

Implementing the SWAP Stoplight Nutrition System: Frequently Asked Questions

In 2019, Healthy Eating Research (HER) convened a panel of experts to create clear, specific recommendations for evidence-based nutrition guidelines tailored to the unique needs and capacity of the charitable food system. Feeding America is encouraging its network food banks to implement the guidelines in their inventory system by 2025.

SWAP is a suite of tools and resources to help food banks and pantries operationalize the HER Nutrition Guidelines. The following frequently asked questions are the result of a year's long pilot with eight food banks around the country who were implementing SWAP in their food banks. They helped identify common challenges and strategies to work through barriers.



1 I am excited to implement the HER Nutrition Guidelines using SWAP in my food bank, but I seem to be the only one who knows about this development. Where should I start?

Talk to your food bank's executive team to gain support. Explain why this work is important, with a focus on the link between hunger and health, and remind them that Feeding America is encouraging their network food banks to implement the HER Nutrition Guidelines in their inventory systems over the next few years. You may also consider sharing [this short SWAP promotional video](#) to reinforce the ways implementing the HER Nutrition Guidelines using SWAP can benefit your food bank, partner programs, and the people you serve.

We suggest you reach out to staff at other food banks that are using the HER Nutrition Guidelines, preferably ones that use the same inventory system as you, such as Ceres or Primarius. This can help create a buddy system for support and troubleshooting.

As you build support for ranking food nutritionally, it would be helpful to include goals and benchmarks into departmental and food bank wide yearly goals to increase support throughout the organization and hold teams accountable.

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This project was supported by Healthy Eating Research, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

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How do I talk with key players at our food bank about working together to implement the HER Nutrition Guidelines using SWAP? Who should I involve in the conversations?

2

Think through the various staff members who are involved with procuring food that should be included in early conversations about nutrition ranking at the food bank. Building relationships with various departments early in the process and listening to their challenges is important.

Some key departments to consider:

- Operations, warehouse, receiving
- Food sourcing and procurement
- Technology/Data/IT

Take time to understand the roles of your colleagues and hear from them how implementation may impact their role and their department overall. You will have more success in the long-term if you take your time to really grasp how this new work may affect each of your colleagues. Work together to think of strategies to conquer some of the challenges they pose. Be prepared that this learning phase may take months.

Working with the Operations team can happen at the same time as you have conversations with other departments such as Data/IT team, see the response to #3 below.

3

Where in my inventory system can I enter the HER / SWAP rankings?

At the beginning of ranking food with the HER Nutrition Guidelines using SWAP, you'll need to involve staff who can create a field within your inventory system or repurpose an existing field to include the rankings, and who can run reports of the food from your inventory. This process can take time and may involve additional costs to communicate with your software provider and to create the field. Staff in your IT or data department may not understand their role in nutrition ranking, so you'll want to work with them in understanding the challenges this work poses to their role in a similar way to how you meet with the operations team. Likewise, it is helpful to become familiar with your food bank's inventory system to inform the process you'll use to rank food and run reports.

Since this process can take time, we suggest you begin ranking food in your inventory using a spreadsheet to help you identify which process for ranking will work best at your food bank, and to practice using SWAP.

Working with the Data/IT team can happen at the same time as you have conversations with other departments, see the response to #2 above.

Check out Feeding America's implementation guide: Implementing Healthy Eating Research Nutrition Guidelines in Food Banks for more information.

How do we start to rank food?

4 At what point should we be ranking 100% of product in our inventory?

It is important to understand that you won't rank all of your food immediately. Also, food that is salvage or reclamation in very mixed loads will likely not be ranked and will be classified as "Assorted – Not Ranked". Start small with one source of food, like USDA or purchased, where you have clear information about nutritional content. Set priorities, rather than aiming to rank everything at once. This approach will help you troubleshoot the process you've established for ranking food and allows time and space for adjustments to be made.

A good place to start is having one or two dedicated staff members begin ranking food from what already exists in the inventory. Use the SWAP rules of thumb to target food items you can rank without a nutrition facts label in front of you (such as produce which is ranked green). Having a dietetic intern help at this stage can be very useful.

Build in redundancy to the ranking process, such as having a team member double check rankings once a week. If multiple people are keeping an eye out for things that don't look right and you have an easy way to flag those items and check them, you are going to improve your accuracy. This will help create a feedback loop.

Reach out to other food banks who are using SWAP and learn from their experiences.

What will we do with the "red" foods?

5 Will we be stuck with extra inventory of red food?

You will likely be pleasantly surprised to see that your supply of "red – choose rarely" foods is lower than you might imagine. By running reports and tracking your inventory, you will be able to see the types of red foods that are available and where you can shift to similar products that are ranked yellow. However, the goal of using SWAP is not to eliminate all red foods. You will be able to see which red items are not in demand from your agencies and talk with your food donors to reduce those donations over time.

How should we set benchmarks for the amount of our inventory that should be ranked green, yellow and red?

6 In order to set goals for the nutritional quality of your inventory, it's important to get a clear picture of where you are starting. It is very helpful to pull data from your inventory system such as jet reports in Ceres, or running a report in Primarius to export into Excel. You can then sort and review your data by food source, food category, and food donor. You can use the information to set realistic goals for increasing the amount of green foods, reducing the amount of red, and reducing the amount of food that is "Assorted – Not Ranked."

How do we communicate with our partner programs about the SWAP system?

7

There are a couple important steps a food bank can take to describe the SWAP system to partners. First, you can make the SWAP rankings visible in your online ordering system so that partner programs can see which items are green, yellow, red or unranked. Check out Feeding America's implementation guide: [Implementing Healthy Eating Research Nutrition Guidelines in Food Banks](#) for more information.

Second, you can describe the SWAP system in your routine communications to partner programs to let them know how the food bank is ranking food nutritionally, and let agencies know that SWAP can be a great tool for promoting healthy food within client-choice food pantries. Resources are available from Connecticut Food Bank/Foodshare for food pantries to implement SWAP with training materials, posters and shelf tags.

We have never talked with our food donors about specific items we want them to donate, and we feel uncomfortable saying no to food donors. How can we start a conversation?

8

It is important to communicate with various stakeholders about your organization's emphasis on healthy food, including your food donors. As you begin ranking food and running reports, you can identify which food donors are champions and should be celebrated, and which food donors have room for growth. This is an opportunity to have conversations with your donors and invite them to join you in your efforts to supply healthy food. We have created a template donor report that you may find useful when starting the conversation with donors.

Additional tools and resources are available to help your food bank implement SWAP in your inventory system, with your partner programs, and with your food donors. Explore the SWAP toolkit [here](#) to learn more.

To access additional tools, ask questions, or share comments, reach out to the Institute for Hunger Research & Solutions at swap@foodshare.org.