

Build a blessing box for neighbors in need

They're called Blessing Boxes, and in the past few months, they're suddenly everywhere—little charitable dispensaries that people set up in their front yards or another public place. They're like those "Little Free Libraries" that have been popular for a while, but instead of offering books, they contain things like food, soap, diapers, and other necessities. People who have items to donate fill (and refill) the boxes; people who need those items take them.

"Take what you need, give what you can . . . above all, be blessed!" reads the slogan on many of the boxes.

The idea probably originated with Jessica McClard of Fayetteville, Arizona, who started her Little Free Pantry in March 2016. She was out jogging when she got thinking about the Little Free Library that she always passed, and sometimes borrowed from. She wondered why the concept had "gone viral," and decided that it allows people to practice neighborliness.

"The fact that it also addressed a larger social issue—literacy—was secondary," she said. "I was waiting in my car for my youngest daughter after school when I decided I would leverage the [Little Free Library] concept to address food insecurity."

Now, her [Little Free Pantry website](#) encourages others to set up their own Little Free Pantry with FAQs, legal advice, and even building plans for those who wish to build one themselves from scratch.

It wasn't long before others began copying the concept. In May 2016, a friend sent Vicki Groomer a picture of McClard's LFP box stuffed with groceries, and Groomer took the idea to her Assemblies of God church, CrystalRock Cathedral in Ardmore,

Oklahoma. Their first box was built and dedicated on June 7; the women who organized the project dubbed it a “Blessing Box”; her daughter came up with the saying that appears on that Blessing Box and many others. Groomer created the [Blessing Box Facebook page](#) a few weeks later, and the concept spread, with more than 150 Blessing Boxes being erected in the following year. McClard estimates that as many as one thousand such boxes have been erected under various names: Community Food Box in Indianapolis, Red Door Pantry, Caring Cabinet, and more.

Whatever the name, the idea has been received plenty of media attention:

- In Watertown, New York, Roman Espinoza has been receiving [nationwide media attention](#) after setting up a Blessing Box in his front yard. He realized there was a need after learning that his local community college had a food pantry. The response has been overwhelming, with lots of people using the resource—and lots more people in the community donating to it, or setting up their own Blessing Boxes.
- Espinoza got the idea from an [NBC news story](#) about an insurance salesman in Big Spring, Texas, who set up his own Blessing Box and filled it with food, diapers, and other items. Eric Escamilla’s initiative has inspired more than a dozen of his neighbors in the small town to set up similar Blessing Boxes.
- After undergoing cancer, Lisa Willman and her two daughters set up a Blessing Box to meet the needs of cancer patients in [Grand Island, Nebraska](#).
- Michelle Radin [persuaded her local library](#) to set up a Blessing Box on its property in Seminole, Florida—a location designed to serve as wide a population as possible.
- Maggie Ballard and her six-year-old son built a Blessing Box to put [in front of their home in Wichita, Kansa](#),

back in November 2016. The resulting media attention went viral, leading to dozens more Blessing Boxes being set up in the town and around the world. According to Ballard, most people who take items from the box do so between midnight and 7 a.m.

- And the [Blessing Box Facebook page](#) reports churches and schools and youth groups setting up Blessing Boxes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Texas, West Virginia, and more.

Like McClard, Groomer doesn't view the Blessing Boxes as a first-line solution to the problem of hunger, but as a way for people to personally practice giving. "The Blessing Box doesn't take the place of a food pantry," she says, "but it's to help families with a hands up situation until payday or until they have better resources."

How your family can participate in the blessing box movement

If you'd like to get your family involved in the Blessing Box movement, here are some ideas about how to start—even if you don't live in a neighborhood where people are looking for food.

Find a location

A high-traffic location works best, especially if it's easily accessible to families and individuals in need. If you plan to locate the box in a public place, you'll need the permission of the property owner, and possibly an okay from your city.

Many people place the box in front of their home, although both Groomer and McClard discourage doing so, because it can attract foot traffic that some neighbors might not like.

"I recommend privately-owned, publicly-operated host sites—businesses, churches, nonprofits," McClard says. "That being said, lots of projects are working just fine in front of people's homes. Neighbor buy-in is critical."

The box doesn't necessarily need to service a low-income area, especially if the point of the project is to foster neighborliness. "In Australia, an upper-middle class neighborhood uses theirs to trade jams and garden veggies," says McClard. "Hungry folks are my priority, but I would love to have one to use. I always forget an onion!"

Build your blessing box

McClard offers building plans at the [Little Free Pantry website](#), but the food boxes come in all shapes, sizes, and designs. (Check out some of the designs in the gallery photos, courtesy of the Blessing Box website.)

Typically, they're placed on a post sunk 18 inches into the ground and secured with concrete, Groomer says. Building a Blessing Box from scratch costs in the neighborhood of \$100, but many people simply use refurbished cabinets. Whatever the design, make sure it withstands the elements and keeps out hungry critters.

Stock your Blessing Box

You can put anything that people might need or want in your Blessing Box: food, personal hygiene products, and so on. Don't stuff the box full at first; leave some room for others to contribute, Groomer says. You'll want to do some light maintenance in terms of occasionally checking the quality of donated items; bad or unwanted items may not get picked up.

The most important part of setting up your Blessing Box, Groomer says, is to dedicate it to God. "It really is a blessing," she says, "for the giver and the taker, both."

Videos about Blessing Boxes and Little Free Pantries

