

New York City Seeks to Create a 'Craigslist for Food Pantries'

A proposed city-managed website would create a place for supermarkets and grocery stores to donate leftover food to nonprofits that feed the hungry.



BY BRIDGET SHIRVELL

Food Justice, Food Waste, Technology

Posted on: April 25, 2017

7 Comments



From [ugly greens](#) to zero-waste cocktails, [dumpster dinners](#), and [food-scrap soup](#), consumers, nonprofits, and businesses all over the country have spent the last several years seeking ways to repurpose food that might otherwise go to waste. Now, New York City officials have proposed a new solution to reducing food waste by encouraging food donations to feed the hungry.

“Here in New York City, 30 percent of the waste in our landfills is food waste and 16 percent of households go to bed hungry every night,” said New York City Councilmember Rafael Espinal, Jr., who represents the 37th District in Brooklyn.

To address that, Espinal recently introduced a bill to amend the administrative code of the city of New York, in relation to facilitating food. The bill would require the city to create and maintain a website where prospective food donors such as supermarkets and restaurants could post availability of excess or unsellable food. Recipients such as food rescue organizations could then arrange to pick up and transport the food.

“I imagine it to be like a Craigslist for the food pantries,” said Espinal.

In a city of more than 8 million people, [an estimated 1.4 million](#) face food insecurity every year and there are a myriad of efforts to get food to those people, including through food banks, food rescue organizations, private start-ups, and even city-run projects such as [Donate NYC](#).

Espinal introduced his bill to try to bring in even more food that would otherwise be wasted, notably from restaurants and supermarkets that are not currently able to donate.

Get the latest articles in your inbox.

Centralizing a Wide-Ranging Food-Distribution System

Espinal’s district has the highest rate of food insecurity of the city’s five boroughs, according to a [2016 report by the Food Bank for New York City](#). His bill, which is sponsored by Council Member Antonio Reynoso and Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, is the latest in a series of city efforts to reduce waste.

“Many food rescue organizations, particularly smaller ones, are often not aware when and where edible food that would otherwise go to waste is available,” Mark-Viverito said in her 2017 [State of the City Address](#). “Many food establishments discarding this food do not have the time and resources to reach out to these organizations individually to see if they can take the food.”



New York City in April 2015 announced a goal to **achieve zero waste by 2030**; with 30 percent of the city's waste consisting of food, Espinal's bill aims to help reach that goal, in tandem with a number of other city-wide waste-reduction initiatives.

In addition to food-scrap drop-off centers to collect residents' compostable waste set up throughout the city, curbside composting is currently available to 270,000 households, and last summer a law went into effect requiring businesses generating large quantities of food waste—such as hotels with more than 150 rooms, stadiums, food wholesalers with at least 20,000 square feet of space, and food manufacturers with at least 25,000 square feet of space—to separate out their organic waste for composting, or composting on-site with city approval.

Nonprofits Encourages Food Donations

Those existing programs, however, don't address the other side of New York's food challenge: hunger. And organizations that have long been working to fight hunger in New York have mixed feelings about the proposed program.

"We are encouraged by the introduction of this bill reenergizing conversations about food rescue across the five boroughs," said Samantha Park, communications manager for **City Harvest**, a food-rescue nonprofit that has been tackled the issue for 35 years

This year, City Harvest will collect an estimated 55 million pounds of food that would otherwise go to waste—from farms, grocers, restaurants, and manufacturers—and deliver it to 500 food programs that will feed nearly 1.4 million New Yorkers. But while City Harvest sees Espinal's proposed bill as a way to bring together food rescue partners and emergency food providers, she says it's not necessarily a tool that City Harvest itself would use.

"We are not looking for a new city-run portal at this time, as we have been working closely with the Department of Sanitation's existing portal, **Donate NYC**," Park said.

The Donate NYC app allows those looking to give food to find nearby drop-off centers, but smaller restaurants and supermarkets still find it challenging to participate. Many smaller restaurants and supermarkets don't have a way to transport food to the drop-off locations or the ability to package it properly for donations, and while the city's larger food rescue organizations will schedule food pickups, they often have a minimum food donation requirement. City Harvest, for instance, requires food donors to be able to donate 50 pounds of food in order to schedule a pickup.



Some groups are specifically devoted to getting around those resource and size requirements for smaller companies looking to donate food. **Rescuing Leftover**

Cuisine (RLC), a nonprofit that started in 2009, accepts any amount of food and, through a calendar on its website, and **connects and mobilizes volunteers** who are willing to pick up food from businesses and drop off donations.

Robert Lee, RLC's CEO, is a big fan of Espinal's bill. "I think it's amazing. The government needs to get more involved and I think it'd be very beneficial," Lee said. He noted that the biggest challenge RLC faces is people thinking food donations are illegal, and he believes having the New York City government behind a website would reduce that misconception and encourage more donations.

"The technology would allow for more food donations and we'd hoped to work with the city to source pickups," Lee said.

On the national front, national anti-hunger group Feeding America today launched **MealConnect**, a project that aims to cover similar ground as Espinal's bill. The web-based project allows companies of all types and sizes to donate even infrequent, small amounts of food to Feeding America, who then distributes it to its partners.

Bill's Future Uncertain

A budget to create and maintain the website hasn't been introduced yet, but Espinal said he believes it would be at low cost to the city and would help offset the costs of subsidizing nonprofits that feed the hungry.

Representatives from both RLC and City Harvest plan to attend an April 26 hearing on the bill to submit testimony and learn more about the legislation.

"We want to ensure that anything new that may come out of the bill leverages existing systems, processes, and investments, as well as allows for greater efficiency and reductions in logistical costs for food rescue organizations," said Park. "We want to ensure that those donating and receiving rescued food through a city-run portal or generally, understand what kinds and amounts food can be rescued and how that food needs to be stored to ensure food safety."

Espinal expects the final language for the bill to be drafted by summer, after which the committee could send the bill to the full council.

Espinal is optimistic about how an accessible platform could move more food to those who need it. "Streamlining the process will allow smaller and more obscure businesses to play a part in diverting food from our landfills into local pantries that need it most," he said.

