The Bridge Pantry

A Financially Sustainable Model for Reducing Food Waste and Homelessness in Chicago

From Food Waste to Social Rehabilitation: A Public-Private Partnership Model for Addressing Hunger and Homelessness in Chicago

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Abstract

Chicago discards prepared restaurant food every night while thousands of residents sleep unsheltered and more than a third of households report food insecurity. This paper asks whether a restaurant-to-street food recovery operation can be scaled into a financially sustainable social enterprise that reduces both food waste and the harms of homelessness. It uses the case of The Bridge Pantry, a volunteer initiative that has redistributed surplus quick-service restaurant meals to unhoused residents since January 2026 and now collects from eight Nando's locations. Drawing on ReFED's 2024 Illinois surplus estimates, USDA SNAP administrative data, Chicago's 2026 Point-in-Time count, audited financial statements of the Greater Chicago Food Depository, EPA life-cycle factors, and a review of Illinois and Chicago law, the paper builds a ten-year cost-benefit model of a sponsored refrigerated-truck program. Illinois foodservice businesses generated about 455,000 tons of surplus food in 2024 and donated roughly 0.24 percent of it. A base-case truck delivers 93,600 meals a year at $1.44 per meal in cash costs. A three-truck program yields a societal net present value of about $0.45 million at a 3 percent real discount rate (benefit-cost ratio 1.11), with a 78 percent probability of a positive return in Monte Carlo simulation. Sponsorship alone covers about 36 percent of operating costs, so the model is viable only as a blended-finance enterprise. The paper closes with a tiered Illinois edible-food recovery proposal, a SNAP-complementary framing, and a design for reintegration centers and social-enterprise cafés.

Keywords: food recovery; homelessness; social enterprise; cost-benefit analysis; corporate social responsibility; SNAP; Illinois food policy

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Executive Summary

The Bridge Pantry began in January 2026 as two volunteers, a borrowed car, and three to four boxes of unsold food collected each day from two quick-service restaurants and handed out under bridges downtown and in Hyde Park. Since then it has gained a fiscal sponsor, the Greater Chatham Initiative, and a formal partnership with eight Nando's PERi-PERi locations that now release surplus on a weekly evening route from Hyde Park to Lakeview. This paper evaluates whether that model can become a durable, financially sustainable institution, and what public policy would help it and organizations like it scale.

The need is not in doubt. Chicago counted 6,527 people in shelters or on the street on one night in January 2026, including 1,641 people who were unsheltered, about a quarter more than the year before (DFSS 2026). A broader measure that includes people doubled up with others puts the 2024 total at 58,625 (Nelsen, Gray, and Paler-Ponce 2026). About 36 percent of Chicago households were food insecure in June 2026 (GCFD 2026a), and Illinois SNAP enrollment fell 18.8 percent in the twelve months to June 2026 after federal changes to the program (USDA FNA 2026a). At the same time, Illinois restaurants, caterers, hotels, and other foodservice businesses generated an estimated 454,817 tons of surplus food in 2024, of which only 1,072 tons, or 0.24 percent, were donated; nearly all of the rest was landfilled (ReFED 2026a).

Four findings stand out. First, a single sponsored refrigerated truck running six nights a week can plausibly deliver about 93,600 meals a year at a cash cost of $1.44 per meal ($1.63 including capital), which is below the $2.07 per meal that SNAP currently provides an Illinois participant and well below the $3.70 national average cost of a meal (Feeding America 2026a). Second, the advertising-only financing model in the original proposal does not close: a $4,000 monthly sponsorship covers about 36 percent of a truck's operating cost, and full self-sufficiency would require roughly $9,400 per month, about 36 percent of the market value of a dedicated LED billboard truck on comparable hours. The program is therefore best designed as a blended-finance social enterprise combining sponsorship, restaurant CSR partnerships, grants, and individual giving. Third, the program is socially worthwhile under conservative assumptions: the ten-year societal net present value is about $0.45 million at a 3 percent real discount rate, the result remains positive at 7 percent, and the program breaks even as long as each consumed meal is worth at least $1.79 to its recipient. Fourth, the climate case is weaker than commonly claimed; under conservative accounting, landfill methane avoided by one truck is almost exactly offset by its diesel emissions, so the environmental benefit depends on whether rescued meals displace new food production.

The paper recommends a phased path: a lean Stage 2 pilot using a used refrigerated van and volunteer drivers; a formal partnership with the Greater Chicago Food Depository rather than parallel infrastructure; a tiered Illinois edible-food recovery requirement for large generators modeled on California and New York; alignment of Illinois donor-liability law with the 2022 federal Food Donation Improvement Act; expansion of the SNAP Restaurant Meals Program in Chicago as a complement to food recovery; and, once operations are stable, reintegration centers

and a training café built on evidence from Chicago's Inspiration Kitchens and the REDF social enterprise evaluations.

1. Introduction

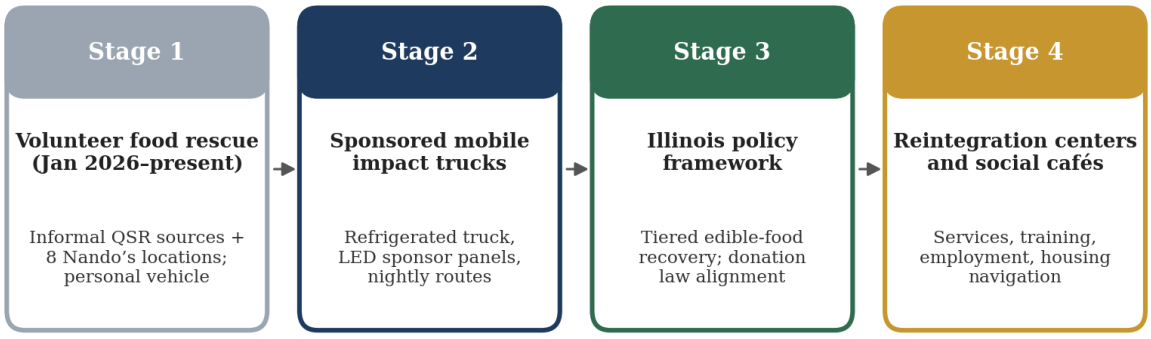
Food waste and homelessness are usually treated as separate problems with separate constituencies. Food waste belongs to environmental agencies, sustainability officers, and waste haulers; homelessness belongs to shelters, outreach teams, and housing authorities. Yet on any evening in downtown Chicago the two problems sit a few blocks apart. Restaurants close with trays of safe, prepared food that will be thrown away within the hour, while people sleeping under Lower Wacker Drive or along the river go without a hot meal. The Bridge Pantry was founded to close that gap with the most direct intervention available: collect the food before it is discarded and deliver it the same night.

Direct food rescue is an old idea, but scaling it is hard. Volunteer operations run on goodwill, private vehicles, and the founders' own money, and they rarely survive the departure of their founders. Large food banks have the logistics but are organized around pantries, shelf-stable inventory, and fixed distribution sites rather than hot meals delivered to people living outside. This paper therefore asks a practical policy question: *Can a restaurant-to-street food recovery system be scaled into a financially self-sustaining enterprise that simultaneously reduces food waste and the harms of homelessness, and what public policies would make that possible?*

The paper makes three contributions. It documents the operating model of a new Chicago food recovery initiative and quantifies its current scale. It builds a transparent ten-year cost-benefit and financial model of the proposed sponsored-truck expansion, including a valuation of the advertising concept at the heart of the original proposal and a Monte Carlo analysis of uncertainty. And it connects that operational model to Illinois policy, proposing specific legal and programmatic changes grounded in comparisons with other states and in current federal law. The analysis is deliberately critical of the original proposal where the evidence requires it, because a plan that survives scrutiny is more useful to funders, partners, and legislators than one that does not.

Section 2 describes the Chicago context and The Bridge Pantry. Section 3 reviews the relevant literature. Section 4 sets out data and methods. Sections 5 through 7 analyze Stage 1 operations, the Stage 2 sponsored-truck model, and the cost-benefit results. Sections 8 and 9 present the Illinois policy proposal and the SNAP framing. Section 10 designs Stage 4 reintegration services, and Sections 11 through 13 cover measurement, implementation, and conclusions.

Figure 1. The four-stage Bridge Pantry model



Source: Author.

2. Background

2.1 Homelessness in Chicago

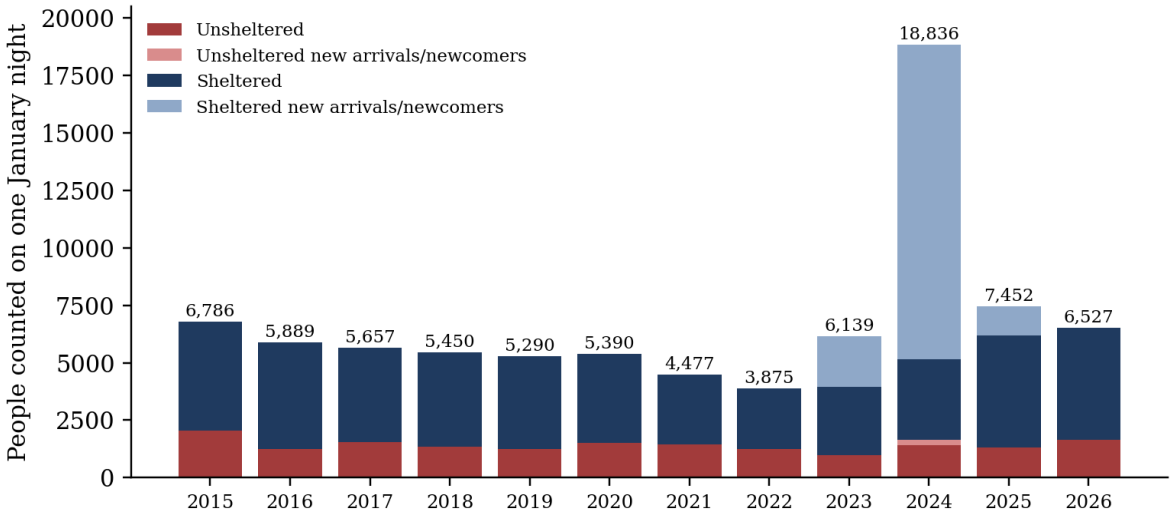
Chicago's official measure of homelessness is the annual Point-in-Time (PIT) count, a one-night census of people in shelters, transitional housing, and places not meant for habitation, conducted under U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) rules. The 2026 count, conducted on January 22 during a wind chill of minus 35 degrees, found 6,527 people: 4,886 in sheltered locations and 1,641 unsheltered (DFSS 2026). The total is down sharply from the 2024 peak of 18,836, but that peak was driven almost entirely by asylum-seeking new arrivals housed in city shelters; once they are excluded, the long-run series is remarkably stable, and unsheltered homelessness rose by about a quarter between 2025 and 2026 (Figure 2). The city notes that the extreme cold pushed many people temporarily indoors onto trains and into police stations, which may have increased the number counted (DFSS 2026).

Two features of the 2026 count matter directly for The Bridge Pantry. The unsheltered population is entirely composed of adult-only households, and 58 percent of unsheltered people were between 35 and 54 years old. And 68 percent of unsheltered people identified as Black, compared with less than a third of the city's population (DFSS 2026). A street-based meal program in the Loop and on the South Side is therefore serving a population that is older, adult, and disproportionately Black, and that is poorly reached by pantries designed for families with kitchens.

The PIT count is a floor, not a ceiling. Because HUD excludes people staying temporarily with friends or relatives, the Chicago Coalition to End Homelessness combines city administrative data with census microdata to estimate how many people experience homelessness over a full year. Its most recent estimate is 58,625 people in 2024, of whom 19,317 were in shelters or on the street and 39,308 were doubled up (Nelsen, Gray, and Paler-Ponce 2026; see also Richard et al. 2022 for the method). The two measures answer different questions, and both are used below: the PIT count

to size the nightly unsheltered population that a mobile meal program reaches directly, and the annual estimate to size the population a reintegration center might eventually serve.

Figure 2. Chicago Point-in-Time count, 2015–2026



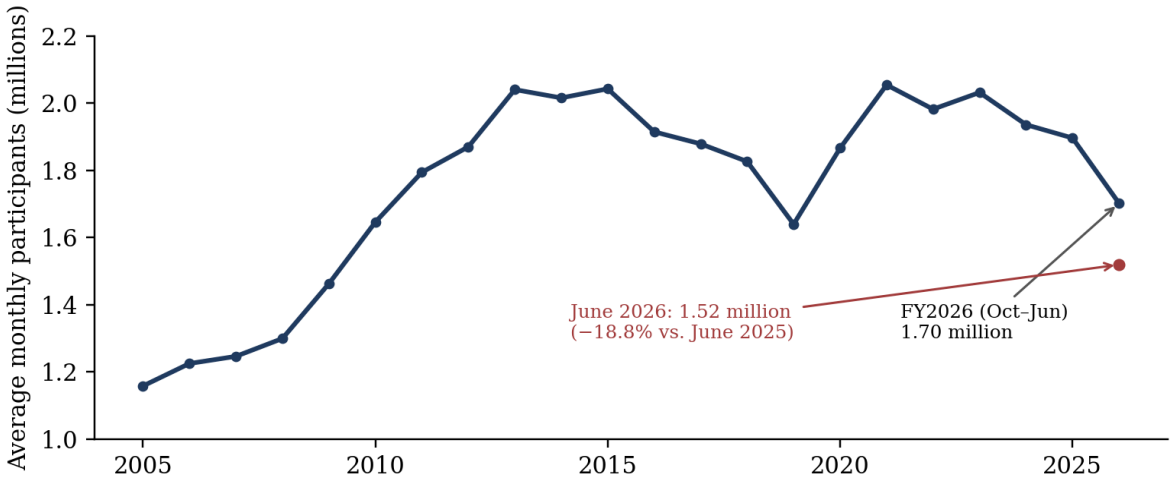
Source: DFSS (2026). "New arrivals" are asylum seekers who arrived between August 2022 and January 2024; "newcomers" arrived between January 2024 and January 2025.

2.2 Food Insecurity and the Retreat of SNAP

Food insecurity in Chicago is high and rising. A representative survey of 1,200 Chicago residents conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago for the Greater Chicago Food Depository found that 36 percent of households, about 417,000, were food insecure in June 2026, and 19 percent had very low food security, the most severe category (GCFD 2026a). Rates reached 51 percent on the South Side, 47 percent among households with children, and 61 percent among Black households. Most adults in food-insecure households were working (56 percent). The same report attributes the pressure to a 22 percent rise in food prices and a 31 percent rise in rents in the Chicago area since June 2021.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) remains the main public defense against hunger, and Illinois has historically used it well: in fiscal year 2022 the state's participation rate among eligible people was estimated at or near 100 percent, compared with 88 percent nationally (Cunnyngham 2025). That changed after the July 2025 federal budget reconciliation law (H.R. 1), which the Food Depository estimates cuts SNAP by $186 billion over ten years and which Feeding America describes as shifting program costs to the states (GCFD 2026a; Feeding America 2026a). Illinois participation fell from 1.87 million people in June 2025 to 1.52 million in June 2026, a drop of 350,633 people, and monthly benefits fell 21 percent to $287 million (USDA FNA 2026a). Because Illinois already enrolled nearly everyone who was eligible, the decline most likely reflects tighter eligibility rather than people failing to apply. The average benefit, about $189 per person per month, equals roughly $2.07 per meal.

Figure 3. Illinois SNAP participation, FY2005–FY2026



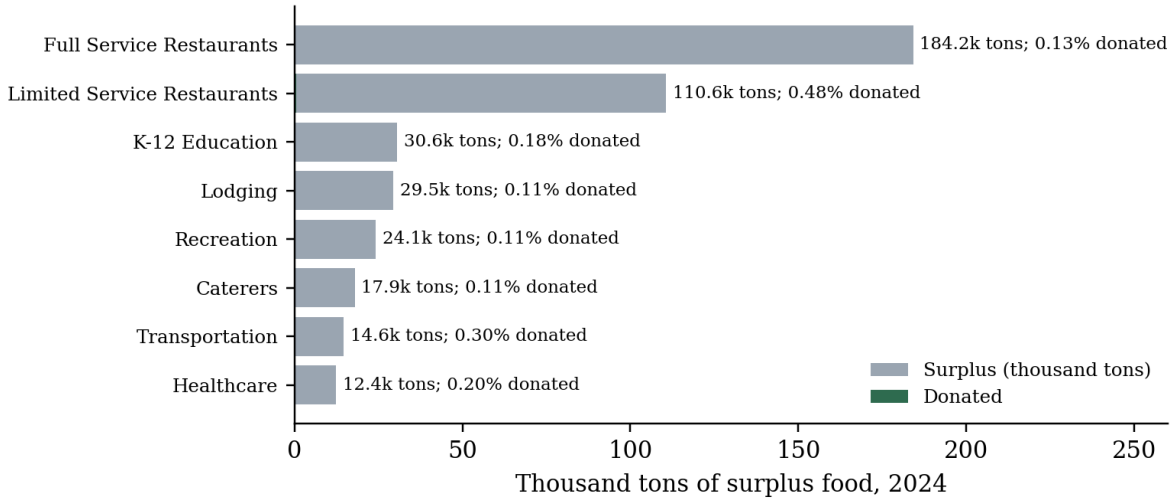
Source: Author's calculations from USDA FNA (2026a; 2026b). FY2026 covers October 2025 through June 2026.

2.3 Surplus Food in Illinois

ReFED's Insights Engine, the most detailed public model of U.S. food surplus, estimates that Illinois generated 2.16 million tons of surplus food in 2024 across farms, manufacturers, retailers, foodservice, and households, enough for an estimated 3.5 billion meals (ReFED 2026a). The foodservice sector, which includes restaurants, caterers, schools, hotels, and hospitals, accounted for 454,817 tons with a retail value of about $5.6 billion. Only 1,072 tons of foodservice surplus were donated, about 0.24 percent, and 99.7 percent was landfilled (Figure 4). Limited-service restaurants, the segment that includes Nando's and the project's other quick-service sources, generated 110,622 tons and donated 0.48 percent. Chicken-focused limited-service restaurants alone generated an estimated 11,131 tons.

Not all of that surplus is recoverable. Nationally, plate waste, food left on customers' plates, accounts for 36 percent of limited-service restaurant surplus and cannot be donated. Overproduction and catering overproduction, which can be, account for 25 and 19 percent respectively (ReFED 2026a). ReFED's methodology also notes that commercial kitchens leave about 4.2 percent of purchased food unused, and that roughly 48 percent of that pre-consumer surplus at limited-service restaurants is overproduction (ReFED 2026b). The recoverable share of restaurant surplus is therefore large in absolute terms but modest relative to total waste, and it is concentrated exactly where The Bridge Pantry operates: cooked, ready-to-eat food at the end of the evening.

Figure 4. Illinois foodservice surplus by segment and share donated, 2024



Source: Author's calculations from ReFED (2026a). Donated tonnage is too small to be visible at this scale.

2.4 The Bridge Pantry

The Bridge Pantry was founded by students at the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy. From January 2026 it collected three to four boxes of unsold food each day from two quick-service restaurants, a fried-chicken chain and a doughnut shop, neither of which is a formal partner, and distributed the food from a volunteer's personal car to unhoused residents under bridges downtown, in Hyde Park, and in neighborhoods adjacent to the Loop. The founders paid all costs themselves until April 2026, when the Greater Chatham Initiative, a Chicago 501(c)(3), became the project's fiscal sponsor. The founders have requested surplus from University of Chicago dining on a daily basis, but the university is not a formal partner; notably, the University is already listed among the Greater Chicago Food Depository's food rescue donors for fiscal year 2025 (GCFD 2025a).

The most significant development is a formal partnership with eight Nando's PERi-PERi restaurants. Under the chain's Harvest Program, The Bridge Pantry collects surplus on a fixed Friday evening route with half-hour pickup windows between 6:00 and 10:00 p.m.: Hyde Park, South Loop, Michigan Avenue, Wabash, Streeterville, West Loop, Clybourn, and Lakeview (The Bridge Pantry 2026). The partnership gives the project a predictable, branded supply chain across the central city and a natural first sponsor for the truck model in Stage 2. The executive proposal shared with Nando's asked each location for eight to ten meals or one tray per pickup, a named staff contact, sealed containers, and a 30- to 45-minute pickup window, at no cost to the restaurant (The Bridge Pantry 2025).

3. Literature Review

3.1 Food Waste and the Environmental Case for Recovery

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency replaced its long-standing Food Recovery Hierarchy in 2023 with the Wasted Food Scale, which ranks eleven pathways by environmental impact using a review of life-cycle studies (US EPA 2023a). Source reduction ranks first, followed by donation and upcycling, because these are the only pathways that can displace new food production. Landfilling ranks near the bottom because food decomposes quickly into methane. EPA cautions, however, that donation is not environmentally free: collection and refrigerated distribution consume energy, and between 4 and 40 percent of donated food may itself go uneaten, depending on the study (US EPA 2023a; Alexander and Smaje 2008). The agency's Waste Reduction Model (WARM) quantifies the difference: landfilling a short ton of mixed food waste emits about 0.50 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent, while preventing a ton of poultry from being produced avoids about 2.45 tons (US EPA 2023b). These factors frame the climate analysis in Section 7 and explain why the result depends heavily on what happens to food demand when rescued meals are eaten.

3.2 Charitable Food Assistance and Its Critics

A substantial literature questions whether charitable food recovery addresses hunger or merely manages it. Poppendieck's (1998) study of the American emergency food system argued that its growth coincided with, and helped legitimize, the retrenchment of public entitlements. Tarasuk and Eakin's (2005) ethnography of Canadian food banks showed that handling unsaleable industry surplus is labor-intensive and depends on volunteers, on recipients' need, and on recipients' lack of rights within the system. A critical synthesis by McIntyre et al. (2016) concluded that food banks are an inadequate response to household food insecurity, and Galli, Cavicchi, and Brunori (2019) modeled the vulnerability of assistance systems that depend on surplus: as retailers reduce waste, the charitable supply shrinks. Lohnes (2021) traces how donor-liability and tax laws have shaped surplus into a regulated charitable commodity.

This critique shapes the design choices in this paper in three ways. The Bridge Pantry is positioned as a complement to SNAP and to housing, not a substitute for either. Its reliance on volunteer labor is treated as a cost and a risk, not a free input. And the policy proposal favors source reduction first and recovery second, consistent with EPA's scale.

3.3 Food Rescue Models and Local Comparators

Operations research on food recovery emphasizes logistics: matching unpredictable supply with need, minimizing time-temperature risk, and routing vehicles efficiently (Lee et al. 2017; Bacon and Baker 2017). The dominant U.S. model is the regional food bank. The Greater Chicago Food Depository, a Feeding America member, distributed the equivalent of more than 96 million meals in fiscal year 2025 through more than 850 partner agencies, with total operating expenses of $244.2 million, of which $157.7 million was the value of donated food (GCFD 2025a). Its cash

operating expenses of $86.5 million imply a cost of about $0.90 per meal, an important efficiency benchmark. Its own reports also show how the system is changing: donated food rose from 28 percent of supply in fiscal 2023 to 42 percent in fiscal 2025, and trucking and freight costs rose from $1.7 million to $2.8 million, while the share of food reaching shelters and mobile programs fell (Table 1).

The Food Depository's partner lists reveal a gap. Its food rescue partners are overwhelmingly grocers and retailers; restaurants such as McDonald's, Panera, and Starbucks appear only in the most recent year, and Chicago restaurant groups appear mainly as cause-related marketing partners rather than as food donors (GCFD 2023a; GCFD 2024a; GCFD 2025a). Prepared-food rescue from restaurants to unsheltered people is therefore a small, underserved niche even within a highly capable regional system. Federal rules reinforce the point: under the Illinois administration of The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), only food banks may operate mobile distribution sites (IDHS 2024), which means a small organization cannot run federally supplied mobile routes on its own but can partner with a food bank that does.

Table 1. Greater Chicago Food Depository operating indicators, FY2023–FY2025

Indicator	FY2023	FY2024	FY2025
Meals distributed (equivalent)	n/a	101 million	96+ million
Total operating expenses	$201.2M	$262.4M	$244.2M
Trucking, freight, and storage	$1.72M	$2.19M	$2.83M
Leased vehicles	29	24	27
Food supply: donated share	28%	33%	42%
Food to group homes and shelters	3%	n/a	2%
Food to mobile programs	5%	n/a	2%
Employees / volunteers	362 / 33,050	368 / 36,061	351 / 36,967

Sources: GCFD (2023a; 2024a; 2025a; 2025b) and Forms 990 for fiscal years 2023 and 2024 (GCFD 2023b; 2024b). "n/a" indicates the item was not reported in comparable form.

3.4 Corporate Social Responsibility and Cause-Related Marketing

The Stage 2 revenue model rests on cause-related marketing, which Varadarajan and Menon (1988) defined as linking a firm's marketing to a contribution to a designated cause. Porter and Kramer (2011) argue more broadly that firms create durable value when social impact and business interest coincide. For restaurants, food donation fits this logic unusually well: it reduces disposal costs, can qualify for an enhanced federal tax deduction available to all business types (ReFED 2026c), produces visible community goodwill, and turns a waste stream into a story. Chicago's restaurant sector already practices cause-related marketing at scale; the Food Depository lists dozens of local restaurant groups as cause marketing partners (GCFD 2025a). The open question, addressed in Section 6, is how much a sponsor will pay for visibility on a truck that serves unhoused residents at night, and whether that payment can be structured without compromising the dignity of the people served or the organization's tax status.

3.5 Social Enterprise, Employment, and Housing First

Stage 4 draws on two bodies of evidence. The first concerns employment social enterprises, businesses that hire people facing barriers to work. A Mathematica evaluation of REDF-funded enterprises in California found that social enterprise employment increased the likelihood of employment a year later by 19 percentage points relative to applicants who were not hired, and the share of workers in stable housing roughly tripled over the year (Rotz, Maxwell, and Dunn 2015; REDF 2015). Chicago's Inspiration Corporation operates Inspiration Kitchens, a full-service social enterprise restaurant that trains about 75 people a year; its restaurant revenue covers about 10 percent of the training program's operating costs, and it uses in-kind donations from local restaurants and grocers (Inspiration Corporation 2026). The lesson is that a café is a training platform that needs subsidy, not a profit center.

The second concerns housing. Randomized evidence shows that Housing First programs, which provide permanent housing without requiring treatment or sobriety first, keep chronically homeless people housed at higher rates than treatment-first programs (Tsemberis, Gulcur, and Nakae 2004), and that supportive housing reduces public spending on shelters, hospitals, and jails enough to offset much of its cost (Culhane, Metraux, and Hadley 2002). Food insecurity itself is associated with worse health and higher health care use (Gundersen and Ziliak 2015). A food program cannot end homelessness, but it can be a reliable point of contact that connects people to housing systems that can.

4. Data and Methods

The analysis combines four types of evidence. Program data come from the founders' operating reports, the Nando's Harvest Program route sheet, and the executive proposal shared with restaurant partners (The Bridge Pantry 2025; 2026). Contextual data come from Chicago's 2026 PIT count (DFSS 2026), the CCEH annual estimate (Nelsen, Gray, and Paler-Ponce 2026), the 2026 Hunger in Chicago survey (GCFD 2026a), Map the Meal Gap (Feeding America 2026a; 2026b), USDA SNAP administrative tables for fiscal years 2005 through 2026 (USDA FNA 2026a; 2026b), and ReFED's 2024 state-level surplus model (ReFED 2026a). Benchmark financial data come from the Food Depository's audited statements and Forms 990 for fiscal years 2023 through 2025. Legal analysis covers the Illinois Good Samaritan Food Donor Act, the Illinois Vehicle Code, the federal Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act as amended in 2022, Chicago's mobile food and sign rules, and the TEFAP distribution manual. Emission factors come from EPA's Waste Reduction Model, version 16 (US EPA 2023b; 2023c).

Stage 1 volumes are based on the founders' reports of boxes collected. They are converted to meals using 8 meal-equivalents per box and 10 meals per Nando's location per weekly pickup, consistent with the partner request, and to weight using 1.2 pounds per meal. The weight conversion matches the ratios implied by ReFED's Illinois limited-service restaurant estimates (1.21 pounds per meal) and the Food Depository's reporting (about 1.2 pounds per meal). Stage 2 capital and operating costs are planning estimates assembled from published vendor rate ranges,

Chicago licensing fees, EIA fuel prices, the city minimum wage, and the Food Depository's fringe-benefit ratio. They are summarized in Appendix B and should be replaced with vendor quotes before procurement.

The cost-benefit analysis follows OMB Circular A-4 of 2003, which was reinstated in February 2025 when the 2023 revision was rescinded (OMB 2003; OMB 2025). Results are reported in constant 2026 dollars over a ten-year horizon at the circular's 3 and 7 percent real discount rates, with a sensitivity case at the 1.6 percent ten-year real Treasury rate from OMB Circular A-94, Appendix C (OMB 2026). The analysis takes the perspective of Chicago and Illinois society and measures the program incrementally against the Stage 1 status quo. Grants and donations are transfers and are excluded from benefits; sponsorship payments are treated as purchases of advertising services, so the sponsor's benefit is valued at the price paid, a lower bound on its willingness to pay. Volunteer time is costed at Chicago's July 2026 minimum wage of $17.05 per hour as an opportunity cost (City of Chicago 2026c). Health and public-service savings are not monetized because no credible local estimate exists for a meal program alone; instead the paper reports a break-even value. Uncertainty is analyzed with one-way sensitivity tests and a 10,000-draw Monte Carlo simulation using triangular distributions over the ranges in Appendix A.

5. Stage 1: Current Operations and Scaling Food Recovery

Stage 1 is a collect-and-distribute model. Food is identified at the end of service, packed by restaurant staff in sealed containers, collected within a short window, sorted into hot, cooked-chilled, and uncooked items, and distributed the same evening, with additional items routed to community refrigerators and partner food banks (The Bridge Pantry 2025). Distribution sites are the places unhoused people actually are: underpasses and lower-level roadways downtown, transit corridors, and encampments in Hyde Park and areas adjacent to the Loop.

Table 2 summarizes current scale. The two informal restaurant sources supply about 336 meal-equivalents a week, or about 13,400 since January 2026, and the Nando's route adds about 80 per week. On an annual basis, the current operation moves about 21,600 meals and 13 short tons of food that would otherwise be landfilled, at a cash cost of roughly $8,200 a year, or $0.38 per meal, borne until recently by the founders. The low cash cost reflects about 2,200 hours of unpaid volunteer time, which is the binding constraint on growth.

Table 2. Stage 1 operating baseline (annualized)

Item	Value	Basis
Informal QSR sources	336 meals/week	7 boxes/day × 6 days × 8 meals/box
Nando's Harvest Program (8 locations)	80 meals/week	10 meals per location, Friday route
Annual meals distributed	21,632	416 meals/week × 52
Food diverted from landfill	13.0 short tons	1.2 lb per meal
Vehicle miles	10,920	35 miles/day, personal car
Cash costs (fuel, packaging, misc.)	$8,221	Gasoline $4.15/gal; packaging $0.25/meal

Item	Value	Basis
Cash cost per meal	$0.38	
Volunteer hours	2,184	2 volunteers × 3.5 hours × 312 nights

Sources: Founders' operating reports; The Bridge Pantry (2026); EIA (2026b) for the Midwest gasoline price of October 12, 2026.

Three constraints limit Stage 1. The first is supply volatility: informal sources can stop at any time, and the Nando's route operates once a week, so nightly supply depends on the least formal partners. The second is cold-chain capacity: a passenger car cannot hold food at safe temperatures for long, which limits route length and the types of food accepted. The third is legal exposure. Illinois law protects restaurants and other food producers that donate prepared food in good faith to a nonprofit, and it protects the receiving nonprofit if it reasonably inspects the food at the time of donation and finds it apparently fit for consumption (745 ILCS 50/2.10, 2.11, 3, 4). The 2022 federal Food Donation Improvement Act adds a federal floor of protection and allows restaurants, as qualified direct donors, to donate directly to individuals (Food Donation Improvement Act of 2022). In practice, the protection depends on documentation, so a simple pickup log recording time, temperature, and condition is the single most valuable compliance step Stage 1 can take now. If the project passes food on to community refrigerators or other feeding programs, Illinois also requires food banks that supply such programs to file an annual list with the local health department for recall alerts (410 ILCS 625/3.2; IDPH n.d.).

6. Stage 2: Financial Sustainability through Impact Marketing

6.1 The Sponsored Truck

Stage 2 replaces the personal car with a refrigerated box truck that collects from partner restaurants on an evening route, holds food at safe temperatures, and distributes it at fixed nightly stops. The truck's exterior carries permanently mounted LED panels and a sponsor wrap, turning the vehicle into a moving acknowledgment of the restaurants and companies that fund it. The base case assumes six nights a week, 300 meals a night, a 55-mile route, a 16-foot diesel truck with a refrigeration unit, and a paid driver-coordinator working seven-hour shifts with one volunteer. The capital package is estimated at $140,000: $95,000 for the truck, $40,000 for the LED display system, and $5,000 for branding (Appendix B). Vendors list complete LED billboard trucks at about $50,000 to $150,000 to purchase (Can't Miss US 2025), and Chicago operators rent dedicated LED trucks at $1,200 to $1,400 per day (Boost Outdoor Media 2026).

Table 3. Annual operating budget per truck, base case (2026 dollars)

Line item	Annual cost	Basis
Diesel fuel (2,652 gallons)	$13,260	17,160 miles at 10 mpg + reefer; $5.00/gal
Driver-coordinator wages and fringe	$60,733	2,184 hours × $22.00 × 1.264
Commercial insurance	$8,000	City minimum $350,000 coverage
Maintenance, reefer, and LED service	$7,290	$0.25/mile + $3,000 equipment
Licenses, permits, GPS, food safety	$1,800	Mobile food dispenser license $700/2 yrs

Line item	Annual cost	Basis
Commissary and secure parking	$6,000	$500 per month
Food-safe packaging and supplies	$18,720	$0.20 per meal
Administration (12%)	$13,896	Share of direct costs
Fiscal sponsor fee (7% of contributions)	$5,460	Pending sponsor agreement
Total cash operating cost	**$135,159**	**$1.44 per meal**

Sources: Author's model; EIA (2026a); City of Chicago (2026a; 2026c); GCFD (2025a) for the fringe-benefit ratio. Capital cost of $140,000 is annualized separately at $17,000 (seven-year life, 15 percent salvage).

6.2 What Is a Sponsorship Worth?

The original proposal assumed $4,000 a month in advertising revenue per truck, or $480,000 a year for a ten-truck fleet. That figure can be tested against the market. A dedicated LED truck in Chicago costs $1,200 to $1,400 for an 8- to 10-hour day on a route the advertiser chooses (Boost Outdoor Media 2026). Pro-rated to a seven-hour evening shift, the Bridge Pantry truck offers about $1,000 of equivalent exposure per night, or roughly $26,000 a month over 26 operating nights. But a sponsor does not choose the route, much of the time is spent parked at distribution stops or traveling after dark, and the audience is partly residential. A discount of 60 to 90 percent from dedicated-truck prices is therefore realistic. At $4,000 a month, the base case prices the sponsorship at about 15 percent of dedicated-equivalent value, which appears achievable for a single anchor sponsor such as Nando's that values the association more than the impressions.

The problem is not the price but the arithmetic. As Table 4 shows, a $4,000 sponsorship covers about 36 percent of a truck's operating cost; with $20,000 in restaurant CSR contributions and $10,000 in individual giving, total contributed revenue covers 58 percent and leaves an annual gap of about $57,000 per truck. Full operating self-sufficiency would require about $9,400 a month in sponsorship, roughly 36 percent of dedicated-equivalent value, which in practice means selling two or three sponsor slots per truck. The ten-truck vision would cost about $1.35 million a year to operate against $480,000 in sponsorship. The model is viable, but as a blended-finance enterprise rather than an advertising business.

Table 4. Sponsorship scenarios per truck

Scenario	Sponsorship / month	Contributed revenue	Operating coverage	Annual gap	Program NPV (3%)
Low	$1,500	$48,000	36%	−$85,059	−$0.18M
Base	$4,000	$78,000	58%	−$57,159	$0.45M
High (two to three slots)	$8,000	$126,000	91%	−$12,519	$1.47M
Break-even	$9,423	$143,076	100%	$0	—

Contributed revenue includes $20,000 in restaurant CSR contributions and $10,000 in individual donations per truck in all scenarios. Program NPV is the ten-year societal net present value of the three-truck program described in Section 7.

A leaner configuration narrows the gap considerably. Using a used refrigerated van, a smaller LED package, volunteer drivers, and a paid part-time coordinator, capital falls to about $85,000 and annual cash costs to about $91,000 for an estimated 68,640 meals, or $1.33 per meal. Contributed revenue then covers 86 percent of operating costs, and the program's ten-year societal

NPV rises to about $0.65 million with a benefit-cost ratio of 1.22. The lean configuration is therefore the recommended Stage 2 pilot.

6.3 Legal and Ethical Design Constraints

Four constraints shape how the truck and its sponsorships must be designed. First, **tax status.** Paid advertising sold by a 501(c)(3) can be taxable unrelated business income, while a qualified sponsorship payment, an acknowledgment of the sponsor's name and logo without comparative claims, prices, or calls to action, generally is not (26 U.S.C. § 513(i); 26 C.F.R. § 1.513-4). The Food Depository, for example, reports no advertising income on its unrelated business income return (GCFD 2025c). Sponsor content on the truck should therefore be acknowledgment-only, a requirement the fiscal sponsor's accountant should confirm before any agreement is signed.

Second, **vehicle law.** The Illinois Vehicle Code prohibits operating a vehicle with a video screen that is visible to the driver while driving, but exempts permanently installed screens whose moving images are not visible to the driver (625 ILCS 5/12-604.1). It also prohibits flashing lights except as expressly authorized and contains a broad catch-all against other unauthorized lighting (625 ILCS 5/12-212), and it restricts red, white, and blue flashing lights associated with emergency vehicles (625 ILCS 5/12-215, 12-215.1). Panels should be permanently mounted on the sides and rear, display static or slowly changing content while moving, and never show red light toward the front. Because the catch-all provision is broad and mobile billboard operators' claims are not legal authority, legal review should precede purchase.

Third, **licensing.** Chicago treats food pantries that meet three criteria as charitable food dispensing establishments exempt from the retail food license (City of Chicago 2026d), but a truck that dispenses prepared food falls under the city's mobile food rules, which require a commissary, a GPS device, daily servicing, insurance of at least $350,000, and no time-temperature-sensitive food stored in a parked vehicle (CDPH 2019; City of Chicago 2026a). Whether a free distribution vehicle needs a mobile food dispenser license is unresolved and should be settled in writing with the Chicago Department of Public Health. Off-premise advertising signs always require a permit under the municipal code (City of Chicago 2026b), although it is not clear that signs on a moving vehicle are covered.

Fourth, **dignity.** A brightly lit sponsor screen parked at a distribution stop can turn people receiving help into an audience for someone else's brand. The original proposal's idea of real-time "impact" counters makes this risk concrete. The program should adopt a written sponsor policy: no images of recipients without informed consent, displays dimmed or switched to neutral messaging during distribution, and impact reporting confined to aggregate figures published online. This protects recipients and, not incidentally, protects sponsors from reputational risk.

7. Cost-Benefit Analysis

7.1 Benefits and Costs

The program modeled here is a fleet of one truck in year 1, two in year 2, and three from year 3 through year 10, a cap that reflects the realistic supply of partner restaurants in the central city. Each truck delivers 93,600 meals a year. Benefits have three parts. The largest is the value of food consumed: after assuming that 15 percent of rescued meals go uneaten, the midpoint of EPA's range, each consumed meal is valued at $2.07, the current Illinois SNAP benefit per meal, with sensitivity values of $0.90 (the Food Depository's cash cost per meal) and $3.70 (the national average meal cost). The second is the value of advertising services to sponsors, measured by the price paid. The third is net greenhouse gas reductions, valued at the $262 per ton of carbon dioxide equivalent implied by ReFED's 2024 estimates (ReFED 2026a). In 2025 the federal government withdrew its interagency social cost of greenhouse gas estimates (Executive Order 14154 disbanded the interagency working group and withdrew its estimates), so a zero value is tested as a sensitivity. Costs include all cash operating costs, capital purchases and replacement at the end of a seven-year life, and the opportunity cost of volunteer time. Benefits and costs of the Stage 1 status quo are subtracted.

7.2 Results

The program passes a conventional cost-benefit test, though not by a wide margin (Table 5). At a 3 percent real discount rate, the present value of benefits is $4.65 million and of costs $4.20 million, for a net present value of $0.45 million and a benefit-cost ratio of 1.11. The result is stable across discount rates because most costs and benefits occur in the same years. Net annual flows are negative in the first three years as trucks are purchased and positive thereafter (Appendix C).

Table 5. Ten-year societal cost-benefit results, three-truck program

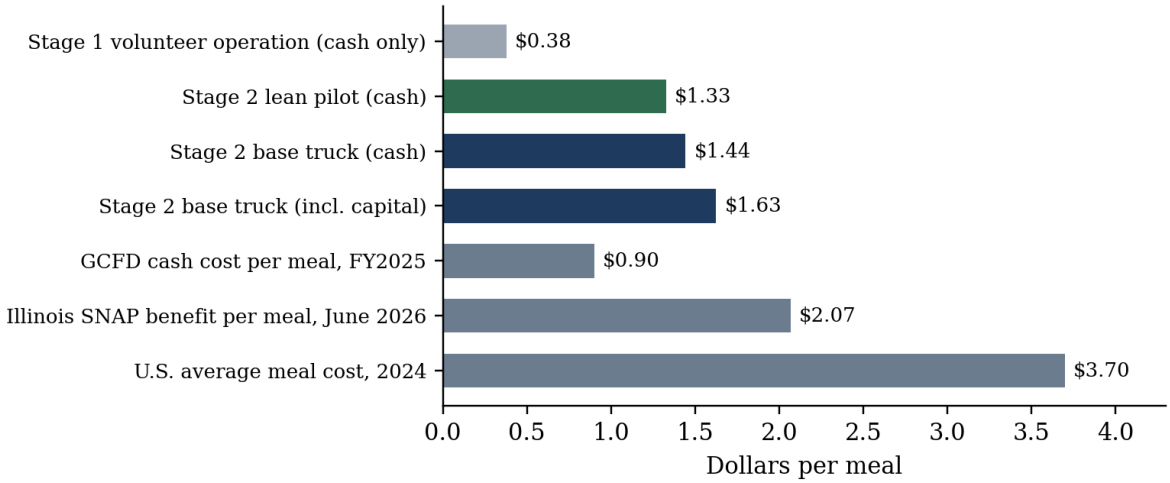
Discount rate (real)	PV benefits	PV costs	Net present value	Benefit-cost ratio
1.6% (A-94 ten-year rate)	$5.05M	$4.54M	$0.51M	1.11
3% (A-4)	$4.65M	$4.20M	$0.45M	1.11
7% (A-4)	$3.73M	$3.40M	$0.33M	1.10

Source: Author's model. Values are incremental to the Stage 1 status quo in constant 2026 dollars and include terminal salvage value of the fleet in year 10.

The climate result deserves emphasis because it runs against the usual framing of food recovery. Each truck diverts about 56 short tons of food a year from landfill, avoiding roughly 28 tons of carbon dioxide equivalent at WARM's landfill factor. But the truck and its refrigeration unit burn about 2,650 gallons of diesel, emitting about 27 tons. Under conservative accounting the net climate benefit is close to zero. It becomes meaningful only if rescued meals displace food that would otherwise have been produced; if half do, net avoided emissions rise to about 70 tons per truck per year. This is consistent with EPA's caution that donation carries energy costs (US EPA 2023a), and it implies that the program's case rests on feeding people, not on climate. It also points

to a cheap improvement: a shorter, denser route or an electric van would make the climate benefit robust.

Figure 5. Cost per meal: The Bridge Pantry compared with public and market benchmarks

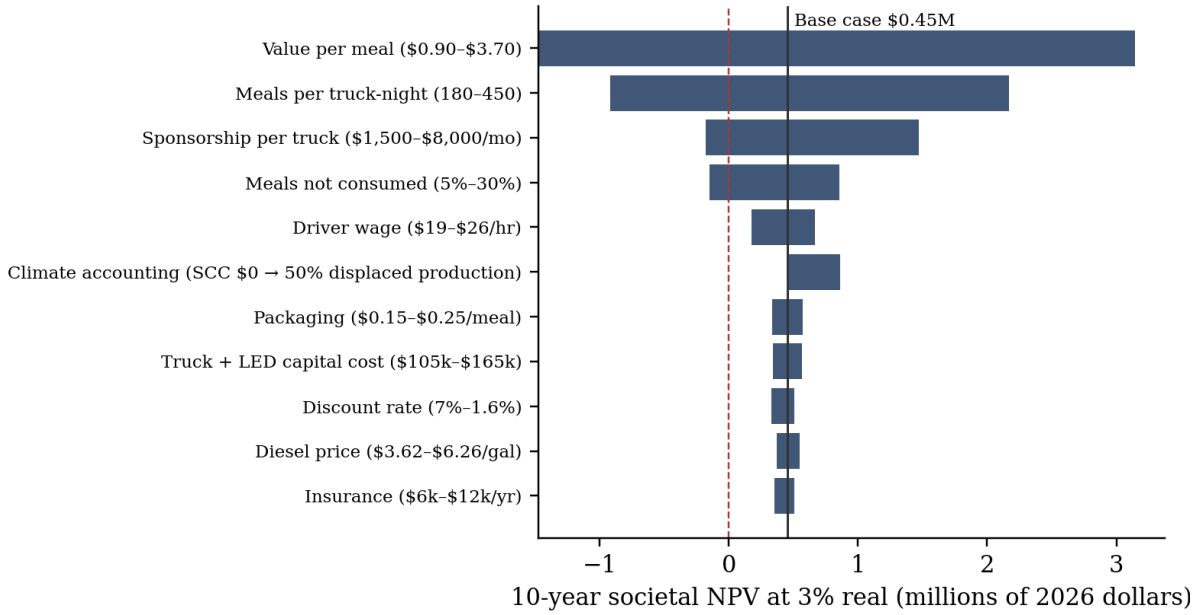


Sources: Author's model; GCFD (2025a); USDA FNA (2026a); Feeding America (2026a).

7.3 Sensitivity and Uncertainty

Figure 6 shows how the net present value responds to each assumption. Two parameters dominate: the value assigned to a meal and the number of meals each truck delivers per night. At 180 meals a night, the program loses money for society unless sponsorship is high; at 450, it is strongly positive under any sponsorship assumption. The share of food that goes uneaten and the sponsorship price are next in importance. Fuel prices, insurance, capital costs, and the discount rate matter much less. The practical implication is that the program's success will be determined by partner supply and distribution reliability, not by financial engineering.

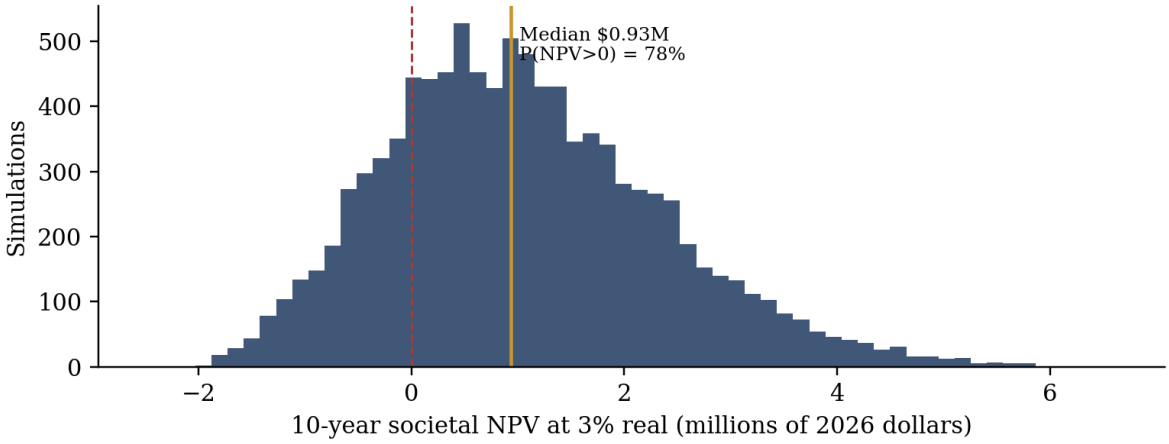
Figure 6. Sensitivity of program net present value to key assumptions



Source: Author's model. Each bar shows the NPV when one parameter moves from its low to its high value with all others at base values.

The Monte Carlo simulation draws all major parameters at once from triangular distributions (Figure 7). The median NPV is $0.93 million, the mean benefit-cost ratio is 1.24, and the program has a positive NPV in 78 percent of draws, with a 90 percent interval from −$0.86 million to $3.39 million. A further way to read the result is the break-even meal value: the program's NPV is positive as long as each consumed meal is worth at least $1.79 to its recipient, which is below the $2.07 per meal that SNAP provides and less than half the $3.70 average cost of a meal. Because health and public-service savings are excluded, these results are conservative; even small reductions in emergency room use among frequent users would raise the benefit-cost ratio.

Figure 7. Monte Carlo distribution of program net present value (10,000 draws)



Source: Author's model.

8. Stage 3: An Illinois Edible-Food Recovery Framework

8.1 Lessons from Other States

No U.S. state requires restaurants of every size to donate food. California and New York are the leading examples of states that require some generators to donate edible food and recycle the remainder (ReFED 2026c). California's SB 1383 requires covered commercial generators, including large grocery stores, food distributors, restaurants with 250 or more seats or more than 5,000 square feet, hotels with on-site food facilities and 200 or more rooms, large venues and events, and large health facilities, to donate edible food to recovery organizations under written agreements, and it set a statewide goal of recovering at least 20 percent of currently disposed edible food for people to eat by 2025 (ReFED 2026e). California pairs the mandate with incentives, including a tax credit worth 15 percent of the wholesale value of food donated to food banks by non-retail producers and processors and a credit for half the cost of transporting donated crops, and ReFED rates its liability protection as strong because state law also protects wholesome past-date food (ReFED 2026e). Massachusetts and Vermont took a different route, requiring organic waste to be separated and recycled rather than mandating donation: Massachusetts applies the rule to any non-residential entity producing more than half a ton of organic waste a week, and Vermont applies it to every person, business, and government entity in the state (ReFED 2026d; ReFED 2026g). The two states also illustrate how much guidance matters. Massachusetts's food safety guidance for donors is rated weak, while Vermont has issued state guidance on storage, labeling, and tracking for donations and school share tables; unclear safety rules are a leading reason businesses decline to donate (ReFED 2026d; ReFED 2026g).

Table 6. Policy comparison: Illinois and comparator states

Policy element	California	Vermont	Massachusetts	Illinois (current)	Proposed Illinois
Edible food donation required	Yes, covered generators	No	No	No	Yes, tiered (2028, 2030)
Organic waste recycling requirement	Yes (strong)	Yes, all generators (strong)	>½ ton/week (moderate)	No	Phase 2, after donation tiers
Donor liability beyond federal floor	Past-date food (strong)	Federal floor (moderate)	Past-date food (strong)	State act, 745 ILCS 50	Align with FDIA
State law protects cost-recovery pricing	—	—	—	No; § 2.07 excludes sellers	Yes
State tax incentives for donation	Food bank and transport credits	None	Farm credit, $5,000 cap	—	Transport credit
Donor food safety guidance	Multiple guides (moderate)	State guidance (moderate)	Weak	—	IDPH prepared-food guidance

Sources: ReFED (2026c; 2026d; 2026e; 2026g); 745 ILCS 50; Food Donation Improvement Act of 2022. Ratings in parentheses are ReFED Policy Finder ratings. "—" indicates the item is outside the scope of the sources reviewed.

8.2 The Proposal

The paper proposes an Illinois Edible Food Recovery Act built in four parts. **Tier 1 (2028)** would require large generators with predictable surplus, including caterers above a revenue threshold, hotels with 200 or more rooms and on-site food service, stadiums and convention venues, hospitals, and colleges and universities with dining operations above a meal-count threshold, to maintain written agreements with food recovery organizations and report donated volumes annually. **Tier 2 (2030)** would extend the requirement to large restaurants using California's seat or floor-area thresholds and to restaurant chains above a location count. Small independent restaurants would be exempt but eligible for incentives. Organizations such as The Bridge Pantry would serve as registered logistics partners, and the state would publish a public registry matching generators with recovery organizations.

Liability alignment. Illinois law already protects restaurants and prepared food, but its definition of a protected nonprofit excludes organizations that sell donated food (745 ILCS 50/2.07). Federal law since 2023 protects nonprofits that charge a Good Samaritan reduced price no greater than the cost of handling and distribution, and protects restaurants and higher education institutions that donate directly to individuals (Food Donation Improvement Act of 2022; ReFED 2026f). Illinois should amend its act to match, which would allow social-enterprise cafés and community grocery models to recover their handling costs without losing state protection.

Safety guidance and infrastructure. The Illinois Department of Public Health should issue plain-language guidance on donating time-temperature-controlled prepared food, including approved cooling, labeling, and transport practices, so that donor uncertainty does not undo the mandate. A targeted tax credit for the cost of transporting donated prepared food, modeled on California's credit for transporting donated crops (ReFED 2026e), would reward restaurants and caterers that deliver rather than wait for pickup. The state should also fund refrigerated vehicles, cold storage, and data systems for recovery organizations through competitive grants, which would position Illinois to use federal funds if pending legislation such as the Zero Food Waste Act of 2025 passes (ReFED 2026c). Illinois's senior senator is a lead sponsor of the bipartisan Reduce Food Loss and Waste Act of 2025, which offers a natural federal-state partnership (ReFED 2026c). Finally, the state or city should clarify how the Vehicle Code's lighting provisions apply to permanently mounted, non-flashing sponsor displays on nonprofit vehicles.

8.3 Statewide Impact

Table 7 estimates what the framework could achieve. If the share of Illinois foodservice surplus that is recovered rose from 0.24 percent to 5 percent, a level well within the overproduction share of restaurant surplus, the state would recover about 22,700 tons a year, enough for 37.9 million meals or about 729,000 meals a week. That is roughly seven times the original proposal's statewide target of 100,000 meals a week. It would also require logistics capacity equivalent to about 400 Bridge Pantry trucks, which is why the framework must be paired with infrastructure funding and with the Food Depository and other food banks rather than relying on small organizations alone.

Table 7. Statewide recovery scenarios for Illinois foodservice surplus

Share of foodservice surplus recovered	Tons per year	Meals per year	Meals per week	Truck-equivalents	Landfill CO_2e avoided (t)
Current (0.24%)	1,072	1.8M	34,000	19	536
2%	9,096	15.2M	291,500	162	4,548
5%	22,741	37.9M	728,900	405	11,371
10%	45,482	75.8M	1,457,700	810	22,741

Source: Author's calculations from ReFED (2026a), 2024 Illinois foodservice surplus of 454,817 tons. Meals at 1.2 lb each; truck-equivalents at 93,600 meals per truck per year; emissions use the WARM landfill factor only.

9. Complementing, Not Replacing, SNAP

The original proposal suggested redirecting part of SNAP toward housing and replacing the food it buys with recovered surplus. That idea should be set aside, for legal, empirical, and ethical reasons. SNAP benefits are restricted by federal law to food purchases, so redirecting them to rent would require an act of Congress. Recovered food is unpredictable in quantity and type, so it cannot provide the steady, chosen diet that SNAP provides. And the 2025 federal changes have already reduced Illinois SNAP enrollment by about a fifth; presenting food recovery as a substitute would invite further cuts precisely when need is rising. The literature on charitable food is clear that it works best as a supplement to public entitlements (Poppendieck 1998; McIntyre et al. 2016).

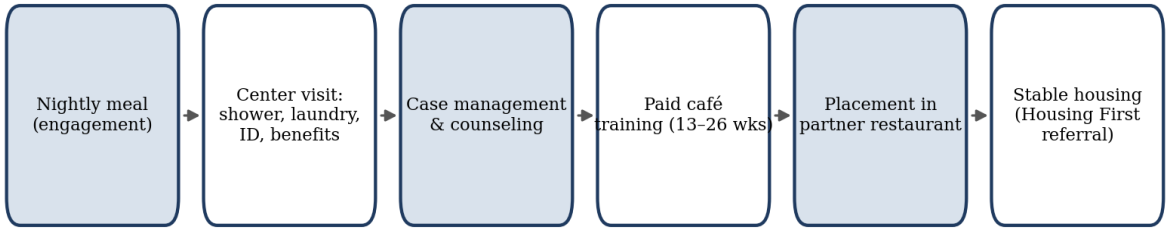
Food recovery can complement SNAP in three concrete ways. First, it is cheap per meal. At $1.33 to $1.44 per meal in cash costs, recovered prepared meals deliver food value comparable to SNAP's $2.07 per meal at a lower public cost, which justifies state co-investment in recovery infrastructure as a hunger program in its own right. Second, it reaches people SNAP serves poorly. Unsheltered adults often cannot store or cook groceries, which is why Illinois allows homeless SNAP households to buy hot meals at participating restaurants through the Restaurant Meals Program. Participating restaurants give a 10 percent discount and may not charge tax (IDHS 2026), and the state expanded the program to 50 restaurants in 16 counties in October 2026 (WSIU 2026). Recruiting partner restaurants such as Nando's into the program in the Loop and on the South Side would give the same people both free recovered meals and the ability to spend their own benefits on hot food. Third, a recovery program is a SNAP enrollment channel: TEFAP rules already require distribution sites to accept self-declared homelessness and encourage referral to SNAP (IDHS 2024), and outreach workers on a nightly route can help people keep benefits under new work requirements.

The research questions in the original outline can therefore be answered directly. The cost per meal delivered is about $1.44 in the base case and $1.33 in the lean case. Each dollar of program cash spending delivers about 0.69 to 0.75 meals and, after allowing for food that goes uneaten, about $1.22 to $1.32 of food value at SNAP prices. The defensible claim is not that food recovery saves SNAP money, but that it stretches the public dollar furthest for the people SNAP reaches least.

10. Stage 4: Reintegration Centers and Social-Enterprise Cafés

Once Stage 2 operations are stable, the nightly route becomes something more valuable than a meal service: a trusted, predictable point of contact with people who are otherwise hard to reach. Stage 4 uses that trust to build a pathway out of homelessness (Figure 8). The proposed reintegration center would be open to everyone, with no religious requirement and no discrimination, offering showers, laundry, mail and identification services, benefits enrollment, counseling, and case management. Church-based outreach centers have long provided these services in Chicago; the design here borrows their low-barrier hospitality while keeping any religious activity separate in time and place and voluntary, as federal rules require of organizations receiving USDA foods (7 C.F.R. § 16.4(b); IDHS 2024).

Figure 8. The Stage 4 pathway from a nightly meal to stable housing



Source: Author.

The attached café would serve as a paid training site, staffed partly by program participants, with placement in partner restaurants as the goal. The evidence supports the model but tempers expectations about its finances. Social enterprise employment improves job retention and housing stability (Rotz, Maxwell, and Dunn 2015), but Inspiration Kitchens, the closest Chicago analogue, covers only about 10 percent of its training program's costs from restaurant revenue (Inspiration Corporation 2026). The café should be budgeted as a subsidized workforce program, with partner restaurants such as Nando's contributing training slots and hiring commitments as part of their CSR partnership. Legally, rescued food can be served free in the café or sold only at a price that covers handling costs, which the federal law permits but current Illinois law does not protect; until the state act is amended, the café's sales menu should use purchased ingredients (745 ILCS 50/2.07; Food Donation Improvement Act of 2022). Finally, the center should not try to become a housing provider. Its job is to connect people to Chicago's coordinated entry system, which housed 13 percent more people in 2025 than in 2024 (DFSS 2026), and to Housing First programs with the strongest evidence of keeping people housed (Tsemberis, Gulcur, and Nakae 2004).

11. Impact Measurement Framework

Credibility with sponsors, funders, and legislators depends on measurement. Table 8 sets out a compact dashboard. Operational metrics should be recorded nightly from the pickup log and route data the truck's GPS already requires, financial metrics monthly, and outcome metrics

quarterly through case management records. The most important discipline is weighing food at pickup, which replaces the conversion assumptions used in this paper with measured data within the first month of Stage 2.

Table 8. Impact metrics dashboard

Domain	Metric	Source	Year 1 target (lean pilot)
Environmental	Pounds rescued; landfill diversion	Scale at pickup	82,000 lb
Environmental	Net CO_2e avoided (incl. vehicle)	WARM factors, fuel log	Positive net
Social	Meals served; unique people reached	Route tallies	68,000 meals
Social	Referrals to SNAP, ID, coordinated entry	Case log	150 referrals
Social	Training enrollments and job placements	Café records (Stage 4)	Baseline year
Financial	Cash cost per meal	Accounts	≤ $1.40
Financial	Operating coverage (contributed ÷ cost)	Accounts	≥ 80%
Compliance	Pickups with temperature record	Pickup log	100%

12. Implementation Roadmap and Risks

Table 9 sets out a realistic sequence. It is slower than the original 18-month roadmap because procurement, licensing, and sponsor agreements take time, and because each stage should begin only when the previous one is producing reliable data.

Table 9. Implementation roadmap

Period	Milestone
Q4 2026	Pickup log and food-weighing protocol; formal agreements with informal sources; written guidance request to CDPH; legal review of display design and sponsorship terms
Q1–Q2 2027	Lean pilot vehicle; Nando's anchor sponsorship (acknowledgment-only); add 4–6 partner restaurants to reach nightly pickups; partnership discussions with the Food Depository
Q3 2027–Q2 2028	Full-size refrigerated truck if pilot exceeds 220 meals/night and 80% operating coverage; second sponsor slot; begin Restaurant Meals Program recruitment
2028	Policy advocacy for the Illinois Edible Food Recovery Act and liability alignment; second truck
2029–2030	Reintegration center and training café in partnership with an existing service provider; third truck

The main risks follow from the analysis. Supply risk, the possibility that partner surplus shrinks as restaurants reduce waste, is the most serious and is partly a sign of success; it argues for a diversified partner base and for measuring source reduction as an outcome. Labor risk, dependence on a few committed volunteers, is addressed by the paid coordinator role. Financial risk is addressed by blended revenue and by not purchasing the full-size truck until the pilot proves demand. Legal risk is addressed by acknowledgment-only sponsorship, permanent non-flashing displays, written health department guidance, and documented food handling. Reputational risk is addressed by the dignity policy in Section 6.3. Finally, the program depends on access to the places unhoused people stay. Across the country, cities have restricted sharing food with people experiencing homelessness through permit and fee requirements for using public property,

mandates to comply with food-safety codes, and neighborhood pressure; at least 21 cities adopted such restrictions between January 2013 and late 2014 alone (NCH 2014), and the National Homelessness Law Center tracks these measures alongside broader criminalization laws in 187 cities (NCH and NLCHP 2010; NHLC 2026). Street distribution is exactly the activity these rules target, so the program should coordinate stops with city outreach teams, document its food-safety practices, which answers the most common regulatory objection, and treat any future local restriction as a policy issue to contest through advocacy rather than an operational surprise.

13. Conclusion

The Bridge Pantry demonstrates that the distance between surplus and need in Chicago can be measured in blocks and minutes. The question this paper asked was whether that insight can become a durable institution. The answer is a qualified yes. A sponsored, refrigerated food recovery truck can deliver meals at a lower cost than either public or market benchmarks, and a three-truck program passes a conservative cost-benefit test with a high probability of a positive return. But advertising alone will not sustain it, its climate benefits are smaller than often claimed, and its success depends far more on reliable restaurant partners and distribution than on financial structure.

Those conclusions point to a clear strategy. Start lean, measure everything, and treat sponsorship as one revenue stream among several. Partner with the Food Depository rather than duplicating it. Ask the state to do what only the state can: require large generators to offer their edible surplus, align Illinois liability law with federal law, issue clear food safety guidance, and fund the cold chain. Keep SNAP whole and use recovery to reach the people SNAP reaches least. And build toward reintegration services that turn a nightly meal into a path to work and housing. If the model succeeds in Chicago, it offers a replicable template for other Illinois cities, and Illinois foodservice businesses, which today donate less than one percent of their surplus, have ample room to supply it.

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Appendix A. Model Assumptions and Sources

Table A1. Parameters used in the cost-benefit and Monte Carlo analysis

Parameter	Base	Low	High	Source or basis
Operating nights per year	312	—	—	Six nights per week
Meals per truck-night	300	180	450	Partner supply: 8 Nando's + informal + new partners
Pounds per meal	1.2	—	—	ReFED (2026a); GCFD reporting
Meals not consumed	15%	30%	5%	US EPA (2023a) range 4–40%
Value per consumed meal	$2.07	$0.90	$3.70	USDA FNA (2026a); GCFD (2025a); Feeding America (2026a)
Diesel price ($/gal)	$5.00	$6.26	$3.62	EIA (2026a): 2026 average; Oct. 2026; 2025 average
Driver wage ($/hr)	$22.00	$26.00	$19.00	Above Chicago minimum of $17.05 (City of Chicago 2026c)
Fringe benefit rate	26.4%	—	—	GCFD (2025a) audited statements
Insurance ($/yr)	$8,000	$12,000	$6,000	Planning estimate; $350,000 city minimum
Truck + LED + wrap	$140,000	$170,000	$110,000	Appendix B; Boost Outdoor Media (2026)
Sponsorship ($/month)	$4,000	$1,500	$8,000	Section 6.2
CSR contributions ($/yr)	$20,000	$5,000	$40,000	Planning estimate
Landfill emissions factor	0.50 t/ton	—	—	US EPA (2023b), WARM v16
Share of meals displacing production	0%	0%	50%	US EPA (2023a); poultry factor 2.45 t/ton
Social cost of carbon ($/t)	$262	$0	$262	ReFED (2026a); Executive Order 14154
Volunteer time ($/hr)	$17.05	—	—	City of Chicago (2026c)
Discount rate (real)	3%	7%	1.6%	OMB (2003; 2026)

Low and high values are those that lower and raise net present value, respectively. Monte Carlo draws use triangular distributions over these ranges, with the displacement share drawn uniformly between 0 and 50 percent.

Appendix B. Stage 2 Capital and Start-Up Cost Estimates

The figures below are planning estimates for budgeting and fundraising. They are derived from published vendor price ranges, Chicago fee schedules, and comparable nonprofit fleet costs, and should be replaced with at least two written vendor quotes before procurement.

Table B1. Planning estimates for Stage 2 vehicles and equipment

Item	Full-size base case	Lean pilot	Notes
Refrigerated box truck (16 ft, non-CDL)	$95,000 (new)	—	Range $80,000–$110,000
Used refrigerated cargo van	—	$55,000	Lower capacity, ~220 meals/night
LED side and rear display system, installed	$40,000	$25,000	Permanently mounted; non-flashing content
Sponsor wrap and branding	$5,000	$5,000	Acknowledgment-only design
Hot-holding and cold-holding equipment	Included	Included	Insulated carriers, thermometers, data loggers

Item	Full-size base case	Lean pilot	Notes
Licensing and fire safety review (first cycle)	$950	$950	Dispenser license $700/2 yrs; fire permit $100; review $150
Total start-up cost	**$140,950**	**$85,950**	

Sources: Can't Miss US (2025); Boost Outdoor Media (2026); City of Chicago (2026a); GCFD (2025a) for comparable fleet lease costs of about $37,000 per vehicle per year (total lease expense divided by leased vehicles), which can be used to evaluate leasing rather than buying with the OMB (2026) lease-purchase discount rates.

Appendix C. Ten-Year Program Cash Flows

Table C1. Societal benefits and costs by year, incremental to Stage 1 (3% real, undiscounted values shown)

Year	Trucks	Societal benefits	Societal costs	Net societal	Organization net cash
1	1	$175k	$267k	−$92k	−$197k
2	2	$388k	$439k	−$51k	−$254k
3	3	$601k	$612k	−$11k	−$311k
4	3	$601k	$472k	$129k	−$171k
5	3	$601k	$472k	$129k	−$171k
6	3	$601k	$472k	$129k	−$171k
7	3	$601k	$472k	$129k	−$171k
8	3	$601k	$591k	$10k	−$171k
9	3	$601k	$591k	$10k	−$171k
10	3	$790k	$591k	$199k	−$171k

Year 8 includes replacement of the first truck; year 10 includes the terminal salvage value of the fleet. Organization net cash equals contributed revenue less cash operating costs and capital purchases, and shows the annual philanthropic gap the blended-finance model must close.