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Subject: Project Focuses on Improving Food Pantries in Rural Food Deserts
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The Ohio State University College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

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News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

Project Focuses on Improving Food Pantries in Rural Food Deserts

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COLUMBUS, Ohio -- Ohio State University Extension is taking part in a five-year, \$4 million grant to help isolated communities increase availability of nutritious foods.

"We're focusing on areas defined as 'rural food deserts' as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture," said Dan Remley, field specialist in food, nutrition and wellness for OSU Extension and Ohio's representative on the project's team. "These are low-income census tracts where a substantial number or share of people are far from supermarkets, generally in the southern and eastern parts of the state."

The project, called "Voices for Food," is being led by South Dakota State University and also includes land-grant university researchers in Indiana, Michigan, Missouri and Nebraska.

The team is testing the theory that communities with local food policy councils will have better food security -- or less of a hunger problem -- than those that don't, Remley said. Improving food pantries is one of the project's main goals.

Extension educators will work with established food policy councils or help communities form them. Ideally, food policy councils have a broad range of stakeholders on board, including people who experience food insecurity and those who can provide food or equipment that pantries need, Remley said.

"Emergency food pantries and kitchens were originally designed for short-term food relief, but we're seeing a lot of people becoming dependent on pantries for their weekly or monthly food needs," Remley said. "Unfortunately, a lot of pantries don't offer the healthiest choices.

"We're trying to address that through the food policy councils."

A key component of the project is to encourage food pantries

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to adopt a "guided client choice" model, in which clients can choose foods from different food groups available at the pantry instead of being offered pre-packaged selections. The project will also develop nutrition education resources to be used in food pantries.

"To develop choice food pantries, you need to involve clients, food pantry directors, and organizations that secure donations such as schools and churches," Remley said. "They need to procure not just canned goods but focus on healthier choices."

It's also important to form linkages between pantries and local farms and gardens to supply fresh foods, he said.

"For example, one of the biggest challenges for pantries is to get a variety of foods in the dairy group," Remley said. "A lot of times, they just have dry milk. With more partners helping, fresh milk and other dairy options can become available."

Remley has long experience with the choice food pantry model, helping create such a pantry when he was the family and consumer sciences educator for OSU Extension in Butler County. By working on this project, he said he hopes to find ways to improve the model.

"This project is making it possible for us to bring in the expertise of Michael Newton-Ward, a social marketing consultant in public health in North Carolina," Remley said. Social marketers such as Newton-Ward apply commercial marketing principles to health, social, and quality-of-life issues.

"Grocery stores often put the most profitable or the most expensive items at eye-level as a subtle way to encourage consumers to purchase them. In the food pantry environment, we want to make changes so the easiest choice is the healthiest choice.

"Combine that with nutrition education, and everyone wins."

The group is holding its first meeting in April and hopes to begin approaching communities by the end of May. The project is funded through the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture and its 2012 Agriculture and Food Research Initiative's Food Security Program.

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