

CASE STUDY

INCREASING CAPACITY FOR RECOVERED FOOD IN DENVER

Up to 40 percent of food in the United States is wasted—enough to feed 164 million people every day. Meanwhile, more than 42 million Americans are food insecure, a number that has increased dramatically since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ While it is not a solution to the systemic causes of hunger in America, food rescue is an important way to redistribute food that would otherwise wind up in our landfills and to support communities that often face barriers to healthy food access.



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In Denver, 17 percent of the population is food insecure.² Through the Food Matters project, NRDC is working with a host of local partners and city staff to find innovative ways to rescue food so that more of it gets onto the plates of those who need it.

Our work to help cities reduce food waste would not be possible without the expertise of our local partners. The goals of NRDC's Food Matter's project—to rethink the scope of the problem and identify innovative solutions and approaches to reduce food waste; to rescue good surplus food and get it back out into communities; and to recycle remaining scraps, ensuring that no food ends up in the landfill—are closely aligned with the mission and work of the Denver food-recovery nonprofit We Don't Waste.

ABOUT WE DON'T WASTE

We Don't Waste's mission is to support the community and the environment by reclaiming and redistributing quality food to those in need. The group has done this by building a network of donors—venues, caterers, distributors, and other food purveyors—from which to collect unused food, and then distributing it to underserved communities via scores of agency partners (more than 70 in 2019). Since 2009 We Don't Waste has recovered more than 120 million servings of food in the Denver metropolitan area, distributing it to soup kitchens, shelters, food pantries, and other community-based food programs. This level of recovery is the equivalent of diverting more than 245 million pounds of food from landfills.

Almost 50 percent of the food recovered by We Don't Waste is fresh produce—items that are often out of reach to food-insecure residents.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In the fall 2019, as a local NRDC Food Matters grantee, We Don't Waste created on a project to increase healthy food access in priority high-risk locations. We Don't Waste had already partnered with a collaborative of local health departments to conduct research and outreach and come up with ways to improve healthy food access in four high-need areas in the Denver metro region. We Don't Waste identified three key strategies for building the capacity of hunger-relief organizations and the ability of local communities to receive recovered food:

- Providing cold storage and training materials to existing partner organizations so that they would be able to store more food and accept more perishables to provide to their clients³
- Developing new partnerships with additional agencies so that more food could be redistributed
- Expanding the [Mobile Food Market initiative](#) to build flexibly in getting more food to people in places where there might not be a brick-and-mortar hunger-relief agency

SURVEY AND PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

We Don't Waste needed to better understand how existing partners could expand their services. While the organization had an idea of how agencies could use additional support, it was important to take a step back and not take a prescriptive one-size-fits-all approach to partners who knew their own

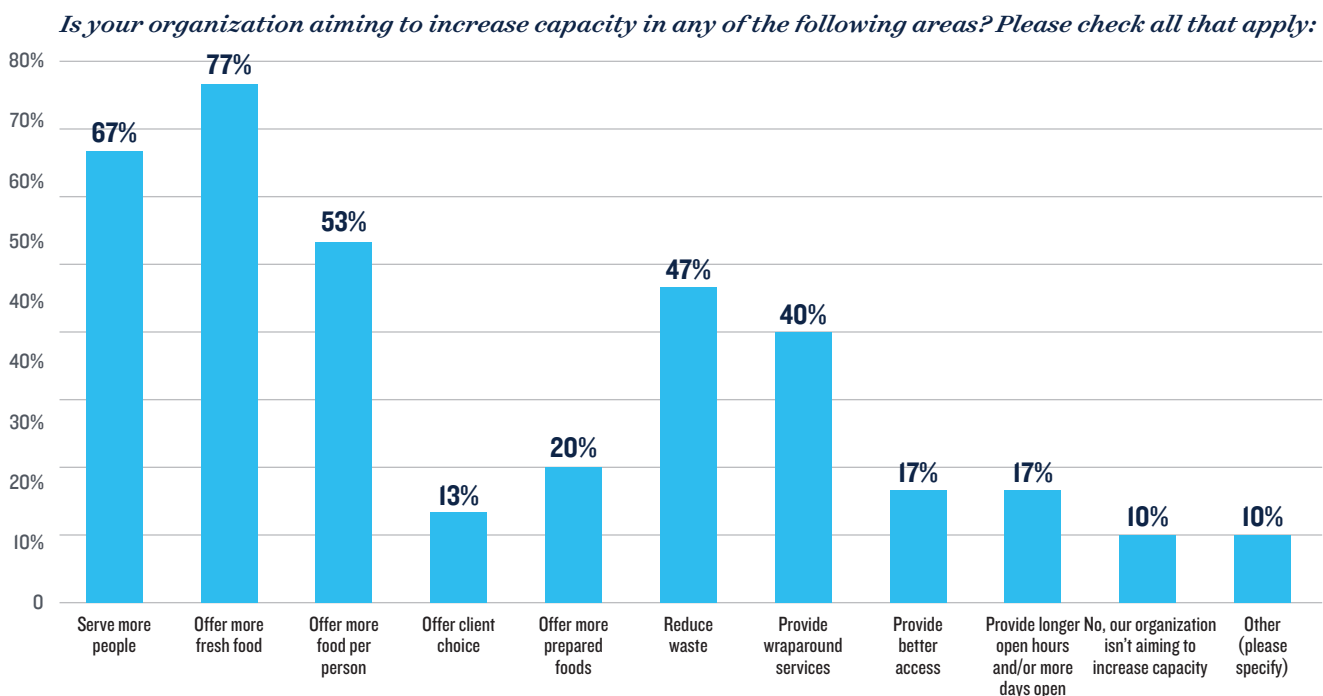
strengths and weaknesses. Accordingly, We Don't Waste developed a survey with questions such as:

Is your organization aiming to increase capacity in any of the following areas? Please check all that apply:

- Serve more people;
- Offer more fresh food;
- Offer more food per person;
- Offer client choice;
- Offer more prepared foods;
- Reduce waste;
- Provide wraparound services (e.g., nutrition education, financial literacy, job skills classes);
- Provide better access to clients who have limited mobility, use wheelchairs, and/or people who have strollers;
- Provide longer open hours and/or more days open;
- No, our organization isn't aiming to increase capacity.
- Other (please specify)

Survey responses were collected from 30 of 70-plus agency partners, with only three respondents (10 percent) saying that they were not looking to increase capacity (see Figure 1). On the basis of the responses, We Don't Waste created and distributed a capacity-building guide with important contact information, volunteer management tools, food safety information, fundraising resources, and other useful tools for partner agencies. The organization also identified 19 agencies that said they needed additional cold storage. Ultimately, We Don't Waste was able to supply nine of them with additional cold storage capacity.

FIGURE 1: PARTNER SURVEY: CAPACITY AND IMPACT



To build additional partnerships, We Don't Waste developed an application form and used community contacts to connect to new agencies. The organization also utilized GIS mapping to locate schools, churches, and community-based organizations with parking lots large enough to accommodate a Mobile Food Market. Following this research and outreach, We Don't Waste conducted eight site visits to evaluate potential Mobile Food Market locations and ultimately brought the market to two new sites in parts of the metro area that the organization was not already serving.

ADAPTING TO COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a major unforeseen challenge to the project. In March 2020, four of the agency food pantries that were scheduled to begin receiving larger shipments of food from We Don't Waste temporarily closed their doors. Some of them had relied on older volunteers, a high-risk population, and felt that they could not guarantee the safety of staff, volunteers, and clients. Other agencies that had been receiving large volumes of perishable foods from We Don't Waste shifted to distributing only shelf-stable products, for ease of delivery and minimized handling.

Despite setbacks, the outreach and enhanced communications that We Don't Waste had already been doing for this project allowed the group to adapt and adjust to changing schedules and operations. For example, two Adams County agencies closed, but an Adams County school district knew to connect with We Don't Waste and was able to distribute 17,000 servings of food a week to local families (including perishable foods). The other major change was shifting Mobile Food Markets from a farmers market model to drive-throughs that minimized contact between staff, volunteers, and clients.

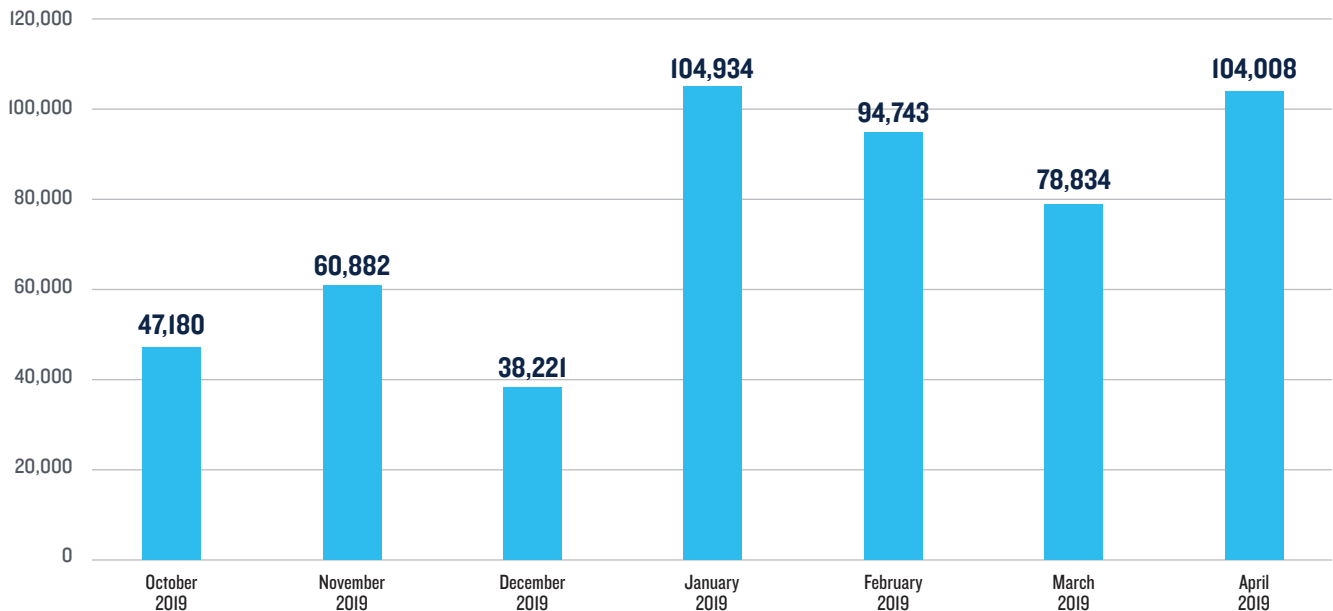


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PROJECT SUCCESSES

Throughout the course of the project, We Don't Waste increased the amount of food distributed each month in the priority neighborhoods above pre-COVID-19 levels (see Figure 2). Even with changes due to COVID-19, We Don't Waste added 13 new agency partners in April 2020, allowing the organization to recover and distribute more food from new and existing donors.

FIGURE 2: AVERAGE WEEKLY SERVINGS IN TARGET AREAS



LESSONS LEARNED

The key takeaway from this project is the importance of communication. With many nonprofit hunger relief organizations operating at maximum capacity, it's easy for communication and coordination to fall by the wayside. For other organizations looking to implement a similar project, We Don't Waste recommends these key practices:

- **Reach out to existing agencies that are food**

recipients: Find out what you're doing well and what you can do better. If you have a surplus of a particular product, ask your existing recipients if they can use it. If not, ask why not. Is it simply that they need additional cold storage to be able to receive the product, or do they need more volunteers to keep their doors open longer? These barriers are not insurmountable.

- **Develop partnerships with local government:** This includes county public health and human services offices. They are often well connected to the needs of their community and can point you to new agencies that might appreciate an additional source of food.
- **Be a respectful partner:** Listen to the agencies that you serve to learn about their needs and barriers. Enhanced communication will help you get the right food to the right agencies, which will help ensure that food isn't wasted.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Dana Gunders and Jonathan Bloom, *Wasted: How America Is Losing up to 40 Percent of Its Food From Farm to Fork to Landfill*, NRDC, August 2017, <https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/wasted-2017-report.pdf>.
- 2 City and County of Denver, *Denver Food Vision*, October 2017, https://www.denvergov.org/content/dam/denvergov/Portals/771/documents/CH/Final_FoodVision_120717.pdf.
- 3 Cold storage refers to refrigerators, freezers, coolers, and so on.