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Food Recovery A Local Solution to a Global Problem

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TIJA MONTO

america grows and raises about 600 billion pounds of food each year, and it's estimated that we throw away somewhere between a quarter and a half of that. That's enough food to fill the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California, notes Wellesley High School (WHS) graduate Jonathan Bloom in his 2010 book, *American Wasteland*.

In the early 20th century, we shifted from a rural, agricultural society to an urban, non-farming one. Today we rely on convenience and expect to get whatever food we want, when we want it. And, Bloom points out an average American generates almost five pounds of trash a day. Since 12 percent of that, on average, is or was edible, we each discard nearly 200 pounds of food a year. Since 1974, our per-person food waste has risen by 50 percent.

Wholesome food that's lost or disposed of is defined as wasted, surplus, or excess food by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). This includes unsold food from retail stores, untouched prepared food, or trimmings from restaurants, grocery stores, cafeterias, or industrial processing. Food unfit for human consumption can be fed to animals, composted, or sent to an anaerobic digester (to generate a biogas that's combusted to make electricity and heat, or processed into renewable natural gas and transportation fuels).

good works “41 million Americans live in households that don’t have enough food”



PHOTOS BY MATT DELANEY

While some unavoidable loss occurs due to harsh weather or spoilage, the costs associated with food waste are huge. According to the EPA, more than 130 million pounds of food ends up in our nation’s landfills. Solid food that rots in landfills emits methane gas, which has a “global warming potential” 28 to 36 times that of carbon dioxide in a 100-year period. Also, resources used to grow, process, transport, store, and dispose of the excess food, like water, soil nutrients, and fossil fuels, are wasted. In financial terms, Bloom reports a family of four throws away an average over \$2,000 worth of food a year.

At the same time, the 2017 *Global Report on Food Crisis* finds over 100 million people worldwide are food insecure, or lack reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. Feeding America, a Chicago-based nonprofit that works to end hunger in the U.S., estimates that 41 million Americans live in households that don’t have enough food to live an active, healthy life. Of that, 23 million are adults, 13 million are children, and 5 million are seniors.

Fortunately, Matt Delaney, Wellesley’s food service director since 2012, is aware of this serious and pervasive problem and is working with Wellesley’s 3R (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) Working Group (Department of Public Works, Natural Resources Commission, and Sustainable Energy Committee) and volunteers across town to tackle it.

Chef Manager at WMS Danny Vieira prepares food for pickup by Food For Free

“In 1992, I learned about food recovery when I worked in food service management at Walt Disney World,” notes Delaney. “Extra food prepared at restaurants and resorts was bagged, tagged, and chilled. At night, a refrigerated truck picked it up and brought it to a food bank and people in shelters.”

The work in Florida made a big impression on Delaney. “It raised my awareness of hardship and hunger that I never knew existed. Not to mention, the environmental impacts such as water wasted to produce food, greenhouse gasses, and lost money on purchased food from the suppliers.”

Delaney felt Wellesley Middle School (WMS) would be a perfect test facility or “proving ground” for food recovery here. A plan to put that in place came about at a February 2016 meeting of the Town’s 3R Working Group.

At the end of lunch service, staff members put extra pre-consumer cooked meals in sealed, plastic bags, and transferred them to a freezer. On Fridays, Wendy Beck von Peccoz volunteered to pick up the food and deliver it to the Wellesley Food Pantry (WFP). Items that couldn’t

be frozen or kept at the pantry, like sandwiches and salads, were offered to staff at the Wellesley Fire Department, Department of Public Works, and other town departments.

“The thought of perfectly good food being put in a dumpster is such a gross waste especially knowing that there are so many people living with food insecurity all around us,” says Beck von Peccoz. “I was more than happy to help Matt, who is the MAN as far as I’m concerned.”

Another volunteer with the pantry took over the pickups at WMS from Beck von Peccoz until fall 2017. Since October, food recovered from WMS has been collected by Food For Free, a Cambridge-based nonprofit that has been bringing food that would have been thrown away to meal programs, shelters, and pantries since 1985.

“Approximately two to three hundred pounds of food per week was being wasted by our overproduction and distribution methods in the past,” says Delaney. “We tracked our donations 2016 to 2017 of nearly 2,000 pounds of food, or 4,000 meals.” He adds, “Food For Free will supply us with an annual report of the amount of food we donate and their estimation of the number of meals they created with the supplies.” WHS was added for collection in November.

To get to the point of recovering food from WMS and WHS, several Wellesley residents started the hard work in 2015. Ellen Korpi, vice chair of the Town’s Sustainable Energy

“it’s possible to reduce landfill-bound waste by 93 percent” **good works**

Committee, became galvanized after visiting Jordan Dairy Farms outside of Worcester—the first farm in Massachusetts to produce energy from organic waste. Korpi is pleased with the expansive progress to date and notes, “Whitsons Culinary Group, Wellesley’s food service provider, has pledged to reduce food loss and waste in its operations 50 percent by 2030. It’s fantastic.”

Korpi and Alison Cross, a member of the 3R Working Group, worked with the Health Department as it developed formal standard operating procedures for food rescue. They’ve also brought area colleges into the effort so it’s more sustainable. Bentley University got started in September, while Wellesley College, Olin College, and Babson College were approved in October for Food For Free pickups. Massachusetts Bay Community College is hoping to become a recipient but needs a freezer first. Delaney is eager to have a regular pickup schedule of donations to Food For Free to “maximize the load going and minimize environmental impacts.”

“A collaborative, iterative food rescue process lends itself to a successful school-based program, with vast potential,” posits Cross. “We plan to donate 20,000 meals this school year.”

In spring 2016, Bates Elementary parents Marybeth Martello, Gretchen Hall, and Alexa Plenge led an award-winning effort to improve cafeteria waste management at the school. An assessment of all cafeteria waste at Bates showed it’s possible to reduce landfill-bound waste by 93 percent, or from about 400 to 28 pounds per week. A pilot cafeteria program took an initial step in this direction. By rescuing unused, post-consumer food like yogurt, cheese sticks, apples, and packaged carrot sticks (left at a “share table”) for the WFP, diverting unused liquids, and recycling cartons,

Members of the Bates 5th Grade Leadership Team with Principal Toni Jolley, Custodian Al Martignetti, and Marybeth Martello accept the Excellence in Energy and Environmental Education Award at the Massachusetts State House



PHYLLIS THEERMAN

good works “teamwork and broad participation”

Recommended Reading

To learn more about food waste and what you can do about it, check out the following books:

- **AMERICAN WASTELAND: HOW AMERICA THROWS AWAY NEARLY HALF OF ITS FOOD (AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT)** by Jonathan Bloom (De Capo Press, 2010)
- **FOOD FOOLISH: THE HIDDEN CONNECTION BETWEEN FOOD WASTE, HUNGER, AND CLIMATE CHANGE** by John M. Mandyck and Eric B. Schultz (Carrier Corporation, 2015)
- **WASTE FREE KITCHEN HANDBOOK** by Dana Gunders (Chronicle Books, 2015)
- **WASTE: UNCOVERING THE GLOBAL FOOD SCANDAL** by Tristram Stuart (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2009)

utensils, trays, and more, Bates reduced landfill-bound waste 40 percent by weight. Diverting food waste to composting or anaerobic digestion in the future will reduce Bates’ landfill-bound waste even further.

With support from parent volunteers, Sprague and Hunnewell Schools adopted the Bates cafeteria program. Bates, Sprague, and Fiske

Recycling setup at Bates with bins full of cartons and bottles



PHOTOS BY MARYBETH MARTELLO

were approved for Food For Free pickups *and* share-table donations in November. With staff training and freezers, food rescue began in January. In addition, Delaney purchased Preserve-brand recycled plastic containers for cold lunches at the elementary schools. Replacing disposable single-use containers will save over 15,000 disposables.

Separately in town, a pilot program run from October 2017 to this past January at the Recycling and Disposal Facility collected food waste from residents in buckets, which was eventually turned into fertilizer. An evaluation will determine if this food management program can be continued.

Successful food recovery and waste reduction has resulted from teamwork and broad participation. Delaney asserts, “Private schools and clubs should also consider this effort. Food that’s intended for people and is ‘extra’ should be given a second chance to nourish a life, not a landfill. The local grocery stores reduce waste, create compost, and donate to recovery organizations. Everyone should consider the amount of food that’s being wasted and the impact that it could have as a positive for people and the environment.”

Food recovery work is not simple, but it has a wide-ranging and lasting impact. Says Delaney, “If we can save money, waste less, and feed more people with what we have, that’s good. If I can teach others to do the same, that’s great!” 