

# A Public–Private Partnership to Mitigate Food Insecurity and Food Waste in Orange County, California

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Food insecurity is a global issue that arises owing to systemic socioeconomic inequities and environmental constraints. To highlight the existence and the extent of food insecurity and food waste, the Orange County Health Department in Orange County, California, created a coalition called “Waste Not Orange County.” Orange County is the sixth most populous county in California and has the highest median income, yet 11.4% of those residing in Orange County are food insecure, and 24.0% live in poverty. The overall vision of the coalition is to mitigate hunger in Orange County by educating the community about food donations, identifying food-insecure individuals, and connecting those individuals to sources of food. We examine the coalition’s impacts between 2014 and 2016. (*Am J Public Health*. 2017;107:105–107. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2016.303450)

**T**he Waste Not Orange County Coalition (WNOC) was established by the Orange County, California, Health Department and the Orange County Food Bank in 2012. WNOC has 1 main objective—to educate businesses about donations of excess food—and 2 secondary objectives—to identify food-insecure individuals and to connect them to food pantries. To fulfill its goal of recovering excess food, the coalition partnered with Food Finders,<sup>1</sup> a nonprofit organization that picks up excess food from hospitals, restaurants, and supermarkets, and distributes it to food pantries.

Food Finders has worked in the community for 30 years and serves as the main food recovery organization for WNOC. WNOC is made up of restaurants, food banks, county departments (e.g., the health department and social services), Food Finders, 211 Orange County (a nationwide

social service hotline<sup>2</sup>), hospitals, supermarkets, schools, and Orange County United Way, to name a few.

A graduate student who conducted a survey in 1 city in Orange County identified liability concerns as one of the top barriers to donating food among businesses.<sup>3</sup> Building on a preliminary survey conducted with a small number of food businesses in Orange County, the health department administered a telephone survey in 2014 to about 100 food businesses and found that the most commonly perceived barriers to food donations were liability concerns and the false notion that the health department would not allow

food donations. These findings, paired with feedback from about 30 stakeholders in the coalition, provided the basis for WNOC’s educational outreach.

## ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH INSPECTOR OUTREACH

Substantial outreach efforts are needed to educate the business community about opportunities to donate excess food and inform them of local resources. Orange County employs about 50 environmental health specialists who conduct food safety inspections and grade 15 000 food facilities throughout Orange County 2 to 3 times a year; this makes the county health department’s Environmental Health Division<sup>4</sup> a crucial ally in executing a food recovery initiative.

One county supervisor attended a coalition meeting and recognized the potential influence these inspectors can have on the food industry with regard to liability education on food donations. As a result, in May 2016, the Orange County Board of Supervisors

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directed the environmental health inspectors to distribute a flyer promoting food donations countywide.<sup>5</sup>

These inspectors are the first point of contact for promoting food donations and educating the business community to donate food without fear of liability. In addition to liability information, inspectors can explain the benefits of donating excess edible food and debunk the myth that expiration dates are indicators of safety and cannot be donated (with the exception of infant formula<sup>6</sup>). Without the support from the Orange County Environmental Health Division, WNOC would have been met with limited credibility. This health inspection protocol has been a simple solution for educating businesses about donating food, ensuring the sustainability of WNOC's outreach.

### APPEALING TO THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

In addition to health inspectors, a group of leaders in the food industry willing to help identify opportunities to educate the public about food recovery is necessary to build credibility among businesses. To ensure business participation, a subcommittee of volunteers was created to bridge the education gap between the health department and food-producing facilities regarding food donations and to market the idea of WNOC to the business community.

One of the subcommittee's most notable ideas involved incentivizing food donations by awarding window seals to participating businesses. These window seals are followed up with a photograph in front of the facility, which is shared

in WNOC's social media as a means to encourage other businesses to follow suit.

### FOOD INSECURITY SCREENING IN MEDICAL OFFICES

WNOC advocates food insecurity screening in primary care settings as well as food donations. One in 8 people living in Orange County is at risk for food insecurity, yet screening individuals at risk for food insecurity is seldom standard medical practice. The Children's Hospital of Orange County (CHOC) and Orange County's Family Resource Centers (FRCs), a subdivision of the Orange County Social Services Agency, have worked with WNOC to incorporate a food insecurity screening tool<sup>7</sup> into their patient intake system.

Once people are identified as food insecure, they can use WNOC's interactive Google Map pantry directory<sup>8</sup> to find the pantries nearest their residence. In both CHOC and the FRCs, 35 000 individuals were screened and 1400 (4.0%) were given pantry information as of February 2016. The 4.0% identified represent only a portion of the individuals who have used CHOC and the FRCs in that period and thus do not reflect the entire 11.4% of those who are food insecure countywide.

Furthermore, the referrals did not discriminate between residents of Orange County and out-of-county residents who may have used CHOC and the FRCs. Future evaluation efforts could include a follow-up survey of those referred to pantries by physicians or social workers to determine how frequently they used the pantries and their place of residence.

### OTHER ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- WNOC has recovered 280 tons of food, equating to approximately 466 637 meals between July 2014 and May 2016 (1.2 pounds of food equates to about 1 full meal).
- WNOC accrued 50 donors between July 2014 and February 2016 in the cities of Anaheim and Orange;
- A new supermarket chain donor was added in November 2015 that made an initial donation of 58 000 meals and averages 10 800 meals a month comprising excess edible food.
- Twenty-five pantries have signed on as recipient agencies for recovered food between July 2014 and July 2015. New recipient agencies have been added every quarter owing to WNOC's expansion and Food Finders' reach into greater Orange County.

WNOC has identified some key existing challenges to food donations and steps to address these: in particular, concerns about the integrity of the food once it leaves the donors' control and getting school districts to donate excess food. The Good Samaritan Act of 1996 protects food donors from liability if they donate food to a 501c3 organization "in good faith,"<sup>9</sup> yet donors still express concern over their branding should a recipient fall ill.

To ameliorate this concern, Orange County's Environmental Health Division is developing training for food rescue volunteers titled "FRESH: Food Rescue Enhanced Safe Handling." The hope is that food recovery volunteers can learn basic safe food donation processes and undergo FRESH training, thus alleviating donors' concerns about the integrity of how

the food is being handled postdonation. Resistance to implementing food donations in school districts is not uncommon, and school districts are more likely to donate when given examples of successful food recovery operations in other districts.

One challenge remains: physicians are in a prime position to address food insecurity, yet even when given the tools to address hunger in their offices, concerns over stigma and time constraints for “asking the question” persist.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

WNOC strives to expand its partnership circle beyond the

cities of Anaheim and Orange by adding more cities to its network. It is our hope that additional strategic partnerships will pave the way for increased, consistent food donations to pantries to feed people in need. *AJPH*

## CONTRIBUTORS

B. Garcia-Silva wrote the first draft and subsequent revisions of the report. E. Handler led the overall direction of the coalition and reviewed drafts of the report. J. Wolfe reviewed initial drafts of the report and provided research support.

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