

CASE STUDY

# METRO CARING FOOD WASTE RECOVERY PILOT

Metro Caring, an anti-hunger organization in Denver, generally receives between 140,000 and 150,000 pounds of perishable food donations each month, about 6 percent of which does not meet the organization’s quality standards. Metro Caring sends this substandard perishable food directly to compost, racking up about \$1,500 per month in compost hauling bills. To tackle this problem, Metro Caring piloted a program in which it recruited volunteers to help create recipes using surplus or substandard donated food—such as wilted greens or bruised fruit—to offer at their no-cost market.

The pilot found success through simplifying recipes and minimizing labor input, focusing on specific ingredients that are donated in high volumes, rescuing foods closest to spoiling first, considering participant food preferences, and incorporating volunteer labor wherever possible. As a result, clients of the Fresh Food Market were able to enjoy high-quality prepared foods created by the community, less edible food ended up in compost, and Metro Caring was able to divert money that would have been spent on compost hauling to their other programs.

## WHAT IS METRO CARING?

Metro Caring was created in Denver in 1974 when five church and civic leaders came together to address local food insecurity. Connecting with nearly 75,000 people per year, the organization has established relationships through years of helping people gain access to food in a way that preserves as much dignity and choice as possible. Their programming includes a no-cost market, nutrition and cooking classes, community gardens, community activation, and help with public benefits enrollment. Metro Caring believes that every person deserves to have access to healthy and affordable food as well as the skills to cook it, store it, and share it.

Metro Caring’s Fresh Foods Market tries to go above and beyond the traditional food pantry model. Instead of being handed a preassembled box of assorted nonperishable food items that an individual or family may or may not actually want or need, Metro Caring participants can choose exactly what and how much they’d like to take home. Metro Caring strives to facilitate a dignified shopping experience for participants, even going as far as to provide culturally specific staple foods like basmati rice and spices, often purchased by the organization.



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## ABOUT THE PILOT AND ITS IMPACT

Metro Caring ran a three-month pilot, funded by NRDC, to assess the viability of processing food donations into simple, value-added products. At the end of the pilot, a total of 1,480 pounds of food had been saved from composting, averaging 493 pounds of rescued food per month, or roughly 6 percent of the perishable food that was previously being sent to compost. These numbers are lower than the potential impact estimated at the beginning of the pilot, but that difference was largely due to limited time available in the organization’s busy kitchen schedule, which includes cooking classes and nutrition education courses. The program was able to achieve, on average, 18 pounds of food saved per hour in the kitchen. With full access to the kitchen (about 30 hours a week), this could scale to 540 pounds of food saved per week, or about 2,160 pounds of food per month. A cumulative 184.5

volunteer hours from 61 individuals were crucial to this program's success. The pilot ended around the time that the COVID-19 pandemic hit, but the organization continues to explore ways to further roll out the project in the future.

Metro Caring believes that limited availability of kitchen time is likely a common difficulty at any organization wishing to replicate this program and should be taken into account early on. Finding innovative ways to share kitchen space, or creating alternative volunteer schedules in order to capitalize on unused windows of time, will be important to the success of the program.

## LESSONS LEARNED

There were several key lessons learned from the pilot:

- **Focus on one or two main staples each day.** Processing a pallet of one type of produce is easier than a pallet of assorted goods.
- **Keep in touch with warehouse stock.** Check in frequently with warehouse managers, and target foods that will perish soon, are not moving off shelves quickly, have high volumes, or are taking up valuable space.
- **Keep it fun for volunteers.** Rescuing large quantities of food can get repetitive. Pairing menial tasks with more creative duties facilitates an enjoyable working environment, encouraging repeat volunteer involvement. Playing music, conversing, and involving volunteers in brainstorming, seasoning, and design of recipes is a great way to accomplish this. Keeping volunteers engaged and solving problems facilitates the flow of shared knowledge among all parties.
- **Prioritize participant preferences.** Recipes should find a balance between maximizing food rescue volume and catering to participant preferences in order to ensure that the food items produced will be consumed.
- **Keep it simple.** Simply dicing, blanching, and freezing produce became more common as the program matured. Keeping recipes simple typically reduces confusion, minimizes labor input, increases the number of potential uses for a product, and broadens its public appeal.
- **Use a straightforward label.** Metro Caring's participants span a wide range of cultures and languages, so it was crucial to simplify labeling as much as possible. If people don't know what a food is, they likely won't take it home.
- **Explain how to use prepared food.** Adding potential uses for the product to the label was found to increase public reception and reduce the amount of food left on the shelves. Simply adding "great on pasta, on toast, in soups, and more" goes a long way to help a product move off the shelves.



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- **Try some marketing.** Adding an extra sign near the product with an appealing photo, eye-catching color scheme, and a recipe helps to move it quickly off the shelf.
- **Start outreach early.** Before applying for pilot grant funding from NRDC, Metro Caring determined the program's feasibility by soliciting input and advice from relevant programs, individuals, organizations, and businesses throughout the nation.
- **Consider food licensure and food safety, and work with your local health department.** Fortunately for the food waste recovery program, Metro Caring already held the appropriate Food Safety License before beginning the pilot, allowing program operators to move forward with cooking operations from day one. Other organizations that want to replicate this program will need to secure the appropriate licenses required by their local health department.
- **Be prepared for trial and error.** Although the partnerships and relationships built throughout this program provided insights vital to its success, there was still substantial trial and error involved due to the novelty and innovative nature of such a pilot. Everything from the recipes to the packaging to the levels of volunteer involvement was subject to adjustment as the program found its footing.

## FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGE: NO-SALE CLAUSES

Food donation agreements from the national donation network—from which Metro Caring receives the bulk of its donations—almost universally contain clauses preventing any sales of donated materials. These clauses ensure that parties cannot take advantage of donations to gain a profit.

An unfortunate by-product of these no-sale clauses is that they largely prevent any financially sustainable means of rescuing foods headed for the compost bin. Even using donated materials and mostly volunteer labor, a program like this requires funding in order to be effective. The ability to sell the foods produced by this program would offer both a means to sustainably continue operations and the opportunity to provide paid jobs to members of the community. Without sales, food rescue programs at organizations such as Metro Caring will need to rely on internal budgeting or individual monetary donations and grants.

Although no-sale clauses are an obstacle to program growth for this pilot, there are other organizations pushing for a national conversation around the sale of donated foods. In the meantime, Metro Caring is exploring work-arounds to no-sale clauses such as suggested donations or paying directly for ugly produce and seconds from retail to supply the program.