

## **We're Wasting the Food Waste Movement**

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In the past two years, the issue of food waste has moved from back-alley dumpsters and out-of-sight landfills and squarely into the spotlight. Thanks to high-profile [documentaries](#) and [books](#), bold public [initiatives](#), and even a popular John Oliver spot, an increasing number of Americans are viewing food waste as a major environmental, economic, and social problem.

New York's [City Harvest](#) pioneered the concept of urban food rescue back in 1982. Here at [DC Central Kitchen](#), we've been in the business of transforming wasted food into balanced, healthy meals since 1989. And in 1996, Congress passed the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act, providing critical legal protections to people donating surplus food to hunger-fighting nonprofits. So why is our national discussion about food waste just heating up now?

Part of the answer involves some compelling early research by groups like the Natural Resources Defense Council, which indicated that the U.S. may waste [40% of its food supply](#) each year. For those of us working to fighting waste throughout our food system – from [farm to table](#) – those numbers weren't surprising, but this number, however preliminary, shocked many observers.

We also owe a debt to activists like Tristram Stuart, a researcher from the United Kingdom who built on his academic interests to found [Feedback](#), an NGO that organizes high-profile events like Feeding the 5000, calling attention to “the global food waste scandal” in a visceral, emotionally affecting way.

And finally, this profound waste of precious resources has also attracted the attention of America's entrepreneurial culture. Visit just about any U.S. city and you won't have to wait long before you hear about its next regional food summit and numerous start-ups pledging a new solution to food waste.

These are all encouraging developments, and we welcome the fresh energy and partnership opportunities these new actors are bringing to the food waste issue. However, DC Central Kitchen has been a practitioner and advocate of food waste solutions for a long time, and we believe our experiences can shorten the collective learning curve of this rapidly expanding movement.

We must start by all recognizing that simply redistributing food from one place to another does not mean that its waste has been prevented. We value the Environmental Protection Agency's [insightful food recovery hierarchy](#), which places feeding people near the top with industrial uses and composting toward the bottom. But simply dumping excess food at nonprofits and shelters is problematic for a number of reasons.

First, given the irregular timing and quantities of food donation, nonprofits still face ‘feast or famine’ cycles of donations that do little to improve their clients' food security. During ‘feast’ cycles, recipient agencies are often forced to toss donations themselves, incurring added financial costs and masking the full scope of waste in our food system.

Second, there is also a hierarchy of food quality, and while daily donations of leftover breads and cupcakes have their place, that place is not the center of the plate. A donation of lean protein or fresh vegetables is clearly more meaningful than one of empty starches, but most all donations are simply measured in pounds.

We clearly need new metrics to measure the performance of food waste-fighting organizations in meeting the food security and nutritional needs of hungry Americans. We also need to build more meaningful infrastructure that can support a ‘second economy’ of food waste. While food banks have provided essential services for generations, most are only equipped to move large quantities of shelf-stable canned and dry goods. Handling more sensitive produce and protein items requires significant refrigeration and

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processing capacity, along with the culinary skill and human capital to transform disparate donations into nourishing, appetizing meals.

While we await the broader development of this type of infrastructure, DC Central Kitchen has scaled our unique approach nationally through [The Campus Kitchens Project](#), which uses existing kitchen and storage infrastructure on more than 50 college and high school campuses to put wasted food to better use.

Finally, this new generation of food waste warriors risks making the same intellectual and moral mistake as yesterday's hunger fighters. Free food, no matter where you get it, will never end hunger, because hunger is a symptom of the deeper, more pernicious issue of poverty. For 27 years, DC Central Kitchen has used our food recovery and meal preparation efforts to provide culinary training and employment opportunities for women and men with histories of incarceration, homelessness, addiction, and trauma.

Wasted human potential is a far greater and costly loss than wasted food. We challenge the energetic new actors entering the food waste space to base their models around expanding opportunity for our most vulnerable neighbors, not just moving food from one place to another. Embracing holistic solutions to poverty and sustainability is the only way for this movement to achieve its full promise.

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