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Triple Bottom Line

RETAIL PERSPECTIVES ON NUTRITIOUS FOOD DONATIONS

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Your Food and Health Watchdog



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About Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI): CSPI envisions thriving communities supported by equitable, sustainable, and science-based solutions advancing nutrition, food safety, and health. www.cspi.org

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About More Than Food Consulting: The mission of More Than Food Consulting is to advance organizational and systems change in the charitable food system to ensure people have economic and nutrition security. It is our core belief that it takes more than food to end hunger. We provide services and conduct research to promote better practices in the approach to hunger relief. www.ittakesmorethanfood.org

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ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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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