

Food Rescue Solutions for Jersey City

Stakeholder Engagement Findings and Recommendations

Background and Overview

Between July and October of 2022, the [Center for EcoTechnology \(CET\)](#) engaged stakeholders in the food redistribution sector in Jersey City to learn more about existing practices and future opportunities. Through interviews with food distribution agencies, CET gained insight into successful food donation partnerships, sectors missing from the food donation landscape, challenges faced by food distribution agencies, and the support and resources that would bolster these entities' food recovery and redistribution work.

The following summary report was developed by CET, with support from the [Natural Resources Defense Council \(NRDC\)](#) and is intended to provide insight for a citywide initiative designed to combat wasted food and food insecurity by rescuing food from local businesses. This information is intended to support Jersey City's Department of Health & Human Services and Department of Public Works efforts in furthering food redistribution across the local surplus food marketplace. Interest in this project has been widely acknowledged with media coverage in the [Hudson County View](#) and [New Jersey 101.5](#), following a press release from Jersey City.

CET reached out to 21 entities throughout Jersey City to request interviews. The outreach list was built using resources provided by Jersey City and the [Community FoodBank of New Jersey's \(CFBNJ\)](#) website, with a focus on a broad representation of entities by type of operation and location. Through a combination of phone calls and virtual meetings, CET interviewed 15 food distribution stakeholders that service the Jersey City community. All the interviewed entities were engaged in rescuing and/or redistributing surplus food, except for one non-profit organization that pays restaurants to make meals for social service organizations and other end sites.

During the interviews, CET asked entities about their mission, area of service and primary clientele, the type and quantity of donated food they accept and redistribute, donors, community partnerships, operations, main challenges, and support and resources needed. The information below provides a summary of findings, as well as potential next steps for addressing challenges and gaps in the redistribution marketplace.

As by design, the interviewed entities vary in type of operation and team size. Overall, the entities have anywhere from no paid staff to 300 FTE and from 6 to 100 volunteers. The food pantries interviewed have staffing levels that range from no paid staff to 10 full-time equivalents (FTE) and rely primarily on volunteer labor, excluding one food distribution agency, which does not work with volunteers at its pantry. While pantries are typically serving smaller populations, redistribution (also referred to as food rescue) organizations tend to be larger with a higher number of staff and volunteers. In most cases, the interviewed entities are collaborating with other organizations to meet their goals, such as the food bank and other food rescue and community organizations. In addition to their Jersey City clientele, most food pantries have beneficiaries outside of Jersey City (most notably from Bayonne, Essex County, and Union City) that come to distribution days. About half of the entities started serving their communities in the 1980s and 1990s, with the other half beginning distribution operations in the early-to-mid 2000's.

Summary of Interview Findings

Populations Served and Service Expansion Goals

The interviewed entities serve a range of beneficiaries. Entities provided estimates of the number of individuals or families served, or quantity of food bags distributed per month. Noting that a few of the pantries had one or no FTE, tracking the number of beneficiaries/quantity of food distributed may not be a priority and/or within their capacity. Some sites expanded upon the ethnic groups within their clientele, naming Middle Eastern, Latinx, Jewish, Ukrainian, Afghan, Syrian, and Egyptian populations. Another site noted they work with Spanish, Haitian Creole, and Bengali-speaking populations in New Jersey. A few pantries specifically noted that, in recent months, more working individuals have been using their services. Commonly, the entities said that they serve “anyone who comes”.

The distribution agencies were asked whether they were looking to expand their food distribution services, or if services are lacking in any area of Jersey City. Of the entities interviewed, a few pantries said there is a greater need in the community than is currently being met by the existing food distribution services, but most agreed that they would benefit from having access to more food for their existing clientele. Though most pantries noted that they were not in a place to expand their own services to other areas of Jersey City, it was shared that services may be needed for the clients coming from other areas including Union City, Essex County, and Bayonne.

One interviewed food distribution agency remarked that many families go to multiple pantries based on the items that are provided, length of lines, etc. **At some pantries, food lines are hours long and individuals aren’t sure what they will receive, indicating that more food is needed to address current needs.** The same food distribution agency shared that they have a space that they envision could be used for educational workshops. The interviewee indicated that this would be a great opportunity to provide classes on food choices and personal purchases, including cooking classes on how to make nutritious, cost-effective meals, particularly for individuals with health-related dietary restrictions. This type of program was referenced as a potential complementary service that could be leveraged for exponential benefit, providing a greater understanding of how to utilize food that is being distributed while proactively addressing health through nutrition.

Both food rescue organizations that were interviewed are interested in expanding their services to more areas of the city—but to do this, more food is needed for redistribution. One of these organizations has received requests to distribute food to apartment buildings in Jersey City, which could be enabled through increased donor relationships. The other food rescue organization is interested in expanding its services by way of increasing the number of donor and recipient relationships they have in the Jersey City area.

One food distribution agency indicated that while many areas of Jersey City are served by food pantries, there are fewer soup kitchen options available. Soup kitchens help accommodate clients without resources to prepare food themselves.

Food that is Redistributed

Most entities receive and distribute both perishable and non-perishable food items. Seven food pantries indicated that they have freezer space and accept frozen items as well. To help its partners meet their needs, CFBNJ provides grant funding opportunities to obtain additional cold storage. The food rescue organizations indicated that they accept prepared meals from restaurants. Most of the entities track the amount of food they receive and distribute. Some entities only had data available for food received from certain sources.

Of the distribution sites and pantries that do track food received, distributed, and/or served, ranges were in the thousands of pounds per month. Encouragingly, all interviewees said that most of the food they receive can be redistributed based on quality and freshness. For that reason, there was not extensive input provided on what is done with food that cannot be redistributed, but it is likely that most is disposed. The interviewed food rescue organizations have collection guidelines for their volunteers based on food safety standards, protecting the quality of food they distribute to end sites.

CFBNJ requires its partners to keep an inventory of the government-provided food that they receive from the food bank and redistribute. Every month, CFBNJ partners are required to send a report that details the amount of government-provided food that was redistributed, along with the number of adults, children, and seniors served. One food pantry shared that the CFBNH provides a workshop to train partner agencies on this reporting process.

Other requirements of being a food bank partner include:

- Holding a 501c3 public charity status;
- Attending a food safety training organized by the food bank on an annual basis, especially if the partner is receiving government-provided food; and
- Storing food at proper temperature conditions. Inspections are conducted through the food bank every two years.

Distribution Schedule, Means of Transporting Food, and Local Partnerships

Food pantries and the food bank

The food bank delivers distributions to most (8) of the pantries that were interviewed. Staff members and volunteers are often transporting food to beneficiaries and picking up donations from donors other than the food bank. Through one of the food bank's programs, partners can pick food up directly from retail stores and report back on what they received to the food bank. This program optimizes the freshness of food that sites distribute. Volunteer labor is crucial to many of the entities' operations, and additional support is needed in most cases. For instance, one food pantry noted that picking up food is the organization's biggest challenge—they are looking for more food but would need additional capacity to pick it up.

Many entities have established partnerships with local businesses, schools, and other community organizations that contribute to their food distributions. A few interviewed entities were interested in expanding their partnerships, for example, food pantries were interested in new partnerships with food rescue organizations, and one entity shared that they are seeking more partnerships to provide wrap-around services (including nutrition education, supplemental nutrition assistance program, and more) and strengthen food security in its served communities.

The distribution schedules of the food pantries vary, but many hold distributions on Saturdays. Testimonials from the pantries that speak to their facilities and operations are bulleted below:

- One food pantry, who receives donation deliveries from CFBNJ, mentioned the organizations that receive over 3,000 lbs./month are eligible for a free delivery of this food.
- Another food pantry, which holds its distributions one Saturday a month from 8am-12pm, noted that to maintain the freshness of perishable foods, these items need to be delivered Wednesday or Friday prior to distribution or no later than 7am on distribution day.
- When one food pantry receives cold food donations, they distribute the food on the same day because they lack sufficient refrigerated storage.

Food rescue/redistribution organizations

Two of the interviewed organizations retrieve or receive excess food from donors. They then deliver donated food to other organizations that redistribute the food to clients. One of these food rescue organizations provided the following description of their transportation and logistics:

- The organization uses an app for food rescue and redistribution. The app has enabled them to rescue food seven days per week. Volunteers who use the app start by logging in to be notified of available food within a five-mile radius. They are then presented with the option to claim a rescue, which entails picking up the food and delivering it to the site indicated by the app.
- Using their truck, the organization can deliver larger amounts of food through neighborhood/drive-through distributions and to larger soup kitchens or food pantries. Through the app, they redistribute smaller amounts of food, usually to group homes, shelters, and church food pantries.

The food rescue organizations indicated interest in collaborating with each other to meet shared goals, in addition to working with ride share and/or transportation services in order to transport larger food donations.

Donors, Percentage of Usable Donations, and Additional Food Items & Sectors Needed

Overall, the most common donors among food pantries and food rescue organizations were the food bank, food manufacturers, grocery stores, and food drives conducted by local schools and community organizations. A breakdown is shown in Figure 1.

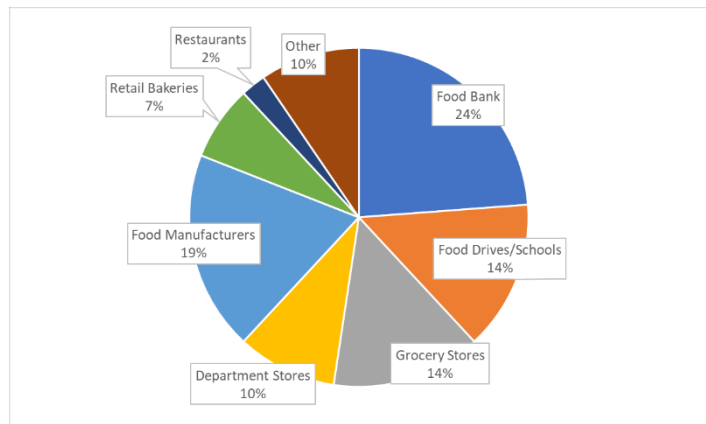


Figure 1. Food Donor Sectors

Encouragingly, entities were overwhelmingly satisfied with the quality of food items they receive from donors. Overall, **the most voiced items needed were proteins (primarily meat), produce, and milk/dairy products**. As is common for food distribution organizations, perishable items were the most sought out. A breakdown of needed food items is shown below in Figure 2.

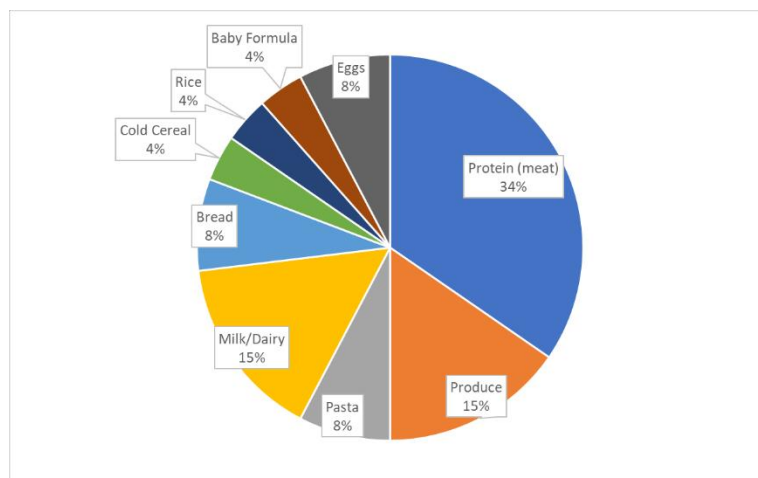


Figure 2. Food Items Needed

Interviewees were most interested in receiving additional food from the grocery store sector. Several entities noted that they will accept food from wherever they can get it, so long as they can obtain more of their needed items.

Notable details about the food distribution and food rescue organizations include:

- Going forward, one entity expects its pandemic-related funding to decrease, leading them to rely more heavily on food donations instead of purchasing to meet their food distribution goals.
- To align with its goals to increase fresh and healthy food options, one stakeholder is increasing its relationships with farms and would be willing to explore purchasing produce from farms that are struggling to stay in business.
- One interviewed food rescue organization would like to receive more from grocery stores, as they can pick up items that would expire the next day. They would also be open to receiving more from restaurants in the form of food donations or gift cards.

- The food rescue organization that operates nationwide is always seeking additional food donor partners from all sectors. The organization is equipped to handle donations of any size, even those that require trucks to redistribute pallets of surplus food.

Biggest Barriers and Challenges

CET also asked each entity what their biggest challenge is as an organization and what support would help them reach their goals. The responses have been grouped into themes below.

Acquiring Certain Types of Food

- For food pantries and soup kitchens, **more sources and donations** of meats, produce such as fruits, pasta, and other items are needed.
- For food rescue/redistribution organizations, **more connections to donors** would help them expand their service area and capacity.

Funding Needs & Capacity

- Entities, particularly pantries, could benefit from **financial assistance** to keep their programs running, pay rent on their facilities, etc.
- **Additional staff capacity**, in the form of volunteers or funding for additional employees, is needed by many entities for receiving and transporting food from donors. The challenge of capacity was demonstrated in many of these entities' inability to have time for a short phone call.

Storage for Food Items

- Some entities need **cold storage** or could use additional cold storage to keep donations fresh or expand their ability to accept and redistribute cold storage foods.
- Some entities would benefit from **donations of or funding for distribution bags** for food items. These have become harder to obtain and more expensive.

Preliminary Recommendations

Considering the information gathered through stakeholder conversations, CET has prepared the following sections to highlight preliminary recommendations that the City could consider for expanding the food rescue marketplace in Jersey City. Actions are identified for supporting food distribution agencies, as well as business sectors that may not be fully engaged currently for donating excess edible food. Each section highlights recommendations based on time frame. For example, immediate actions are opportunities that can be taken quickly with little lead time in order to further donation in the community. Mid-term actions may require more planning or steps before realization, whereas long-term actions are steps that may be taken as more groundwork has been laid to support food rescue in the community.

These recommendations are based on CET's experience working to address food loss and surplus in communities for over 20 years. The actions outlined below are intended to provide a menu of options for the city to consider when moving forward, but do not include step-by-step guidelines for incorporating each suggestion. It is recommended that the City review this information and then conduct a process to plan next steps based on the findings of this research.

Actions to Support Pantries, Soup Kitchens, & Food Redistribution Organizations

Immediate Actions

- **Engage volunteers** for food rescue and redistribution efforts by utilizing existing volunteering platforms like [VolunteerMatch](#), [Jersey Cares](#), and [JCFamilies](#).
- **Facilitate connections between food rescue entities** where feasible.

- **Investigate possible sources of surplus** meat, dairy, and produce, and other items that food rescue organizations have in short supply.
- **Explore grant or donation opportunities** that could address the needs for bags and additional cold storage for pantries. CFBNJ provides grant funding opportunities for cold storage for their partners. Consider funding support for distribution agency's operational needs as well.
- **Explore grant opportunities for translation services** and offer them to the interviewed food distributors with non-English-speaking clientele.
- **Distribute an electronic survey** using a platform such as Google Forms to gather information on food loss tracking methods.
- **Provide a tool for tracking food received from various donors.** Consider modeling the tool after the spreadsheet that is used for tracking distributions through the food bank.

Mid-Term Actions

- **Support infrastructure for transportation of food from donors to food rescue organizations** by exploring grant opportunities for transportation or leveraging existing vehicle fleets. This could include opportunities for food rescue organizations to collaborate with ride share programs such as [Via Jersey City](#).
- Through engaging volunteer networks and/or providing additional funding to distribution agencies, **facilitate opportunities for pantries to deliver food directly to individuals when needed.** This is particularly important for seniors and disabled individuals who may not be able to travel to a pantry or meal site to obtain food. To see how this is being done in other communities, consider connecting with [Share My Meals](#), a nonprofit organization that rescues surplus meals and delivers them to individuals and households in the Princeton area.
- **Organize networking meetings among food rescue sector participants** via virtual or in-person methods. These meetings can provide an opportunity for groups to learn about available benefits, trends in the space, gaps and opportunities for increased collaboration. CET organized several meetings for the food rescue sector in Ohio. A theme was chosen in advance of the meeting and a few food rescue organizations gave presentations on successes or challenges they were experiencing. CET also worked with Massachusetts Food System Collaborative to host a series of meetings for food rescue organizations across the state to foster collaboration and partnership between the agencies. Nearby, Bergen County has organized a [Food Security Task Force](#). Note that food rescue organizations may have limited availability.
- **Engage pantries with food scraps recycling efforts underway.** Where possible, extend organics recycling initiatives to encompass food pantries, offering an opportunity for processing un-distributable food.
- **Establish satellite cold storage location(s)** where multiple food pantries can store cold donations. To ensure the success of its community fridges, The City of Denver conducts regular inspections and asks for items to be labeled. To do this, explore funding opportunities and collaborative approaches to support expansion of food recovery infrastructure. The [Food Waste Innovation Grants](#) offered by the Department of Small and Local Business Department in Washington, D.C. and the [Local Emergency Food Relief Equipment Grant](#) program from NYSDEC are examples.
- **Leverage existing underutilized cold storage space for use by food distribution sites,** such as schools that may not be utilizing kitchens during the summer months.
- **Develop an annual survey** to gather feedback and data from organizations as the City develops additional strategies to foster the growing food system. When creating this, take into consideration results from the electronic survey on tracking methods, if distributed. This information can be leveraged to support monetization of waste diversion, as well as understanding evolving trends in the marketplace.
- If needed, **offer resources and support to entities for gathering data on food received and distributed** to entities that are not Foodbank partners. This could be accomplished through offering funding with a requirement to share this data.

Long-Term Actions

- **Support the establishment of more soup kitchens or organizations that repurpose surplus.** [La Soupe](#), an entity operating in Ohio, rescues perishables from farms, grocers, and wholesalers, and transforms them into soups and meals that are delivered to agencies.
- **Support the development of farmer's markets** in Wards across the city. Consider transportation accessibility when planning and siting a market. Excess food from markets may also represent an opportunity for collection and redistribution at the end of the day.
- **Provide classes/workshops** for people to learn about food choices/smart purchasing, nutrition, and cooking.
- **Grow the distribution network and food availability** to enable replicating more distribution sites at community centers like schools, or apartment complexes.
- **Ensure that transportation is available** (public bus routes, bikeshare programs, etc.) to the food rescue locations that do not offer a drop-off service.

Engaging the Missing Sectors

While some supermarkets and food distribution services are already donating, interviewees were most interested in receiving from the grocery store sector. Other desired donors mentioned were food manufacturers and distributors, restaurants, and country clubs.

Sectors that could be further engaged include:

1. Grocery stores & stores with grocery departments (most popular)
2. Restaurants (mentioned least frequently as a donor)
3. Purveyors/manufacturers
4. Meal kit companies (a company with a different model from others that may have surplus to be discovered!)

Recommendations

Immediate Actions

*All Sectors

- **Become familiar with legislation that can support food donation.** Policy categories influential to food recovery are outlined in the [NRDC Food Waste Policy Gap Analysis and Inventory for New Jersey](#). In this report, the long-term actions for all sectors highlight an opportunity to introduce a tax incentive for food rescue, which currently does not exist at the state level in New Jersey. Other policy categories that support food donation include Food Donation Liability Protections and Food Safety Policies for Share Tables. In both of these categories, New Jersey has a strong policy rating. In another example of how planning may support food waste reduction, the [Charlottesville Climate Action Plan](#) has included a strategy to reduce food waste and notes food donation as a key action.
- **Highlight businesses with existing food donation programs** through newsletters, local news outlets, and social media. Sharing success from peers may help to motivate increased participation.
- **Promote food rescue organizations** through networking and business-facing channels.
- **Conduct direct outreach to target entities for food donation.** This may include having conversations with large quantity generators like food manufacturers to understand how their surplus food is currently being handled and exploring the potential for additional diversion.
- **Coordinate a campaign promoting food donation.** This could draw from Community Based Social Marketing techniques that encourage others to donate.
- **Provide direct technical assistance to businesses.** Waste assistance to implement food surplus reduction, recovery, and diversion programs includes conducting site evaluations and providing customized recommendations on organics service providers, donation agencies, and best practices. An example of this type of initiative is demonstrated in the [waste assistance provided by Center for EcoTechnology through the RecyclingWorks in](#)

[Massachusetts program](#), funded by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection. Explore the opportunity for replicating similar efforts.

**Grocery Store Sector*

- **Encourage businesses with existing donation programs to connect with food pantries seeking their surplus.** This could serve to involve individual locations in a chain that aren't donating or help more pantries access food from these donors if they have additional surplus product to distribute. Consider contacting a regional representative for the retailers to understand gaps in donation or explore a chain-wide approach to donation.

**Restaurant Sector*

- **Combat restaurants' perception that they don't have surplus that is suitable for donation by:**
 - Structuring all communications from Jersey City to restaurants (through social media, press releases, etc.) to recognize that surplus food is often an infrequent, if not avoided, occurrence at many restaurants, and that certain food rescue agencies can accommodate and will appreciate one-time donations when they are possible;
 - Facilitating open discussions among businesses, health inspectors, and food rescue organizations that clarify misconceptions about safe food handling guidelines; and/or
 - Providing clear and comprehensive guidance on safe food handling in new and additional forms (magnets/signage/one-pagers where applicable), equipping restaurants with resources that allow them to donate with a confidence that liability protections cannot alone provide. Any guidance resources should be translated into languages spoken by employees.
- **Recognize that to reach businesses of all sizes, sectors, and services, a menu of options is best to meet these varied needs and interests. This increases the likelihood of adoption and extends overall impact and is integral to the technical assistance offered by CET.**
 - A one-size-fits-all approach cannot be applied to assisting the restaurant community. For example:
 - Some restaurants would be motivated by public recognition for their donations, and others would find that a deterrent;
 - Some restaurants are open to drop-in communications and others prefer email communications;
 - Some restaurants would like additional refrigeration capacity on-site for donations, while others don't have space for it; and
 - Restaurants have different staff training preferences (video vs. in-person).
 - Alternatively, select a specific focus within the restaurant sector (i.e., limited-service restaurants of a certain cuisine) to target outreach and resources. This will drive peer-to-peer stories and replicable models found valuable in the discussions.

Mid-Term Actions

**All sectors*

- **Provide a list of food rescue organizations** (in printed and email form) to businesses that includes the organizations' phone numbers. If possible, include the hours that they can pick up and the types of items/meals they accept.
- **Leverage and promote redistribution networks to businesses**, including [Table to Table](#), [Rescuing Leftover Cuisine](#), [Food Donation Connection](#), and [MEANS Database](#).
- **Continue collaborating with health inspectors to spread information about food donation.** In addition to Jersey City's existing Food Donation Guidelines brochure, consider guidance provided by NRDC'S [Engaging Health Departments Overview](#), such as offering trainings on safe food donations to health inspectors, identifying a food donation "staff champion" in the health department, and establishing ways to track how much and where food donation information has been shared through health department channels. Tools such as [legal fact sheets on food donation](#) and other guidelines on prevention and source separation can also be conduits of information that health inspectors can share with food service businesses.

- **Implement a Food Waste Business Challenge** that businesses can opt into. Examples of technical assistance and food waste business challenges are: the [Food Matters Restaurant Challenge](#) in Denver, CO; the [Philly Food Waste Business Challenge](#); and the [Food Matters Challenge](#) in Greenwich, CT. These challenges invite businesses with surplus food to participate and adopt food-saving measures. For a Jersey City challenge, emphasis could be placed on the adoption of surplus food recovery programs.
- **Implement an incentive or rebate program such as the [Zero Waste Business Rebate](#)** in Austin, which provides financial rebates to businesses that divert wasted food from disposal.
- **Publicly recognize food rescue organizations through networking and business-facing channels.**

**Grocery Store Sector*

- **Work with a technical consultant such as CET to establish a food donation training video** that can be used to train new staff.

**Restaurant Sector*

- **Conduct outreach to Jersey City restaurants** promoting the work of local food rescue organizations, as they are known to accept food donations from the restaurant sector and are interested in doing so going forward. This could be done through physical and online flyers that include the organizations' phone numbers.
- **Host an informational event on food donation with a Jersey City business association**, such as the [Jersey City Restaurant Association](#), and incentivize restaurants to attend through a monetary reward or requirement.

**Manufacturing Sector*

- **Connect manufacturers with surplus to entities that may incorporate it into new meals for distribution.**

Long-Term Actions

**All sectors*

- **Develop a tax incentive to support increased food donation.** Philadelphia provides an example of a policy enacted at the local level that helps to incentivize food donation. The city implemented a sustainable business tax incentive that allows businesses who meet certain sustainability criteria— including participating in food donation—to receive a tax credit of up to \$4,000 on the Business Income & Receipts Tax (BIRT).

**Restaurant Sector*

- **Leverage the food inspection program to promote increased donation.**
 - Businesses could receive a special designation if they donate surplus food.
 - If a business passes inspection, inspectors could provide follow-up information about safe food handling guidelines for donation and training materials for staff.

Conclusion

There is a strong food redistribution system in Jersey City. Food distribution sites play crucial roles in their communities to meet the immediate needs of their neighbors and offer a consistent variety of food items to anyone who is served. The food bank, the greatest source of most interviewed pantries' distributions, is a partner with a positive reputation. There is interest in increasing overall food security by expanding wrap-around services through educational initiatives and partnerships with social service organizations. To support distribution sites that serve localized populations and continue contributing to a more equitable food system overall, food rescue organizations are motivated to increase rescues from food permitted businesses with surplus food. Interviewed stakeholders— distribution sites, food rescue organizations, and the food bank—are looking to expand their partnerships and collaborate with other agencies to strengthen the food distribution network and promote greater food security in the city.

Though the Jersey City food distribution network is already strong and has momentum, it will need additional food donations and other resources to support its growth. Most stakeholders are seeking more donations of meat, produce, and dairy through increased donor connections. Many would benefit from financial assistance to meet their food distribution goals or to simply cover their operational costs. Certain distribution sites could use additional labor capacity to pick up, unload, and organize distributions. On a case-by-case basis, distribution sites may also benefit from bags for distribution and additional cold storage. Moving forward, one stakeholder noted that they will have less funding to purchase food and will be more reliant on donations, which may also impact the food redistribution landscape in Jersey City.

The City can continue to bolster the work of food distribution agencies by facilitating connections to other organizations and volunteer bases, providing resources to track donations and distributions, sourcing funding for additional cold storage and bags, and seeking input on a recurring basis to stay updated on these entities' needs. There are a variety of ways to engage additional donors of needed food items, including highlighting existing donation efforts, conducting direct outreach, providing technical assistance for businesses interested in establishing food donation programs, enacting legislation that encourages food donation, and more. CET is particularly familiar with best practices for engaging the grocery and restaurant sectors, which could represent future sources of meat, dairy, and produce for communities in Jersey City. CET looks forward to continuing to support the City's food distribution system through engaging these missing sectors and helping the City meet the financial, capacity-building, and resource needs of food distribution agencies.