



## Charitable Food Distributions FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



### FAQS

#### **Why does the Health Department care if we want to serve food to people who are experiencing homelessness?**

The mission of Marion County Public Health Department Food & Consumer Safety Department is to prevent food-related illnesses and improve food safety practices in Marion County.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that each year 1 in 5 Americans get sick from contaminated food or beverages and 3,000 die from foodborne illness. The most commonly reported symptoms of foodborne illnesses are nausea, vomiting, stomach cramps, and diarrhea.

Although anyone can get a foodborne illness, some people are more likely to develop one and more likely to suffer more extreme symptoms. Older adults, young children, women who are pregnant and those with weakened immune systems are most vulnerable. Vulnerable people are not only at increased risk of contracting a foodborne illness but are also more likely to have a lengthier illness, undergo hospitalization, or even die, according to the Food and Drug Administration.

Due to limited access to health care and possible nutrition concerns, those who are experiencing homelessness are considered a vulnerable population and at a higher risk for foodborne illness and more serious results. Effects of foodborne illness symptoms can quickly lead to dehydration. This is especially a problem for those exposed to extreme temperatures and without ready access to fresh drinking water.

There are many ways that food can become a risk for causing foodborne illness. Licensed food establishments must follow a lot of procedures to keep food safe to serve consumers. Without the knowledge and practice of food safety guidelines, the risk of foodborne illness can outweigh any good intentions.

#### **What options do we have to help people who are experiencing homelessness if we do not provide food to them directly?**

- Donate non-perishable food, money or time to an existing food pantry or shelter.
- Organize a food or clothing drive.
- Partner with a licensed food establishment or licensed mobile food truck to provide food at a giving event.

#### **What kind of food can we provide without being licensed?**

Pre-packaged, shelf-stable foods in their original packaging such as boxes of crackers, bagged cookies, jar of peanut butter, granola bars, whole unpeeled fruit, hot coffee, hot cocoa, or unopened bottled beverages.

Also pre-packaged perishable foods that are pre-portioned and packaged by a licensed and inspected restaurant may be distributed with simple registration instead of licensing.

### **Why is shelf stable food more safe than other foods?**

To be shelf stable, perishable food must be treated by heat and/or dried to destroy foodborne microorganisms that can cause illness or spoil food. Shelf stable food lasts longer and does not require refrigeration or special storage to be safe. Pop tops or packaging that does not require a can opener is preferred.

### **What are safe sources of perishable foods?**

Licensed and inspected restaurants, mobile food trucks and grocery stores are considered safe sources of perishable foods. You can search licensed food establishments at <https://hhcwebfood.hhcorp.org/default.aspx>.

### **How can we serve food we prepare or package ourselves?**

It is highly recommended that food distribution be handled through existing food distribution programs.

A group or organization who wants to have their own food distribution that includes items they prepare, cook and/or package themselves must register with the Marion County Public Health Department and become licensed.

### **How much is a license to distribute food?**

Many of the charitable feeding distribution options are exempt from licensing. For distributions that would require licensing, the Marion County Public Health Department offers a reduced annual fee of \$20 for retail food establishments which serve or provide food or beverage to the indigent and needy at no charge or fee to the recipient.

### **Where is it okay to set up and distribute food to people who are homeless?**

Those wishing to donate food and/or supplies for people who are experiencing homelessness are highly encouraged to do so through established shelter and pantry programs.

[Charitable Distribution Sites](#) have been established by the City of Indianapolis. Always be sure to obtain permission by the property owner wherever you plan to set up. Charitable giving cannot block sidewalks or other right of ways.

### **Can we set up a refrigerator outdoors as a self-serve pantry to help preserve perishable foods?**

Proper temperature monitoring and prevention of food tampering, cross contamination, and spillage are all issues that are difficult to manage with an outdoor refrigerator. Also, most refrigerators are not equipped to function correctly in the variant and extreme temperatures of an outdoor setting.

Guidance for approved self-service pantries is available [here](#).

### **Why can't we leave food behind for those who were not able to come by while we were there?**

- Foods left unattended are susceptible to tampering and temperature control is not possible. Both increase the chances of foodborne illness that can cause extreme sickness especially for those who are members of the vulnerable populations.
- Foods left unattended will attract rodents.

**What other tips may help make our efforts successful?**

- Don't block streets or sidewalks.
- Get permission from the property owner where you set up.
- Remove all food scraps and trash so you don't draw rodents.

**We are providing food through my church. Does this make a difference?**

There are some exemptions for churches, civic or charitable organizations for events or celebrations. The full guidance, including menu restrictions and frequency limits, can be found [here](#). Food pantries or feeding operations that are operated routinely would not be exempt from requirements.