

Should SF Help Feed the Hungry?

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Sister Mary Valerie, center, hands out bags of popcorn at the Fraternite Notre Dame Mary of Nazareth Soup Kitchen in San Francisco on Feb. 9. (Jeff Chiu/AP)

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Last week, two nuns who feed San Francisco's homeless made national headlines when their landlord threatened to raise their rent by almost 60 percent. Their story is another example of the housing crisis facing San Francisco, but it also highlights a necessity many in The City lack: food. According to the San Francisco-Marin Food Bank, one in four residents face hunger. The problem isn't limited to our homeless neighbors; it affects children, seniors and families — people who hide their hunger inside their homes.

But there is a solution that may help San Franciscans and the environment: a municipal food donation program. I am surprised The City, with its mandatory composting and "greasecycle" programs, doesn't have one yet.

Why haven't Mayor Ed Lee and our city officials made feeding San Francisco's hungry part of our waste reduction plans?

National law already encourages food donation. The Good Samaritan Food Act protects businesses from liability when they donate food to a nonprofit, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture called last September for a 50 percent reduction in food waste by 2030. The California Legislature may also expand the tax credit farmers get for donating to food banks. But San Francisco hasn't done enough to help city businesses donate their leftovers.

Thankfully, some local businesses donate to nonprofits like Food Runners or for-profits like Copia despite the lack of support from The City.

Mary Risley, the director of the Food Runners, told me they pick up food from every Whole Foods and Trader Joe's in San Francisco. Big tech companies like Uber, Twitter and Zynga also regularly donate, as well as smaller grocers, restaurants and hospitals.

Jo Licata, the Community Projects Manager at the Hilton Union Square, describes the hotel's food donation program as a "turn-key operation."

"Donating food is something that takes organization and planning," Licata told me. "As you move the food from the event space, to the kitchen, to the site for pickup, you have to be mindful of logistics and handling the food."

But not every business has the Hilton's organizational capacity to collect and distribute food. Businesses may also worry about liability issues or not know which nonprofits to contact.

The lack of infrastructure and education is more than unfortunate; it means good, healthy food isn't finding San Francisco's hungry. City government is in the best position to step in and help.

"Right now San Francisco has a phenomenal infrastructure in place for trash, compost and recyclables, but we don't have this in place for food recovery," said Dana Frasz with [Food Shift](#), an organization that works with governments to reduce food waste. "Obviously, food to feed people is more important than bottles and cans."

Food Shift [recently conducted a study](#) to help Santa Clara County officials better understand what happens with leftover food. The county responded to the study by hiring a Food Rescue Coordinator to create local food waste policies. The idea is to move beyond voluntary food donation, toward a government-backed program with infrastructure and resources.

"There's been a history of reliance on charities and nonprofits to do food recovery," Frasz told me. "Clearly, this model isn't working. We're in a crisis where we're throwing away 40 percent of our food. We need to step up our game."

Yes, The City needs to step up. San Francisco launched a citywide effort to divert grease from sewers and turn it into biofuel for The City's fleets in 2007. San Francisco was the first to initiate curbside collection for organic waste in 2009. Although these programs have been very successful, San Francisco hasn't taken steps to ensure donations to The City's hungry.

Creating the United States' first food donation program should be our next goal. San Francisco officials need to contract with an organization like Food Shift to determine the scope of our food waste and take steps to help our hungry and our planet.

Robyn Purchia is an environmental attorney, environmental blogger and environmental activist who hikes, gardens and tree hugs in her spare time.
