



# Blazer Kitchen Employee Resource Guide



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## Our Mission

Welcome to the Blazer Kitchen Employee Resource Guide! Blazer Kitchen is a food assistance program under UAB's Benevolent Fund that receives donations to acquire food (including non-perishable, frozen, and fresh goods), personal hygiene products, and other essential items (UAB, n.d.). Our mission is to decrease food insecurity by ensuring that UAB students, employees, and patients have access to nutritious ingredients to make balanced meals throughout the week.

Additionally, we aim to connect shoppers with a range of social services, including the UAB Employee Assistance & Counseling Center (EACC) and the UAB Student Wellness Center, among others (UAB, n.d.).



# Cultural Competence

## What is Cultural Competence?

It is the ability to understand, respect, and effectively communicate with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (CHCM, 2023). However, psychologist Terry L. Cross created this term in 1989, which focused on healthcare workers developing a set of interpersonal skills to improve cross-cultural communication (Gallegos et al., 2008).

## Key Components

<b>Awareness</b>	Self-reflection enables individuals to examine their cultural values and biases, which in turn influence their perceptions of diverse backgrounds (CHCM, 2023). Empathy is also a critical component for fostering trust and mutual respect with all visitors (Rogers, n.d.).
<b>Attitude</b>	An open-minded, positive, and inclusive approach can reduce discrimination and ethnocentrism, the belief in one's own culture's superiority (Global Brigades, 2024).
<b>Knowledge</b>	Learning about various cultures takes time, but it is essential when making informed decisions. Additionally, understanding cultural norms helps people to appreciate the beauty of diversity (Rogers, n.d.)

## Cultural Competency and Mental Well-being

At Blazer Kitchen, our role extends beyond decreasing food insecurity in our community. Unfortunately, visitors may face additional challenges, including unemployment, financial constraints, and housing displacement (Ejiohuo et al., 2024). According to the MHM Group (2023), cultural competency enables healthcare workers to gain a deeper understanding of how cultural norms influence behavioral cues.



# Special Dietary Considerations

Dietary requirements and culinary traditions vary due to individual factors, including culture, religion, and health status. It is in the best interest of staff to acknowledge these nuances so that a larger population can feel understood. Here are some examples of the options we offer here at Blazer Kitchen:



## Halal Diet (Muslim Community)

Individuals practicing Islam follow dietary laws outlined in the Quran or Hadith (Anees, 2024). The core concepts are **halal** (lawful) and **haram** (forbidden). Most foods and drinks are considered halal unless they contain ingredients that are prohibited by Islamic law (Anees, 2024). Halal food requires strict handling, including proper slaughter (**Dhabiha**), hygienic preparation, and avoiding cross-contamination (Anees, 2024). Thus, Blazer Kitchen partners with the Birmingham Islamic Society, which donates halal chicken on a monthly basis (Thompson, n.d.).

### Dietary Restrictions

- Pork
- Alcoholic beverages
- Blood of animals
- Lobster
- Crab
- Most Insects



## Vegetarian Diet (Hindu Community)

Although many individuals worldwide are vegetarians, those who practice Hinduism, especially from the Krishna sect, view it as a spiritual philosophy (BDA, n.d). Additionally, a central principle of the faith is **ahimsa** (non-violence), which prohibits harm to all creatures on Earth (BDA, n.d.). The Krishna community believes in adopting a lacto-vegetarian diet (one that includes dairy products) to achieve spiritual alignment (BDA, n.d.).

### Dietary Restrictions

- Eggs
- Beef
- Coffee
- Dairy products
- Garlic
- Mushrooms



## Kosher Diet (Jewish Community)

Kashrut is a set of regulations that determine which foods and cooking utensils are permissible (Kosher) or forbidden (terefah). Kosher food is categorized into three groups: **fleishig** (meat), **milchig** (dairy), and **pareve** (neither meat nor dairy) (Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, n.d.). Notably, it is strictly forbidden to prepare or eat meat and dairy products together. Therefore, individuals will undergo a waiting period of about one to six hours to avoid cross-contamination (Chouraqui et al., 2021). However, pareve foods are neutral and can be eaten with fleishigs or milchigs (Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, n.d.).

### Dietary Restrictions

- Pigs
- Shrimp
- Most insects
- Non-Kosher Wine
- Oysters
- Rabbit

# Cultivating Compassion with Every Interaction

It is our responsibility to treat every visitor with dignity and respect. All Blazer Kitchen employees are expected to refrain from making assumptions or stereotypes based on an individual's appearance or cultural identity. Therefore, we must approach shoppers with an open mind and a genuine willingness to assist them, creating a welcoming environment for all.

## Why are Stereotypes Harmful?

**Reinforcement of Social Stigma**



Some shoppers are embarrassed to seek assistance, fearing they will be viewed as irresponsible (Schmidt, 2023). If employees are passing judgment on them, they will begin to internalize these negative perceptions.

**Decline in Outreach**



Shoppers are unlikely to visit if their needs are deliberately ignored. Additionally, they can voice their negative experiences through various platforms. Consequently, others may perceive our pantry as hostile and unfriendly (Jia et al., 2024).

## Effective Communication Strategies

- **50/70 Rule for Eye Contact:** Cuncic (2024) recommends maintaining eye contact 50% of the time while speaking and 70% while listening. Limit eye contact to four to five seconds at a time, as staring is perceived as rude in some cultures (Cuncic, 2024).
- **Observe Non-Verbal Cues:** Take note of the visitor's body language and facial expressions as you speak with them. If the person is crossing their arms and avoiding eye contact, it may be a sign that they are uncomfortable (Cherry, 2025).
- **Build a Deep Relationship with Visitors:** Ask open-ended questions that prompt people to share honest insights about their life experiences (NSCAHH, 2017). Creating a safe space where they feel heard can lead to meaningful interactions (Estrem, 2024).
- **Be Transparent with Shopping Procedure:** It is essential to discuss each food category, item limits, and appointment periods in detail so that visitors are well-prepared for each visit (Food Bank of North Alabama, n.d.).

## Culturally Sensitive Questions to Ask Shoppers

### For First-Time Shoppers:

- Good morning/afternoon/evening, sir/ma'am! Is this your first time shopping with us today?
- We have a checklist of the food options available this week. Would you like me to go over each category with you?

### For Returning Shoppers\*:

- Hello! Do you have an appointment scheduled with us today?
- Excuse me, sir/ma'am! Would you like me to help you carry your groceries into your car?

\*Especially if they have not had an appointment for over a month



# The Mental Strain of Food Insecurity

Food insecurity and mental health are deeply connected. The severe stress of feeding oneself and one's family when living from paycheck to paycheck, or if one runs out of food before the next paycheck arrives, puts even greater stress on someone. The stress of not knowing where your next meal is coming from can cause emotional turmoil. This leads to anxiety, depression, and other emotional health issues, which then can affect work and other relationships. Consequently, the constant worry about having enough food can lead to chronic anxiety and depression.



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## The Vicious Cycle Between Mental Distress and Inconsistent Food Access

Additionally, if someone has pre-existing mental health conditions, food insecurity can exacerbate them as it becomes harder to get adequate and nutritious food. Eventually, this creates a never-ending cycle where poor mental health can lead to food insecurity, and food insecurity can lead to poor mental health. People become hopeless and isolate themselves, which can cause increasing depression and anxiety. If they are unable to work due to mental health issues, people become more reliant on food assistance programs (U.S. Hunger, 2022).



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## Effective Strategies

Abeldt (2024) emphasizes the importance of addressing food insecurity and mental health simultaneously. One way of achieving this is to identify those who are food insecure and provide them with mental health assistance to help them cope with the challenges they face, so that they do not mentally decline any further. According to Pourmotabbed et al. (2020), who conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis about food insecurity and mental health on 372,143 individual participants in ten countries, food insecurity puts someone at greater risk for depression, stress, and anxiety.



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## Cultural and Demographic Factors

The United States faces high levels of stress and anxiety, especially among men, who often feel pressure to be providers. Food insecurity not only impacts nutritional and physical health but also mental well-being. Inability to afford or access culturally appropriate foods adds to stress, anxiety, and depression, as individuals may rely on unknown or unsuitable food sources that don't align with their cultural identity (Pourmotabbed et al., 2020).

# Nutritional Deficiencies and Mental Disorders



## Iron (Anemia)

**Cause(s):** Iron deficiency, also known as anemia, is a condition in which the body does not produce enough red blood cells. The primary cause is an insufficient amount of iron in the body (Mayo Clinic, 2022).

**Physical Health Complications:** Some common symptoms include brittle nails, fatigue, and tongue sores (Mayo Clinic, 2022).

**Mental Health Consequences:** Increased risk of depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder (Lee et al., 2020).

**Iron-Rich Foods:** Taneja et al. (2020) suggest eating food such as spinach, lentils, and chicken. Additionally, foods rich in vitamin C, such as broccoli, oranges, and kiwi, can enhance iron absorption (Mayo Clinic, 2022).

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## Magnesium (Hypomagnesemia)

**Cause(s):** Hypomagnesemia occurs when there are low levels of magnesium in the blood. Aside from insufficient intake of magnesium, kidney disease, alcohol use disorder, and gastrointestinal issues can decrease magnesium absorption (Lewis, 2025).

**Physical Health Complications:** Numbness, muscle spasms, irregular heart rate, and seizures (Mercy Health, n.d.).

**Mental Health Consequences:** Depression, Schizophrenia, and various sleep disorders (Botturi et al., 2020).

**Magnesium-Rich Foods:** Dark chocolate, almonds, bananas, and tofu (Spritzler, 2024).



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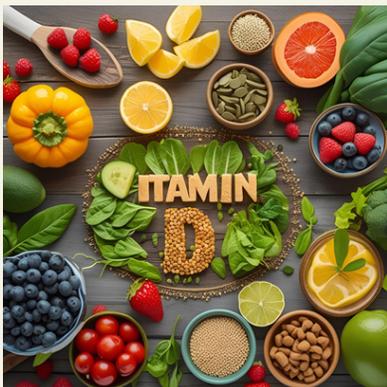
## Vitamin D (Hypovitaminosis D)

**Cause(s):** Hypovitaminosis D occurs when there is a lack of sun exposure, insufficient amounts of vitamin D in the diet, or an inability to absorb it in the body (NLM, 2024).

**Physical Health Complications:** Loss of bone density (Osteoporosis), hair loss, and impaired wound healing (Kaushik, 2024).

**Mental Health Consequences:** Depression, anxiety, Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), and Schizophrenia (Guzek et al., 2021).

**Vitamin D-Rich Foods:** Mushrooms, egg yolks, and liver (Devje, 2024).



# Feedback From Shoppers

Active listening is a vital skill that all food pantry volunteers should adopt, as it helps build rapport with shoppers (Fund for Shared Insight, 2017). As a result, they will become more comfortable sharing their honest opinions about the quality of service (Fund for Shared Insight, 2017). Open communication allows staff to determine whether they are meeting the community's dietary needs and identify areas of improvement. Our staff have not only received positive feedback verbally but also through heartfelt cards and numerous offers to volunteer at our pantry.

## Comments From Our Shoppers\*

**\*These words are not direct quotes but paraphrases to capture key themes**

The data was gathered through interviews conducted at Blazer Kitchen. Participants could choose to participate in person, via Zoom, or submit their responses via email. Ultimately, in-person interviews proved to be the most effective method, as participants were able to share richer, more detailed responses. This approach truly fostered genuine connections and enhanced our understanding

**I know Blazer Kitchen staff are doing the best they can to provide us with food each week.**

**I.F., UAB Student**

**We started coming to Blazer Kitchen last month and we are satisfied with their services.**

**D.S., Patient**

# Areas of Improvement

On the other hand, some of our shoppers have raised minor yet legitimate concerns that warrant our attention and consideration. Ignoring these issues would not align with our steadfast commitment to our mission and values. (Fishbein et al., 2023). Therefore, it is essential that we not only acknowledge these concerns but also actively engage with them to foster a more inclusive environment for all. By demonstrating a willingness to make necessary adjustments, we can ensure that every visitor feels appreciated, valued, and respected.

## Concerns Shared with Us

**\*These words are not direct quotes but paraphrases to capture key themes**

I noticed that whenever I receive my groceries, the bags tend to rip. I would like volunteers to start double-bagging heavier items to prevent this from occurring.

**B.L., UAB Student**

I typically work 12-hour shifts at the hospital, and I am unable to buy food because the stores close early. I would like Blazer Kitchen to have longer operational hours so that employees have enough time to purchase food after work.

**D.G., UAB Employee**

# Support Services

## For UAB Students

The Student Wellness Center is an on-campus facility that provides a variety of health services to all students. It aims to promote physical and mental wellness, ensuring that students excel in both their academic and personal lives (UAB, n.d.).



### Primary Services

- Mental health counseling
  - Immunization
  - Allergy testing
  - Nutritional counseling
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## For UAB Employees

The UAB Employee Assistance and Counseling Center (EACC) provides counseling services specifically for UAB employees and their household members (UAB, n.d.).

### Primary Services:

- Individual, family, and couples therapy
  - Telehealth counseling
  - Stress management
  - Traumatic stress management
  - One-at-a-time therapy (OAAT)
  - Community case management
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## For Patients with Referrals

211 is a crisis phone number provided by United Ways of Alabama, which helps individuals from vulnerable populations access the support they need (211 Connects Alabama, n.d.).

### Primary Services:

- Crisis intervention
- Maternal health
- Financial assistance
- Military support
- Job training
- After-school programs



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