



The Office Hero's Guide to Leftovers:

How to Safely Donate
Food and Reduce Waste



Three steps to food donation

How often do we react to a problem by thinking “What can I do about it?” Take the problem of food insecurity. The [Feeding America](#) hunger-relief organization estimates that 1 in 7 people in the U.S. are food insecure. That’s 48 million Americans who struggle daily to get enough to eat. And the problem exists in every community. [Helping the Needy](#) lists 12,250 emergency food programs currently operating in the U.S. While many go hungry, global food waste is estimated at 1.3 billion tons annually. In America, more than 25 percent of the food prepared annually ends up as methane-producing waste. That’s about 96 billion pounds of food, according to the US Department of Agriculture.

But here’s the good news: if you’re someone who orders food regularly, there’s something simple you can do to help.

Businesspeople have a straightforward way to help address hunger by participating in food-recovery and donation programs. All that’s needed is a bit of planning. In fact, there are lots of people who have thought about this and have made it easy to help.

You could look at this as one way for your company to improve sustainability while helping those in need. It doesn't cost anything to implement, and you can take pride that leftover food from your meetings, training sessions, and conferences gets donated to local food banks.

It takes **three simple steps**:

- 1. Request that your caterer, event coordinator, or hotel donate leftover food.**
- 2. Identify a local food bank or mission and arrange for them to pick up the food.**
- 3. Get a receipt for the donation.**

What are the legal issues?

Let's start by dismissing the legal question. Even those who are in the food business are sometimes unaware they are free from danger of liability lawsuits. That's thanks to the [Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act](#). This is a federal law that encourages food donations and protects good faith food donors from civil and criminal liability. So, they're covered.

When do donations make sense?

If you have a few teenagers in the house, the question of leftovers is seldom a concern. If you work at a company that orders food regularly, you undoubtedly know the team that's always up for a slice of pizza. So, if you have a few bagels or sandwiches left from a business meeting, just leave the leftovers in the break area for your office mates. Watch it disappear.

For larger group meetings and events, it's a different situation. Larger events are most likely to produce beneficial food donations. For example, when preparing to feed a large group, most caterers build in overages. That makes it almost certain that there will be leftovers that are wholesome, edible, and nutritious. Why let all that food go to waste? There are some safe and efficient ways that you can be sure it

goes to charitable organizations and isn't wasted.

Start by planning ahead. Let the caterer know that you want any excess food to be donated. Write it into their contract. Although for some this may already be standard procedure, others may be unaware of the legal protections noted above and need some coaxing. Also, it's important to request a receipt from the food bank. It should include how much food was donated, what it is, and how many meals it is expected to serve. The receipt also makes your food service provider accountable for their follow through.

“It’s important for us to know about potential donations in advance. There’s disappointment on both sides if an unexpected offer is made and we already have a meal prepared.”

-Alex Grant, Director of Community Development,
Hope Fellowship Church in Cambridge, MA

Any experienced caterer will know that the key to safely prepared food donations is careful management of food temperature, handling, packaging and storage times. It's not much different than the sniff test you'd use to handle food in your own kitchen. For specifics, see [detailed guidelines](#) published by the National Restaurant Association. Also, whenever possible, make it easy for the agencies receiving your donations by requesting that the food be packaged in marked containers that can be easily stored and transported.

Donating Prepared Foods: What You Need to Know



A joint report created by the National Restaurant Association and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, [Food Donation: A Restaurateur's Guide](#), covers what you need to keep in mind when donating prepared food.



Avoid dishes containing foods that have been **heated, chilled, and reheated**, such as chicken that has been given a second life in a stew.



Store dishes in **shallow, one-use recyclable aluminum pans** or clear-plastic food-grade bags.



Package donations in smaller containers, such as shallow pans, so that recipients can **maintain the food's temperature**.



Label and date all containers so their contents can be identified and used or destroyed within a safe period.



Keep hot dishes to be consumed immediately at **140 degrees Fahrenheit or above**.



Refrigerate and/or freeze cold items that will not be immediately consumed—don't do this for hot food.



Never **add warm leftovers** to a container of chilled or frozen food.



Keep donated food products separate to **avoid cross contamination**.



Discard any food items that may have been **handled by anyone except kitchen staff**.



Know what time a hot dish was prepared, the temperature, and how long it took to cool to ensure that foods are **not kept in the danger zone of 41-140 degrees Fahrenheit for more than four hours**.

Where to Donate?

While some food banks handle only packaged food and limited perishables, you should have no trouble finding willing recipients for your prepared food donations. Most will even pick up food after your event. (Another reason to plan ahead.) [Feeding America](#) has a searchable database listing food banks located across the country. Rock and Wrap It Up is an “anti-poverty think tank” that provides [Hungerpedia](#) as a resource to match donors with charitable agencies. We’ve also listed several other search resources and large-city food banks below.

Of course, the ideal situation for receiving organizations is when they know that a provider will regularly be donating over a long term. For example, a local business that conducts frequent training programs may reliably produce a donation to a local soup kitchen. This works best if the donor also has an individual clearly responsible for coordinating arrangements consistently.

For one-time events, local or remote, it still comes down to planning and coordinating with food suppliers and recipients.

Feeling Good Isn’t the Only Benefit

Donating leftover food isn’t just a generous exercise. Businesses that donate food can receive tax benefits for their donations. That’s one reason you want the receipt. Food donations can be itemized and listed at fair market value or cost, whichever is lower. It works pretty much like any other charitable donation. The food can go to any to a qualified charitable organization (primarily, 501(c)3 nonprofits). It must be edible and useful for the food bank and can be unprepared or prepared food. There are extra tax benefits for corporations that donate prepared foods under [Section 170\(e\)\(3\)](#).

Along with the tax benefits, there is the warm feeling of doing the right thing and the opportunity for your company to craft positive internal and external leadership and community service messages.

Other Resources

We encourage you to take this further and create a corporate policy to donate leftovers where appropriate after any meeting or catered in-house event. The staff at [Rock and Wrap It Up](#) can help setting up programs for large corporations and public events. They have a history of working with sports arenas and rock bands. (That's where they get the name.) [Food Donation Connection](#) has been helping to set up Harvest Programs internationally since 1992. They work with restaurants, airports, universities, and other large organizations to create efficient food donation programs.

Major City Food Banks

Boston

Boston Rescue Mission
39 Kingston Street
Boston, MA 02111
617.338.9000
www.brm.org

Chicago

Greater Chicago
Food Depository
4100 West Ann Lurie Place
Chicago, IL 60632
773.843.2847
www.chicagosfoodbank.org

Washington, D.C.

DC Central Kitchen
425 2nd Street NW
Washington, DC 20001
202.234.0707
www.dccentralkitchen.org

New York

City Harvest
575 8th Avenue, 4th Floor
New York, NY 10018
917.351.8711
www.cityharvest.org

San Francisco

Food Runners
2579 Washington St.
San Francisco, CA 94115
415.855.8043
www.foodrunners.org

Los Angeles

Angel Harvest
5461 West Jefferson Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90016
323.256.6881
www.angelharvest.org



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