

Supporting Wellness At Pantries

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Background

Supporting Wellness at Pantries (SWAP) is a stoplight nutrition ranking system designed to help promote healthy food choices at food banks and food pantries. SWAP was developed to create an easy to implement, easy to understand nutrition ranking system to categorize the food offered in a food bank or food pantry.

Why is this important?

Studies show that people who visit food pantries experience a double burden of food insecurity and chronic diseases.¹⁻² More than half of the families who visit food pantries have a household member with high blood pressure and one-third have a member with type II diabetes.³ These chronic diseases can often be prevented, managed, and reversed through the foods we eat. Food pantries can be ideal settings for healthy eating strategies.

The goal of SWAP is to help increase the supply and demand for healthy food in food banks and pantries.

Methods

SWAP provides detailed guidelines for ten food groups with specific ranges of saturated fat, sodium, and sugar. The system is based on the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines, and the MyPlate Daily Checklist, and was field-tested on 500 actual food items. An Excel spreadsheet with an algorithm was created for food banks to use SWAP for their inventories.

The SWAP system was pilot tested in six food pantries in Connecticut:

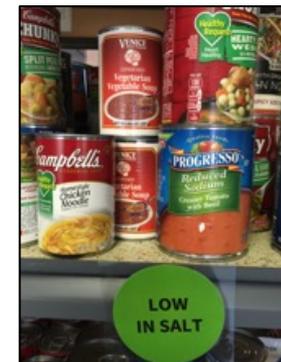
- Summer 2016: Baseline inventories conducted over four weeks
- Summer 2016: Focus groups conducted with pantry staff and volunteers
- Fall 2016: Visual materials created in English and Spanish
- Winter 2017: SWAP implemented with shelf reorganization and food rankings
- Spring 2017: Staff surveys collected
- Summer 2017: Follow-up inventories conducted over four weeks to measure changes over time
- Fall 2017: Dissemination of findings and development of Toolkit

Key Messages

Green = choose often; low in saturated fat, sodium and sugar; supports health

Yellow = choose sometimes; medium levels of fat, sodium or sugar; can contribute to good health

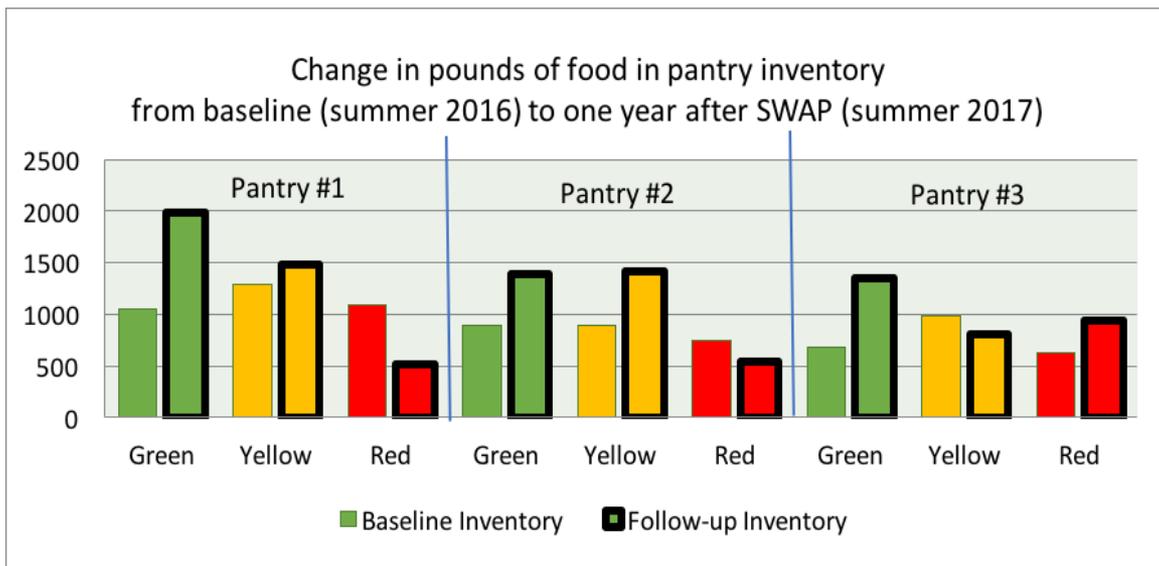
Red = choose rarely; high levels of fat, sodium or sugar; think of as treats; limited health benefits



Results

A few months after SWAP implementation, surveys were administered to staff and volunteers (N=54) to measure their perceptions of the system. **Overall, the reaction to the new SWAP system was very positive.** More than two thirds of pantry staff and volunteers said they liked the system (70%) and that it was easy to use (68%).

Using the baseline and follow-up inventories, the percentage of red, yellow and green items were calculated by food group. At baseline, the six pantries had very different profiles for the proportion of red (7% to 46%), yellow (23% to 43%) and green foods (20% to 69%). Results from the pilot in three food pantries in Hartford, CT show **promising increases in green and yellow foods and modest declines in red foods**, see *chart below*. Results from three pantries in Bridgeport, CT were more mixed, with all pantries showing increases in yellow foods, one pantry showing gains in green foods and one pantry showing declines in red foods. One Bridgeport pantry had to renovate during the study, and another had a limited number of volunteers over the winter.



Next steps

- Provide tools for pantries to request healthier food from donors and suppliers
- Create a Toolkit of trainings and materials that can be used by food banks and pantries to implement SWAP
- Evaluate the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of pantry participants about SWAP
- Identify the best ways to implement and sustain SWAP in pantries

In addition to ten food pantries using SWAP, two food banks in CT are currently using SWAP to rank foods in their inventory databases.

Summary

SWAP is an innovative stoplight nutrition ranking system that was successfully implemented in six food pantries, and results show promising improvements in nutritional quality of the food offered. The SWAP system can enhance both the supply and demand for healthy food and target hard to reach populations at high risk for chronic diseases. Future research and resources will help sustain the system over time and to bring SWAP to scale in additional pantries.

For more information about SWAP, please contact Katie Martin at ksmartin@usj.edu.

References

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