



Tips for Handling Incidents and Complaints

Connecticut Foodshare agency partners are dedicated to serving their neighbors and fostering a safe, respectful environment. Keeping services offered to the community safe, fair, and welcoming helps ensure a positive experience for guests, volunteers, and staff. When situations do arise, neighbors accessing the program should be able to count on staff/volunteers to address them in a timely, consistent, and professional manner. This guide is intended to help agency partners consider different ways they can help prevent and address incidents and complaints.

Common reasons why conflict occurs:

Conflict is an inevitable part of working in the community. Some common instances where conflicts may arise include:

- Miscommunication, or lack of clear communication about policies
- Mistreatment or perception thereof
- Preferential treatment or perception thereof
- Any change in process or policy

While complaints are often perceived as negative, they are actually an important form of feedback from the people your program serves. Even if 100% of the complaint may not be valid, there is usually something that the person is sharing with you that may deserve a closer look and will help you improve your services.

Conflict prevention

By implementing some of the best practices below, **many conflicts can be prevented:**

- **Ask for Guest Feedback:** One way to potentially avoid conflict is to have a process for receiving guest feedback. For example, have a suggestion box in the pantry, or an online form that people can complete if they have suggestions or complaints. One Connecticut Foodshare partner has a QR code posted in the program's dining room, which links to a form that guests can use to send anonymous feedback directly to the President of the Board. This allows people to make suggestions without fear of repercussion.
- **Consistency & Communication:** Have a clear and consistent process for how food is distributed and make it easy for people to know what to expect, especially if there are changes. For example, have a clear process for how volunteers qualify for and receive food assistance, to avoid any perception of special access.

- **Staff and Volunteer Training:** Another way to minimize conflict is by providing customer service and de-escalation training to staff and volunteers. Some programs do a team huddle before service, to help set expectations for how neighbors are served, and after each meal service, to debrief on any issues that may have occurred. Please see our [7 Tips for De-Escalation and other De-escalation Resources in the Neighbor-Centered Practices and Welcoming Culture webinars](#) on our website (see Resources section below for links).

Handling complaints and conflict documentation

When handling in-person feedback or complaints, consider the following language when responding:

- Appear calm, and listen first. Let the individual speak without interruption. Sometimes people just want someone to listen to them.
- Be curious, not defensive. Do not take it personally. Ask thoughtful questions to understand their concerns. “Can you tell me more?”
- Use empathetic statements: “I hear how frustrating this must be for you.” “That sounds really upsetting. I appreciate you sharing this.” “We never want someone to feel that way.”
- Collect as many details as possible (who, what, where, when, how) and any supporting documentation (videos, letters, recordings) if relevant. “If you have any photos or videos, they can help us understand better.”

When a conflict does occur, a process should be in place so that incidents are handled and documented in a consistent manner. Make sure that all key staff and volunteers are aware of the process for handling incidents and complaints. Putting the procedure in writing, even if it is brief, is a best practice and makes it easier to ensure that all key staff and volunteers are aware of and understand the process. A template can be used so that important information is documented: who, what, where, when. This should be completed as soon as possible after an incident or complaint happens. An example template is included; you can customize it for your specific program. Communicate this to volunteers/staff during onboarding and/or through handbooks so that everyone understands the process. These forms should be printed out and kept in a visible place so they are easy to access whenever an incident occurs.

Next steps

After the incident report is submitted to and reviewed by the appropriate persons (i.e., Program Director, Board of Directors, etc.), it is important to follow up with the persons involved, based on the nature of the complaint/incident. Collaborate with others on your team. Often, incidents and complaints are an opportunity to reflect as a team on ways to improve, help prevent future issues, and minimize future risk for your organization.

Resources:

[Tips for De-Escalation](#)

[De-escalation Resources and Welcoming Culture webinars in the Neighbor-Centered Practices section](#)

[Additional CTFS webinars](#)

[Sample Food Pantry Incident Report](#)