that you serve?

Questions 10 and 11 assess whether the foods available on your food bank's ordering platform meet neighbors cultural needs, and if not, what changes need to be made.

12. What cultural or traditional foods are requested by the neighbors you serve?

This question gathers information about the foods that neighbors request, whether they are regularly available at the pantry or not. This helps ensure that you are not overlooking the importance of foods that may be available somewhat regularly, but are culturally important to only a small subset of the neighbors you serve.

13. What are the top culturally connected food items frequently requested by your neighbors that you can't consistently access at your pantry? (For example: Semolina flour, Halal foods, bulk size grains.) Please describe with as much detail as possible (e.g., the type of flour requested).

- a. Proteins:
- b. Fresh fruits and vegetables:
- c. Canned/frozen fruits and vegetables:
- d. Grains and flour:
- e. Beans, lentils, and peas:
- f. Spices or herbs:
- g. Other:

By asking about different types of food (proteins, fresh fruits and vegetables, etc.), this question prompts the survey respondent to consider foods that may not have come to mind when answering previous questions.

14. Does the food pantry receive or purchase culturally connected foods from other sources (e.g., international grocers, community gardens, donations)? Please give examples.

If pantries are routinely procuring culturally connected foods from other sources, it may be worthwhile to attempt to source these at the food bank level.

15. If we have more questions, can we follow up with you?

If you include this question, remove language from the introduction indicating that the survey is anonymous.

Remember to adapt this survey as needed to fit the needs and community of your food pantry. Add, delete, or rephrase questions as necessary.

An editable Word document with this survey can be found on the [Rudd Center website](#).

Neighbor Survey

This survey is intended to gather data from food pantries' neighbors.

- Please adapt this survey to fit the needs of your food pantry, food bank, and community.
- We recommend using this survey for neighbors who have already visited your pantry at least once. Many of the questions on this survey will not be applicable to first-time visitors (e.g., "Are the foods available at your food pantry relevant to your culture?").
- It may be helpful to survey neighbors after they have finished shopping in the pantry so that their experiences in the pantry are fresh on their minds.
- Providing incentives for neighbors to participate in the survey can dramatically increase the response rate. Consider offering incentives like \$5 or \$10 gift cards to grocery stores, gas stations, or popular restaurant chains.

This survey is to help us learn more about your culture and food preferences related to your culture. It will take you about 5 to 10 minutes to finish the survey. No information from this survey will be shared with anyone outside of this pantry. You can skip any questions that you are uncomfortable answering.

Tell us about yourself.

1. What [counties/towns/neighborhoods](#) do you live in?

Adapt this question by choosing "counties," "towns," or "neighborhoods." Use whichever word will give you the most useful information. Consider: Using "counties" might make more sense if you're in a rural area where pantries might cover an entire county—or multiple counties. Using "towns" might make sense if you're in a suburban area that covers multiple towns. Using "neighborhoods" might make more sense if you're in an urban area where pantries might only cover a few neighborhoods.

Knowing where your pantry's neighbors live can help you find relevant Census data.

We'd like to learn more about your cultural identity and food preferences that are related to your culture so we can learn how we can best serve this community. Your voice will help us make decisions about what to offer so that we can meet the needs of this community. We can't be sure that we will be able to get everything, but your responses will help us learn about the foods that are important to our neighbors' cultures and traditions.

This explanation helps neighbors understand why you are asking about potentially sensitive topics like their country of birth. It emphasizes how their responses will help others in their community. It also includes wording to try to avoid too much disappointment if some culturally connected foods cannot be sourced.

2. What is your country of birth?

Responses to Questions 2 and 3 will give you information about your neighbors' cultural identities.

3. What is your cultural background?

4. What languages do you speak at home?

Responses to Question 4 can help you assess the need for translation services.

5. Are foods that are important to your culture available at this pantry? (Choose one)

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Sometimes
- d. I don't know


6. (If yes to question 5) What are some examples of foods you get at the food pantry that are relevant to your culture?

7. (If No or Sometimes to question 5) What foods that are relevant to your culture are missing from the food pantry?

8. What foods do you still need to buy after a food pantry visit?

Many neighbors who use food pantries are hesitant to say they want something in formal surveys because they are afraid to come across as ungrateful, so Question 8 helps frame this in neutral terms.

9. Where do you find foods relevant to your culture to purchase?

The culturally specific markets where neighbors purchase food can inform you of your neighbors' needs. For example, if many neighbors purchase foods at a Korean grocer, you may want to source more Korean foods. You can also include logos as answers to this question (e.g., )

10. What are some foods that you often make for breakfast?

11. What are some foods that you often make for lunch?

12. What are some foods that you often make for dinner?

By asking about what neighbors often make for each of these meals, these questions provide insight into foods that neighbors see as routine, but may not be obvious to others outside of their culture.

Please help us understand your preferences for different types of foods.

The lists in Questions 13 through 16 can be left as-is or modified to focus on foods commonly eaten among the cultural groups served by your pantry if this information is already known.

13. What are the most important kinds of meat or meat alternatives for you to have in your home? (Choose all that apply)

- | | | |
|------------|---------------|-----------------|
| a. Beef | e. Lamb | i. Tempeh |
| b. Chicken | f. Organ meat | j. Tofu |
| c. Fish | g. Pork | k. Turkey |
| d. Goat | h. Seitan | l. Other: _____ |

Questions 5 through 7 allow neighbors to describe which foods they get from the food pantry that are important to their culture and which culturally connected foods are missing.

14. What are the most important kinds of flour for you to have in your home? (Choose all that apply)

- a. All-purpose flour
- b. Cassava flour
- c. Fufou flour
- d. Masa flour
- e. Rice flour
- f. Rye flour
- g. Semolina/durum flour
- h. Sorghum flour
- i. Other: _____

You can use logos or pictures as answers to help neighbors quickly identify products.



15. What are the most important kinds of grains for you to have in your home? (Choose all that apply)

- a. Barley
- b. Brown rice
- c. Bulgur
- d. Couscous
- e. Jasmine rice
- f. Millet
- g. Oats
- h. Pasta
- i. Red rice
- j. White rice
- k. Whole grain pasta
- l. Other: _____

16. What are the most important kinds of beans/lentils/peas for you to have in your home? (Choose all that apply)

- a. Black beans
- b. Black lentils
- c. Chickpeas/garbanzo beans
- d. Fava beans
- e. Mung beans
- f. Pinto beans
- g. Red lentils
- h. Yellow split peas
- i. Other: _____

17. What are the most important kinds of fruits for you to have in your home?

18. What are the most important kinds of vegetables for you to have in your home?

19. What are the most important kinds of spices or herbs for you to have in your home?

Questions 17 through 19 are phrased the same as the previous questions but are left open-ended to accommodate the variety of fruits, vegetables, spices, and herbs used in cooking.

20. Do you have any dietary requirements? (Choose all that apply)

- a. None
- b. Diabetic diet
- c. Gluten-free diet
- d. Vegetarian diet
- e. Vegan or plant-based diet
- f. Kosher
- g. Halal
- h. I prefer foods that do not need to be refrigerated
- i. I prefer ready-prepared foods instead of ingredients
- j. Other: _____

Question 20 assesses neighbors' dietary needs, including needs that are culturally or religiously based, health-related, or needed due to their living situations and available appliances.

21. Do you have other food suggestions relevant to your culture you'd like to see at the pantry?

This open-ended question is similar to Question 7 but asks more broadly what neighbors want to get from the pantry. Also, its placement after the food lists means that neighbors taking the survey may be prompted to think of a food they had not previously considered.

22. What are 3 foods you would like to see more of at the pantry?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Another option is to ask neighbors to name a limited number of foods that they would most like to see more of at the pantry.

23. What would you like to see more: [\[Food 1\]](#) or [\[Food 2\]](#) (Choose one)

Specify two foods that may interest neighbors based on previous feedback or staff perceptions of neighbors' food needs; for example: pineapple or mango?

24. Is there anything we have not asked about that you would like to share?

Open-ended questions like this one are a good idea at the end of a survey or interview to provide your respondents a chance to include any relevant information that was not captured by the prior questions.

**Remember to adapt this survey as needed to fit your needs and food pantry community.
Add, delete, or rephrase questions as necessary.**

An editable Word document with this survey can be found on the [Rudd Center website](#).