

GREAT PLAINS FOOD BANK

FARGO, NORTH DAKOTA



BUILDING A HUNGER-FREE NORTH DAKOTA

Community partnerships are the foundation of the Great Plains Food Bank's (GPFB) work to end hunger across North Dakota. The only food bank in North Dakota, GPFB recovers and distributes food for more than 10 million meals annually through innovative programs aimed at ending childhood, senior and rural hunger as well as through a network of more than 260 partner feeding programs operating in more than 100 communities statewide.

STORY BY MORGAN MERCER

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Our role is to recover surplus food from those food industry donors who have it and get it into the hands of hungry people in our state who need it.

— MARCIA PAULSON, Great Plains Food Bank

YEARS ACTIVE
Founded in 1983

GEOGRAPHY
North Dakota,
Native Nations

BUDGET
\$5,000,000+

LEADER
Steve Sellent

INNOVATION

GREAT PLAINS FOOD BANK (GPFB)

GPFB ends hunger through community partnerships that make sure people aren't just fed today, but for years to come.

BREAKTHROUGH



GPFB redefines what it means to distribute food by utilizing existing resources from its food industry partners. Now, the model is simple. Turn waste into wealth by recovering surplus food and putting it in the hands of people who are hungry.



MEETING EVOLVING NEEDS

To inspire long-term solutions and sweeping change within its operations, GPFB teamed up with community groups and state organizations to draft a watershed study that examined hunger from a holistic perspective. The findings gave rise to nine new programs and boosted the number of meals the food bank provided from four million to 10 million annually.



FINDING LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

As national chains added groceries to their product lines, GPFB retooled its program to keep up with industry trends. By welcoming new partners, it nearly tripled commercial food donations from 5.2 million to 13.1 million pounds a year, bringing the organization one step closer to long-term solutions that prevent hunger.

GPFB'S KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF INNOVATION



**VALUES
PROACTIVITY**



**COMMITS TO
COMMUNITY**



**LISTENS
ACTIVELY**

Finding a Home for the Ugly Potato

THE UGLY LITTLE POTATO sat apart from the rest of the spuds at a plant in the Red River Valley. With its small stature and slightly blemished surface, it wasn't allowed to join the group of pretty potatoes set to ship from the packaging plant to grocery stores later that week. Instead, it sat among the pile of potatoes deemed too large, too small, oddly shaped or too marked up to sit on a dinner plate. These were the rejects. Instead of becoming food, they were set to become trash. That is until GPFB found them.

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Making sure people have food and that their basic needs are met is the first step in helping them turn their lives around.

— STEVE SELLENT, Great Plains Food Bank



GPFB EXHIBITS RESOURCEFULNESS

Five days a week, a fleet of white semi-trucks stamped with a golden stalk of wheat and bearing the name “Great Plains Food Bank” drives thousands of miles throughout the state. Along the way, the trucks stop at grocery stores to pick up food otherwise destined for landfills, and redirects it into the hands of people who might otherwise go hungry. Back in the early '90s, food banks across the nation started food recovery programs centered on corporate cafeterias, restaurants and caterers. But those kinds of businesses exist few and far between in North Dakota. So GPFB turned to an untapped resource: grocery stores.



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teve Sellent, the executive director of GPFB, sent a staff member to tour the facility in 2011. “They said they had no product available to donate. We discovered that millions of pounds of potatoes were being discarded because they didn’t quite meet appearance standards,” said Steve. Although these potatoes were ugly, in most cases, they were edible and nutritious. Instead of heading to the landfill, the little ugly potato and its pile of castoffs were redirected to the doorstep of North Dakota’s only food bank. In its first year, the GPFB’s Potato Recovery Project put 1.1 million pounds of the red-skinned vegetable on dinner tables across the upper Midwest.

But the Red River Valley potato rescue mission was just the start. In a world where Instagram has

turned photographing beautiful food into an art, GPFB has been sticking up for the ugly potatoes of the world, turning the recovery of unwanted food into an art of its own. When grocery stores find a bruised apple or gallon of milk set to expire, GPFB swoops in to redirect those valuable resources away from the garbage dump and onto the shelves of its food pantry partners across the state.

For one in 10 North Dakotans, the charitable feeding network has been the difference between having food on the table and going hungry. As the only food bank serving the state of North Dakota and the Native nations that share the same geography, GPFB can’t afford to let any food go to waste.

We knew we needed to attack the issue of hunger from a new direction while we continued our current work.

— STEVE SELLENT, Great Plains Food Bank



GPFB'S POTATO RECOVERY PROJECT



MEETING EVOLVING NEEDS



GPFB EMBODIES COLLABORATION

For GPFB, success is based on building new collaborations—think health, housing and education. The group recently met with the largest health care provider in the region to discuss where health and hunger overlap to solve problems together. For example, should clinics offer diabetes screenings at mobile food distribution sites or keep a stock of food boxes on hand at their offices? While these newly forged partnerships are still developing, GPFB hopes to roll out its first joint pilot project soon.

For more than 25 years, the staff at GPFB had faced the real rumblings of hunger head on by putting food on people's tables. But around 2008, demand started to outgrow resources. When the charitable feeding network couldn't keep up with changing demographics and trends, GPFB recognized it needed to make a radical shift in the way it operated if it was going to realize its goal of making North Dakota a hunger-free state.

Food banks across the country began shifting their work away from short-term solutions that react to hunger and toward long-term solutions that actually prevent hunger. "We knew we needed to attack the issue of hunger from a new direction while we continued our current work," Steve said. "Our focus has always just been on getting

food on people's plates, but how do we continue to feed that line while also shortening the line?"

To answer this question, GPFB produced "Create a Hunger-Free North Dakota," a landmark comprehensive study that hinged on collaboration with partners throughout the state that not only were passionate about hunger relief, but also would offer a fresh approach to the work. GPFB went to one of its board members first and asked Ann Pollert, the executive director at North Dakota Community Action Partnerships, if her organization would team up on the survey. The group agreed. From there, the partnership list grew organically. Community Action leveraged its network to bring the Department of Commerce into the fold, and soon GPFB had locked in four partners

throughout the state and across sectors, including the USDA's Grand Forks Human Nutrition Research Center and North Dakota State University Extension Service.

By bringing together a variety of perspectives, GPFB hoped to piece together a holistic view that wasn't limited by a single experience or way of working. "We all play a defined role in North Dakota, but didn't collaborate to the degree we thought we could," said Steve. Opportunities to collaborate bloomed once the staff traveled across the country to attend conferences, workshops and sessions. At each stop, GPFB took notes

on how individual food banks approached fresh topics such as collective action. They also paid keen attention to the regional food banks tackling long-term solutions to hunger.

The findings from the study inspired nine new programs and increased the number of meals the food bank provided from four million to 10 million annually. The survey also highlighted significant portions of North Dakota going underserved. "As we grew as an organization, we were able to bring in more expertise in terms of staff, board members and stakeholders," said Steve.



It's not an internally driven process; it's listening to what's going on externally, and that drives the process.

—Great Plains Food Bank stakeholder



GPFB STAKEHOLDERS



GPFB PARTNER GROCERY STORE



FINDING LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

GPFB's initial goal was to collect 100,000 pounds of food a year from the entire Hornbacher's Grocery Store chain. Instead, they got 100,000 pounds of food from each store. Local grocery store chains have long been a part of the charitable feeding network. Over the past several years, as national chains added

groceries to their product lines, GPFB retooled its program to keep up with industry trends. By welcoming new partners, it nearly tripled commercial food donations from 5.2 million to 13.1 million pounds a year, bringing the organization one step closer to long-term solutions that prevent hunger.

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— STEVE SELLENT, Great Plains Food Bank

“We had to change along with the food industry if we were going to expand our program,” said Steve.

The results have been impressive. A whole bunch of food finally found its purpose in life.

In the past, GPFB saw its main role as supplying resources to keep the region’s food pantries and kitchens stocked. Now their solutions are meeting long-term needs.



GPFB BUILDS RELATIONSHIPS

When GPFB faced the challenge of meeting the need for meals for low-income children during summer vacation, they looked for help. Lack of refrigeration and long distances posed distribution logistic woes. Its partnership with a local meal packager resulted in a nonperishable nutritional food tray that is easy to ship, store and distribute.



GPFB WAREHOUSE / GPFB PARTNER GROCERY STORE



GPFB DELIVERY TRUCK