

FOOD WASTECASE STUDY: EMPOWER CITIES TO PREVENT, RESCUE, AND RECYCLE

DC CENTRAL KITCHEN

A REPLICABLE STRATEGY TO IMPROVE THE EFFICIENCY OF FOOD RESCUE FOR HUNGER RELIEF WHILE CREATING MEANINGFUL CAREER OPPORTUNITIES FOR AT-RISK INDIVIDUALS



STUDENTS CELEBRATE AT A CEREMONY MARKING THE MILESTONE 100TH GRADUATION FOR DC CENTRAL KITCHEN'S CULINARY JOB TRAINING PROGRAM

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LOCATION:

Washington, D.C.

DATE STARTED:

1989

LEAD ORGANIZATION NAME:

DC Central Kitchen (DCK)

ORGANIZATION TYPE:

Revenue-generating nonprofit

STRATEGY IN A NUTSHELL:

A multifaceted nonprofit focused on alleviating hunger, reducing the amount of food going to waste, and empowering communities and individuals

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS:

Farms, large food wholesalers, and food retailers

ORGANIC WASTE DIVERTED FROM LANDFILL:

372 tons/year (743,885 lbs.)¹

GHG EMISSIONS AVOIDED:

1,562 million metric tons CO₂ equivalent per year²

EMBEDDED WATER SAVED:

12,869,210 gallons/year³

THE CHALLENGE

One in eight Americans, or roughly 42 million people, are food insecure, that is, they lack reliable access to the food they need.⁴ This can contribute to a range of health issues.⁵ For example, in Washington, D.C., 35 percent of children are considered overweight or obese.⁶ In addition, Washington, D.C. and other U.S. urban areas are home to thousands of at-risk individuals who need job training and career paths out of poverty. Meanwhile, up to 40 percent of food in the United States goes uneaten, including vast amounts of fresh produce, meat, dairy, and other foods.

For more than 25 years, DC Central Kitchen (DCK) has tackled issues such as food insecurity, food waste, joblessness, and community health, using a holistic strategy to deliver results across social, economic, and environmental metrics. In its own words, "DC Central Kitchen turns leftover food into millions of meals for thousands of at-risk individuals while offering nationally recognized culinary job training to adults overcoming homelessness, addiction, and incarceration. We use food as a tool to strengthen bodies, empower minds, and build communities."⁷

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RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

DCCK was founded in 1989 when Robert Egger, a former nightclub manager, became frustrated with the inefficiency of traditional charitable responses to hunger and homelessness. Egger sought to create a new model – one that could provide not only meals, but also a path out of homelessness and poverty. He devised a plan for a central kitchen that would pick up high quality, unsold food from caterers, turn it into balanced meals for shelters, and train jobless adults in the culinary arts in the process.

Thanks to his former career in the local entertainment sector, Egger was well connected to event venues that regularly had surplus food. With access to this network, a van, and a borrowed kitchen, Egger started collecting surplus food from events and training at-risk adults to prepare meals to donate to homeless shelters and other social services nonprofits. This marked the beginning of DCCK, a multifaceted nonprofit organization.

In 1992, DCCK expanded into a 10,000 square foot commercial kitchen in the basement of a homeless shelter in exchange for preparing meals for its residents. This required ramping up its meal preparation from 400 to 2,000 a day.⁸ This helped DCCK expand its culinary training program, which serves adults with high barriers to employment, such as those who were formerly homeless or previously incarcerated. The intensive 14-week program provides hands-on education, career readiness training, and internships, and is free to students, who receive full scholarships thanks to philanthropic support from DCCK sponsors.

In 1996, DCCK began a service called Fresh Start Catering, which hires graduates from DCCK's culinary training program and gives them a chance to begin careers in food services. This program helped DCCK generate revenue while creating more job training and employment opportunities. DCCK also started expanding its sources of food, contacting local farmers and beginning to source so-called “ugly vegetables” – aesthetically imperfect produce that farmers were unable to sell through their traditional distribution channels.

In 2001, DCCK launched The Campus Kitchens Project, a partnership with colleges, universities, and high schools that builds on DCCK's existing model. Campus Kitchens chapters use on-campus kitchen space, recover food from college cafeterias, train students to prepare and deliver meals, and work with the surrounding community to identify opportunities for lasting impact.

In 2008, shortly after Michael Curtin took over as chief executive officer, DCCK further expanded its size and impact by launching Healthy School Food, a program that provides healthy meals to local schools. In 2011, DCCK launched Healthy Corners, which uses DCCK's extensive network to bring fresh fruits and vegetables to corner stores in neighborhoods that lack access to high quality, fresh produce.

Today, DCCK operates an expanded portfolio of food service social enterprises, including Fresh Start Catering and Healthy Corners, and continues to achieve measurable success. In 2016, DCCK's food service related revenues covered more than half of its operating costs, with the remaining half covered by philanthropic support.⁹ In the same year, DCCK rescued 680,987 pounds of food¹⁰, prepared approximately 1.8 million meals, graduated 91 culinary students, and achieved a job placement rate of 88 percent.

In 2014, Egger launched L.A. Kitchen in Los Angeles, building on the model he pioneered in Washington, D.C. while adding some new elements. In particular, L.A. Kitchen focuses on providing better meals for Los Angeles' aging population.

“Los Angeles happens to be home to the largest concentration of older people,” says Egger. Many of these aging seniors live on fixed incomes and face food insecurity.

Like DCCK, L.A. Kitchen also runs a culinary training program called Empower L.A. that provides an opportunity for unemployed adults (many formerly incarcerated or who have aged out of foster care) to learn culinary arts skills. L.A. Kitchen also runs Impact L.A., which works with volunteers to turn high quality donated surplus food into nutritious meals for social service agencies serving aging populations. Finally, L.A. Kitchen has launched a social enterprise called Strong Food to provide high-quality, locally sourced, and freshly made meals to clients, including nonprofit social service agencies, healthcare providers, government, and universities.

Although still relatively young, L.A. Kitchen is already realizing success in training young adults and formerly incarcerated individuals. From July 2016 to June 2017, 98 individuals graduated from L.A. Kitchen's culinary training program; 145,959 nutritious meals have been delivered; and 223,260 pounds of produce have been reclaimed.¹¹

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

MISSION MATTERS: IDENTIFYING CORE VALUES AND GOALS UP FRONT CAN SET ORGANIZATIONS UP FOR SUCCESS IN THE LONG RUN.

From the start, DCCK's mission included addressing the underlying causes of food insecurity. DCCK seeks to be an “engine of community empowerment” that helps people leave behind hunger and poverty for good.¹² This includes hiring and providing a living wage for formerly unemployed and at-risk adults who prepare the meals DCCK distributes to social service agencies. By centering its mission around addressing the root causes of (and creating pathways out of) poverty, DC Central Kitchen has continually built new social enterprises that deliver community benefits, reduce food waste and recidivism, and increase access to opportunity and healthy food for the underserved.

BUILD A REPLICABLE MODEL. At its core, DCCK's operational model is replicable.

“We use things that exist in every city—surplus food, men and women that need jobs and job training, and underutilized kitchens... We are always open-source about our model and materials,” says Egger.

This enables others to replicate and build on the DCK model. Similar social enterprises in operation include Kitchens for Good in San Diego, The Food Shift Kitchen in Alameda, California, No More Empty Pots in Omaha, Nebraska, L.A. Kitchen in Los Angeles, and The Campus Kitchens Project across the country. In its third year of operation, L.A. Kitchen has already established a strong network of volunteers, a culinary arts training program, and a range of new initiatives, all aimed at greater community health.

In 2008, DCK launched The Campus Kitchens Project, which partners with high school, college, and university students to recover food from cafeterias and prepare and deliver meals to the community. However, Campus Kitchens' mission goes beyond meals and also includes community engagement: each of the more than 68 Campus Kitchen projects is encouraged to connect with its local community to find ways to address the gaps and challenges in collaboration.

IMPROVE AND INNOVATE. DCK consistently strives to improve its model, increase its impact, and maximize its skills and resources. This has led to additional initiatives that build on and complement each other. For example, DCK's professional catering service built on the expertise developed through the job training program. The Healthy Corner initiative built on the network of suppliers developed through the catering service. And the Campus Kitchens initiative built on DCK's open-source model to bring together volunteers and underused kitchens as a catalyst for community engagement.

SUPPORTING ROLES FOR CITIES

DCK's 25-year trajectory and continuing innovation have been empowered by a broad range of partnerships and supporters. Often, support has come from the private sector and philanthropies in the form of donations and in-kind contributions, such as rent-free kitchen space. In addition, municipal agencies have been valuable partners, adjusting their own procurement practices to support social entrepreneurs and encouraging food businesses to donate surplus food. In these and other ways, cities can be strong allies in supporting this type of high-impact, crosscutting model. As Washington, D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser observed at DCK's 100th graduation in July 2015, "We could learn a thing or two from you, DC Central Kitchen, because [the DC] government invests more than \$100 million every year in workforce investment funding and improvements in training, but not all of it produces the results that DC Central Kitchen does... I'd rather double down on the programs that work for DC residents."

City procurement practices. Cities have the opportunity to lead by example in promoting environmentally and socially sustainable business models through city procurement practices. For example, in 2016, Los Angeles County implemented guidelines that seek to encourage contracting and purchasing from social enterprises – "businesses that distinguish themselves by accounting for their measurable social, public health, and environmental impact."¹³ This preferential procurement initiative can help support social

benefit enterprises, creating value in their local communities. Another example in L.A. is the Good Food Purchasing Policy, which directs L.A. County to procure food that adheres to a set of values that includes supporting local economies, environmental sustainability, fair labor practices, animal welfare, and healthy food. These types of policies recognize and reward organizations like L.A. Kitchen for sourcing and processing their food locally.

Expand food rescue infrastructure and capacity. DCK has invested in a robust infrastructure to rescue, prepare, and deliver meals. It has benefited by housing its kitchen in a city-owned building near Union Station, in Washington, D.C.¹⁴ Other cities aiming to support nonprofits and social enterprises can consider contributing underused assets like kitchen space to organizations fulfilling a social mission. They can also build partnerships between philanthropies and city economic development agencies to support infrastructure investments that enable food rescue enterprises to increase in scale and flourish.

Streamline and clarify food donation policies. Many potential food donors lack a clear understanding of local food safety regulations. City health departments can help streamline and clarify existing regulations. Addressing potential food donor concerns about liability and risk can help increase donations from commercial enterprises.

In addition, many donors, particularly smaller businesses, are unaware that they are protected from legal liability through the federal Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act. City health departments and health inspectors can help spread this information and encourage food donations while helping businesses to do so safely.

EQUITY IMPACT

Give priority to social outcomes. DCK's mission is to "use food as a tool to strengthen bodies, empower minds, and build communities," with a focus on helping people build a path out of poverty and incarceration. DCK provides job training and career placement in the food industry for men and women who may not otherwise be able to find stable employment. This focus has driven its success, which is evidenced by its consistently high job placement rates and consistently low recidivism rates. DCK's culinary arts training program teaches not just food preparation skills but also personal and professional development and job readiness. As DCK has expanded into revenue-generating social enterprises, these enterprises have invested in hiring DCK culinary arts graduates and paying living wages.

Provide healthy meals for those in need. Over the years, DCK has expanded its model to include a catering service, which provides schools and nonprofit organizations with affordable, wholesome meals, and the Healthy Corners program, which supplies fresh, local produce and healthy snacks at affordable prices to corner stores in Washington, D.C.'s low-income communities. Each of these programs creates opportunities for greater access to healthy and affordable food that would otherwise be out of reach for many.

ENDNOTES

- 1 DC Central Kitchen, *DC Central Kitchen Annual Report* (2016), <https://dcentralkitchen.org/annual-report-2016/>.
- 2 Calculation based on the U.S. EPA Waste Reduction Model (WARM) Version 14, [https://www.epa.gov/warm/versions-waste-reduction-model-warm#WARM Tool V14](https://www.epa.gov/warm/versions-waste-reduction-model-warm#WARM%20Tool%20V14).
- 3 DC Central Kitchen, *DC Central Kitchen Annual Report* (2016), <https://dcentralkitchen.org/annual-report-2016/>.
- 4 NRDC, *Wasted: How America Is Losing up to 40 Percent of its Food from Farm to Fork to Landfill*, 2017, <https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/wasted-2017-executive-summary.pdf>.
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- 7 DC Central Kitchen, <https://www2.guidestar.org/profile/52-1584936>.
- 8 Alexander Justice Moore, *The Food Fighters, DC Central Kitchen's First Twenty-Five Years on the Front Lines of Hunger and Poverty* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2014).
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NRDC would like to thank the Rockefeller Foundation for making this report possible.

Thanks also to the following people for their advice and insight during the preparation of this report:

Robert Egger, Founder and Former CEO, DC Central Kitchen, and Founder and CEO, LA Kitchen; Jason Babbie, JoAnne Berkenkamp, Margaret Brown, Catherine Cox Blair, Dana Gunders, Darby Hoover, Madeline Keating, and Andrea Spacht from NRDC; and Yvette Cabral and Monica Munn from Rockefeller Foundation.

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