



AN INSIDE LOOK INTO
THE AMERICAN FOOD
SYSTEM THAT LEAVES
MANY WITHOUT
FOOD ON THE TABLE.

FOOD INSECURITY ISN'T TABOO

WORDS EMILY POSTLETHWAIT
PHOTO MICHAEL CUMMINGS
DESIGN EMILY POSTLETHWAIT

Aubrey Alvarez doesn't work a normal nine to five. Some days she's glued to Zoom, talking about food insecurity with partners across Central Iowa. Others, she's driving a bright green truck, also referred to as Barry, rescuing food from Trader Joe's and other local convenience stores in the Des Moines area.

"This job, originally when I took it, the title was local food coordinator," she says. "I really didn't know what that meant."

She does now. It means Alvarez is a lifeline, though she's no longer a local food coordinator. She's the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Eat Greater Des Moines, a nonprofit that focuses on increasing access

to quality food. In 2021 alone, Alvarez was a part of rescuing over 2,125,228 pounds of food and products. Where does this food go? The answer is simple: anyone who needs it.

The term food insecurity isn't as complicated as it sounds. It is being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. And it's more common than you think.

Alvarez has been working with partners to combat food insecurity since 2013. She has celebrated a lot of wins, but has also seen the problem remain. Over 2 million pounds of food rescued is a big number. You'd think this would solve the hunger crisis. But, it hasn't. In fact, hunger has not only remained but continues to grow.

THE PROBLEM

Here's the truth: our food system is not designed to benefit everyone. "A lot of people who are food insecure—it has nothing to do with any short sort of character flaw," Alvarez says. "It's the ecosystem, the broken food system."

She's not wrong. In 2019, the food insecurity rate was the lowest it had been in over 20 years. But then a pandemic hit. The percentage of individuals who lived in a food insecure household spiked from 11 percent to 14 percent. That's 45 million people.

And that number makes sense. Restaurants closed. Farmers weren't needed. Milk was dumped. Crops went unpicked. Prices spiked. Food banks temporarily closed. And people were left hungry. The cracks in the American food system were exposed because of Covid. Food that would have normally been bound for restaurants couldn't be quickly repacked and rerouted to grocery stores or food pantries. A lot of it went to waste.

Eventually, food assistance programs arose. Stimulant checks were mailed out. Supply food chains sort out—mostly. And the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits increased, helping low-income people buy the food they needed. There were

also child tax credit payments that went directly to lower-income families, allowing them to cover all their expenses. For the first time in a long time, people were talking about making a change in food insecurity. And fewer people were hungry.

Fast forward two years and things have changed for the worse. Those extra SNAP benefits are gone. So are the child tax credits payments. There is less focus on filling up food pantries. And thanks to record inflation, prices everywhere are high. An average SNAP benefit is around \$150 a month. The price of avocados has risen 40 percent in the past year. Eggs are now \$3 a dozen. Meat has shot up. Milk has too. A hundred and fifty bucks can run out in seconds.

Now, the lines to food banks have multiplied. Food pantries are often overtaxed. And there are still a lot of hurdles to getting food. In food deserts, pantries are often inaccessible to populations. For houseless folks, they might not have the proper documentation that food pantries require to receive food. And here are limits to the amount of food people can get and how often that food can be accessed.

We can all agree that everyone deserves food. But unfortunately, there are rules in food banks and pantries that constitute who deserves food over others.

With Food Rescue US, would-be-wasted food can be used to fight hunger rather than ending up in landfills and contributing to climate change.

OTHER SOLUTIONS

That is why other solutions are needed. Melissa Spiesman, Chief Operating Officer at the nonprofit Food Rescue US, dedicates her time to ensuring there are options for hungry people.

The model is simple. They use a web-based app that allows volunteers to rescue fresh perishables and deliver them to organizations that serve hungry people. They aim to rescue perishables, including produce, dairy products, meat, and premade meals, to not only feed people but fuel those people as well.

"With Food Rescue US, would-be-wasted food can be used to fight hunger rather than ending up in landfills and contributing to climate change," Spiesman says.

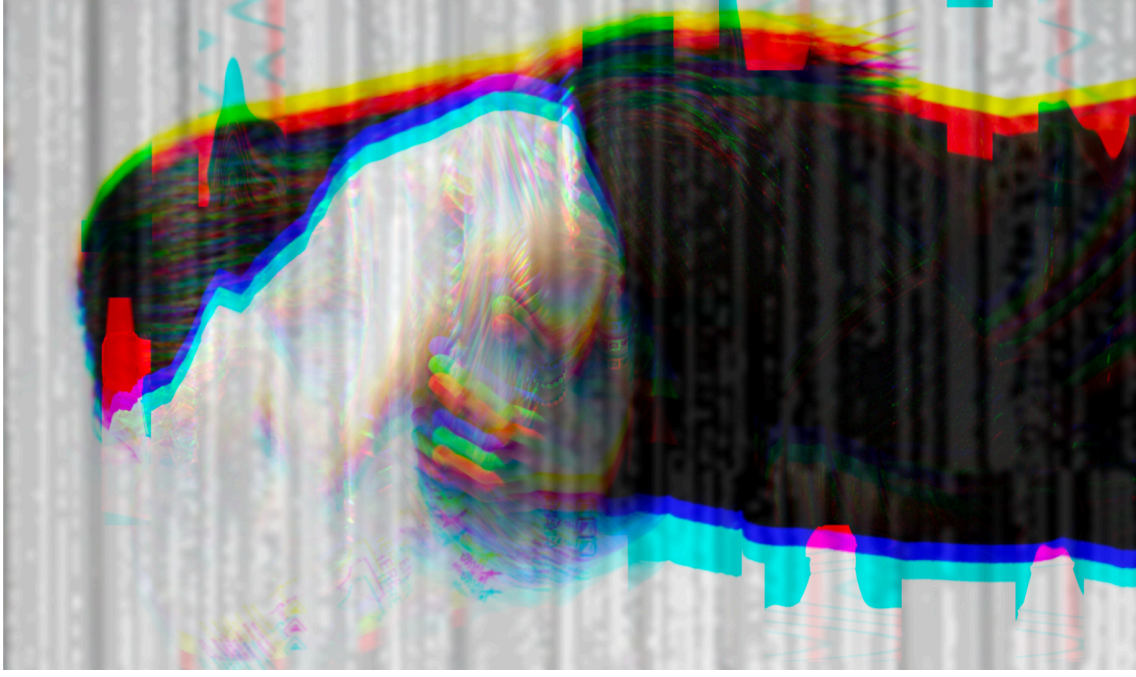
A common misconception about rescued food is that it is considered used or old. However, food waste includes myriad things.

"Food waste includes excess food at grocery stores, imperfect produce at farms, unused food at large-scale events, and premade meals with approaching sell-by dates," Spiesman says.

Unfortunately, that excess food that ends up in landfills and decomposes releases carbon dioxide and methane, both of which contribute to climate change. According to Project Drawdown, the food we waste is responsible for roughly 6% of global emissions. Put another way, 130 billion meals and nearly 40 percent of all food in America is wasted. 130 billion.

It's because of companies like Food Rescue US that this number is decreasing—slowly to say the least. Other organizations like Eat Greater Des Moines and Sweet Tooth Community Fridge have thought of innovative solutions to minimizing food waste in their communities.

Monika Owscarski, the founder of Sweet Tooth Farm and Sweet Tooth Community Fridge, has had a front-row seat in



watching her community come together to help people access food.

“Since starting the first community fridge in Iowa (as far as we can tell), I have had a large perspective shift,” Owscarski says. “You don’t have to fit into any criteria to use community fridges. They are for us all. You just need to be hungry.”

And that is exactly the motto that Sweet Tooth Community Fridge lives by. Food is available 24/7, 365 days a year. For anyone and everyone. There’s no surveillance that monitors how much people take.

Owscarski bases her work on the belief that there shouldn’t be policing of people who are hungry. Sweet Tooth Community Fridge works with Eat Greater Des Moines on filling the fridge. Although they have fresh groceries filling the fridge many times throughout the week, the fridge can be empty within ten minutes of food being delivered.

“I think that just accentuates how much people are struggling. How much need there is, Owscarski says. “People just need resources. There is no fluffy language to it. We don’t need another analysis. We don’t need another focus group. People just need money and food. It’s not rocket science.”


MAKING AN IMPACT

There are a lot of stigmas surrounding those who are food insecure. People are lazy, people don’t know how to budget, and people are making bad choices. There is so much shame surrounding the problem. Alvarez felt that shame herself.

Aubrey Alvarez was 21 when she bought her first house. Two months later, she was laid off. She resorted to eating ramen noodles – or simply didn’t eat.

“I didn’t ask for help,” Alvarez says. “I thought food pantries were for those who were worse off than me. As it was, I was trying to make 20 dollars last

People just need resources. There is no fluffy language to it... People just need money and food. It’s not rocket science.



for a week. If I was able to get some groceries or food, it would have been so helpful. There was a lot of internalized shame that came with being food insecure.”

Soon after, Alvarez realized that it wasn’t a character flaw that resulted in people being food insecure. She realized that the food system is messed up. That shift opened her eyes to the impact that she could make on her community, and further introduced the founding of Eat Greater Des Moines.

Alvarez urges people to challenge their own biases on why people are food insecure. Checking yourself can be an important step in being a part of the solution.

“If you didn’t have anything right now and you needed to get help with food today, where would you go? See what’s available in your community. There is an assumption that anytime you need help, you can get it. But that’s not true.”

Are there gaps? Are there things that could be better? Ask your grocer what happens with the extra food. Really think about where the gaps are in your own community and how you can make a difference. After all, one person making a difference is better than nobody caring at all.