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## Retail Store Donation Program helps feed the hungry

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It used to be that when meat at Springfield supermarkets hit the sell-by date without being sold, it was tossed into the garbage. Same with milk and bread and canned corn. Bananas and lettuce on the verge of browning also wound up in a landfill.

But no more.

Now when food is nearing the end of its shelf life at several local groceries and food businesses, it is donated to the Central Illinois Foodbank, where it is quickly distributed to food pantries, soup kitchens, after-school programs and residential feeding programs in 21 central Illinois counties.

“This is another way, another level, of making sure that food doesn’t go away,” said Pam Molitoris, executive director of the Central Illinois Foodbank. “This has opened the flood gates for us.”

Food bank donations from manufacturers have decreased as the troubled economy has caused them to become more efficient, she said.

The Retail Store Donation Program, which cranked into high gear several months ago, salvages meat, produce, dairy, baked goods and canned and boxed products from a number of local supermarkets and other food sellers. In addition, some restaurants donate unused and safely stored prepared food.

The food bank gets about 100,000 pounds of food each month through the initiative, which is growing. Donor stores are being added and complex corporate policies — wrought with liability protections — are being rewritten.

That was the case at Wal-Mart, which now strives for “zero waste” in its stores nationwide. It was that change in company policy that allows the two Springfield Wal-Mart supercenters and sister store Sam’s Club to donate still-good food to the food bank.

“We looked at sustainability goals and decided we want to get to zero waste,” said Chicago-based Wal-Mart spokeswoman Tara Stewart. “And we looked at what we were dumping in landfills. Those two things bore out this new program.”

She said foods not suitable for human consumption are given to hog farms, zoos, animal shelters and compost sites. “We’ve looked for avenues to take everything,” she said.

Molitoris said Wal-Mart’s participation in the Retail Store Donation Program has encouraged other businesses to come on board.

“Wal-Mart has a memo of understanding with Feeding America to donate to all of our food banks nationwide. They gave us a \$90,000 refrigerated truck last fall with no strings,” she said. “We can use it for all of our needs. That says a lot.”

Feeding America (formerly Second Harvest) is the nation’s largest domestic hunger-relief charity.

Stewart said the Springfield-based food bank received one of more than 35 refrigerated trucks given by her company so far. “Our goal is to make sure every food bank has at least one,” she said.

“We’ve given 90 million pounds of food (nationwide) from Wal-Mart and Sam’s Club since November of 2008. That’s 70 million meals. It makes us the largest food donor to Feeding America and keeps 70 million meals out of landfills.”

### **Food run**

The Retail Store Donation Program wouldn’t work without food bank volunteers — especially those from The Real Estate Group, a local firm, who devote their time to do much of the driving and pickup.

“They’re very dependable,” said food bank warehouse manager Bill Nickell. “Rain, shine, snow, cold, they’re here.”

“It’s the drivers who make or break the program. They’re the ones who forge the relationships with the store employees,” said Kristy Gilmore, manager of food and agency resources for the food bank.

Pickups are made five days a week.

On a recent Wednesday, Real Estate Group partner Bill Lash and his brother-in-law, Jim Pinnegar, handled the food bank's morning run.

Stop 1: Sam's Club, West White Oaks Drive. Yield: Bacon, salami, banana-nut loaves, decorated cupcakes, croissants, red velvet Bundt cakes, breadsticks.

"We see lots of stuff here," Corey Eyer, receiving supervisor at Sam's Club said, as he helped Lash and Pinnegar load boxes onto the food-bank truck. His staff in the receiving department sorts and packs up the goods destined for the food bank.

"I'm a student, so this is making me hungry," added Eyer, as he handled white bakery boxes filled with cupcakes. He studies computer-aided drafting at Robert Morris University.

Stop 2: Shop 'n Save, Wabash Avenue. Yield: Fresh apples and oranges, boxes of chunked melons, frozen vegetables, yogurt, snack boxes of cut carrots and celery, mixed green salads, organic cookies, canned soups, boxes of brownie mix.

"It's easier for stores to throw away this food than to box it, weigh it, freeze it, save it. There is a tax incentive for them, but it's still easier not to do it," said Lash, 72, a former Lanphier High School teacher and administrator.

Stop 3: Chipotle Mexican Grill, Wabash Avenue. Yield: Cooked rice, black beans, shredded beef and chicken.

Some restaurants had been donating excess, unserved prepared foods to the food bank through a nine-year-old program called Food-Rescue Express. But that initiative was rolled into the Retail Store Donation Program to make pickups more efficient.

Stop 4: Wal-Mart, Sixth Street. Yield: Juice boxes, flavored water, ground beef, chicken breasts, brownies, individual deli bowls of cut fruit.

"It was really upsetting when we had to throw the food away," said Wal-Mart grocery receiver Camille Muncy.

Boxes of frozen chicken breasts weigh 80 to 100 pounds each, causing Lash and Pinnegar to grunt and groan a bit while lifting them into the truck.

Stop 5: Big Lots, Dirksen Parkway. Yield: Cereal and taco shells.

"There are 203 food banks in the United States, and 95 percent of them participate in a program like this," Gilmore said. All eight Illinois food banks participate.

Stop 6: Shop 'n Save, Dirksen Parkway. Yield: Pork sausage, applesauce, flour.

"I go to Westside Christian Church. I thought I should do something for the community, so I asked if I could help," Lash said.

Stop 7: Wal-Mart, North Dirksen Parkway. Yield: Sugar, flour, cereal, canned pumpkin, evaporated milk, crackers, microwave meals, bottled water.

Pinnegar, 75, moved to Springfield from Florida 18 months ago. Lash asked him to help with a food-bank pickup run four months ago, "and I never stopped. I feel like I'm doing something good, and it keeps me in shape. If I weren't doing this, I'd probably be sitting in a recliner doing nothing."

### **Same-day service**

"We give anything and everything, any product that can be used," said Bob Best, store director for Shop 'n Save on Dirksen Parkway. "When meat gets to the sell-by date, we throw it in the freezer."

It's not only older commodities that are salvaged.

"A product might be damaged in some way — a nick in a box, a busted package. It's not a big deal for us. We have to handle it anyway." He said Springfield's three Shop 'n Saves give 8,000 to 10,000 pounds of food a month to the local food bank.

To get the food to recipients more quickly, the Central Illinois Foodbank has changed the way it deals with food pantries and other receiving agencies. The staff lets agencies know what's available and invites the agencies to pick it up at the food bank, 2000 E. Moffat St. Salvaged food can get from retail store to food bank to agency to dinner table on the same day.

"We're retraining our staff and our pantries," Molitoris said.

Although agencies aren't charged for food from the food bank, they are asked to pay a maximum of 18 cents per pound to help cover the cost of labor.

Molitoris noted the Retail Store Donation Program brings in a much wider variety of foods than previously, including more meat and produce.

“It lends itself to far more choice. From a nutritional standpoint, it’s better to have variety.”

**Springfield businesses that participate in the Central Illinois Foodbank’s Retail Store Donation Program:**

- Wal-Mart, Dirksen Parkway and Sixth Street stores
- Sam’s Club
- Shop 'n Save, all three stores
- Schnucks, both stores
- Target
- Big Lots
- Murs Munchies
- Memorial Medical Center
- Smokey Bones
- Red Lobster
- Chipotle Mexican Grill
- Olive Garden
- LongHorn Steakhouse

**A partial list of Sangamon County agencies, pantries and programs served by the Central Illinois Foodbank:**

Asbury Children’s Supper, Attention Home for Youth, Auburn Food Pantry, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Club of Springfield, Brother James Court, Calvary Baptist Church, Care Center of Springfield, Contact Ministries, Daily Bread, Fifth Street Renaissance, Fishes and Loaves, Freedom in Holiness Mission, Grace Lutheran Food Pantry, Helping Hands, Holy Family Food Pantry, Inner City Mission, Kumler Neighborhood Ministries, Mini O’Beirne Crisis Nursery, Rutledge Youth Foundation, Salvation Army, Sojourn Shelter, SPARC, St. John’s Breadline, St. Joseph’s Home, St. Martin De Porres Center, The Hope Institute, United Cerebral Palsy and Zion Baptist Food Pantry.

Comments (7)

dnance0105

5 days ago

Report Abuse

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Report Abuse

I think this is a great idea and glad that these businesses are helping others in the community!

Illse

4 days ago

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Report Abuse

Super, super idea!

This is a 'shock and awe' moment for me that food has been taken to land fills. Has this practice been an oversight or an FDA regulation?

Cubs Girl 72

4 days ago

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Report Abuse

Excellent story . Ironically there is a story on Yahoo news today about Walmart and another store in New York that would destroy clothes so that they could not be recycled before they threw them out. Now that the NEWS is out, that policy has been changed due to shame.

hdguy

4 days ago

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instead of giving the food away why cant they lower the price at the store so everyone gets a chance at it

ProfMom

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This is a brilliant idea and will ensure many of our friends and neighbors in need get some help.

myopinion2

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I don't see County Market, Save-A-Lot, or Aldi's on the list. Aren't they participating in this worthwhile program?

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