Foundation For Essential Needs

Foundation for Essential Needs (FFEN) is a non-profit providing operations support and resources to food shelves.
For more information, visit www.ffen.org.

De-escalation Strategies for Your Food Shelf

While food shelves often serve as a safe, community place, it's important to remember that asking for help or accessing resources can be a stressful experience for any of us. Sometimes volunteers and food shelf leaders may experience behaviors from shoppers that reflect the difficult nature of their current realities. This guide can be a framework for food shelf leaders to maintain calm, connection, and safety during challenging shopper interactions.

Core Principles of De-escalation

"Be a thermostat, not a thermometer." You can cool the conversation down by modeling calm and connection. Matching agitation or frustration can escalate tension.

Stay Calm and Centered
- Maintain a low, even tone of voice.
- Practice slow breathing before responding.
- Keep body language open and non-threatening.

Listen First
- Use active listening: "I hear that you're frustrated..."
- Avoid interrupting, or defending policies too quickly.

Validate, Don't Argue
- Acknowledge and validate their feelings, while still reinforcing appropriate behavior.
- Focus on shared goals:"Let's see what we can do together."

Set Clear Boundaries
- Use calm, respectful phrases to outline expectations: "I want to help, and I need us both to speak calmly."

Know When to Step Away
- Recognize when a situation is unsafe or unproductive.
- Call for backup or pause the interaction if necessary.

Quick Reference and Food Shelf Service/Shift Strategies

Quick Scripts
- "I can see this is frustrating."
- "Let's take a minute to talk through it together."
- "Here's what we can do right now..."

The 3 C's of Responding under Pressure
Calm: Model composure
Clear: Communicate expectations plainly
Compassionate: Lead with empathy, not emotion

Before Food Shelf Service/Shift
- Hold a 2-minute huddle for urgent updates and reminders
- Review any de-escalation tips
- Determine a point person for any issues

After Food Shelf Service/Shift
- Spend 5 minutes debriefing: What went well? What can we improve?
- Thank volunteers for their time and care

Resources are developed and reviewed regularly with input and insights from food shelf leaders and sector partners. Additional feedback on tools can be shared with programs@ffen.org. (Last updated: 11/5/2025)