Keep safety in mind when donating food, says K-State expert

Nwadike says food pantries also appreciate volunteers, money

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – A Kansas State University food safety specialist says giving to food pantries, food banks or soup kitchens this time of year is appreciated, but the generosity needs to be accompanied by the gift of safety and health.

Londa Nwadike, who holds dual extension appointments with K-State and the University of Missouri, urged people to think about who will eventually receive the donated items.

“We need to think ahead of time about their nutritional needs and that the food is available to them in a way that is safe and of high quality,” Nwadike said. “And that it is something that they will be happy to bring home to their families.”

She urges consumers to check expiration dates prior to donating food: “Those dates can be confusing, but when we’re donating food, we want to be sure the product is not past the ‘best by’ or ‘used by’ date.”

According to Nwadike, infant formula product dating is regulated at the federal level, but many states – Kansas included – does not regulate other food product dating. “So, food pantries actually can put foods out after the (expiration) date if they choose to; it’s okay from a regulatory perspective, and the food still may be safe,” she said.

Some warning signs that a food may not be safe to eat include a can that is dented or bulging, or perhaps not intact.

“Overall, it’s better not to provide canned foods that are dented,” Nwadike said. “Bulging is a bad sign; do not donate those. Or, if it’s rusty, that’s also another bad sign.”

Nwadike also discourages people from donating home-preserved foods and repackaged foods. “We just don’t know what has happened from the time the food was removed from its original package and put into a smaller bag,” she said. “We don’t know how it was handled or if something was introduced to the original food.”
As a guideline, Nwadike suggests donating shelf-stable, non-perishable goods, which not only last longer, but don’t require equipment by the pantry to handle.

“Things like produce are great and people need to eat more fresh produce,” Nwadike said. “But if you want to donate fresh produce to your local food bank, check with them ahead of time to make sure they are willing to accept it and can give it the care it needs to get to the final user safely and in the most nutritious way possible.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion publishes a nutrition guide known as MyPlate, which can be an aid in donating healthy foods. MyPlate suggests a diet consisting of fruits, grains, vegetables and proteins.

“A can of green beans is great to donate; also think about a can of tuna packed in water, grains (such as brown rice or crackers) and evaporated milk (including non-fat dry milk),” Nwadike said.

Peanut butter is a popular protein to donate, but some people are allergic to peanuts. Nwadike said sunflower butter is a non-allergenic option. Also, she notes, consider gluten-free options.

Aside from food, Nwadike said food banks and pantries also accept donations of time and money. “If you provide cash,” she said, “they are able to buy items in bulk and plan for them.”

Nwadike has published a fact sheet – titled Donating Safe and Nutritious Food to Food Pantries and Soup Kitchens – that is available online.

More information on food safety and nutrition is available at local extension offices in Kansas.

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story

K-State Research and Extension statewide offices, www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html

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