

How to Start a Community Fridge and Help Your Neighbors in Need

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How to Start a Community Fridge and Help Your Neighbors in Need

They popped up seemingly overnight: Fridges full of free food in neighborhoods around the country. The fridge is placed in an easily accessible place, where it's plugged into a host outlet. People can come and take food or drop it off. If there isn't a fridge in your area, but a need exists, take some time to learn the permit requirements in your city or state. You're also going to need a fridge and a place to plug it in somewhere. Finally, to succeed, there needs to be a strong sense of community behind the fridge.

They popped up seemingly overnight: fridges full of free food in neighborhoods around the country. Just like the [Little Free Library](#) model, where people leave and take books, people come and take fresh produce or drop off extra food that will go uneaten in their homes. Known as community, shared, or free fridges, these charitable resources have been around for years, but they really caught on during [the pandemic](#).



Credit: Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images

"I think one of the silver linings of the pandemic is that people's perception of risk and aid changed," said Ernst Bertone Oehninger, co-founder of [Freedge](#), which founded its first community fridge in 2013. "Before the pandemic, the biggest obstacles to free fridges were liability and perception, but COVID helped people see that anyone can be in need and it helped make the fear of liability go away. We created a sense of community because we needed to." Yet even as vaccines roll out and we get back to our routines, there's still a need for these fridges. Here's what you need to know about starting one in your neighborhood.

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How Do They Work?

Think of the community fridge as a community garden or that Little Free Library down the street, except in the form of a refrigerator. It's placed in an easily accessible place, where it's plugged into a host outlet, typically outside a business that's permitted the use of its outlet and electricity. People can come and take food or drop it off. There are several community fridge networks including, [Community Fridge Network](#), [Free99fridge](#), and more. Some of these networks, like Oehninger's Freedged, maintain not only a database of where fridges are but also provide resources for people looking to start their own; they might even offer funding. Some individuals have also started them on their own.

Each community fridge operates a little differently. For instance, some have certain days where tables of non-perishable food are set up near the fridge. Others partner with restaurants and supermarkets to get food that would otherwise go to waste. In Atlanta, where the Free99Fridge network dedicates each fridge to a victim of police brutality in support of the Black Lives Matter, resident Leah Abucaya routinely donates fresh greens from her hydroponic garden system. "I noticed a lot of pre-made lunches, canned food, and fruits, as well as toiletry kits and feminine hygiene kits in the fridges," said Abucaya. "I realized I had an overabundance of veggies and greens at home from my [Gardyn](#) so instead of throwing out produce when they start to get too mature, I decided to donate the greens."

How Can You Start a Community Fridge?

The first step is to do some research. You'll want to see if there's already a fridge in your area. "If you have a skill set that would be beneficial I would reach out to your local fridge and let them know," said Abucaya, who did just that with the Free99Fridge network.

If there isn't a fridge in your area, but a need exists, take some time to learn the permit requirements in your city or state and what types of food can be shared. You can find resources for that on Freedged. You're also going to need a fridge and a place to plug it in somewhere. "We spent about four weeks going to different businesses giving them our pitch," said Sarah Ribeiro, who started the [Allston and Brighton Community Fridges](#) in Boston with a group of her neighbors. Ribeiro and her neighbors were willing to cover the cost of supplying power to a fridge, usually about \$30 per month, although the businesses hosting the fridges ended up covering the cost.

After getting the location and the fridge, there are logistics to think through. "Fridges work well when they have a strong community behind them," Oehninger said, adding that sometimes he and his partners would start a fridge and then leave a community, and the fridge would flounder. To work the fridge needs community support and a team of people responsible for it. "Be clear about your intentions from the get-go," said Ribeiro. "We're not a charity; we're not a photo opp; we are doing this in response to a failing in our community, and being outright about that helps people understand the mission." She adds, "Covid 19 shed light on a lot of inequalities. Food apartheid isn't going away as vaccines rollout, we'll be available as long as there is a need for food, and that's a long road ahead of us."

The Allston and Brighton Community Fridges include a volunteer network that sends members to check on the fridges at least three times a day, ensuring the temperature is right, that anything homemade is appropriately labeled, that any spills are cleaned up, and to check for any spoilage.

How Else Can You Help?

If you don't have the resources or the time to start a fridge in your community, there are still ways you can get involved. "The easiest way is to leave toiletry kits or food, whether it's canned, or pre-made lunches. It's a simple and easy way to help your community," Abucaya. "Donating is also very helpful for the people running the fridges who make sure they're cleaned, organized, stocked, and not expired."

Oehninger is quick to point out that he sees the fridges as one part of a more comprehensive solution to food waste and food insecurity. He'd like to see them connected to other community actions, be it shared kitchens, gardens and food forests or even other mutual aid initiatives such as mutual aid medics. "We see the fridge as a patch, as a band-aid the big focus is on creating community," said Oehninger.

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