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National Food Day: Let's Feed the Hungry (and Nourish Them, Too)

Food banks, food pantries, and consumers need to step up to the plate by providing foods that will nourish the millions of people in the United States who go hungry every day.

Written by Sandra Levy | Published on October 24, 2014

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If you think people who suffer from hunger are always underweight and malnourished, you may be surprised to learn that many actually suffer from obesity.

The primary reason is that the cheapest and most widely available foods in the United States are full of sugar, unhealthy fats, and preservatives.

Not only that, but people who are at risk of going hungry often don't have the time, supplies, or know-how to prepare healthy meals every day.

Today is National Food Day, and Healthline sat down with Ruthi Solari, founder and executive director of [SuperFood Drive](#), a San Diego nonprofit working with hunger relief organizations to change their focus from simply feeding the hungry to nourishing them. The organization also trains volunteers and the public on which foods are healthy and how to cook them.

Did You Know?

- More than **50 million** Americans visit food pantries regularly.
- **One in five** children gets food from food pantries.
- More than **30 million** elderly people visit food pantries.

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Many Foods Donated to Pantries Contain Sugar and Fat

Six years ago, when Solari started SuperFood Drive, she noticed that a lot of the food being collected during food drives, especially during the holidays, was very highly processed and high in fat, sugar, salt, chemicals, and high fructose corn syrup.

"I thought, even if someone is just eating this food once, this isn't the best food for you. Could there be an opportunity to use food drives to collect more nourishing foods and more whole foods in their nonperishable form?" said Solari, who is also a certified nutritionist.

Solari provided the following statistics from Feeding America, a national association that represents food banks:

- More than 50 million Americans visit food pantries on a regular basis.
- One in five children gets food from food pantries.
- More than 30 million elderly people visit food pantries.
- One in three returning veterans visits food pantries.
- More than 60 percent of those who visit food pantries have a diet-related disease, such as diabetes or heart disease.

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More People Going to Food Pantries Face Hardships

Solari explained that historically, the goal of food pantries has been to serve people who are in an emergency situation. Because so many Americans are living at or near poverty levels due to hard economic times, they have come to rely on food pantries for longer periods of time. This is especially true for seasonal workers who face layoffs during certain parts of the year.

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“When I started SuperFood Drive, there was little to no emphasis on the nutritional quality of the food being distributed. It was really about ‘Let’s just fill empty stomachs.’ If you were going to go to a food pantry once, for an emergency, a focus on filling empty stomachs is not a big deal. But now that people are getting those boxes and bags on a regular basis, the quality of food is really important,” said Solari.

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Ruthi Solari, SuperFoodDrive

How does SuperFood Drive make sure that nutritious food is available? The organization works with food pantries to create nutrition policies, including ones that ban soda, sheet cakes, and other items containing high fructose corn syrup.

Alameda County Food Bank in Northern California, the Philadelphia Food Pantry, and the Santa Barbara Food Bank have nutrition sourcing policies. As a result of working with SuperFood Drive, Feeding America San Diego adopted a nutrition sourcing policy.

“The nutritional guidelines for sourcing food mean that the foods they bring in have at least a certain amount of fiber and are below a certain amount of

sugar,” said Solari.

Some Donations Include Expired or Unhealthy Foods

Some food pantries receive up to 80 percent of their food from food drives. “These food drives typically prompt people to reach in back of their pantries and donate unused or expired food in their house, or buy Hamburger Helper or macaroni and cheese,” said Solari.

What kinds of foods would Solari like to see people donate instead? “Super foods. These are foods with the most nutrient-density per calorie, and they contain lots of vitamins and minerals.”

Solari recommends:

- black beans, instead of refried beans
- brown rice, instead of white rice
- fruit canned in its own juices, instead of high fructose corn syrup.
- nuts, seeds, and canned fish
- whole grains, such as quinoa, amaranth, and buckwheat

SuperFood Drive teaches food pantry workers and volunteers about super foods so they can educate food pantry recipients. The organization also offers educational resources on its [website](#).

“It’s one thing for people who have a choice not to want to learn about it. When it comes to people who don’t have a choice, that’s where we have a responsibility,” Solari said. “If we provide food, it needs to be food that promotes health.”

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