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Triple Bottom Line

RETAIL PERSPECTIVES ON NUTRITIOUS FOOD DONATIONS

Toby Beckelman, MS, MPH
Bianca Eagan, MPH
Lanae Hood, PhD
Katie S. Martin, PhD
Roni Neff, PhD

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AUTHORS

This research was performed as a partnership between CSPI: Toby Beckelman and Lanae Hood; Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health: Roni Neff and Bianca Eagan; and More Than Food Consulting: Katie Martin.

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CONTRIBUTORS

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| Executive Summary

Affording food has become increasingly challenging for many households, and at the same time food banks are experiencing a greater demand for their services. Food retailers remain a critical partner in responding to this need, donating the largest share (35 percent) of food distributed through food banks and pantries. However, retailers must balance the triple bottom line of profit, people, and the planet while facing cost and operational pressures. These competing factors shape how retail food donation programs are implemented and sustained.

| “We talk a lot about our core values and our mission as a company... and our priority of improving the community and environment in which we operate. And so, the donations program is like one of the closest linked ways that a store team member can act on that mission and purpose.”

—Corporate Interviewee

Many food banks and pantries are requesting donations of foods that support health. More than 100 food banks have adopted the Healthy Eating Research Nutrition Guidelines for the Charitable Food System and are prioritizing sourcing and supplying more nutritious foods. There is limited research on the barriers and facilitators to healthy food donations from retailers, including the operational realities that shape donation decisions, how retailers view requests to prioritize donating healthier foods, and what strategies have helped retailers increase healthful donations.

To explore these questions, we interviewed nine corporate- and three store-level retail professionals across eight grocery companies with experience in food donation programs from the Mid-Atlantic region. Interviews covered food donation practices, priorities, challenges, and innovations. This report provides practical insights from those conversations to advance both business and community goals for food donations, including improving access to nutritious foods.

KEY FINDINGS

• Donation Drivers

- Food donation is embedded within broader corporate priorities related to sustainability, operations, waste reduction, and community impact
- State and local food waste policies can prompt retailers to strengthen food donation practices across their operations, extending beyond the jurisdictions where the policies apply
- Retailers prioritize maximizing food donation volume, with limited emphasis on nutritional quality
- Food safety and quality shape decisions, especially for perishable food donations

• Operational Limitations

- The frequency, consistency, and timing of donation pickups and availability of cold storage are critical factors
- Understaffing and staff turnover create continual challenges with program consistency
- Training, clear guidance, and prioritization from leadership are needed to support consistent donation decisions

• Relationships with Food Banks/Pantries

- Strong retailer-food bank/pantry relationships improve coordination, trust, and donation outcomes
- Food banks were viewed as well positioned to coordinate retail donations across local partner agencies, including helping redistribute excess food and ensure donations are fully utilized

- **Practices That Support Successful Food Donation Programs**

- Technology, data systems, and performance metrics strengthen accountability and identify opportunities for improvement, although none of the retailers interviewed tracked nutritional quality
- Embedding food donation into routine operations and connecting employees to its community impact strengthens long-term program sustainability

! “It’s not a resource constraint problem, is actually a logistics issue. We have enough food. Let’s feed the people. How we do that is within a structure and a system that is hard to change, hard to break, right, let’s just acknowledge that.”
—Corporate Interviewee

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RETAILERS

1. **Align food donation efforts with food bank priorities for nutritious foods.** Regularly communicate with food banks and pantries about their priority food categories, such as produce, dairy, and protein and incorporate these priorities into department-level donation goals where feasible.
2. **Demonstrate and communicate the business value of food donation programs to staff, especially store managers.** Highlight how donating safe, high-quality food can simultaneously promote community food access, reduce waste, and support business goals and values. Retailers reported greater buy-in when food donation programs aligned with existing operational priorities. Food donation programs should support both community needs and retailer goals while maintaining a focus on providing nutritious, quality food to communities.
3. **Connect employees to the social impact of food donations.** Formally recognize store “champions” and share stories, data, volunteer opportunities, and feedback from food bank partners to help employees understand the impact of their efforts on the surrounding community and reinforce food donation as part of the organization’s mission and commitment. Encourage relationship building between store employees and food bank pickup volunteers.
4. **Use data to increase accountability and identify opportunities for improvement.** Track and share food donation performance across stores and departments, including eligible shrink (unsold, quality food that can be donated), donation rates, and financial results. Use data to identify opportunities to increase donations, particularly from perishable departments.
5. **Invest in organizational capacity to support food donation programs.** Dedicate sufficient staff time and resources at the corporate level to strengthen food donation programs across stores. Ensure teams have the capacity to provide training, technical assistance, program oversight, and continuous improvement across stores.
6. **Invest in infrastructure and logistics that support nutritious food donations.** More frequent pickups, cold storage, transportation, and streamlined operational processes were consistently identified as critical to increasing donations of produce, dairy, meat, and other perishable foods.
7. **Integrate food donation into routine store operations.** Embed food donation into standard operating procedures, employee training, performance reviews, and store processes rather than only relying on individual “champions” or discretionary effort.
8. **Equip employees with clear guidance and practical tools for donation decisions.** Provide training and decision-support resources to help staff confidently assess food quality and donation eligibility, particularly for fresh and perishable foods.
9. **Pilot and scale innovative models to increase healthy food donation.** Test a “push” model where retailers use store trucks/staff to deliver food to food banks/pantries, assessing cost-benefit to retailers. Develop and share case studies of successful partnerships for healthy food donation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOOD BANKS AND PANTRIES

- 1. Leverage corporate buy-in.** Frame food donation as a strategy that aligns with retailers' efforts to redirect surplus food, avoid disposal costs, and advance sustainability commitments.
- 2. Invest in retailer relationships at multiple levels.** Build relationships and strengthen communication with store managers, department managers, receivers, and corporate staff to reduce disruptions caused by turnover.
- 3. Show the community impact of food donations.** Provide stores with data, photos, stories, thank-you notes, and volunteer opportunities that help employees understand how donations benefit their communities and reinforce participation. Ensure information is shared directly with store contacts and not just corporate offices.
- 4. Clearly communicate preferred products and operational needs.** Regularly share priorities related to the need for specific products (e.g., produce, dairy, and protein), pickup schedules, and quality expectations. Retailers reported being responsive to requests when partner needs were clearly communicated.
- 5. Increase capacity for perishable food donations and reliable pickups.** Invest in staffing, refrigeration, transportation, and other infrastructure needed to support the safe and timely recovery of produce, dairy, meat, and prepared foods. Food banks and pantries can pursue grants from retailer foundations, as well as public funding opportunities that support charitable food system infrastructure. Frequent, reliable pickups were consistently identified as critical to maximizing donations, particularly for perishable foods. Explore partnerships with rideshare drivers or other alternatives to address transportation gaps.
- 6. Monitor and engage in state/local-level food waste policies that affect food donation systems.** Organic waste bans and other [food waste policies](#) can influence retailer donation practices by encouraging food donation. Food banks should monitor emerging policies and work with retailers, policymakers, and advocates to ensure charitable food organizations have the infrastructure, partnerships, and capacity needed to manage potential increases in donations while maintaining food quality and safety.

Retailers and food banks share a common goal: ensuring that good food reaches people who need it. Food donation programs are increasingly viewed by retailers as both a community investment and an operational strategy to reduce food waste, reduce disposal fees, and strengthen local partnerships. However, findings from this study suggest that successful food donation systems require more than charitable intent. Programs were most effective when food donations were integrated into company culture and routine store operations. Growing momentum around state and local food waste policies further underscores the need for continued investment in charitable food infrastructure and strong retailer-food bank partnerships. As food insecurity and demand for charitable food assistance continue to rise, retailers, food banks, policymakers, and community partners have an opportunity to move beyond volume-based approaches and toward more coordinated, nutrition-focused donation systems that support both operational efficiency and community health.

I "It's not something that's an add on, it's not something that's kind of nice to do. It's not something that is a when I have time type thing, it's not a plus one, it is part of my job. It's part of what I do every single day...So incorporating [food donation] into everyday tasks and every standard practice and procedure and sequence of events, I think, makes it just a normal part of my job, and I do it every single day, versus an add on or a nice to have, or an extra thing to do when I have the opportunity or when I have extra time. So, I think that's really critically important...to us."

—Corporate Interviewee

I "One of the hardest things to do is to get feedback from the donation partner down to the store level employee. Like they can send...a report, right, but how do you tell those people, hey, you know you're making a difference, or that meat we started saving, it fed 25 families...how do you get the backflow or the communication loop working a little bit better?"

—Corporate Interviewee

Introduction

Food retailers have a long history of supporting hunger relief efforts. At a time when communities are experiencing rising costs for basic necessities, recent changes to federal food assistance programs have placed additional pressure on the charitable food system.^{1,2} In 2025, food banks lost \$1 billion in federal food-purchasing support, while cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) enacted through H.R. 1 were expected to cause approximately 2.4 million people on average, each month to lose benefits over the next nine years, and more recent participation data indicates that an estimated 4.7 million people have since lost access to SNAP benefits as of July 2026.^{3,4,5} These changes are increasing the importance of food donations[†] as food banks and pantries prepare to meet greater demand with fewer resources.

“The less product that’s going into our landfills, the better, and anything that’s edible and it goes to our food banks, the better off we all are, right?”

—Corporate Interviewee

In 2024, nearly 14 percent of U.S. households (18.3 million) experienced food insecurity, meaning throughout the year, these households were unable to acquire enough food due to a lack of money or other resources.⁶ Almost one-third (31 percent) of food insecure households surveyed in 2024 reported receiving free groceries from a food pantry or food bank one or more times during the year.⁷ Food banks and pantries provide a vital safety net, and grocery stores play a critical role in supporting community well-being through food donations. Indeed, retail food donations comprised the largest source (35 percent) of the 5.9 billion meals provided by Feeding America in 2025.^{8,9,10}

Recognizing the strong association between food insecurity and chronic disease risk, food banks and pantries increasingly prioritize providing food that supports nutrition.¹¹ Research consistently shows that neighbors^{††} want more fresh produce, lean proteins and dairy from food banks/pantries.^{12,13,14} In an effort to meet this need, more than 100 food banks have adopted the Healthy Eating Research Nutrition Guidelines for the Charitable Food System, which provide a framework for classifying foods based on nutrients of concern such as saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars.^{15,16} As charitable food organizations place greater emphasis on nutrition, the types of foods available through retailer donations have become increasingly important.

Food donation programs serve as a mechanism for retailers to support hunger relief efforts while also advancing business objectives. These programs can strengthen community relationships, reduce food waste, and provide financial benefits through reduced waste disposal fees, tax incentives, and avoided fines.^{17,18} Recent industry data point to growing momentum: the U.S. Food Waste Pact estimated that the retail sector donated 1.21 billion meals in 2024, a 31 percent increase from 2023, while the proportion of retail inventory going unsold declined slightly.¹⁹ While retailers contribute substantial quantities of food donations to food banks and pantries, the nutritional quality varies.²⁰

Limiting donations to relatively healthful^{†††} foods can be less straightforward for retailers than donating all food types, due to both the operational and infrastructural demands of selecting and managing perishable foods, and the need to organize substitute destinations for other foods. As a result, some food banks and pantries hesitate to ask retailers to prioritize healthier donations, fearing that the added burden could strain donor relationships or reduce overall volume of food they receive.²¹

While previous research has examined charitable food organizations’ strategies to increase the availability of healthy foods, little is known about how retailers perceive requests for healthier donations, and the challenges they may face in meeting them.²² Given retailers’ significant contribution to charitable food inventories, the objective of this study was to understand retailer perspectives and practices, identify strategies that can increase the donations of nutritious foods, and support retailer operations. In this brief, we share key findings from retailer interviews, and provide practical, partnership-oriented recommendations for retailers and food banks/pantries.

[†] We use the term “food donations,” however “food recovery” and “food rescue” are also commonly used.

^{††} We use the term “neighbor” to describe an individual who visits a food pantry and receives free food.

^{†††} We use “healthy,” “healthful,” and “nutritious” interchangeably to indicate foods with relatively high nutritional value including fruits, vegetables and lean proteins, not limited to items prioritized in the [HER Guidelines](#).



Methods

We formed an advisory committee representing anti-hunger organizations and retailers, who supported the recruitment strategy and reviewed the interview guide and report. The research team conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with nine corporate and three store-level retail professionals across eight grocery companies. The sample included current and former employees of national and regional grocery chains as well as an independent grocery retailer, with a focus on the U.S. Mid-Atlantic region. We began by identifying grocery retailers operating in the region and used purposive sampling to recruit participants with direct knowledge of food donation programs. Participants were recruited through a combination of existing partnerships, professional networks, referrals, and targeted outreach.

Recruiting both corporate- and store-level staff proved challenging, particularly at the store level, requiring multiple recruitment strategies to ensure representation across organizational roles and retailer

types. Because food donation programs are often overseen by a relatively small number of employees within each company, participants were selected based on their direct involvement in designing, implementing, or overseeing food donation programs. As a result, all companies interviewed had well-established food donation programs. Interviewees held roles related to food donation, sustainability, social impact, operations, and store management. Interviews were conducted between August 2025 and May 2026 and explored:

- current food donation practices and policies
- nutrition considerations in decision making regarding donations
- operational realities regarding donations
- food bank partnerships
- opportunities for stronger alignment with food banks to support healthy donations

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed in Dedoose using thematic analysis. Two members of the research team independently coded each transcript and met regularly to discuss findings and refine themes. We synthesized findings across interviews to identify common patterns, barriers, and opportunities related to retail food donations. We also provided draft text for interviewee review to confirm confidentiality was preserved and perspectives were accurately captured. As qualitative research, our study provides depth of insight from participants who have significant relevant knowledge and experience; it does not aim for quantification or representativeness.

| Key Findings

FACTORS INFLUENCING HEALTHY FOOD DONATIONS

The following four factors emerged from the interviews as shaping the amount of food donated and the extent to which donations focused on nutrition. We provide greater detail and relevant quotes for each factor and subtheme.

1. Donation Drivers

- Food donation is embedded within broader corporate priorities related to sustainability, operations, waste reduction, and community impact
- State and local food waste policies can prompt retailers to strengthen food donation practices across their operations, extending beyond the jurisdictions where the policies apply
- Retailers prioritize maximizing food donation volume, with limited emphasis on nutritional quality
- Food safety and quality shape decisions, especially for perishable food donations

2. Operational Limitations

- The frequency, consistency, and timing of donation pickups and availability of cold storage are critical factors
- Understaffing and staff turnover create continual challenges with program consistency
- Training, clear guidance, and prioritization from leadership are needed to support consistent donation decisions

3. Relationships with Food Banks/Pantries

- Strong retailer-food bank/pantry relationships improve coordination, trust, and donation outcomes
- Food banks were viewed as well positioned to coordinate retail donations across local partner agencies, including helping redistribute excess food and ensure donations are fully utilized

4. Practices That Support Successful Food Donation Programs

- Technology, data systems, and performance metrics strengthen accountability and identify opportunities for improvement, although none of the retailers interviewed tracked nutritional quality
- Embedding food donation into routine operations and connecting employees to its community impact strengthens long-term program sustainability

1 DONATION DRIVERS

KEY THEME: Donating food is seen as aligning with corporate values and goals

Retailers described food donations as a strategic component of broader corporate sustainability efforts, including waste reduction goals. These goals, and the food donation programs that support them, were characterized as being influenced by corporate culture, financial incentives, and food waste laws. Across interviews, food donation was more commonly framed as a waste reduction strategy than as a mechanism for improving the nutritional quality of foods available through the charitable food system.

“I think that food waste and that food rescue goals go hand in hand. So...the more edible food that we can make sure it gets into the food rescue program versus being thrown away helps us achieve our food waste goals.”

—Corporate Interviewee



Within these broader waste reduction efforts, food donations were generally viewed as a preferred outcome for edible food. Both corporate and store-level interviewees valued donation above other strategies such as composting or sending food to the landfill.

“We really just try to strive to highlight the importance of donating, as opposed to sort of the easy option, which for a long time has just kind of been...landfill.”

—Corporate Interviewee

Participants also highlighted the role of state and local food waste policies in shaping donation practices. These policies may encourage retailers to donate quality, edible food rather than compost it or send it to landfill. Several participants noted that changes in state laws prompted updates to corporate donation policies that were subsequently implemented across all stores.

“There are a lot of mandatory food waste recycling laws that we need to be in compliance with across the United States, and that definitely plays into the decision making...there are a lot of municipalities who are very interested in how we’re disposing of our food waste and making sure that it’s not being landfilled, and that edible food is being used in the community as intended.”

—Corporate Interviewee

Many retailers also see food donation as part of their core mission and broader responsibility to be a “good neighbor,” balancing social impact with business realities like cost, efficiency, and regulatory compliance. There was a common value to not only provide customers with quality food but to feed people in need through food donations and other philanthropic initiatives. This shared commitment to hunger relief and community responsibility provides a strong foundation for innovation and continued partnership with charitable food organizations. Interviewees valued developing initiatives and internal communications focused on giving back to the community.

“It’s the triple bottom line of corporate giving, like we get...the tax benefit of food donations, but also we get the cost benefit of reducing the amount of waste that...we’re charged, that goes to landfills. We get an amazing, I think, license to operate in communities, because we’re so important to the lifeline of food rescue in the communities. And so mayors and political figures see our feeding program as you know, one of the kind of pillars of how we operate in communities as well.”

—Corporate Interviewee

While several participants emphasized hunger relief and company mission as top motivators for staff engagement and organizational buy-in, others noted that operational efficiencies and cost savings were often stronger drivers of sustained retailer investment in donation programs at both the store and corporate levels.

“I really focused on: Here’s the cost of not making a good decision with food that we tried to sell at full price, then we marked it down, now the code date is approaching. We got to get it out of here. Why would you spend money trashing it when you can get somebody to come for free to take it away? So the policy when I first got there was, ‘let’s look at it as a community thing to do.’ [Over time, it became] more of a ‘this is smart business, retail operations.’”

—Corporate Interviewee



These motivations shaped not only why retailers donate food, but also how donation programs operate at the store level.

KEY THEME: Retailers prioritized donation volume over nutrition quality

While no retailers reported that nutrition standards were included in their formal donation policies, several indicated efforts that focused on increasing donations from specific departments. Half of the retailers described efforts to prioritize donating perishable food categories such as produce, meat, and dairy. Most described having different standard operating procedures (SOPs) related to donation for each department. Some indicated directly responding to requests for such categories from Feeding America and local hunger relief organizations. Although these efforts were typically framed around maximizing food recovery and donation volume rather than improving nutritional quality, they suggest opportunities to align retailer priorities with food bank goals for increasing access to nutritious foods.

“We conducted a survey maybe two years ago to a lot of our food donation partners, and got [a] pretty good response. We asked them to basically like value different product categories as like most wanted, least wanted. And no surprise, like protein, dairy, milk, cheese, produce were all at the most valued end. And so, when we were designing interventions to boost our donation numbers in previous years, we’ve pushed on those areas the most to be sure that we’re getting the food banks what they really want, and not just, you know, chips and candy.”

—Corporate Interviewee

However, this prioritization was not always reflected in store practices. Store-level interviewees more commonly described donation programs as focused on prioritizing the amount of food reaching people in need, rather than on nutrition or donations from specific departments. This suggests a disconnect between corporate-level strategies to increase donations from priority departments and the day-to-day practices guiding store donations. As one participant explained:

“We don’t do nutrition. We just want to not throw food away that can be used for someone else to feed. You know, help someone else out.”

—Store Interviewee

Some retailers expressed concern about limiting donations to only healthier items, emphasizing that food donation programs should maximize recovery of all edible food rather than risk more food being discarded. For example, one participant indicated that donation partners were required to accept all available products, and another said:

“We donate everything that we legally can. Some food banks push back...like they won’t pick up soda, and we have to find an alternate donation partner for that. But those are few and far between.”

—Corporate Interviewee



Importantly, retailers did not describe food bank/pantry requests for more nutritious foods as a barrier to partnership. Rather, they described adapting their donation practices to align with food bank/pantry preferences, while still supporting their goals of prioritizing donation over alternative diversion paths. The distinction appeared to be between requesting or encouraging more of certain categories, such as produce, dairy, or protein, and restricting or declining donations of other items, such as soda. Despite often emphasizing the importance of donating all quality food, no retailer said they would avoid or reduce donations to a food bank that requested more healthier foods.

KEY THEME: Food safety and quality shape decisions, especially for perishable food donations

All interviewees consistently described food safety as a central factor guiding retail food donation programs. Decisions about what food could be donated were driven by the need to maintain product safety, quality, and compliance with internal and external standards. Corporate and store-level employees frequently referenced temperature control, food date labels, cold chain management, and visual quality standards as key to donation decision-making. As one participant explained:

“...we have really, really strict guidelines regarding the food safety requirements of the food, where it needs to be stored, whether or not it can be staged...a lot of our procedures revolve around making sure that the food is safe to consume and still wholesome by the time it leaves our receiving dock.”

—Corporate Interviewee

Food date labels were mentioned in several interviews as providing guidance on when food must be discarded for safety reasons. However, currently in the U.S., food date labels (e.g., Sell-By or Use-By) refer only to quality (other than those on infant formula), not safety and are inconsistent across states. Food banks/pantries can accept shelf-stable or frozen items past their label dates, provided the packaging is in good condition, and the food is handled and stored in accordance to food safety guidance. Infant formula should not be distributed after its “Use-By” date. Standardizing food date labels would help retailers and charitable food organizations make more informed donation decisions and reduce unnecessary disposal of safe food.

Source: USDA, Food Safety and Inspection Service. Food Product Dating. <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/food-product-dating>

Participants also emphasized that food donations were only acceptable if products still met company quality standards. One participant explained:

| “If it’s not edible, then we are not giving it to the food bank. And it’s held within food safe standards, so making sure that through the chain, it’s still in good shape and is safe for people.”

—Corporate Interviewee

While most participants indicated that food can only be donated if products meet company quality standards, they also described the difficulty of judgment calls to separate edible from inedible food. One said,

| “If you have a moldy lemon, maybe put that in one box, and then if you have a lemon that looks good, it’s just a little banged up, then we can put that in another box for donation.”

—Store Interviewee

The Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act of 1996 established protection from civil and criminal liability for persons, businesses and organizations donating wholesome food in good faith to nonprofit organizations to be distributed to people experiencing food insecurity. The Food Donation Improvement Act, passed in 2022, expanded protections, including allowing for donations to go directly to individuals.

Source: <https://chlpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Emerson-Act-Legal-Fact-Sheet.pdf>; <https://zerofoodwastecoalition.org/federal-food-donation-liability-protections/>

While businesses donating food in good faith are protected from liability by the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act,²³ liability concerns nonetheless shaped some decisions around fresh produce donations. One participant explained:

| “We don’t do a lot of produce. We’re scared...produce turns so quick. We’re kind of scared to donate produce...because of the quality...the lifespan on produce is very, very, very small.”

—Store Interviewee

Others have formal agreements with donation partners to ensure food safety standards are met and reduce further liability concerns.

2 OPERATIONAL LIMITATIONS

KEY THEME: The frequency, consistency and timing of donation pickups, and availability of cold storage in stores and pantries are critical

Retailers express strong commitment to food donation, but face operational challenges that shape what is feasible day-to-day. Among the most consistent requests from retailer interviewees was for more frequent pickups by food banks/pantries. One retailer said that with daily pickups, their donation amounts could double. However, coordinating and consistency of pickups can be variable as food banks/pantries often rely on volunteers.

“We could be donating probably twice as much food than we currently are... Food bank leaders don’t believe that. And so if we can get the message out to food bank leaders that there’s so much more food to get, right? We have a struggle getting [them] to commit to five day a week pickup because they don’t believe, I think that it’s there. But...I know for sure that we can be giving double food, and the primary reason that we don’t is we can’t get the charitable food system to commit to five day a week pickup.”

—Corporate Interviewee

Pickup frequency especially limited their donations of perishable food. One participant stated:

“If you’re only picking up three days a week, the food that we’re ready to give away on Monday, if we’re not giving it by Wednesday, will go to the farmers, or will go to the trash, or go to some other way, other waste.”

—Corporate Interviewee

Coordinating donation pickups was another challenge. Interviewees commented on the need for food bank/pantry pickup timing to align with store receiving hours, and on the detriment of pickup inconsistency. One explained:

“If donations are not picked up, it’s very easy for a disgruntled and overworked, understaffed manager to say, ‘I don’t know why we’re collecting food donations, they don’t even come for them.’ In the trash it goes and they stop donating.”

—Corporate Interviewee

To streamline coordination and reduce the administrative burden on retail staff, one company invests in an external organization to manage the logistics between stores and hunger relief organizations. Another retailer worked with a rideshare company to use when volunteer drivers from food banks/pantries were not available.

Entwined with the need for frequent pickups, several retailers indicated that their ability to donate healthy items was limited by their storage space, especially cold storage. One said:

“Storage space is a huge issue for retailers, and so ideally, you would have an area that is designated for food donation items in the produce cooler, in the store’s freezer, in the dairy cooler, and in the dry goods area at the back of the store. Well, in theory, that would be nice, but that doesn’t happen.”

—Corporate Interviewee

Interviewees noted that an additional barrier to donating healthier products was when the food pantries they worked with lacked cold storage to enable holding fresh foods. However, several interviewees described company efforts to fund food banks and pantries to strengthen their cold storage, including refrigerated trucks. Additional investment in capacity and storage at food banks and pantries could enable more perishable food to be donated.

KEY THEME: Understaffing and turnover hinder consistent food donation

Participants described food donation as one of many competing demands on store staff. Setting aside food for donation requires time to identify eligible items, prepare or package them, scan products appropriately, organize donations, and store them safely until pickup.

| "The biggest problem is, is there's so many other things going on, that's [food donations are] farther down the line, than are the shelves stocked and is the bread done, and you know, like it's just, it's just far down the line."

—Corporate Interviewee

Understaffing and high turnover at retail stores led to reduced time for these operational tasks. High staff turnover also contributes to the loss of institutional knowledge about donation procedures and loss of relationships cultivated by food banks and pantries. Turnover among staff that champion food donation is particularly challenging for programs. One corporate staff person explained,

| "Every single time I visited the store, they had a different staff, like different department managers, different store manager, different, the receiver was always the same, which was great, but he was working with, you know staff, he couldn't be constantly training staff on how to do the donation process over and over again. So that store never maintained donations."

—Corporate Interviewee

Another interviewee commented that while turnover is high in frontline staff, it is lower in store management and department lead roles. Accordingly, engaging these individuals as partners may help maintain continuity in donation practices.

KEY THEME: Training, guidance, and prioritization from leadership are needed to support staff making donation decisions

While all interviewed retailers expected staff to donate food, interviewees described considerable variation in how food donation was prioritized within store operations. In some stores, food donation was treated as an optional activity dependent on individual employee initiative, while others incorporated donation into daily operations and staffing expectations. One employee stated,

| "It was not a required training for staff, for employees, it just was like an available module that they could reference. Nothing was mandatory for the staff."

—Corporate Interviewee

When asked to describe how donation guidelines are communicated at the store level, one corporate level interviewee explained,

| "How to properly donate food from the produce department is way down the list on what a new associate has to learn or is told."

In contrast, one corporate interviewee stated,

| "The store manager...was like, no, like, donations is a huge priority for us, this is something we build into our schedules every day. We have unlimited amount of hours and resources we can put towards this."

Interviewees suggested that when food donation was prioritized by company leadership, staff were more likely to receive the training, guidance, and time needed to carry out donation activities consistently. Participants also described a need for clearer, more practical guidance to help staff make consistent decisions about what foods should be donated. Internal donation guidelines were often viewed as unclear or inconsistently communicated to staff, leading staff to make potentially overly conservative choices about donating vs. disposing of perishable foods. Some stores do have visual aids for staff to reference but they were far from ubiquitous.

3 RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNICATION WITH FOOD BANKS/PANTRIES

KEY THEME: Interpersonal relationships and communication matter

Several interviewees indicated that strong interpersonal relationships between retail staff and staff/volunteers at food banks and pantries were among the most important donation facilitators. More broadly, communication and coordination between retail staff and donation partners was critical to program success and supports the opportunity to improve nutritious donations — but does not always happen.



“We find that...when the food agency leaders know the store leaders that are running the charitable food program, that those are amongst the best, the highest rates of donation. And so, we really push on our partners and Feeding America to increase that kind of local relationship between the charitable food system and the retailer...to kind of drive up food donations.”

—Corporate Interviewee

Consistent communication was viewed as especially important when operational challenges arose. Several participants acknowledged that food banks and pantries often face staffing and volunteer constraints that can affect pickup schedules. However, interviewees stressed that proactively communicating schedule changes and maintaining reliable partnerships helped preserve retailer confidence in donation programs.

“Making sure you’re just always there. It’s not like, something where you know, you don’t [pickup] because sometimes...they’re [donation partners] not getting as much, so they’re like, ‘Oh, we’re just not going to come on Wednesday, and we’ll just show up on Friday, and then we’ll have, like, a bigger amount.’ But they don’t really communicate that and then the stores, you don’t show up once you’re done, it’s over. So, consistency is big for the partners.”

—Corporate Interviewee

Beyond individual relationships, interviewees identified opportunities to strengthen coordination across local hunger relief networks. Several participants noted that food banks can play an important role in supporting partner pantries by providing food safety training, refrigerated transportation, pallet jacks, thermal blankets, scales, and other equipment that enable efficient food donation. Others suggested that food bank networks are well positioned to coordinate donations across multiple agencies, helping redistribute excess food from one agency to another when needed and ensuring that available donations are fully utilized.

I “Networking...maybe the pantry that’s picking up on Thursday can’t accommodate a bunch of bananas, but maybe they, you know, work with two or three other food pantries in the area that can and just redistributing food in the community so it can be eaten.”

—Corporate Interviewee

One corporate participant also suggested that food banks could play a stronger leadership role in coordinating retail food donation efforts across communities by improving data collection and visibility into which agencies are receiving donations, where gaps exist, and how food can be more equitably distributed.

I “There might be 300 food agencies in [CITY] fighting over...the 40 retail stores and food donation programs. We don’t have any good insights into...which of those food agencies is collecting, how much they’re collecting, where the gaps are. So, I can’t tell you that you know the church...is picking up way more than they need, and has overstock, while the high school food pantry is understock. Like I can’t, I don’t have access to that data. And I can’t tell you that the reason that is because the high school food pantry doesn’t have the supply chain or the distribution capabilities like the church does. So, we don’t have access to that data.”

—Corporate Interviewee

Successful food donation programs depend not only on retailer operations, but also on strong partnerships and coordination across the charitable food system.

4 PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT SUCCESSFUL FOOD DONATION PROGRAMS

KEY THEME: Leveraging technology and data systems

Technology and data systems emerged as an opportunity area for strengthening food donation programs and improving consistency across stores. Retailers used internal metrics to monitor food donations, eligible shrink, and financial value, which was a key motivator at the store level.

I “I could take the weight of it and then say, okay, store director, this past week, you diverted 500 pounds of unsold product to the food bank, at your current waste hauling and disposal costs of two cents per pound, here’s how much money you saved. That got their attention, more than here’s how many meals you provided to the folks in need around your store. And it doesn’t mean they’re callous. Okay, they’re business people, and they’re just being driven in a different way.”

—Corporate Interviewee

Participants also discussed efforts to improve transparency and accountability by sharing donation data with store teams, using performance tracking to identify trends, and providing targeted technical assistance to underperforming locations. Several participants suggested that increased data visibility and department-level reporting could help embed food donations as part of routine store operations and business performance reviews rather than a separate charitable initiative.

| “The data was sent to site teams on a weekly basis. So, they saw...their prior week’s donation rate, they saw their week over week increase or decrease, and then they saw how far they were from their goal. And the goal we had was to donate 75% of eligible shrink, and that was sent out every single week, and again, just creating visibility.”

—Corporate Interviewee

One participant expressed a desire to look at metrics beyond pounds of food or number of meals, which is how food donations are often reported:

| “It’d be really amazing if I could prove out the nutritional value of our donations... it’s not just meals, it’s not just pounds, it’s not, it’s not an arbitrary [number] we don’t understand. It’s actually understanding, like, what are those fresh components, and why does that matter? And wouldn’t it be cool if we started to think about it in that way?”

—Corporate Interviewee

Donation decisions could be supported with technology to reduce individual decision making and therefore make regular donation processes easier and more efficient. Several retailers described handheld scanners, inventory systems, and donation-specific software that automatically identify close-dated products, simplify donation tracking, and generate data on donated foods. As one participant explained, “They have a handheld computer that they use to tell them what items to check and when,” allowing staff to more efficiently identify products eligible for donation. Another noted that scanning systems enabled stores to track “exactly what was going to be donated versus trashed.” Participants suggested that expanding these tools could increase consistency across stores, reduce staff burden, and facilitate the donation of nutritious, perishable foods that might otherwise be discarded.

| “We need to reduce the amount of individual decision making that happens and that burden on team members for saying, is this the right quality to donate or not, we need to automate that process so it’s not something they need to spend the time thinking about, and there’s less variance between stores.”

—Corporate Interviewee

Additionally, given the labor challenges, participants valued operational technologies such as apps for scheduling pickups and systems that allow mixed produce pallets to be scanned and processed more easily.

KEY THEME: Making donations both valued and routine

Many participants emphasized the importance of connecting store staff to the “why” behind food donations and embedding donation into routine store operations as key strategies for sustaining engagement and strengthening program success. One participant emphasized that clear and repetitive messaging from leadership was critical. Participants also described how volunteer opportunities, food bank visits, and direct interactions with communities experiencing food insecurity helped employees better understand the impact of their work and reinforced donations as more than just an operational task.

| “We’ve been very successful in terms of incorporating it...into our standard practice and how we do things and part of our training. And it’s, it really just becomes part of what our associates do. And it’s not a hindrance...if you can make it part of routine, and then to understand the why, then it just becomes part of what they do, and it just becomes much easier to manage and much easier to execute.”

—Corporate Interviewee

Some employers also cultivate and recognize food donation “champions” who take leadership in organizing and motivating food donations in their stores. Some retailers recognized specific stores and individuals through donation competitions.

| “I feel like they’re on every team there are probably those couple of people that are super motivated about it...I would find your people in the store that are passionate about it...and I would, I would let them be the stewards of your program, you know, and I would let them run with it. I would let them create the excitement around it. I would make sure everybody is aware and...this is what we do.”

—Store Interviewee

While individual “champions” often played an important role in motivating store teams, participants cautioned that donation programs become vulnerable when they rely too heavily on a small number of passionate employees. Instead, interviewees emphasized embedding food donation into routine operations, accountability systems, and messaging on local impact to ensure donation programs remain sustainable over time.



| Discussion and Conclusions

Through food donations, retailers and food banks share a common goal: ensuring that good food reaches people who need it. A collaborative approach provides an opportunity to evolve the system from one focused primarily on moving surplus to one that more intentionally delivers nutritious food while continuing to reduce waste, save money, and strengthen food access.

Food donation programs are increasingly viewed by retailers as both a community investment and an operational strategy to reduce discards of high-quality food, reduce disposal fees, and strengthen local partnerships. However, findings from this study suggest that successful food donation systems require more than charitable intent. Consistent with previous research showing that competing priorities and inconsistent organizational messaging can create uncertainty around food donation practices,²⁴ participants emphasized the importance of integrating donation into company culture and routine store operations. Programs were most effective when

supported by mandatory training, leadership support, technology systems, data visibility, and strong retailer-food bank coordination. Further, programs were more effective when employees were connected to the broader purpose and community impact and when strong relationships with food banks were cultivated.

Participants consistently emphasized that infrastructure investments, including pickup frequency, transportation support, and cold storage capacity at both retailers and food donation partners, are critical to increasing donations of nutritious, perishable foods. Retailers generally did not view requests for more nutritious foods as a barrier to partnership, suggesting opportunities to strengthen the nutritional quality of donations while maintaining strong retailer-food bank relationships.

The findings also highlight important opportunities to evolve how food donations are tracked and prioritized. While pounds donated and meals provided remain common metrics, some participants expressed interest in better capturing nutritional quality and broader community benefit. As state and local food waste policies continue to expand, coordinated investments in the charitable food system will be increasingly important to ensure these policies translate into greater access to nutritious food.^{25,26}

| Despite often emphasizing the importance of donating all quality food, no retailer said they would avoid or reduce donations to a food bank that requested more healthier foods.

This study has several strengths and limitations. Findings are based on a relatively small, purposive sample of retail professionals from grocery companies in the U.S. Mid-Atlantic region and may not be generalizable to retailers in other geographic areas or those without established food donation programs. However, the study provides perspectives from a difficult-to-reach population that is rarely represented in published literature. Participants had direct experience designing, implementing, and overseeing food donation programs across national, regional, and independent grocery retailers, offering valuable insights into the operational factors that influence retail food donations.

Overall, the findings suggest that strengthening retail food donation programs will require continued investment in infrastructure, collaboration, and innovation across the charitable food system. As food insecurity and demand for charitable food assistance continue to rise, retailers, food banks, policymakers, and community partners have an opportunity to move beyond volume-based approaches and toward more coordinated, nutrition-focused donation systems that support both operational efficiency and community health.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RETAILERS

- 1. Align food donation efforts with food bank priorities for nutritious foods.** Regularly communicate with food banks and pantries about their priority food categories, such as produce, dairy, and protein and incorporate these priorities into department-level donation goals where feasible.
- 2. Demonstrate and communicate the business value of food donation programs to staff, especially store managers.** Highlight how donating safe, high-quality food can simultaneously promote community food access, reduce waste, and support business goals and values. Retailers reported greater buy-in when food donation programs aligned with existing operational priorities. Food donation programs should support both community needs and retailer goals while maintaining a focus on providing nutritious, quality food to communities.
- 3. Connect employees to the social impact of food donations.** Formally recognize store “champions” and share stories, data, volunteer opportunities, and feedback from food bank partners to help employees understand the impact of their efforts on the surrounding community and reinforce food donation as part of the organization’s mission and commitment. Encourage relationship building between store employees and food bank pickup volunteers.
- 4. Use data to increase accountability and identify opportunities for improvement.** Track and share food donation performance across stores and departments, including eligible shrink (unsold, quality food that can be donated), donation rates, and financial results. Use data to identify opportunities to increase donations, particularly from perishable departments.
- 5. Invest in organizational capacity to support food donation programs.** Dedicate sufficient staff time and resources at the corporate level to strengthen food donation programs across stores. Ensure teams have the capacity to provide training, technical assistance, program oversight, and continuous improvement across stores.
- 6. Invest in infrastructure and logistics that support nutritious food donations.** More frequent pickups, cold storage, transportation, and streamlined operational processes were consistently identified as critical to increasing donations of produce, dairy, meat, and other perishable foods.
- 7. Integrate food donation into routine store operations.** Embed food donation into standard operating procedures, employee training, performance reviews, and store processes rather than only relying on individual “champions” or discretionary effort.
- 8. Equip employees with clear guidance and practical tools for donation decisions.** Provide training and decision-support resources to help staff confidently assess food quality and donation eligibility, particularly for fresh and perishable foods.
- 9. Pilot and scale innovative models to increase healthy food donation.** Test a “push” model where retailers use store trucks/staff to deliver food to food banks/pantries, assessing cost-benefit to retailers. Develop and share case studies of successful partnerships for healthy food donation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOOD BANKS AND PANTRIES

1. **Leverage corporate buy-in.** Frame food donation as a strategy that aligns with retailers' efforts to redirect surplus food, avoid disposal costs, and advance sustainability commitments.
2. **Invest in retailer relationships at multiple levels.** Build relationships and strengthen communication with store managers, department managers, receivers, and corporate staff to reduce disruptions caused by turnover.
3. **Show the community impact of food donations.** Provide stores with data, photos, stories, thank-you notes, and volunteer opportunities that help employees understand how donations benefit their communities and reinforce participation. Ensure information is shared directly with store contacts and not just corporate offices.
4. **Clearly communicate preferred products and operational needs.** Regularly share priorities related to the need for specific products (e.g., produce, dairy, and protein), pickup schedules, and quality expectations. Retailers reported being responsive to requests when partner needs were clearly communicated.
5. **Increase capacity for perishable food donations and reliable pickups.** Invest in staffing, refrigeration, transportation, and other infrastructure needed to support the safe and timely recovery of produce, dairy, meat, and prepared foods. Food banks and pantries can pursue grants from retailer foundations, as well as public funding opportunities that support charitable food system infrastructure. Frequent, predictable pickups were consistently identified as critical to maximizing donations, particularly for perishable foods. Explore partnerships with rideshare drivers or other alternatives to address transportation gaps.
6. **Monitor and engage in state/local-level food waste policies that affect food donation systems.** Organic waste bans and other [food waste policies](#) can influence retailer donation practices by encouraging food donation. Food banks should monitor emerging policies and work with retailers, policymakers, and advocates to ensure charitable food organizations have the infrastructure, partnerships, and capacity needed to manage potential increases in donations while maintaining food quality and safety.

I "I do think that that most people everywhere would raise their hand to want to contribute to something that's doing good for their local community. And so that message, connecting the 'Why' to the rest of it."

—Corporate Interviewee

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