



Introduction

Donated surplus food is one critical tool in addressing both food insecurity and preventing waste by diverting edible food from the waste stream. SPU is building cross-sector collaborations, investigating incentives to improve donation practices, identifying impactful policies, and putting present-day food insecurity (hunger) challenges at the center. Solid waste studies show that food is the single largest material going to garbage from Seattle businesses. SPU is invested in this work as a key diversion tactic for food waste with the benefit of making *more* food available to *more* people.

Core Challenges

To divert more edible food out of the garbage and compost, hunger relief organizations consistently request more trucks, cold storage, labor, and funding. However, research from the University of Washington Supply Chain Transportation & Logistics Center coupled with insights from SPU's [Food Rescue Innovation](#) convenings has revealed deeper, more complex barriers to transformational change. Core challenges include:

- A complex, **siloed** system fosters competition for the same funding, food, storage, transportation, and volunteers. Collaborative work is essential for efficient use of limited resources and could divert more food.
- A lack of granular, accurate **data** hampers informed decisions and opportunities to leverage resources, test new approaches, and monitor progress.
- Consistent, reliable **communications** across food donors and hunger relief organizations doesn't exist which further deepens silos and the inability to aggregate data.

Program Goals:

- Reduce food and packaging waste occurring in food rescue operations (donors and rescue organizations).
- Reduce cross contamination of food and packaging in our compost, recycling, and garbage streams.
- Increase the quality and volume of edible food serving Seattle residents in need.

Steps to Achieve Goals:

- Gathering credible data to inform partnerships, actions, and next steps.
- Creating metrics for measuring progress and shared success.
- Developing a coalition of partners to share data and take joint action.
- Based on findings, providing outreach, incentives, grant funding, and policies that reduce wasted food and packaging contamination within food rescue operations.

Grocery Rescue Assessment

As a direct outgrowth of 2019-2020 projects, SPU engaged and funded Northwest Food Alliance to review grocery donation practices, develop early baseline measurements, and identify recommendations. Grocery donations comprise a significant portion of HROs' food supply. Based on interviews conducted prior to this project (and prior to COVID-19), grocery donations could provide up to 80% of HROs' food supply.

This focus on grocers' challenges is an opportunity to leverage retailers' environmental and community goals for the purpose of reducing wasted food and improving the quality and/or quantity of donated product for the community. Donors (grocery stores) have the unique capacity to implement or modify strategies that benefit *all* parties.

Two Seattle area grocers voluntarily agreed to participate in this assessment in a desire to improve their food donation impacts and potentially change their practices. Both grocers are actively pursuing ways to prevent food waste in the first place, donate unsold food to hunger relief organizations, and recover inedible food through composting and

biodigestion. Both retailers are also dedicated to increasing access to food more broadly across their communities. In a few instances, granular recommendations apply only to one retailer. Ultimately, lessons learned from different operations helped inform recommendations that could be applied to a variety of retailers for greater replication.

The Assessment was conducted at eight Seattle store locations in different neighborhoods, serving distinct customer bases. It included:

- Over 30 on-site employee interviews and additional interviews with store leaders across three months
- On-site observations of donation practices in the stores and at loading/unloading docks
- Measurement and valuation of donated food across a ten-day period
- Coordination with their 13 HRO partners who receive donations from these store locations

2021 FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

There are four key findings of this assessment. Most recommendations apply to both retailers, but not all. Each finding is an opportunity for shared learning and collaborative action.

1. Donated **fresh produce** offers significant opportunities to reduce waste and improve community health.

FRESH PRODUCE	<p>FINDINGS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce accounts for the largest portion of grocery donations and is the single most requested item of food from HROs. • Fresh produce is the most vulnerable to being wasted and least measured food item. 	<p>RECOMMENDATIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce handling is a key intervention point for improving food donation practices. • Third-party diversion bins are leading to reductions in food donation where edible food is going to biodigestion or garbage collection. 	<p>POTENTIAL ACTIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine grocer and HRO capacity to jointly use a uniform, durable bin. • Partner with grocers who are using third-party diversion bins and determine how much edible food is going to biodigestion instead of donation and how much overall food goes to garbage when third-party bins have insufficient capacity.
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2. Absence of **standardization** across operations fosters uncertainty and inconsistency leading to waste.

STANDARDS	<p>FINDINGS</p> <p>Absence of standardization causes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food waste • Compromised food safety • Operational inefficiencies • Added/hidden costs 	<p>RECOMMENDATIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify key standards to prioritize and strengthen. • Advocate for wider adoption of successful standards. 	<p>POTENTIAL ACTIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine capacity to test standards with food donors. • Field test the top one-two standards through a pilot – potentially bins and employee training. • Develop case studies to summarize pilot results, lessons learned, and opportunities to improve. • Work across sectors to develop policy that incentivizes and institutionalizes successful and impactful standards.
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3. Siloed and missing **data** prevent food donors and HROs from understanding each other’s constraints, costs, and opportunities.

	FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS	POTENTIAL ACTIONS
DATA	<p>Siloed and insufficient data result in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inaccurate reporting • Hidden food waste • Hidden costs • Missed opportunities for tax credits by donor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine full potential of food donation volume. • Measure and report net donations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect baseline data from third-party diversion programs that includes analysis of food donations, including the amounts going into garbage and compost. • Document the costs and savings of donated food. • Identify ways to incentivize data collection that tracks progress, enables analysis for improvements, and identifies true costs of food rescue.

4. Existing **communication** among stores and HROs isn’t sufficient to address challenges or take advantage of opportunities to improve food rescue operations and results.

	FINDINGS	RECOMMENDATIONS	POTENTIAL ACTIONS
COMMUNICATION	<p>Feedback loops are constrained among HROs, store staff, and distribution agencies, resulting in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure to use existing standards causing waste and inefficiencies • Miscommunications and conflicting information • Missed opportunities to collaborate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use consistent messaging across donors, HROs, and public agencies to avoid confusion and strengthen adherence to standards. • Share results of collaborative pilots and projects to encourage greater cross sector involvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include information sharing and consistent messaging in pilot and data gathering efforts to ensure feedback loops with stakeholders. • Host virtual and in-person meetings with rotating hosts to share cross-sector lessons, ideas, and needs. • Advocate for incentives, policies, and other broader supports that reinforce supported recommendations and actions.

PROPOSED ACTIONS FOR 2021-2022 AND BEYOND

Test a Uniform, Reusable Bin & Enhanced Employee Education

- Identify metrics and data collection strategy.
- Determine store locations, partnering HROs, and other key players.
- Co-develop criteria for bins and field test.
- Co-develop employee education methods.

Expand Baseline Data Collection & Analysis

- Conduct waste characterization studies with participating retailers.
- Pilot technical assistance for hunger relief organizations which would include waste characterization.

Develop Consistent Communications

- Strengthen communications with food donors and HROs.
- Identify opportunities to scale.

Visit Seattle Public Utilities [Food Rescue Innovation website](#) for more information.