

Workshop: Serving Immigrant Populations

Lessons from the IRIS Food Pantry

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What we will cover

1

IRIS + pantry context

Who we serve

2

Language access

Multilingual, clear expectations, trust

3

Emerging needs

Know Your Rights, multilingual updates, rapid adaptation

4

Operational practices

Training, fear reduction, proxy pickup, halal access

Goal: leave with adaptable practices you can use at your own pantry

IRIS: mission, and new direction

More than 40 years of welcoming and supporting New Americans

IRIS is a nonprofit, helping refugees and other immigrants to rebuild their lives, pursue their dreams, and contribute to the vitality of their communities.

- Serving Connecticut since 1982
- New Americans framework supports immigrants and refugees already here
- Core stabilization includes food access, legal, education, language, employment, health, and belonging



The need did not end when arrivals paused

- Families already here still need help with food, legal status, education, healthcare, and work
- Federal cuts and policy upheaval make private funding, partnerships, and flexible operations more important
- The pantry serves IRIS clients and New Haven community



Introducing the New Americans Framework

IRIS is evolving to meet the needs of refugees and immigrants who are already here, helping families build stable lives, achieve economic security, secure legal status, access education and language services, and participate fully in their communities.

The New Americans Framework brings these services together through four connected areas of support, all built on a foundation of **stabilization**. **Food Pantry is part of that stabilization foundation.**

Stabilization is the bridge to opportunity.



The IRIS Food Pantry as a community hub

500–600

families facing food insecurity
served weekly

Wednesdays

8:30–11:00 AM distribution at
75 Hamilton St.

180K+

pounds of food rescued from
landfill/waste in 2026



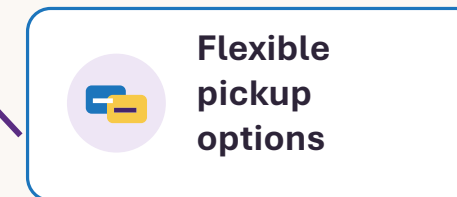
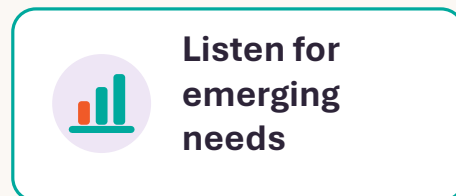
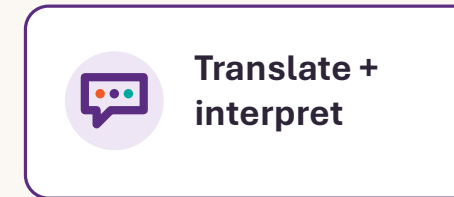
IRIS Food Pantry as a community hub

Open access, high volume, and built through partnership



- Serves all members of the community regardless of immigration status, race, gender, or nationality
- Primary food source is **Connecticut Foodshare**; delivery Tuesdays, distribution Wednesdays
- **Community Soup Kitchen** partnership helps sustain the shared space and broader service hub

- A pantry can be more than food distribution. It can be a trusted access point for information, safety, and partner referrals.
- In addition to food, IRIS pantry offers the community access to **the Closet and Market Space**



Support layer: staff + volunteer cultural humility training · partnerships · language services

1) Language access: how we manage language barriers

Translate the information people need before the line starts

English

Spanish

Haitian Creole

Swahili

French

Arabic

Pashto

Dari

What to translate

- Hours, location, closures, and changes
- Eligibility and pickup rules
- How to ask for help without sharing unnecessary personal information
- Rights and resource information



Why it works

- Reduces confusion and repeat questions
- Makes rules feel fairer and less personal
- Signals respect before anyone has to ask
- Builds trust with people who may fear institutions

2) Listen for emerging needs — then adapt

When fear rises, information becomes a basic need

What we heard

- More concerns about immigration enforcement
- Questions about status, benefits, and legal process
- Fear about whether it is safe to seek services

How IRIS responded

- Know Your Rights sessions and flyers
- Red cards available in multiple languages
- Community Zoom updates with interpretation
- Resource hub and referral pathways

Pantry takeaway

- Treat the pantry line as a listening post
- Use simple, vetted, consistent messages
- Do not improvise legal advice
- Make trusted resources visible and easy to carry

3) Train volunteers

Volunteers need confidence, boundaries, and practice



Cultural humility

Ask, do not assume. Treat every interaction as individual.



Operational clarity

Everyone should know the pickup rules, escalation path, and resource boundaries.



Respectful communication

Use plain language, visual cues, and interpretation when needed.



4) Reduce fear as an access barrier

IRIS practices

- Volunteer observers/watchers around the warehouse area
- Clear communication protocol for suspicious activity
- Simple, consistent messages; avoid rumors
- Red cards and resource flyers available at pantry

Adaptable checklist

- Decide who watches, who documents, and who communicates
- Do not ask about immigration status unless legally required
- Train staff on what to say and what not to say
- Keep client privacy central in all conversations

5) Flexible pickup: proxy + card system

Proxy pickup

- A registered family may designate someone to pick up food when they cannot attend
- Proxy pickups follow the normal check-in process
- Pickups are limited to a maximum of two families per visit
- Rules protect both access and fairness

Blue / yellow card system

BLUE
1 family

YELLOW
2 families

- Station signs show how much each card color receives
- Staff use expected family counts to set quantities
- The system makes rules visible and easier to explain across languages



6) Culturally appropriate food access

Food people can actually use is part of dignity

Halal options

- IRIS purchases halal meat weekly through grant funding so Muslim clients have culturally appropriate protein options.

Common barriers

- Higher cost
- Sourcing and availability
- Authenticity and trust
- Balancing diverse client needs

How to start

- Ask clients what foods matter most
- Work with vendors and food banks
- Use grants/private donors for targeted gaps
- Label options clearly and respectfully



Key takeaways for pantry operators

1 HOW do we manage language barriers? Translate first. Make high-stakes information multilingual before the day of service.

2 HOW do we identify needs? Listen constantly. Use the pantry as a feedback loop for emerging needs and fears.

3 HOW to train volunteers to work with the different cultures? Cultural humility, de-escalation, privacy, and clear referral boundaries.

4 HOW do we help when there is fear? Proxy pickup and visible quantity systems reduce fear and confusion.

5 HOW do we make sure we provide culturally appropriate food? Partner with halal providers and local farms

If people feel safe, understood, and respected, they are more likely to receive the food and support they need.



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The Center for Immigrant Opportunity