

Food Safety at Food Pantries and in Your Home

SANDY HAGGARD – NUTRITION, FOOD SAFETY, AND HEALTH AGENT

Food pantries, food banks, and blessing boxes provide valuable support to families throughout the Southwind District. Whether donating food or storing it at home, following basic food safety guidelines helps ensure food remains safe and usable for those who need it.

When donating food, avoid items with broken seals, bulging or leaking cans, damaged packaging, or visible mold. Food that is past its expiration date generally cannot be distributed, so check dates before donating. If donating frozen foods, keep them frozen until delivery and separate them from ready-to-eat foods to prevent cross-contamination.

Refrigerated foods should be kept at 40°F or below, while frozen foods should remain at 0°F or below. Shelf-stable foods such as canned goods, boxed meals, rice, pasta, peanut butter, and oatmeal should be stored in a cool, dry location. The ideal storage temperature is between 50°F and 70°F. Food should also be kept at least six inches off the floor and away from cleaning supplies, chemicals, and moisture.

Before donating canned goods, inspect them carefully. Avoid donating cans that are dented near seams, rusted, leaking, swollen, or otherwise damaged. Dry goods with crushed packaging or missing seals should also be discarded. If a food has an unusual color, texture, or odor, it should not be donated or consumed.

Understanding shelf life can also help donors make good choices. Dry cereal and pasta can often remain in good condition for up to two years when stored properly. Frozen vegetables typically maintain their best quality for up to eight months. Spices can retain flavor for up to three years, depending on the type of spice and how they are stored.

Bread requires special consideration. Refrigeration may slow mold growth but can cause bread to become stale more quickly. Freezing is often the best option for long-term storage. Fresh bakery breads typically remain good for two to three days after thawing, while commercially produced breads may last up to a week, depending on storage conditions. Once mold appears, bread should be discarded.

Many food pantries have a continual need for nutritious, shelf-stable items. Commonly requested donations include canned vegetables, fruits, meats such as tuna and chicken, rice, pasta, oatmeal, peanut butter, cooking oil, flour, sugar, baby formula, baby cereal, and personal hygiene products.

Several communities in the Southwind District, including Chanute, Fort Scott, Yates Center, Iola, Erie, and Toronto, maintain blessing boxes that are accessible around the clock. Because these boxes are exposed to changing weather conditions, canned and boxed foods are usually the safest donations. Perishable items should generally be avoided because it is difficult to predict when someone will pick them up. Hygiene products are also welcome and often in high demand.

One creative donation idea is a birthday cake kit. A kit can include a disposable cake pan, cake mix, a can of clear soda to replace eggs and oil, frosting, and candles. For families facing financial challenges, this simple package can help make a birthday celebration a little more special.

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By following safe food handling and storage practices, donors can help ensure that food remains safe, nutritious, and available to support neighbors throughout our communities.

For information about food safety and nutrition programming in the Southwind District, contact Sandy Haggard, Nutrition, Food Safety, and Health Agent, at SJHaggard@ksu.edu or 620-365-2242

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Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and
Cooperative Extension Service