



# How To Build A Food Bank

A TOOL KIT FOR ESTABLISHING NEW FOOD BANKS

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# PURPOSE OF THIS TOOL KIT

This Tool Kit is presented not as a comprehensive step-by-step manual for setting up food banks, but as an educational guide to help the reader:

- better understand the history and concept of food banking
- recognize the breadth of involvement required for a successful food banking operation
- identify the resources necessary to sustain the food bank
- develop a credible and inclusive planning process
- launch a viable food banking operation

# WHAT IS FOOD BANKING?

Food Bank – (noun): A nonprofit charitable organization that collects surplus, unsaleable, and otherwise donated and/or purchased food and grocery products and redistributes those items to low-income individuals/families and/or to community-based charitable organizations that then provide the items to those who need them.

A food bank is – and needs to be – a community asset. While it may be developed and operated by an existing NGO or an independently organized legal entity, its “owners” must ultimately be the community in which it resides and delivers service. Clearly, such ownership is not literal in the legal sense, but is very real in the practical sense. If the local community does not engage with and feel a sense of ownership of the food bank, it is destined to mediocrity at best, and failure at worst.

In most cases, food banking will not be the solution to hunger in a community or in a country. Generally, the real solution to the problem lies in far more complex resolution of poverty in the community or country. That being said, however, food banking represents a unique coalition of key representatives from the three sectors of society in a context that not only allows, but promotes serious dialog and action aimed at addressing the needs of hungry (poor) people. The three sectors of society referred to, of course, are the public sector (government – at all levels), the private sector (the business community – including the food industry and the media), and the voluntary sector (the NGO community).

The absence of any one of these sectors in the design and delivery of a food banking system will result in a serious loss of community ownership and will likely create a flawed implementation ultimately subject to failure. On the other hand, a successful coalition representing all three sectors provides a forum for healthy debate and assessment of need, opportunity, and collaboration. It serves as a catalyst to move its participants past issues of turf and propriety to look objectively at the facts relative to the need and the lack of sufficient existing infrastructure to service that need. Ultimately,

it leads to the break down of walls and the extension of hands to create a truly collaborative effort with the unified focus of alleviating hunger for those in the community who suffer from it – whatever the cause of that condition.

On the continuum from Networking to Collaboration, a successful food banking infrastructure depends on full collaboration.

- Networking is: Exchanging information for mutual benefit.
- Coordination is: Exchanging information and altering activities for mutual benefit.
- Cooperation is: Exchanging information, altering activities, and sharing resources for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose.
- Collaboration is: Exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources, and enhancing the capacity of each other for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose.

Communication is the foundation of each, and the catalyst that carries them forward.

Having reached this point, the food bank now has fertile ground in which to grow and develop a functional alignment of policies and resources from all three sectors and thereby grow into a sustainable, effective asset for its community.

So, how do food banks work? What are core functions and the variations –on-the-theme that have developed in different parts of the world?

The core role of the food bank is to collect food from its community that would otherwise go to waste and make it available to people who are hungry. This should not suggest the food bank is distributing waste – or garbage – to hungry people. Quite the contrary – food banks (at least reputable, effective food banks) are distributing food to their clients that is every bit as good as that which those who have the ability to do so are buying from the shelves of the local grocery store. The reasons this product is considered “waste” is because it has expired its commercial value by no longer being able to move successfully to the point of sale in the retail market due to short shelf life, labeling error, discontinued

brand, surplus inventory, minor recipe variation, damaged packaging, etc. None of these reasons for donation is a cause of damage to the product or its usability by people. If such a threat exists for any particular product, the food bank will either decline the donation or dispose of the product rather than distribute it.

So the core function is the acquisition of donated food for distribution to people who need it. The distribution process can be accomplished in several ways. Most food banks distribute through a network of community organizations that have some sort of feeding program. These would include soup kitchens, homeless shelters, domestic abuse shelters, pantries or community cupboards, child care centers, senior care centers, schools, after school programs, drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, orphanages, etc. Some food banks distribute most of their food through direct service programs, wherein they take the food in bulk to a particular community and facilitate the distribution to residents of that community, or wherein they allow recipients to come to the food bank to receive a food parcel. Finally, some food banks do both – they distribute through community agencies and they do direct distribution.

The resources provided by the food bank to the various community agencies it may serve should not be underestimated. While many agencies may have established very positive relationships with food donors in their communities, they typically are not of a scale to receive large donations from many sources. So the products they are getting, while valuable, are limited relative to their need. The agencies then are forced to purchase significant quantities of product, and typically do so at retail – or close to retail – cost. All of this requires a significant investment of funds and staff/volunteer time to acquire the products it needs. The food bank, by definition, has the capacity to acquire and handle very large scale donations (multiple truckloads from individual donors) and the ability to purchase on a large scale, thereby allowing the community agencies to reinvest their funds and their staff/volunteer time into the core mission of their programs while at the same time having access to

larger quantities and a wider variety of food products from the food bank at lower cost.

Do food banks offer other services to their community beyond their core function? Yes! Depending on the community / country, food banks offer a wide range of ancillary programs to deliver service to their client base. Because of the significant posture that the food bank develops in the community, it is in the position to help fill gaps that identified in service to the community. It is not unusual for a food bank to launch a service in response to a particular need and then spin that service off into a new NGO that can provide greater focus and resource development for the need being addressed.

Some examples of ancillary services include:

- Skills Training – Food banks may operate training programs in collaboration with colleges and or government to prepare low-income adults for gainful employment, thereby moving them from the position of need to the position of self-sustainability. Such programs may involve official certificates or diplomas, and usually include life skills training as well (budgeting, managing finances, work ethics, etc.). Finally, such programs usually also include some degree of case management by which the food bank assists its graduates in obtaining employment and follows the graduates for a year or two to support them and monitor their success at staying self-sufficient.
- Clothing Distribution – This is rather self explanatory. Some food banks operate clothing banks as well. Clothing is solicited in much the same way as food and grocery products, and donors make it available for many of the same reasons as food companies donate food (minor flaws, seasonal clothing, surplus inventory, etc.)
- Disaster Response – Food banks are a natural partner with government and the private sector in cases of disaster response. Food bank networks have warehouses scattered across the country, food banks have trucks and existing paid and volunteer staff to facilitate distribution, and they typically have a network of distribution sites (their member agencies). Most importantly, they have a day-to-day understanding of the needs of their community and a network of regular communications with the entities most likely to be playing an official role in the response effort – within the government, the private sector, and among their sister NGOs. In many cases, even the food banks have not promoted themselves as viable and interested responders, they are called upon by government and the community

to respond for many of the reasons listed above. It is advisable for national food bank networks to proactively seek out the appropriate government, private sector, and voluntary sector thought leaders in disaster management and participate in the development of local and national response plans so that when the disaster strikes the food bank(s) role is already defined and all parties are prepared to collaborate appropriately. It is important to understand that the resources of a food bank can become quickly overburdened during a major disaster if it has not been proactive in establishing relationships with the governmental and NGO agencies mentioned above. During a catastrophe is not the time to suddenly become a “player” in the disaster field. Emergency Management is a separate and equally important role for food banks to consider, especially if the area you serve is prone to recurring or frequent natural or man made disasters.

- During or After School Child Service Programs – Many food banks place a priority on services to children, and in order to promote such services they engage in campaigns to bring focus to this issue. Such programs may include providing food and cooking services to deliver school breakfast and/or lunch programs, adding a meal component to existing independent after-school facilities such as Boys and Girls Clubs, Church/Mosque/Synagogue based after-school tutoring or social programs, or programs whereby children are provided simple-to-prepare and eat foods to take home over the weekend when they won't have access to the school feeding programs.
- Public Services Programs Referral – Some food banks operate programs whereby they provide training and/or actual screening and application for clients who may be eligible for, but not enrolled in, government and/or private services programs targeted to the low-income community.

Where does the food bank's product come from? It comes from many sources.

- Food Industry – There are multiple motivations for the food industry to donate, depending on the country and the legal / regulatory environment in which it operates. (Certain legal incentives will be addressed later in the section on Public Policy.)

Regardless of those legal and regulatory incentives, however, grocery products companies make donation decisions based on two internal factors: philanthropy and good business decisions. Companies generally want to be known as doing the right thing in the

communities that comprise their market. They recognize the long-term benefit to their business operations of being known as good corporate citizens. They also know that their employees are happier when they know that their employer is supporting their community. For these reasons, companies donate product purely out of good will.

There are also many short-term business factors that motivate companies to donate. It costs money to throw product away. There are costs of transport to the landfill, costs to actually deposit the product in the landfill, and, depending on certain circumstances, costs of destroying the product before sending it to the landfill in order to ensure that it is not diverted. Food banks offer a disposal alternative that saves the companies money, ensures that the product will be put to good use, and potentially provides a tax benefit as well.

The products that they donate are mislabeled, close to expiration, have a slight recipe variation, are seasonal in nature, are discontinued items, are failed test products, etc. Farmers and Fisheries may donate products that are surplus or are not even harvested due to market conditions. The donations come from all segments of the industry:

- Manufacturers
- Wholesalers and Brokers
- Retailers
- Food Service Companies
- Restaurants and Caterers
- Farmers and Fisheries
- The Public at Large
- Food Drives are the most common way for the public to donate food. Corporations, Churches/Mosques/Synagogues, Fraternal Organizations, Youth Clubs, Schools/Universities, etc. will conduct a variety of types of food drives wherein the public is encouraged to bring certain non-perishable food products to central collection points. The food banks and/or their member agencies pickup, sort, and inspect the products then distribute them to their clients.

- Cash Contributions are also common from the public. Individuals will contribute funds specifically for the purpose of buying needed food items.
- Government
  - National / Federal Governments may donate food commodities that they purchase from various industries to support market pricing. They also may provide funds to purchase certain staple food items needed by the food banks and their agencies.
  - Provincial / State Governments may donate funds to purchase needed items.
  - County / Local Governments may donate funds to purchase needed items.

Where does the food bank's funding come from? It also comes from various sources.

- Corporate Grants – For many of the same reasons that the food companies donate grocery products, Corporations donate funds to food banks. These donations are usually in response to a formal proposal process, and are typically restricted to certain uses as defined in the proposal submitted by the food bank.
- Foundation Grants – These grants are also usually based on a proposal submitted by the food bank to the Foundation. They tend to be more targeted to specific projects and programs, rather than to general overhead costs.
- The Public at Large – The Public supports the food bank through contributions solicited via a number of mechanisms. Food bank websites, newsletters, and special events typically request donations from individuals. Many food banks operate direct marketing campaigns through which they solicit public support via mailings, email campaigns, and public service announcements on radio, television, and in newspaper advertisements.
- Government – Governments at all levels typically operate programs through various agencies or ministries whereby NGOs can access funding for specific programs and projects.
- “Earned” Income – Some food banks charge their member agencies a membership fee and/or a handling fee for products received from the food bank. If they do direct service to clients, they may also assess a very small handling fee for the product they provide to the clients.

Finally, where does the food bank get its labor? Again, the sources are varied.

- **Paid Staff** – Most food banks, while heavily dependent on volunteers to do their work, maintain at least a core staff of professionals to manage the various areas of operations. Funds to hire and sustain a paid staff come from the various sources identified above. As valuable as volunteers are, it is the rare occasion that a food bank has the availability of sufficient and consistent volunteers to assume the ongoing responsibilities related to managing a business of the scale and scope represented by food banking. It is therefore usually necessary to hire a general director, and several key management positions to ensure effective and consistent operations and administration. Issues such as donor relations (food and funds), community and public relations, client services, food safety management, inventory controls, and fiscal management require concerted and dedicated oversight.
- **Volunteers** – This category is the lifeblood of any successful food bank. The day-to-day operations of the various functional areas of the food bank demand a large contingent of workers to keep the flow of products and the delivery of services in motion. The total labor requirement of even a small food bank is typically beyond the financial capacity of the food bank, thus making an effective volunteer recruitment, training, and management effort a key component of the food bank's operations.
- **Interns** – This is a small but valuable resource for food banks. Students pursuing their degrees in professional areas of study and apprentices in certain employment situations often are required to undergo an internship in their field before completion of their program. These may be 3 month, 6 month, or one year internships. Food banks can often benefit significantly from the work of these young, creative minds in addressing program development, research, or operational enhancement projects.
- **Military Personnel** – Another specialized but potentially valuable pool of people can come from the various branches of the military. Often commanders and leaders want their personnel to be involved with local or regional community interests. Food banks can be the recipients of this valuable labor once the commanders are convinced that the food bank serves a valuable community need. It should also be mentioned that establishing a strong working relationship with the military during calm times can be of extreme value during times of disaster. When special demands are made on the food bank to assist with the response effort, that relationship may yield access to resources under the military's control.



# ASSESSING THE POTENTIAL FOR ESTABLISHING A FOOD BANK

Conducting an effective assessment of the need for and potential for establishing a food bank requires serious research and understanding of the environment. Of course, the very basic need is a clear and factual understanding of the extent of hunger and its causes. While many who work in the area of human services in the community may have a “gut sense” about the causes and extent of hunger in the community, a credible effort to address the problem will depend on facts and an empirical articulation of the problem. Anecdotal articulation is valuable in supporting the argument, but will not make the case to those from whom you are seeking concrete resources.

So the first step is a clear definition of the need. A collection and review of government studies, academic studies, and service reports from existing credible NGOs provide a valuable resource base for this research. It is necessary to identify who is hungry, why they are hungry, where they are located, and how many they are.

It is also necessary to identify the extent of the current policy and service environment.

What human services programs – focused on hunger – are being delivered by the:

- Government – at all levels
  - School Feeding Programs
  - Cash Grants for Food Purchase
  - Direct Food Distribution
  - Disaster Mitigation Programs
  - Other
- Voluntary Sector
  - Soup Kitchens
  - Food Parcel Distribution
  - School-Based Feeding Programs

What public policies exist to facilitate and encourage food service programs:

- Tax Deductions for Donors
  - Corporate Food Donors
  - Corporate Funds Donors
  - Individual Funds Donors
- Liability Protection
  - For Food Donors
  - For Volunteers and Board Members

It is also necessary to conduct an assessment of available resources to sustain the food bank. This would include looking at several different categories of resource needs:

- Food and Grocery Products – It is not enough to assume that “If You Build It They Will Come”. Understanding the types of food and grocery products available for donation from the various segments of the food industry is critical to thinking through the development of a plan to access those products and facilitate their distribution. The research should include an identification of the major companies in each segment of the industry (see “Where Does The Food Bank’s Food Come From” above), and some dialog with those companies about what products they are disposing of and why. It should also include discussion with those companies regarding their willingness to donate if a credible, transparent infrastructure is put in place. Likewise, it is essential that the food bank have a high level of empathy for the clients that it is ultimately serving with regard to the types of food solicited. For example, bulk frozen meats are of little use to a homeless person who has no means of cooking. Additionally large cans or tins of products have little value without the right tools to open the containers. The food required must match the needs of the clients and the agencies you serve. While many agencies can be “creative” (soup kitchens, shelters, or sites that have the luxury of resources to experiment) your goal should be to make as much food as useful as possible with the greatest ease.
- Funding – Although the food bank may generate some income from fees, the majority of the food bank’s funding will be in the form of donations. It is therefore necessary to investigate the potential for corporate and foundation grants, support from the government (at all levels), and support from the public. Researching the funding success of other human services organizations should be part of this effort.
- Volunteers – The food bank will have a need for a significant number of volunteers. There will be routine day-to-day tasks such

as administrative, clerical, cleaning, warehouse work, driving, and agency management. There will also be special activities that occur only occasionally such as staffing special events, handling special donations, responding to last minute service needs, etc. And there will be critical high-level needs such as Board of Directors, advisory committees, etc.

- Legal Services – Although most of the need in this area will occur during the setup process, there will be an ongoing need for legal counsel as the food bank evolves. While the overall list of issues requiring legal counsel will vary by country, there will always be a need for some level of legal support. In order to assure the food bank’s ability to deliver its services with confidence and with the promise of continued sustainability, the management of the food bank must be constantly attentive to potential legal exposure and aware of new and/or changing legislation and regulations that could affect the food bank’s operations..
- Accounting Services – Transparency is the food bank’s key to success. It is absolutely critical that the food bank be able to clearly and immediately demonstrate its use of funds donated by the community. It is, after all, a community asset. The Board and management are in place to function as stewards of the community’s investment in that asset. Although the food bank may have paid or volunteer staff in place to manage the day-to-day accounting functions, it is advisable that the food bank engage the services of an independent certified public accountant to conduct a formal annual audit of the food bank’s financial statements. It is also advisable that the food bank have adequate capacity to generate regular financial statements for management purposes and for reporting to funders.
- Architectural / Building Management Services – If the food bank plans to occupy a currently vacant structure or design and build new, it is advisable that it seek the expertise and talents of an architect. A working knowledge of local building codes, regulations, and food storage requirements is essential. These technical skills can be viewed as an investment rather than expense if they are not provided voluntarily. It can save your organization considerable resources to do things right the first time rather than to retrofit or conform to a building code after occupancy has already been established. This position can also help you with insider knowledge of resources you may need at some not too distant point in the future of your warehouse and operations.
- Logistics Support – The very nature of food banking demands ongoing attention to the challenges of logistics management. Depending on the “service area” of the food bank, these issues can vary significantly. Decisions regarding the processes for distribution of product will need

to be based on the identification of such logistics questions: Are the recipients (agencies or individuals) capable of picking up at the food bank? Is the majority of the service area rural, thereby requiring that the food bank deliver to the agencies or to a central location for clusters of agencies? What types and quantity of vehicles does the food bank have? What types and size of facility(ies) does the food bank have? What kind of staffing implications do the answers to these questions suggest? Is it more efficient and effective to hire contracted drivers and vehicles to accomplish the food bank's distribution goals? Is rail service an option? For heavily populated urban areas are there restrictions as to the size and weights of delivery vehicles? Are special licenses or permits required? The food bank may also need to answer more finite questions such as: Is there a reliable source for cartons or bags the clients can carry their food in safely? What transportation needs are there to help the clients get the food back to their home? How much food should a person/family actually receive?

- Communications & Media Relations – For the food bank to continue to grow and expand both its capacity and its service, it needs to remain in the public eye. A strong relationship with the media is critical to ongoing promotion of the food banks work. A Media Plan needs to be crafted once the decision to move forward in establishing the food bank has been made. The Media Plan should be utilized to keep the public informed of progress, ideas, and communications that could affect the food bank. This is also a low or no-cost way to appeal for monetary donations, volunteers, and some of the core resources mentioned above. If possible a reputable and well regarded member of the local media could be an asset to the planning and oversight of the food bank for short and long term goals. Finally, a Crisis Communications Plan should be developed so that the food bank is prepared to respond in the event of bad publicity.
- Feeding Programs / Human Services Programs – The majority of food banks rely on a network of member agencies to deliver feeding services within their communities. It is necessary, then, that the food bank know who the service providers are that are already operating in the community. Not only will the food bank ultimately want to establish a relationship with these organizations to provide them with product, but it will also need to know where there are gaps in service so that it can either help create new agencies or develop its own logistics plan for getting product into those areas.

# DESIGNING THE FOOD BANK'S STRUCTURE AND OPERATIONAL PLAN

Having conducted the research to define the need, identify the potential resource base, and determine that a food bank is a viable option for the community, it is then necessary to build a coalition that can take on the responsibility of thinking through the issues related to establishing an effective food bank structure and building a business plan to launch the operation. This coalition needs to be inclusive and needs to have strong representation of all three sectors of society.

There is no question that certain individuals and organizations will be concerned about the potential for the food bank to interrupt or co-opt their existing relationships with various resource providers (food, funds, media, and volunteers). This is natural and normal. In reality, it is likely that the creation of a food bank will interrupt or co-opt certain existing relationships. What is important to understand, however, is that the creation of the food bank will, in fact, provide access to broader quantity and variety of product to those agencies whose relationships have been affected. The coalition should expect these concerns to arise, and should focus on trying to help those involved to remain objective and focus on the bigger picture, expecting that the resolution of the stated issues will be forthcoming.

With a commitment to focus on a common mission, the group will undertake the process of considering the various administrative, governance, operational, and logistical issues related to setting up and running the food bank. They will also look at the implications for existing service providers, identify areas in need of feeding programs, and develop a process to engage the existing providers and build consensus about the establishment of the food bank.

### Bricks and Mortar

Consideration must be given to the food banks needs regarding size and specifications for the warehouse (dry storage space, refrigeration and freezer space, office space, special activity space), equipment needs, and routine services and supplies needed to maintain food safety, accountability, and security.

# COMMUNITY FOOD BANK DESIGN GUIDELINES

- a. Food Banking Infrastructure Plan:
  - i. warehouse location
  - ii. facility construction / renovation
  - iii. analysis of cold and dry storage needs
  - iv. product processing and warehouse moving equipment
  - v. transportation support services and/or vehicle procurement
  - vi. identification of distribution network (member agency identification, product processing, etc.)
- b. Local Food Distribution Plan (in concert with the national system) for addressing Special Needs target populations within each food bank service area:
  - i. urban poor
  - ii. informal settlement dwellers
  - iii. people living rural areas
  - iv. HIV/AIDS afflicted persons (heavily concentrated in informal settlements & rural areas)
- c. Resource Development Plan:
  - i. Food sourcing: Detailed analysis of food sources
  - ii. Financial Support: identification of funding opportunities from government grants, corporate grants and in-kind services, corporate cause-marketing opportunities, individual giving and community fundraising events.
  - iii. Volunteers: identification of volunteers for operations of the food bank to augment staffing and volunteers to serve in a board-governance capacity for the Sponsoring Organization
- d. Management and Governance Plan:
  - i. Create annual operating budget and capital investments strategy
  - ii. Management and staffing plan

- iii. Board Governance: By-Laws, schedule of Board meetings, Board training, recruitment/membership composition, etc.
- e. Implementation Plan & Timeline
  - i. Procurement of Start-Up Funding Support
    - general operations and program and
    - capital projects (warehouse, equipment, transportation infrastructure)
    - grant proposal development, setting up fundraising/development programs, etc.
  - ii. Warehouse Operations Set-Up: inventory system, food safety, agency monitoring for compliance and product accountability.
  - iii. Operations Support: IT and communications systems, bookkeeping and financial management, personnel management, etc.

Food banks, while being charitable organizations, need to be approached as seriously as any other food storage and distribution business. With that said, it is imperative that local food handling licenses, regulations and standards be adopted by all staff having product contact responsibilities. The management and governance bodies of the food bank must enforce all accepted food safety and security regulations on a daily basis.

Site selection is crucial and access to donors and agencies must drive the process. While it is tempting to accept the least expensive building to house the food bank, often it is a grave mistake to sacrifice short term cash savings for long term goals. The warehouse is the pivotal point that will determine the success or failure of the food bank. Ideally the food bank will be placed strategically and with much fore-thought.

If you are constructing the facility from the ground up, the services of an experienced designer/architect should be sought. Again, pro-bono is often a temptation but it may be wise to spend money on a professional that will be answering to your needs as a customer and

not just be seen as a recipient of generosity. There is no one-size-fits-all layout for food banks. No two are the same nor should they be the same. Each food bank must be reflective of the area, clients, agencies, donors and community they serve.

## **ABOUT THE GLOBAL FOODBANKING NETWORK**

The Global FoodBanking Network is a private, non-profit international organization headquartered in Chicago, Illinois. For additional information, visit [www.foodbanking.org](http://www.foodbanking.org), e-mail, [info@foodbanking.org](mailto:info@foodbanking.org), call (312) 782-4560 or mail us at: The Global FoodBanking Network; 203 North LaSalle Street, Suite 1900; Chicago, Illinois 60601.

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