

CASE STUDY

URBAN GREEN LAB: LOCAL OWNERSHIP OF NASHVILLE FOOD WASTE INITIATIVE

In 2015, NRDC selected Nashville as its pilot city for developing high-impact local policies and actions to address food waste by preventing food from being discarded, rescuing surplus food to direct to hungry people, and composting and digesting food scraps. Today, the [Nashville Food Waste Initiative](#), led by Urban Green Lab with support from NRDC and the Environmental Law Institute, engages governments, consumers, businesses, nonprofits, and communities, developing and implementing strategies and tools as models for cities around the country.

From the very beginning of their work in Nashville, NRDC and the Nashville Food Waste Initiative (NFWI) wanted to ensure that local efforts to reduce food waste would continue to thrive after the pilot program ended. According to Darby Hoover, NRDC lead on the project, “It was very important to NRDC to build on existing local efforts in creating the Nashville Food Waste Initiative, to involve local stakeholders in the development of the initiative, and to ensure that the work was locally rooted so that it could continue after NRDC was no longer actively leading the project.”

Linda Breggin, an attorney with the Environmental Law Institute, was hired by NRDC as project director for NFWI. After NFWI had been in place for several years, Breggin, who lives in Nashville, led the process of developing a succession plan to transfer leadership of the initiative from NRDC to local partners. “In the Southeast, there’s not always the same level of funding for sustainability nonprofits that you might find in other parts of the country,” Breggin says. “For our food waste work to continue, we needed to work with our nonprofit community to help build capacity to do the work long-term.”

One member of that community in particular, [Urban Green Lab](#) (UGL), grew to be a valuable partner for NRDC and the city of Nashville and stepped up to officially lead NFWI beginning in 2020. UGL’s mission is to teach communities how to live sustainably. Founded in 2009, the group organizes, trains, and connects professionals in classrooms, households, and workplaces so they feel more empowered to teach the people they serve how to make sustainable choices.



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UGL was already addressing food waste in its projects and programs when NFWI first reached out to the nonprofit to explore opportunities for collaboration. According to Todd Lawrence, UGL's executive director, "At Urban Green Lab, we believe food waste is a gateway into learning about many intersecting issues of sustainability. We've found that just talking about sustainability isn't practical enough and can feel overwhelming. Food waste is a perfect storm of all of these sustainability issues at once—energy, water, transportation, packaging, money, and time."

UGL worked with NRDC and NFWI on various projects and events and conducted its own independently sponsored convenings and hands-on projects related to food waste. UGL currently weaves food waste reduction education into each of its three divisions—Classrooms, Households, and Workplaces. In schools, UGL trains teachers on how to impart lifelong skills for food waste reduction. One example of its classroom education is a February 2019 audit at H.G. Hill Middle School, where UGL worked with students to sort through their discards; the students ended up diverting more than 131 pounds of food waste, or about 75 percent of all waste, from the day's lunch. UGL also leads Nashville's Nonprofit Sustainability Roundtable and trains diverse nonprofits on integrating food waste reduction education into their outreach programs. And through its Corporate Sustainability Roundtable, UGL trains companies on how to educate their own employees about making better food decisions in the workplace every day.

"Our culture is tied to our food. A lot of the words we use relate to food, and a lot of our daily activities are centered around our food," Lawrence says. "We believe that prevention is better than the cure, and there's a lot of cool education and engagement you can do around the topic."

After years of collaboration and coordination, UGL joined the NFWI leadership team in 2019 in preparation for formally taking on primary leadership in 2020. For Hoover and Breggin, this changeover was made possible by NFWI's commitment to including local partners from the beginning and throughout its development. Breggin stresses the importance of growing relationships, working to build a community of stakeholders, and being an enabler for those organizations that have an interest in food waste.

"The leadership opportunity with Urban Green Lab became more of an obvious fit over time, but we had to build the relationship," Breggin says. "When building this type of initiative, it's important to reach out and try to involve as many nonprofits that are working on sustainability as possible. This includes developing a robust list of people to invite to your convenings and to reach out to on your social media. We also made every effort to include nonprofit partners in press stories about our work. In addition, we tried to build the capacity of nonprofits, as well as other stakeholders, to address food waste by providing studies, research, and high-profile events."

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

[Urban Green Lab Website](#)

WSMV-TV: [Nashville school learning ways to reduce food waste](#)

WTVF-TV: [Pilot program designed to reduce food waste](#)

WKRN-TV: [Kroger's Zero Hunger and Zero Waste Foundation donates 100K toward food waste reduction for MNPS](#)

MNPS blog: [Students found 131 pounds of food waste. Here's what they're doing about it.](#)