

Food Bank Unpacked, Then Repacked

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By Lydia Smith

Food Bank For New York City had a number of exciting achievements in 2011. One of the biggest is that we are now able to procure food in bulk, before it is packaged into individual containers suitable for supermarket shelves, helping the Food Bank to significantly stretch our purchasing power.

Purchasing in bulk is now one of the major ways we are able to keep costs down on nutritious food. However, processing large food containers safely in our warehouse so they are ready for distribution was a big hurdle that took close to a year of planning to pass. The project that allowed us to process bulk containers was the construction of a new, state-of-the-art repack room in our Bronx warehouse, where teams of volunteers repackage food into container sizes suitable for delivery to soup kitchens and food pantries.

Like most major projects, no matter the field, this one began with an extensive round of research. The Food Bank first turned to Feeding America's national network of food banks, traveling to food banks around the country to assess different approaches to dealing with the safety requirements for working with open (bulk) product. We then turned to a veteran in the industry, Bob Matlosz, former Greater Chicago Food Depository Operations Director, for further assistance and hired Rogers Marvel Architects, an architecture firm familiar with the food bank network, to design the space within our active, 90,000 square foot warehouse.

The piece of this project that I am most proud of is the fact that we kept our food distribution process safe and up-to-code throughout the entire construction process. We knew that, in order to best serve our network, we could not interrupt food deliveries to network in any way for any amount of time, even while working toward developments that would increase our supply of food.

Now that construction is complete, not only is our purchasing power greater – our volunteers also have a more rewarding experience. We couldn't have done any of this without knowing our volunteers, who make up a key part of the distribution process, would be there to make this possible.

Thanks to this dream combination of passionate volunteers and facilities that meet the strictest of food safety codes, our network will be able to fill more shelves and plates for New Yorkers who struggle to afford food.

The Food Bank is already scheduling thousands of purchases that will require repacking before being distributed to our food assistance network. If you have a group of 10 to 30 people who are interested in volunteering at our new Repack Room, please fill out our online volunteer application today.