

CASE STUDY

BOOSTING PREPARED FOOD RESCUE IN NASHVILLE

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.

In the effort to rescue surplus food that would otherwise go to waste, prepared food (such as entrées, side dishes, and desserts) from restaurants, caterers, and other donors poses a particular set of challenges. During the summer of 2017, the Nashville Food Waste Initiative (NFWI) conducted research, including interviews with key stakeholders around Nashville, on ways to expand prepared food rescue. NFWI issued its findings in a report, the Food Rescue Landscape Analysis, that identifies and analyzes the impediments to prepared food donation from the perspectives of both donors and rescue organizations. The report also makes recommendations for how to address these challenges.

NFWI staff interviewed leaders of 28 hunger relief nonprofits that interact directly with the city's food-insecure residents, as well as representatives of 16 donor organizations such as large restaurants, caterers, and other food businesses. The interviews helped NFWI identify close to a dozen barriers to prepared food rescue, including logistical challenges, concerns about liability, and lack of awareness of the federal enhanced tax deduction for food donation.

“Probably the biggest challenge related to food rescue is logistics, which includes lack of storage capacity, drivers to pick up donations, and availability of specific types of food. And donors do not necessarily know who can take the food they have to donate,” notes NFWI project director Linda Breggin. “When we looked at NRDC’s research on the large number of meals that potentially could be rescued in



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the city, we realized how important it was to try to address these barriers and feed more food-insecure Nashvillians. For example, we determined that it would help if we could connect major surplus food generators with nearby nonprofits that have trucks to pick up the donations.”

Once NFWI staff better understood the barriers to surplus prepared food rescue, they met with stakeholders to discuss actions that could be taken to remove those impediments. Among the initiatives identified was a pilot “matchmaking” project to help individual food businesses connect with recipient organizations. NFWI developed a questionnaire for both recipient organizations and potential donors using factors identified during the interviews, as well as a simple

spreadsheet to track responses. If, while analyzing responses to the questionnaires, it appeared that two organizations' needs might line up, NFWI connected them.

“What we discovered during the interviews was that, if we could find recipient organizations with the right facilities that were interested in the right food at the right time, then we could forge an ongoing partnership,” explains Emmett McKinney, a member of the NFWI team. “The idea behind the project was to build a relationship between a consistent donor and a consistent recipient in order to minimize the amount of confusion each time a donation is available,” McKinney adds. “This allows donors to embed donation into their normal routines and business procedures, and it also allows nonprofits to budget and plan their own grocery purchases around these donations.”

NFWI found that simply connecting donor businesses with recipients was in most cases fairly straightforward. Once the initial connection was made, the organizations worked together to figure out the logistics of the donation process.

NFWI focused on entities with large amounts of food to donate on a regular basis in order to leverage its matchmaking efforts as much as possible. For instance, the team helped regular donors such as the Music City Center donate more food and partner with additional nonprofits, and it encouraged other large businesses, such as Bridgestone Arena and the Hilton Nashville Downtown, to become consistent donors. In so doing, the matchmaking process fostered champions who in turn were helpful to NFWI in recruiting peer businesses. As a result, tens of thousands of pounds of food have already been diverted from landfills and instead provided to those in need.

Because it is not possible to find a match for each of the thousands of restaurants and other food businesses in the city, Breggin says, NFWI embarked on additional ways to encourage donation of surplus prepared food, such as the development of a [mayoral challenge](#) for hospitality-sector businesses to donate food and take other measures to reduce food waste. NFWI also distributes information about [enhanced federal tax incentives](#) for food donation and about [liability protection for surplus food donors under federal and state law](#), working with partners such as the [Metro Health Department](#) and [industry trade associations](#) to ensure that the information is widely disseminated. Further, NFWI developed information on [how to package prepared foods for donation](#). And a pilot project is being conducted in 2020 with the Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee to see how well Feeding America's MealConnect app fosters communication between surplus food donors and hunger relief agencies.

McKinney's advice on launching a similar program in another city is to research that city's barriers to donation at the front end, invest the time to get large donors on board, and think through the factors that are specific to that city as the program is developed. Nashville is a relationship-based town, he says, which made human connections all the more important to the project's success. “Some methods can work really well within your city, but it's important to think about how people feel most comfortable communicating. And the best way to do that is to start in the simplest way and just ask them.”