

Surplus as a Solution to Scarcity: Building a Healthier Food System

By: Nourhan Ibrahim*, Victoria Wilson*, Evan Ehlers*

*Director of Development, Sharing Excess

*Operations Director and Co-Founder, Sharing Excess

*Founder and Executive Director, Sharing Excess

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Abstract

Philadelphia-based nonprofit Sharing Excess (SE) addresses the dual challenge of food waste and food insecurity in an innovative and sustainable way. Partnering with over 200 food businesses nationwide, they've rescued and distributed 26 million pounds of surplus food to nourish over 1 million people to date. By focusing on fresh produce, they've enriched food bank offerings while diverting over 87 million pounds of CO2 emissions. Beyond this, SE's approach integrates with businesses, creating cost-efficient models while engaging volunteers and community partners. This food rescue model offers an innovative solution to food insecurity, promoting greater health equity in underserved communities.

Summary

Sharing Excess (SE) is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit that uses surplus food as a solution to scarcity. While over 40 million people in the U.S. face food insecurity, nearly 40% of the nation's food supply is going to waste. Their mission is to solve the logistical barrier between excess and scarcity by partnering with retailers, wholesalers, and farmers to deliver surplus food to a network of non-profit organizations that alleviate local food insecurity. They have partnered with over 200 food businesses to deliver 26 million pounds of fresh food to 300+ organizations across 66 zip codes in Philadelphia—feeding more than 1 million people to date. SE has distributed food in 18 states and now maintains daily food rescue operations in 4 states across the Northeast. Scaling these kinds of food rescue initiatives can play a vital role in bridging the gap between surplus food and communities in need, promoting increased access to nutritious dietary options, reducing food insecurity, and fostering more equitable distribution of resources that are essential for maintaining population health.



Photo Credit: Branden Eastwood

Surplus produce donations being sorted at Sharing Excess's wholesale food rescue operation at the Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market before being distributed to community members.

The Issue

While 40% of food goes to waste, nearly 40 million Americans are food-insecure.ⁱ While this problem touches the lives of people of all backgrounds, communities facing systemic injustices are at higher risk of food insecurity. Food insecurity is experienced in greater proportion by African American, Latino, and Native American communities due to several complex factors—primary among them being structural racism and geographic discrimination. 20% of Black individuals lived in food-insecure households in 2021, and Black individuals are three times more likely to face food insecurity than white individuals.ⁱⁱ Discriminatory practices and policies have led to systemic injustice and lack of access in predominantly BIPOC communities.ⁱⁱⁱ Factors like having fewer savings or access to owning property increase someone's likelihood of experiencing food insecurity. Black and Latinx households are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity, with food insecurity rates in 2021 triple and double the rate of white households, respectively.^{iv}

Food insecurity significantly impacts health equity, leading to increased rates of chronic illnesses, malnutrition, and other health issues. Food insecure individuals also tend to show a higher healthcare utilization rate and higher costs of care.^v For families who are already often facing financial challenges, this traps them in a cycle of struggling to afford healthcare and

nutritious food, worsening both issues. When families have increased access to nutritious, affordable food, they are able to minimize their healthcare costs.

An equitable food system is one that creates a new paradigm in which all — including those most vulnerable and those living in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color — can fully participate, prosper, and benefit. To achieve a food-secure America, it is paramount that public and private entities work in tandem to address the root causes of systemic inequities that directly affect access to nutritious food. While the solution to these issues is multifaceted, SE's model of food rescue has proven to be an effective and innovative means to sustainably use surplus as a solution to scarcity.

An Innovative Approach to Food Rescue

Sharing Excess is particularly focused on serving marginalized and excluded communities, including racial and ethnic minorities, who historically face systemic barriers to accessing food. By working with these communities and tailoring their efforts to meet their specific needs, they aim to promote greater food security for all. In addition to strengthening communities and focusing on capacity building, SE's model takes a unique and innovative approach by addressing two problems simultaneously: food waste *and* food insecurity. This model is distinct because rather than purchase food, the organization rescues it, which allows it to make a cost-effective impact. By using surplus as a solution to scarcity, SE is able to bridge the gap between underutilized resources and urgent needs. Over 85% of the food they distribute is fresh produce, so they are also able to supplement what is often an oversaturation of canned goods and nonperishable items in hunger relief organizations, providing people with fresh, nutritious food. As an organization that is reactive to the food ecosystem and an array of food business partners, Sharing Excess is able to provide a diverse array of food to its community partners each week.

The organization aims to alleviate health disparities by increasing access to surplus resources. At Sharing Excess, they believe the best way to feed a community is to empower a community to feed itself. Throughout the past five years, their team members have maintained hundreds of strong partnerships with community-based organizations, food banks, pantries, local elected officials, and even block captains. As a core distribution strategy, SE works directly with these community leaders to provide them with the resources, partnerships, and food supply they need to serve their network of neighbors and community members who know and trust them. Sharing Excess collaborates with organizations that are deeply embedded in the Philadelphia community, enabling them to reach a wide network of individuals who can utilize their services for free, fresh food options. The team is also sensitive to different cultural and dietary needs when distributing food and centers the needs of the communities we serve to optimize the utility of our distributions; for example, distributing Kosher products to synagogues and Jewish organizations or creating recipe cards when they have produce that may be unfamiliar to different groups. By regularly communicating with recipient partners to assess ongoing needs and making pop-up food distributions visible to everyone, SE takes an approach that helps to ensure that anybody in need of nutritious food is able to access it regardless of their background.

Impact and Scaling

In addition to the positive impact on communities, rescuing food and creating sustainable partnerships allow SE to focus on ROI and use their funds extremely efficiently, creating a sustainable revenue model from food rescue operations. To do this, they meet food donors where they are and integrate their programs into businesses' daily operations while benefiting their bottom line. Businesses that work with SE are able to access tax incentives and waste cost savings while engaging responsibly and giving back to their communities. The nonprofit is able to generate waste cost savings even on inedible food through their partnerships in composting and repurposing the inedible surplus that they rescue.

The food donation process is often unreliable, labor-intensive, and time-consuming, which can deter businesses from participating. SE is technology-driven and innovates in ways others cannot to create a seamless process for every partner they work with. As a startup entering its sixth year, Sharing Excess has built its entire operations around being agile, flexible, and innovative in changing environments. Their custom-built Food Rescue App helps the organization act as a good disruptor in the food ecosystem - allowing them to streamline operations, track data, and engage partners and volunteers. Their volunteer network has a massive reach to younger audiences, especially college students, and has proven instrumental in getting the youth of the city involved in their own communities.

Sharing the impactful results of SE's food rescue initiatives highlights the power of collaboration and partnership, bringing together key players in the industry to rescue food and feed communities. Sharing Excess's growth is a testament to the power of collaboration, uniting a diverse and robust network of food businesses and community partners to create meaningful change in the fight against food waste and hunger. Partnering with mission-aligned food rescue and waste organizations enables us to focus on the people we serve and streamline processes, implement sustainable practices, and optimize resources to benefit them. Seeking complementary partnerships reduces duplication of efforts within the food rescue sector, ensuring a more impactful approach to bridging the gap between surplus and scarcity.

Sharing Excess's lifetime impact shows a proven model: over 26 million pounds of surplus food rescued (equivalent to over 20 million meals) and \$47.6 million retail value of rescued food. Cumulatively, SE has diverted over 87 million pounds of CO₂ emissions – that is equivalent to taking over 650 cars off the road forever.

This is just the beginning. Research shows that there are large pockets of food surplus and food scarcity that we can and must reach.^{vi} Scaling this model across the region and the nation will address several interconnected issues and advance health equity at the population level. By redistributing nutritious produce to underserved communities, food rescue programs increase access to nutritious options that may otherwise be unavailable. Food rescue efforts also provide a sustainable source of produce for community organizations, connecting families to a consistent supply of free food to supplement their existing food access. Involving local communities directly in the work through community engagement initiatives also allows for tailored

distributions that meet specific needs and preferences, creating equitable solutions to food insecurity in the long term.

ⁱ “Hunger and Food Insecurity.” Feeding America. Accessed August 1, 2023.

<https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/food-insecurity>.

ⁱⁱ “Hunger & Poverty in America.” Food Research & Action Center, January 25, 2023.

<https://frac.org/hunger-poverty-america>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} USDA releases annual Food Insecurity Report, highlighting ... - naco. Accessed August 13, 2023.

<https://www.naco.org/blog/usda-releases-annual-food-insecurity-report-highlighting-importance-federal-nutrition-programs>.

^v Gundersen, Craig, and James Ziliak. “Food Insecurity and Health Outcomes among Multigenerational Households (805.11).” *The FASEB Journal* 28, no. S1 (2014). https://doi.org/10.1096/fasebj.28.1_supplement.805.11.

^{vi} EPA. Accessed August 13, 2023. <https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-management-food/excess-food-opportunities-map>.