



NC DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Healthy Opportunities Pilots Healthy Food Box (Pick-up & Delivery) Guidelines

INTRODUCTION: HEALTHY FOOD BOX

Healthy food boxes are part of the Food Domain within the Healthy Opportunities Pilots (HOP). They can be provided either for pick-up or delivery for Medicaid recipients that have been identified with diet or nutrition-related chronic illnesses. The purpose is to supplement daily food needs, and they do not provide a complete nutritional diet. The boxes are designed to promote better nutrition and offer nutrition educational materials on healthy eating. Local Human Services Organizations (HSOs) collaborate with other community organizations to design, source, and distribute these boxes either for pick-up at community settings or delivery to recipient's homes.

WHAT DO THE GUIDELINES INCLUDE?

This document includes guidelines within the following areas:

- **Standards for Box Contents and Food Sourcing:** HSOs can use the guidelines to determine which types and how much of food should be included in the food boxes and from where the food items should be sourced. This document outlines the 1) elements of a healthy food box; 2) defines the quantity of food items; 3) describes the process for food purchasing and sourcing, and 4) shares resources for purchasing NC-grown food products.
- **Food Allergies, Medical Conditions, and Preferences:** Healthy food boxes should take into consideration chewing and swallowing limitations, food allergies, diet-related medical conditions, food sensitivities, and cultural/personal food preferences.
- **Packaging and Distribution:** Recommendations will support organizations in packaging and transporting the food in a way that ensures safety and freshness, and to ensure that the food boxes are delivered to the target population in a timely and efficient manner, including the frequency and duration of the food boxes. The label for the outside of the food box is described with examples.
- **Nutrition Education:** HSOs can use the guidelines to develop educational materials and resources that promote healthy eating habits and how to prepare healthy meals. They can also use the guidelines to engage the community and partner with other organizations to implement the healthy food box program.
- **HSO Monitoring Tool:** A checklist to use for self-assessment and program evaluation to monitor progress, identify areas for growth, and assure high standards of service delivery. This checklist empowers HSOs to continually assess the impact of their efforts, optimize program outcomes, and ultimately enhance the health and well-being of program recipients.



Overall, these guidelines will provide a framework for organizations to follow in order to effectively and efficiently implement the healthy food box program and to ensure that the program is meeting its goals of improving access to healthy food and promoting economic integrity for organizations, vendors, and producers.

HSO's are encouraged to regularly communicate with their Network Lead and be sure they are using the most [current HOP Fee Schedule and Service Definitions](#), as changes over time may not immediately be referenced within these HOP Food Service Guidelines documents.

Standards for Box Content and Food Sourcing

The connection between food and health is well documented, with substantial evidence showing a healthy dietary pattern can help achieve and maintain good health throughout the lifespan. The core elements of a healthy dietary pattern are defined by the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#). A healthy food box aligns with the guidelines and includes nutrient-dense supplemental food items that provide vitamins, minerals, and other health-promoting components and have no or little added sugars, saturated fat and sodium.

Contents of a Healthy Food Box

A 'food box' is one unit of delivery per one reimbursement. A 'box' can be one or more bags of food items or one box of food. The healthy food box is designed to supplement the daily food needs for individuals with limited food security and have diet or nutrition-related chronic illness. The food box does not necessarily constitute a full nutritional content of three meals per day per person.

The food box should provide balanced nutrition, meet dietary needs, be client choice when possible, **emphasize fresh** and must incorporate foods across **all** food groups, including the following:

Food Category	Example of food items
Vegetables	Dark green; red and orange; starchy; and other vegetables
Fruits	Especially whole fruit, a variety of colors and types should be included
Grains	At least half of which are whole grain, such as brown rice, whole wheat bread, oats, barley, and quinoa
Dairy	Fat-free or low-fat milk, yogurt, and cheese, and/or lactose-free versions and fortified soy beverages and yogurt as alternatives <i>Programs may replace dairy items with dark leafy greens, bone-in canned fish, and other calcium rich foods.</i>
Protein	Lean meats, poultry, and eggs; seafood; beans and lentils; vegan-based meat sources; and nuts, seeds, and soy products
Oils / Other*	Vegetable and olive oils and healthy oils in food, such as seafood, nuts, avocados, seeds; Spices, herbs, and other flavorings

*Oils and other food items can be used to supplement the food boxes.

Food boxes should also address the nutritional needs of individuals who are pregnant; in order to maintain universality, healthy food boxes should NOT include foods that pregnant individuals are unable to eat including high-mercury fish, soft cheeses, and raw milk. See a full list of foods to avoid during pregnancy at [FoodSafety.gov](https://www.foodsafety.gov).

Tip for Success

HSOs are encouraged to work with a registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN) to design the healthy food box. Find a nutrition expert by visiting the [Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics website](https://www.eatright.org).

The guidelines below are suggestions to improve the nutritional quality of the boxes, support client choice and be adaptable to local situations.

Quantity of Food Items

The exact amount of each food item to be included in the box depends on the size of the box. In general, about half of the food box should include fruits and vegetables, with a variety of colors and types included. Human Services Organizations may provide a small or large box, dependent upon the referral type received. Per NCDHHS, a small food box is intended to provide 2 meals per day for a household of 2 people, and a large food box is intended to provide 2 meals per day for a household of 4 people.

The number of items in each box is recommended to include:

Food Category	# Units for small	# Units for large	Example standard unit sizes
Vegetables*	5	10	Approximately one unit of fresh (ie. one bunch of kale, one pound of potatoes); 12-16 oz bag frozen; 15 oz. can
Fruits*	4	7	One unit of fresh (ie. 1 pound of apples, one pint of blueberries); 12-16 oz bag frozen; 15 oz. can
Grains	4	5	One pound bag rice or pasta; 1 loaf of bread; 12-16 oz. cereal box/canister
Dairy	1	2	Quart; Gallon (milk); Ounce (cheese)
Protein	3	5	One pound fresh/frozen; 15 oz can of beans; 6 oz. container nuts; One carton of eggs
Oils / Other	1	2	One container of cooking oil or olive oil; Spices

***One-quarter (25%) of the fruits and vegetables included must be fresh.**

Food Purchasing and Sourcing

It is recommended that Human Service Organizations use purchased food products for the healthy food boxes, in order to support local food vendors and growers. Donated food can be used in the food boxes, so long as more than 55% of the items are purchased and the donated food does not compromise external contracts (ex. Feeding America). For example, if an HSO receives a donation of apples from a local farm, they can count them toward 1 unit of fruit within the food box. If HSOs choose to use donated food, they must still follow and meet all guidelines set forth within this document.

Fresh Fruits and Vegetables

Healthy food boxes should include an assortment of fresh foods, as available within the growing season, with a minimum of 25% of fruits and vegetables being 'fresh'. While shelf-stable food items offer good nutrition and are easily packaged and distributed to recipients, HSOs should consider including fresh fruits and vegetables for variety.

Packaged Foods

Canned or frozen foods are also part of a balanced, healthy diet. When including these items in the food box, it is important to review the Food Label to ensure it meets nutrition standards (limited sugar and salt). The Percent Daily Value (% DV) on packaged foods should not exceed more than 20% DV for fat, added sugar, and sodium. It is recommended that the % DV of these items be less than 5% DV, if possible.

Local Food Sourcing

When possible, source from local farms, food hubs, markets, fisheries, and other local suppliers. Local food is often defined as being sourced directly from the farm (direct to consumer). For the purpose of this guidance, the term 'local' is defined as being produced within the state of North Carolina in order to promote [NC Farm and NC Food Business Impact](#).

Sourcing Recommendations

For at least 6 out of the 12 months each year, the food box program should include local, NC-grown food that provides NC Farm and/or NC Food Business Impact.

	Recommended %*	Definition
NC Farm Impact	25% of the food box	Farm-impact purchases include food items with ingredients sourced from North Carolina farms and/or fisheries, such as fresh vegetables, meats, dairy, and breads.
NC Food Business Impact	10% of the food box	Vendor of the product is a food grower, processor, or value-adding enterprise operating primarily in North Carolina, and the majority of business is owned by North Carolina citizens.

*25% of the food box should support NC Farm and Food Businesses

Explore the visitncfarmstoday.com to learn [What's in Season](#) in North Carolina

Food Allergies, Medical Conditions, and Preferences

When designing a healthy food box, follow the [client choice model](#) in which the member has choice over the food items included. A client choice model takes into consideration chewing and swallowing, food allergies, dietary sensitivities, and cultural preferences in addition to the ability and access to kitchen equipment for preparation of the recipient.

The client choice model offers many benefits for you and the recipients. This model can reduce food waste, better meet the recipient's nutrition needs, promote equity, upholds dignity, helps HSOs develop relationships with recipients, and is shown to save money.

Assess the Need

Before creating food boxes, it is important to assess the specific population being served. Substitutions must be made for known allergies. Considerations should be made for the health condition of the recipient, dietary restrictions, food sensitivities, cultural preferences, food insecurity status, and age. This information may be collected and included during the referral process. HSOs can also establish their own method, such as asking the recipient during an initial call and continuously through the healthy food box distribution relationship. **A process should be outlined for securely documenting food allergies, medical restrictions, and other dietary needs in the system of record.**

A key part of the process of assessing the need includes offering the opportunity for the recipient to provide feedback on their food items. HSOs will likely develop relationships with recipients and are encouraged to ask for recipient feedback within the first month of services, and throughout the authorization period. Enrollees can share feedback informally via phone or in-person conversations, or be collected formally via survey tools. **Continuously assess and improve food choices offered and make any changes, as needed and available.** Question examples that you can use in your assessment are included within the section below.

Food Allergies and Medical Dietary Restrictions

A primary consideration in determining food box content is to ensure that the food accommodates any dietary medical restrictions, including food allergies and dietary limitations due to

HSOs should have a clear, defined process for assessing the satisfaction of the food boxes in meeting the nutrition and dietary needs of recipients.

a chronic health condition. It is important to consult the referral and learn of any dietary allergies or restrictions directly from the individual prior to designing the food box.

The most common food allergies that can cause severe reactions in some individuals include the following:

- Peanuts: A legume that is a common allergen.
- Tree nuts: These include almonds, walnuts, pecans, and others. Like peanuts, tree nuts can cause severe allergic reactions.
- Fish (e.g. bass, flounder, cod, salmon, tuna)
- Crustacean shellfish (e.g., crab, lobster, shrimp)
- Mollusk Shellfish (clams, mussels, oysters and scallops)
- Milk: An allergy to milk is most common in infants and young children, but can occur at any age.
- Eggs: Allergic reactions to eggs can occur in both children and adults.
- Wheat: Wheat allergy is one of the most common food allergies and it can cause an allergic reaction to gluten.
- Soy: Soybeans and soy-based products are a common allergen and can cause allergic reactions.
- Sesame: Foods that commonly contain sesame seeds or sesame oil. These include foods like hummus and sesame bagels, and also: crackers, chips, and other snack foods.

Individuals may have dietary restrictions based on a medical condition, such as:

Medical Condition	Description	Restrictions
Celiac Disease	Requires a strict gluten-free diet.	No wheat, barley, rye, or oats (unless certified gluten-free). Avoidance of foods like regular bread, pasta, and baked goods.
Lactose Intolerance	Inability to digest lactose, the sugar found in milk and dairy products.	No milk, cheese, yogurt, or any foods containing dairy. Use lactose-free or plant-based alternatives.
Diabetes	Requires careful management of blood sugar levels.	Limit sugary foods, refined carbohydrates, and high-glycemic index foods. Focus on whole grains, lean proteins, and non-starchy vegetables.
Hypertension (High Blood Pressure)	Requires a diet low in sodium.	Avoid high-sodium foods like processed meats, canned soups, and salty snacks. Emphasize fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.
Chronic Kidney Disease	Requires a diet low in sodium, potassium, and phosphorus.	Limit foods high in these minerals such as bananas, potatoes, dairy products, and processed foods. Focus on low-potassium fruits, vegetables, and lean proteins.
Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)	Requires a diet that minimizes acid reflux symptoms.	Avoid spicy foods, citrus fruits, tomatoes, chocolate, caffeine, and fatty foods. Focus on lean proteins, non-citrus fruits, and vegetables.
Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)	Requires a diet that minimizes gastrointestinal distress.	Avoid trigger foods, which can vary but often include high-FODMAP foods like certain fruits, dairy, and wheat. Emphasize low-FODMAP options like certain vegetables, proteins, and grains.
Heart Disease	Requires a heart-healthy diet.	Limit saturated fats, trans fats, and cholesterol. Avoid fried foods, fatty meats, and high-fat dairy. Focus on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and healthy fats like those from nuts and olive oil.

Gout	Requires a diet low in purines to prevent flare-ups.	Avoid high-purine foods such as red meat, organ meats, and certain seafood like anchovies and sardines. Emphasize low-purine foods like dairy, fruits, and vegetables.
Diverticulitis	During flare-ups, a low-fiber diet is often recommended.	Avoid high-fiber foods like nuts, seeds, and raw vegetables. Focus on refined grains and cooked, low-fiber vegetables until symptoms improve.

Consult a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist for dietary restrictions and altering food boxes for medical conditions.

Chewing and Swallowing

Consider chewing and swallowing difficulties that some recipients may face. Soft, easy-to-chew foods should be included for individuals with dental issues, dysphagia, or other conditions affecting their ability to chew or swallow. Examples of suitable items include pureed vegetables, applesauce, mashed potatoes, yogurt, and soft-cooked grains. Avoid hard, crunchy, or sticky foods that can pose a choking hazard or be difficult to manage. Providing a variety of textures and consistencies ensures that all recipients can safely and comfortably consume the food provided.

Example question for recipient: *Are there any chewing or swallowing challenges that you have, such as needing mashed foods?*

Cultural and Personal Food Preference

Consider cultural and personal food preferences to ensure the selections are both culturally appropriate and personally satisfying for each recipient. Households often have diverse cultural and food preferences based on religious, ethical, or health considerations. For instance, some may follow halal or kosher dietary laws, requiring specific preparation methods and prohibiting certain foods like pork or shellfish. Others might adhere to vegetarian or vegan diets, excluding meat or all animal products. Cultural influences also shape diets, such as Hindu preferences for vegetarian meals excluding beef, Buddhist vegetarianism with avoidance of pungent foods, and traditional East Asian diets featuring foods like rice and tofu. By recognizing and accommodating these varied needs, the program can provide inclusive and respectful food options for all households.

Example question for recipient: *What are the cultural or personal food preferences that we should accommodate?*

Packaging and Distribution

Distribution

The healthy food box can be distributed in two ways: 1) The healthy food box is offered for pick-up by the recipient in a community setting; or 2) The healthy food box is delivered to the recipient's home.

Frequency

The Healthy Food Box is expected to be delivered weekly, or two boxes delivered every other week based on recipient preference or HSO closures (ex. holidays).

Duration

The duration of the Healthy Food Box services is determined by the Care Manager. HSOs should refer to the end date on the authorization for each case.

Packaging

HOP Healthy Food Box Guidelines, Adopted: April 18, 2025

The packaging could include bags or boxes that are durable enough to withstand storage and distribution to recipients without breaking or tearing, and be easy to open, handle and store. Use reusable or recyclable packaging (when possible).

Tips for Success

A liner within food boxes allows food boxes to be reused.

Food Safety

To ensure the safety and quality of the food, food safety considerations include:

Temperature control

The food should be packaged to maintain the appropriate temperature for the food items included. There are certain foods that require temperature control for safety (TCS) and those foods need to remain below 41 degrees F or above 135 degrees F. Insulated bags or containers with ice can help to maintain the temperature of the food during storage and distribution to recipients. Temperatures should be monitored during transportation.

Labeling

The outside of the food box should be labeled, indicating if it needs to be refrigerated or frozen (in the case when there are perishable food items) and any expiration dates that are not already included on the food items. In cases where a person was not at home to accept their box, it should also include a time of when the box was delivered.

Food Safety Resources

When it comes to ensuring food safety and proper storage, two valuable resources can help:

- **StillTasty** (<https://stilltasty.com/>) offers comprehensive guidance on the shelf life of various foods, providing tips on how to store them to maximize freshness and safety. This resource covers a wide range of food items and includes food storage tips, such as whether they should be refrigerated, frozen, or stored at room temperature, and for how long they remain safe to eat.
- **The USDA Foodkeeper App** (<https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2015/04/02/new-usda-foodkeeper-app-your-new-tool-smart-food-storage>) is another essential tool, available for smartphones, that helps users manage the shelf life of their groceries. It provides recommendations on how to store over 400 different food and beverage items to prevent spoilage and waste. The app also features alerts for when items are nearing the end of their recommended storage period, helping users ensure they consume or freeze foods in time to maintain safety and quality.

Nutrition Education

Healthy Food Boxes should include nutrition education materials related to topics including but not limited to healthy eating and cooking instructions at least monthly. By providing culturally relevant nutrition education resources, Human Service HSOs will promote healthy eating through the use of recipes and cooking instructions. Example nutrition education resources are offered below. Please keep in mind that this is not a comprehensive list. When evaluating nutrition education materials to include, it is important to consider the source and ensure that they were created by an accredited website / organization, such as those listed below.

Nutrition Education Resources

- **MyPlate.Gov** - USDA: Interactive online tools and resources based on the MyPlate model, providing personalized guidance on healthy eating and portion control.
- **Eat Right When Money's Tight** - USDA SNAP-Ed Connection: Practical tips and resources from the USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) for eating nutritiously on a budget.
- **Food and Nutrition Information Center (FNIC) - USDA**: A wealth of nutrition resources, including information on dietary guidelines, food composition, and meal planning, offered by the USDA's Food and Nutrition Information Center.


Healthy Recipes

- [American Heart Association Recipes](#): Heart-healthy recipes endorsed by the American Heart Association, emphasizing cardiovascular wellness through balanced and delicious meals.
- [EatingWell Recipes](#): A joint compilation of recipes from Cooking Light and EatingWell, featuring nutritious meals with an emphasis on health-conscious ingredients.
- [NIH's Deliciously Healthy Eating Recipes](#): National Institutes of Health (NIH) curated recipes promoting heart health and overall well-being, with a focus on flavorful, nutrient-dense options.
- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) Recipes: Heart-healthy recipes endorsed by NHLBI, offering flavorful options for those aiming to improve cardiovascular health.
- [American Diabetes Association Recipes](#): Diabetes-friendly recipes approved by the American Diabetes Association, catering to individuals managing blood sugar levels with nutritious and tasty meal options.

HSO Monitoring Tool

This monitoring tool and checklist will ensure the integrity and effectiveness of the HOP food box program in promoting health within communities. Through comprehensive self-assessment and program evaluation, HSOs can monitor their progress, identify areas for growth, and maintain high standards of service delivery. Throughout the year, Network Leads may visit (planned or impromptu) an HSO to ensure the Guidelines are being met.

Below are the expectations network leads will observe during a visit:

 <p>NC DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES</p> <p>Healthy Opportunities Pilots Healthy Food Box (Pick-up & Delivery) Facility Monitoring Tool</p>		
Human Service Organization (HSO):		
Individual Completing Form:		Date:
# of boxes screened (5-10% of the typical service):		Timeframe:
<i>Monitoring Item</i>	<i>Status</i>	<i>Comments</i>
STANDARDS FOR FOOD SOURCING		
Contents of a food box match the food category requirements.	(Select)	
The quantity of the food items match the required number of units for a small or large box.	(Select)	
Resources and training are provided for staff and volunteers. Information includes the number, type of items to be placed in a healthy food box (ie. signage), and food safety / storage requirements of the food.	(Select)	
The food purchasing and sourcing guidelines are followed.	(Select)	
More than 55% of the food items are purchased. There is a process for documenting donated food products.	(Select)	
A minimum of 25% of fruits and vegetables are 'fresh'. The packaged foods are healthy choices, with less than 20% DV in fat, added sugar, and sodium.	(Select)	
At least 35% of the food is locally sourced and supports NC Farm and Food Businesses.	(Select)	
FOOD ALLERGIES, MEDICAL CONDITIONS, AND PREFERENCES		

The HSO has an established process for assessing the needs of the recipients.	(Select)	
The HSO has a process for securely documenting food allergies, medical restrictions, and other dietary needs in the system of record.	(Select)	
The food boxes meet food allergies , medical restrictions, and chewing or swallowing limitations identified.	(Select)	
The HSO has a continuous and defined process for assessing the food boxes after distribution by recipients and modifying food items based on feedback.	(Select)	
PACKAGING AND DISTRIBUTION		
The HSO follows all distribution, frequency, duration, and packaging guidelines.	(Select)	
The HSO has a process for ensuring the recipient receives the correct healthy food box.	(Select)	
The HSO adheres to food safety guidelines to ensure the safety and quality of the food.	(Select)	
The HSO has temperature logs, including for food items and food storage (ie. HACCP Plan).	(Select)	
The food items are kept, stored, and delivered at adequate food safety temperatures.	(Select)	
The food boxes are labeled on the outside with the date and storage requirements (ie. refrigerated/frozen).	(Select)	
NUTRITION EDUCATION		
Nutrition education is included and is in the appropriate language for the recipient.	(Select)	
FACILITY MONITORING		
The HSO has a process for documenting food-related complaints, responding, and keeping them on file.	(Select)	
If the HSO has received a food-related complaint, it is well documented and the issue has been resolved.	(Select)	
Summary of Areas of Strength - Areas with Exceeds Expectations or Meets Expectations selected above		

Summary of Areas for Growth - Areas with *Modifications needed* or *No - needs to be addressed* selected

Follow-up Goals:

Signature:

Follow-up Date: