

A Partnership to Reduce Waste: Developing a Food Rescue Program

FOOD for Lane County

For 20 years FOOD for Lane County (FFLC), located in Eugene, Oregon, has worked hard to meet its mission of alleviating hunger in Lane County. FFLC is the central point in the county for food distribution to 100 local agencies and programs that serve residents living on limited resources. These include food box programs, emergency shelters, congregate meal sites, senior sites and affordable housing communities. FFLC also serves hot meals to children when school is out through the Summer Lunch Program that operates in 51 sites throughout the county.

In 2003, 5.9 million pounds of food were distributed in Lane County to more than 20% of the county's population. Providing a steady stream of food is a complex challenge and keeps FFLC constantly soliciting food and donations. In addition, the agency coordinates a gleaning program to collect food from area farms and runs three community education gardens that last year produced 70,000 pounds of food for distribution through the food bank and an on-site farmstand.

In 2000, FFLC formed a partnership with the City of Eugene Solid Waste Department to build its capacity to divert more food from the local landfill by conducting observational studies at food waste producing businesses such as grocery stores, restaurants and produce houses. The Community Partnerships to Reduce Waste (CPRW) program was funded through the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) Solid Waste grant program.

In the following interview Jessica Chanay, FFLC's assistant director, describes how the program works:

You collected from groceries and produce warehouses before CPRW?

Yes, for more than 10 years FFLC has solicited food from these sources, but the items were limited. We were able to collect more bread and sweets than other types of food. It was a frustration because we know there is much more available and this is food our clients need. Food banks are constantly on the lookout for sources of high-protein food along with fresh fruits and vegetables to subsidize the canned and dry food that is the mainstay. The "already prepared food" is a bonus for many of our clients. However, few of our donors would go beyond bread.



Jessica Chanay, Assistant Director, FFLC

CPRW was a partnership with local and state government. How did it get started?

We were contacted by the City of Eugene Solid Waste Department about a grant program available from DEQ. The state's priority for managing organics is to reduce food waste and reuse edible food. If that can't be accomplished, the next priority is to compost that food. Local governments were just beginning to look at composting food waste and the state wanted to encourage recovery of edible food. It's a perfect match, when you think of it. Why would Oregon want to send edible food to the landfill when the state has such a high rate of hunger?

You tried a different approach, using students from University of Oregon to conduct business assessments.

We were going to hire two interns, but the University of Oregon had a new service learning opportunity through the Environmental Studies program. Through this program we received four students who were supervised by a project manager for two semesters for the same amount it would have cost for two interns. This increased the labor available for the observations, and the project manager gave us consistency and an excellent feedback mechanism. It also was a good experience for the students to learn more about food waste as an environmental issue.

How did the assessments work?

This was a model that DEQ and Metro Regional Government used to promote resource efficiency. Instead of just looking at what is in the garbage can – it's too late for food diversion once it's in the garbage – the process is assessed. For example, the students looked at the food when it came through the door, during prep and trimming, and as the items were pulled, rotated, and stored. They also observed food that was



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prepared, but not served, to the point of disposal. Each stage offers an opportunity for food rescue.

FFLC honed an assessment tool provided by Metro, and DEQ provided training on conducting assessments and communicating with business managers and employees. The students and FFLC's food solicitor spoke with the store manager and surveyed each department head. Later, they returned to map each food handling area. They also talked with employees about the program to get their views on how diversion might work in their department. FFLC was provided a report on their findings. There was one step that did not get fully implemented; we had envisioned we would provide the businesses with written diversion plans, but we found that FFLC had to do an assessment of its own capacity before expanding more formalized diversion opportunities.

FFLC had some relationships with most of the participants prior to the assessments. Was the approach more successful?

Yes, the assessments were a good tool; I've given this some thought and I think it all comes down to relationships. Our food solicitor was very competent, but her relationship was based on soliciting good will. The CPRW approach was different; we were partners with the state, local government and the University, and offered a service to the businesses. The students and our food solicitor were on-site talking with people. As we made observations and exchanged information, we worked with them to figure out ways to do business together. So, the relationship was different – we became partners.

What were the opportunities?

It varies depending on the type of business, but let's look at a grocery store, as an example. We discovered opportunities in the bakery, deli, dairy, frozen food, meat, produce and dry good areas. For example, damage on the truck is the largest contributor to dry food refuse and the contents are usually emptied and the package returned to the company for credit. This is the same scenario for milk in the dairy. Once the participant became more comfortable with the way we handled donations they worked out a system to scan the containers for credit rather than dump the contents. Another example is the "pull by" date; some stores have a policy that they won't donate items that are four days past the pull date. Although items are usually good longer, that is fine with us because we turn around those items very quickly.

How do you manage this turn-around?

Several ways: We have a large commercial kitchen with a chef, staff and volunteers. The

food that reaches the kitchen is repackaged or used to make meals and other items such as soups and stews. We take samples of the ready-to-eat items we receive, date and freeze them so we can track any problems. For other foods, we put them directly in the freezer (if possible), thus extending their shelf life. Finally, we have agencies coming to pick up food five days a week. They will "cooler shop" for items that have been picked up that day (or the day before) and that helps us quickly move items that are perishable.

You must have come across some barriers too. How did you overcome them?

Clearly, liability is a major concern. We give our food donors information about the Good Samaritan Law that protects them from liability. Also, we often invite them to tour our facility so they can see first-hand our food handling practices and the procedures we have in place to protect their donations. A second barrier is the structure of corporate-owned stores. Chain stores often must get permission from headquarters to participate. It's more difficult to convince them because they are setting policy for the entire business, and because they're often removed from individual communities and their local issues and opportunities. They tend to stand firmly behind liability concerns. That's just the first step, however. Once headquarters give the okay, the next step is the store manager, and then the department managers. The department managers are really important because they can make or break the program.

Other issues are related to the time and cost associated with diverting and sorting donated product and storage space issues, particularly for cooler items. Finally, providing containers and the timely collection of donations is important. If we miss even one day of pick-ups we can jeopardize relationships that have taken years to develop.

What are the benefits to donating?

You always hear that the bottom line for businesses is saving money, but that's not always the case. Many of them do want to help their communities. They must get beyond the issues associated with donated food, however. Liability, timely pick-up, storage concerns, and not adding a lot more work for their employees are important concerns for them as a business. As participants begin to see the items that can be donated and that FFLC is dedicated to ensuring their donation is handled properly, the system is eventually viewed as a convenient and easy way for them to both divert food from their own waste stream and help their community.



It's not certain they will save money on disposal costs; they may qualify for a tax break – FFCLC provides a record of the pounds donated and they may save money on disposal -- but probably not much. I think the bottom line for the businesses is contributing to the community.

Could you go over the key ingredients in a successful food rescue/diversion program?

- Providing participants with information on the food safety laws and demonstrating that you follow strict food handling guidelines.
- A well-developed route and pick-up system that allows for regular pick-ups.
- Refrigeration is needed at all points, including refrigerated trucks to pick up the goods, refrigerators and freezers at central distribution points and refrigerators at provider sites (where clients access the food).
- Efficiency is a key; it is important to collect from sites with large amounts of quality food that is consistently available and within an established collection route.
- Relationships! This is the most important ingredient. If the business does not value the program or feel connected to the food bank, or if it feels its concerns are not being addressed, it will see little reason to continue.

What role can solid waste programs provide?

Our first grant provided insight into what was available, but we quickly learned that it was like the saying, "Build it and they will come." We saw the potential for more food than we had infrastructure to handle. We recently received a second grant (after two years) that will help us expand our cooler space to accommodate more perishable foods. Food rescue is labor intensive and expensive to maintain. Collecting recyclables is factored into the costs of the solid waste system, but food recovery is not. There is a great opportunity to get edible food out of the waste stream and to people in need, but ongoing funding for capacity-building can be a barrier.

Can this program make a difference to Oregon's needy?

We collect quality food from grocery stores, restaurants, institutions, farmstands and produce warehouses. Last year we diverted more than 2.5 million pounds of perishable food that would have ended up in the landfill. That's a lot of good food that will feed families in need. We are dedicated to alleviating hunger by creating access to food, and we now have community businesses sharing our goal.

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