

CASE STUDY: BALTIMORE FOOD SOURCER WITH THE MD FOOD BANK

# CITY-BASED FOOD SOURCER ADVANCES FOOD RESCUE IN BALTIMORE



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## BACKGROUND

In 2018, the City of Baltimore set a goal to reduce its food waste by 50 percent by 2030. Baltimore's Office of Sustainability (BOS) and the Maryland Food Bank (MFB) have partnered to pursue this goal by increasing food rescue. With funding from the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), the food bank hired a food sourcer focused on coordinating small-scale food rescue in Baltimore. This food sourcer works to connect potential donors to nonprofit food rescue organizations, thereby helping to feed people (as opposed to feeding landfills and incinerators) and to standardize a process for small-scale food rescue in urban environments.

Successful food rescue operations require intentional coordination, significant staff time, timely communication, and well-managed relationships between donors and recipient organizations. Baltimore’s small-scale food rescue has three key players: donors who have excess food to give away, volunteers who transport the donations, and agencies—typically nonprofits—who receive the donations. Feeding America’s MealConnect app helps to link these three stakeholder groups through a streamlined and automated process.

Much of the MFB food sourcer role is focused on identifying new donors and agencies that can benefit from using MealConnect. Employing a Baltimore-based food sourcer focused solely on small to midsize food donations (no more than 250 pounds) was previously uncharted territory for both the MFB and the BOS, and the organizations’ partnership has challenged both teams to think more critically about the motivations for and barriers to food rescue. In this case study, we outline challenges and lessons learned for local nonprofit rescue organizations, surplus food generators, and volunteers who support food rescue.

## PARTNERSHIP AND SHARED GOALS

Roughly a quarter (23.5 percent) of Baltimore residents are food insecure, while at the same time, copious amounts of food—including food that is suitable for rescue—goes to waste in commercial food industries across the city. In 2018 the MFB distributed more than 10.5 million pounds of donated food in Baltimore, but just 6.6 percent of it was sourced from food donors within the city. MFB and BOS are working together to build a more robust food rescue network, and the food sourcer is a key player in this effort.

To ensure synchronicity with Baltimore’s other initiatives to tackle wasted food, the food sourcer position is embedded into the work of Baltimore’s Food Matters team, which coordinates food waste programming with support from NRDC. To holistically implement its [Food Matters](#) work, BOS works with six city agencies—the Department of Public Works, the city’s local development corporation, city schools, the Health Department, the Department of General Services, and the Baltimore Office of Promotion and the Arts. Cross-agency collaboration has been critical in catalyzing the Food Matters work.

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENGAGING FOOD RESCUE PARTNERS

MFB began coordinating food rescue activity through MealConnect in February 2019, prior to the MFB-BOS partnership and the hiring of a food sourcer. During the first few months of the program, donating organizations expressed fear of liability from food donations due to ongoing misunderstandings of health code regulations regarding donated food. To overcome these concerns among would-be

donors, the food sourcer, the Health Department, and BOS met with potential partners, including colleges/universities and hospitals, to debunk some of the erroneous assumptions that prevented them from donating food and to connect them to key stakeholders, including the Environmental Health Bureau of the Baltimore City Health Department (BCHD). Connecting potential donors to the local health department was critical to dispelling legal concerns associated with food donations. The Environmental Health Bureau chief met with executive staff and food and nutrition leaders across city organizations to share information on the legal protections afforded to donating groups, helping to instill a sense of security regarding food rescue activity. Engaging with local food and safety regulators proved to be an essential food rescue expansion strategy for the city.

While MFB made significant progress in recruiting new, consistent donors and increasing food donation activity on MealConnect, it also experienced challenges. To overcome these challenges, Baltimore was fortunate to have a strong coordination team strategically implementing food rescue expansion with support from city agencies, nonprofits, and large anchor institutions. Key takeaways from this process:

- Ensure that donor concerns are addressed early and frequently throughout the process. If potential donors continue to harbor apprehensions about food rescue, follow-up can prove time-consuming but highly beneficial when attempting to build trust.
- Be prepared for identification and support of new food donors to be resource-intensive in terms of staff time and funds.
- Factor in logistic and infrastructure considerations before implementing food rescue activities. For example:
  - How and where can food donors store their donations so that the pickup process for volunteers is simple and quick? MFB provides donors with pans and bins to store food donations. This ensures that workers and volunteers can easily find them.
  - What are the preferred time slots for donations? Having drivers and other volunteers available for food donations at different times of day can ensure that no donations are discarded due to scheduling conflicts. If a food rescue program employs drivers who transport surpluses, flexible hours can be beneficial. For volunteer-dependent programs, recruiting volunteers for various shifts can help to ensure timely food rescue through intentional coordination.
  - What infrastructure (e.g., vehicles, storage units) is needed to improve food rescue efficiency and meet the needs of an expanded initiative?
- Plan to train organizations on donation standards, including identifying trainers and protocols for trainings.
- Develop a system to connect volunteers (drivers and others) with donors and recipients.

## OUR PROGRESS

Food rescue progress is typically measured by weight and number of meals, though these metrics do not reflect the importance of other actions implemented to achieve food rescue diversion goals. From February 2019 to February 2020, 13,272 pounds of surplus food—equivalent to 11,060 meals—were rescued through this project. Before launching the program, small-scale food rescue at MFB was supported by approximately 30 percent of one full-time MFB employee, along with support from MFB’s food sourcing team and volunteer program. This was not enough to fully engage donors and grow the Baltimore food rescue program to achieve substantial donations from within the city.

Having a staff member dedicated solely to advancing small-scale food rescue led to an increase in the number of organizations donating surpluses, the number of organizations signed up to accept these donations, and the number of volunteers. Currently the program has 15 donors, 33 volunteers, and 5 recipient organizations, reflecting steady progress over the past year.

One of the greatest indications of progress was the rescue of food surpluses across Baltimore City after mandatory restaurant and bar closures were announced in March 2020 in response to COVID-19 concerns. Typically around 1,000 pounds of food are donated each month through the program. But when hundreds of restaurants and bars across the city closed, MealConnect helped to deploy 4,000 pounds of rescued food in just the first two days of closures. Our food sourcer was critical in managing logistics of large and small food donation drop-offs and pickups at catering

companies and food service operations of all sizes, including the Baltimore-Washington Airport. Without this resource in place, providing food for thousands of people impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak would have been much more difficult.

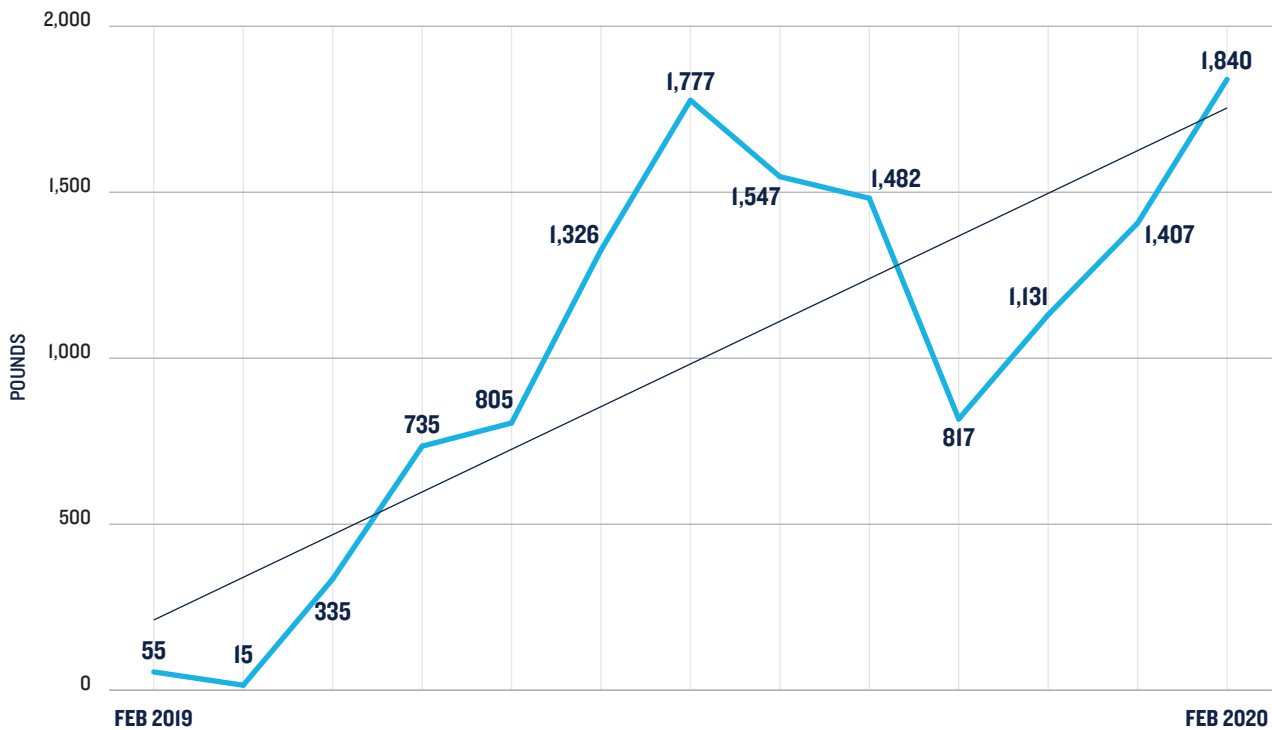
The NRDC-funded food sourcer role has allowed more knowledge, time, and attention to be dedicated to the growth of food rescue. Additional human resources have resulted in increased food donations reaching agencies and programs that, in turn, can effectively reach more Baltimoreans.

## LESSONS LEARNED

**1. Outreach Approaches to Donors:** When recruiting new donors, it became clear that calling and emailing food and nutrition leaders at institutions across the city were not effective ways to get responses. Leveraging existing social networks within the local food industry proved to be a better approach. For example, leveraging BOS to target universities with students interested in food rescue and connecting with donors through food waste-related networking events have been instrumental in gaining buy-in from university and hospital partners.

**2. Ongoing Education for Donors:** Once contact is made with a possible donor, the sourcer plays an important role in educating senior management about food safety and liability concerns, debunking myths associated with food donation, and helping the donor think through the on-the-ground logistics of food rescue. Support from senior management in the food facility is essential for successful, timely food donations by food service managers, as well as front-of-house and back-of-house workers. Educating food

DONATIONS THROUGH MIDDLE MILE FEB 2019 – FEB 2020





service managers and other staff should include providing background information on federal and state Good Samaritan laws, as well as acclimating food workers to the MealConnect app or another food donation tracking application. Routine reminders, emails, and even tips to streamline and clarify the process for the food workers facilitating food rescue can also be helpful.

**3. Sourcing Needed Foods:** Not all types of food donations are equally desirable, and the total amount of food received for donation may exceed the amount that can be used. For instance, the biggest donor in the MFB program is a bakery, which donated 5,673 pounds of food over six months. Bread is frequently donated more often than other types of food, and the program has found that distributing partners struggle with this because of limited storage capacity. It is helpful to work with donors and recipient organizations to ensure that the food being donated is a good match for the needs of the recipients’ food-insecure clients, so that these organizations are not put in the position of having to discard food that they cannot use.

**4. Balancing Resources Among All Parties:** Though a sourcer will spend considerable time focused on food donors, he or she must understand the need to maintain balance among all three stakeholder groups (donors, recipient organizations, and volunteer workers). If the focus is solely on onboarding or providing support for one category, relationships with the other two can begin to deteriorate. For example, if there is an excessive number of donors, then there may be more donations than the number of volunteers can handle, or more donations than the distributing agencies have capacity for. As the program expands, onboarding and support need to be closely coordinated to maintain a well-balanced food rescue operation that runs smoothly.

## THE FOOD SOURCER POSITION

Provided below is a sample budget for a part-time or full-time food sourcer position, as well as a sample job description. In addition to allocating resources for a food sourcer program, local government and nonprofits should factor in any other staff costs and programmatic resources needed to sustain the project.

ITEM	ESTIMATED COSTS
Food sourcer salary (part-time)	\$25,000
Food sourcer salary (full-time)	\$50,000 + benefits
Educational materials and digital outreach to support food rescue	\$1,500
Operating costs	\$1,000
Material costs	\$1,500
<b>Total part-time costs</b>	<b>\$29,000</b>
<b>Total full-time costs</b>	<b>\$54,000 + benefits</b>



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## SAMPLE JOB DESCRIPTION

*Food Sourcing Specialist, Baltimore City*

### POSITION SUMMARY

**Overall purpose of the position:** The Maryland Food Bank is seeking a part-time (20 hours/week) Food Sourcing Specialist for a one-year contract position to support the rollout of Feeding America’s MealConnect app in Baltimore City. The Food Sourcing Specialist will lead the coordination of food rescue activities under the MFB’s Middle Mile Project and the implementation of food rescue and objectives for Baltimore City. The person in this role will serve as a liaison between the food bank, food donors, grassroots nonprofit food rescue organizations, and city agencies to facilitate increased food donation—ensuring that more food feeds people and not landfills. This role also entails supporting communications, outreach, engagement, and strategic planning efforts related to food rescue.

**Work experience:** Minimum of 2 years of experience in a similar position in sales and marketing or a food retail environment.

**Education:** Bachelor’s degree preferred. A combination of relevant work experience and education will be considered.

### ESSENTIAL DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

#### 70% food sourcing:

- Manage the rollout of the Feeding America MealConnect app in Baltimore City to help small food rescue organizations build capacity via technical assistance and support to increase food rescue and donation operations.

- Engage and support potential donors, grassroots organizations, and nonprofits in registering with the MealConnect app.
- Develop and support volunteer recruitment for food rescue activities in Baltimore City via the MealConnect app.
- Create social media and educational content related to food rescue and safe food handling for donations to increase awareness about food.
- In conjunction with the Baltimore City Health Department and the Office of Sustainability, develop leads on potential donors.
- Convert leads into productive relationships with food donors to increase the amount of rescued food from within Baltimore City.

### **30% operational coordination:**

- Provide oversight and training to donors, volunteers, and MFB agencies to ensure that donated food is safely handled.
- Offer training and/or support services on how to use Meal Connect (a web-based application) for volunteers and MFB agency partners.
- Coordinate with donors, volunteers, and MFB agencies in Baltimore City to ensure that food donation data are accurately recorded and reported. Share this information with Office of Sustainability and other relevant stakeholders.
- Attend bimonthly Baltimore Food Waste Reduction Working Group meetings to support relationship-building among members of the food rescue community.
- Attend biweekly internal working group meetings to provide status updates on the project to foster consistent, timely communication.
- Coordinate with the Baltimore City Health Department to educate various people along the food rescue chain—including environmental sanitarians, food/facilities workers, Main Street programs, business improvement districts, merchant associations, the Baltimore Development Corp., and other food waste reduction stakeholders—about the best protocols for food donation and engagement with donors and potential donors. Also provide documentation to environmental sanitarians and others for dissemination to potential donors.

### **Desirable skills:**

- An understanding of food distribution as it relates to storage, handling, and shipment of perishable, frozen and dry goods.
- Strong customer service, sales, and/or marketing skills.
- Excellent verbal communication skills and professional appearance.
- Ability to work independently and as a part of a highly collaborative team.
- Microsoft Office proficiency.
- Strong organizational skills.
- Ability to multitask in a high-demand environment.
- Attention to detail.
- A valid driver's license.

### **ESSENTIAL WORKING CONDITIONS**

**Work environment:** The employee will carry out the job duties in/around a warehouse environment which will have fluctuating noise and temperature conditions.

**Physical demands:** While performing the duties of this job, the employee is regularly required to talk and hear. The employee regularly is required to stand; walk; sit; use hand to manipulate objects, tools, or controls; and reach with hands and arms. The employee may need to lift and/or move up to 50 pounds. Specific vision abilities required by this job include close vision, peripheral vision, and the ability to adjust focus. **The physical demands described here are representative of those that must be met by an employee to successfully perform the essential functions of this job.**