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.

Choosing a Reliable Data Collection System

A Leadership Guide for Confident, Compliant, and Calm Operations

Choosing a data system is not just a technology decision — it affects how your food shelf operates every day. The system you use influences shopper dignity, volunteer confidence, compliance clarity, reporting accuracy, and your ability to communicate impact.

Reliable data supports reliable service.

Operational Fit: Supporting the Day-to-Day

A system can meet compliance requirements but still be difficult to use in daily operations. The right platform should support your workflow — not complicate it.

Use the questions below to evaluate whether your current system supports daily operations.

Area	Questions to Consider	Why It Matters
Intake Workflow	Can shoppers be quickly located in the system? Is data entered during intake instead of after distribution? Can existing shopper records be easily updated?	Reduces long lines and prevents duplicate records.
Volunteer Experience	Can volunteers learn the system quickly? Does the system guide volunteers through intake steps?	Volunteers often rotate and need user-friendly tools.
Duplicate Prevention	Does the system automatically detect duplicate shoppers or households already in the system?	Prevents inaccurate reporting and confusion.
Reporting	Can the system track individuals, households, and visits? Can reports be generated quickly for grants or leadership?	Accurate data strengthens funding and board reporting.

Questions to Ask Before Choosing a Data System

When exploring a platform, ask clear questions about how the system functions in real operations.

Category	Questions to Consider	Why It Matters
Security	Is our data encrypted and stored securely? Who can access the data? Does each user have a different login?	Protects sensitive data, maintains compliance, and builds trust with shoppers and partners.
Reporting	Can the system track individuals, households, and visits? Can unduplicated counts be generated?	Strengthens funding, supports compliance, and enables clear communication of your impact.
Workflow	Does intake happen in real time? Does the system prevent duplicate records?	Creates efficient, real-time intake that reduces errors and improves the overall experience.
Support & Stability	How are income guidelines updated? What training is included? What happens to our data if we stop using the system?	Provides long-term reliability, training, and confidence that your system will continue to meet your needs.

Responsible data practices support dignity, trust, and accountability.

By taking intentional steps to evaluate your data system, food shelf leaders build stronger operations, clearer compliance, and calmer intake environments. Your data system should support your mission — not strain it.

TEFAP Compliance & Alignment

Food shelves participating in TEFAP must ensure their intake systems support the required processes.

TEFAP food shelves must align with Minnesota DCYF requirements. Visit the DCYF TEFAP webpage for full information.

Ethical Data Collection & Use

How data is collected and used communicates respect for the people we serve.

Principle	Example Practices	Why It Matters
Collect only what is necessary	Avoid unnecessary personal questions	Reduces barriers to service, shortens intake time, and respects shopper privacy.
Limit access	Only staff providing services have access to the shopper data. Remove system access when staff or volunteers leave.	Protects sensitive information, reduces risk of data misuse, and ensures accountability within your organization.
Transparency in data sharing	Get consent from shoppers to collect data; make it clear which questions are optional, and how the data will be used.	Builds trust with shoppers, supports informed consent, and increases comfort with the intake process.
Trauma-informed collection	Minimize the quantity and frequency of questions. Use strength-based language and avoid questions that may be retraumatizing, such as those requiring detailed explanations of past trauma, housing instability, domestic situations, or financial hardship beyond what is required for eligibility.	Creates a safer, more respectful experience by reducing stress, preserving dignity, and preventing re-traumatization.

Need Help Evaluating Your System?

Still not sure what food shelf data collection system is right for you? Sign up for a call on FFEN's Resource Hub to receive live, virtual, one-on-one support to discuss the unique needs and challenges at your food shelf. Go to: www.ffen.org/resource-hub today!

This resource is intended to support learning and peer connection by sharing how food shelves are currently using data collection platforms. If you have updates, corrections, or questions, please contact ***programs@ffen.org****. (Last updated: 3/23/2026)*