



This Group Is Helping The Needy By Rescuing Tons Of Food

Though the nonprofit typically relies on grants, Aloha Harvest is looking to the city of Honolulu in hopes of a contract.

By: Courtney Teague / July 17,2017

Almost every morning before sunrise, Aloha Harvest trucks head out to pick up their first food donations of the day.

From Monday through Saturday, drivers can be found hauling food from about 40 donors, including Zippy's, Times Supermarket and Love's Bakery. The food is delivered that same day to social service agencies around the island that work with Oahu's homeless, unemployed and needy.

Aloha Harvest is the only "food rescue" organization — a collector of food that business would otherwise throw away — on the island that deals mainly with prepared food, said Executive Director Kuulei Williams.



Aloha Harvest hopes to expand to neighbor islands, but wants to maintain the same level of service it gives to Oahu residents.

The organization relies on grants and donations to keep running, but Williams is hoping City Council Bill 9 will lead to a contract with the city to continue and expand its service.

After learning Councilwoman Ann Kobayashi was interested in reducing food waste, Williams and her team approached her, hoping to get a contract with the city instead of continuing to apply for grants.

Kobayashi did not return calls requesting comment last week, but Williams said Bill 9 arose out of that effort.

Its intent is to encourage food establishments to donate food, Williams said. The text of the bill doesn't specifically mention incentives, but would allow the city to take charge of collecting excess food and delivering it to food banks. Bill 9 would allow the city to contract the work out and restaurants could directly donate to a food bank of their choice.

It's unclear whether the bill as currently written would require or request food establishments to donate their excess food. Amendments proposed by the Department of Environmental Services in February suggest establishments should be "encouraged" to donate nonperishable and unspoiled food.

Bill 9 has been deferred twice in the council's Public Works, Infrastructure and Sustainability Committee so adjustments can be made. The next committee hearing hasn't been scheduled yet, but Williams believes the bill is moving forward.

In written testimony, some Honolulu restaurants and others in the food industry have expressed concerns about the idea of requiring establishments to donate excess food, and note that storage space is limited in some kitchens.

Aloha Harvest tries to educate restaurant operators that donating food isn't a lot of extra work — it's a matter of placing food into donated containers instead of the trash, Williams said, and most people who give the program a try stick with it. Company higher-ups often like it because donations are tax-deductible, she said.

Every year, 273,000 tons of food are wasted statewide, according to Williams.

"Our homeless population keeps growing, and so council member Kobayashi's whole concern is that a lot of people are going hungry still and we're throwing so much food away," Williams said. "That's her drive on this bill, to get more restaurants and food establishments to donate the food rather than throwing away."

The nonprofit is run by four women out of a Kaimuki office and is growing quickly. In 2013, Aloha Harvest doubled in size and delivered more than 2 million pounds of food. For the first time in 2016, more donors reached out to the organization than vice versa, Williams said.

This year, Aloha Harvest received a \$200,000 grant from the Legislature and another \$100,000 from the city.

In 2016, Aloha Harvest averaged 291 food deliveries per month and fed 52,000 people per month per month, Williams said. More than 2 million pounds of food were delivered to 172 agencies last year, and each "rescued" meal cost the organization just 41 cents. More than 9,000 tons of food have been delivered since Aloha Harvest opened its doors in 1999.

When Williams became executive director of Aloha Harvest in 2008 at the onset of the Great Recession, grants had dwindled, she said, and at one point the nonprofit was down to its last month of operating funds.

“That was a really common question: ‘How is the economy affecting Aloha Harvest?’ And fortunately, because so many people love what we do, we continued to be supported through that,” Williams said.

Williams wrote 13 grant proposals that year — all of which were approved.

More than half of the food goes to agencies in urban Honolulu, but the nonprofit also serves other parts of the island daily, Williams said.

The majority of donations come from restaurants like Kentucky Fried Chicken and Starbucks, but other donations come from food distributors, grocery stores and caterers, she said.

The most fulfilling part “is relationship-building and we’ve gotten to know a lot of great people through this work,” she said, adding, “if one drops out, we can’t do what we do.”

The greatest challenge is finding qualified drivers willing to start so early, she said.

Because Aloha Harvest doesn’t charge for food deliveries, the recipient agencies are able to put more of their resources toward events or classes, Williams said.

“Food is such a connecting thing, particularly in Hawaii ... it’s like almost every event we have is based around food,” she said.



Aloha Harvest delivers food to agencies throughout Oahu. Kuulei Williams is the organization’s executive director.

Williams emphasized that donors and agencies can give food without worrying about liability, thanks to the federal Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Act, which shields them from lawsuits. Still, she hasn’t heard of any foodborne illness cases stemming from Aloha Harvest donations. Her staff is certified by the state Department of Health and trucks are refrigerated.

During site visits, agency workers often share stories with Williams. She recalled being told about two homeless mothers eating donated muffins, joking about how happy they were to be in Aloha Harvest’s program and gain weight.

On visits, Williams said truck drivers are sometimes able to interact with the people they’re serving. Drivers love watching a child’s face light up when donations arrive, she said.

“A lot of the homeless, they get so excited and they cheer when the truck comes and a lot of them want to give the drivers a hug,” Williams said.

Aloha Harvest also brings snacks and nonperishable items to the Boys and Girls Clubs on the Leeward coast every two or three months, said the organization’s regional director, Lala Fernandez. At the end of the day, she said children are encouraged to take some of the food home to their families.

The donations provide “another avenue of access to food that doesn’t cost anything to families and youth in low-income areas,” much like a food bank, Fernandez said.

Sadrian “Pastor Sage” Chee, a senior pastor at Ohana Family of the Living God, said his church receives donations from Aloha Harvest two or three times a week. The North Shore church prepares and distributes meals across the island to fight hunger, and brings food to other agencies like the Institute for Human Services, which operates homeless shelters.

Aloha Harvest workers “go that extra distance,” working quickly on days and hours most people don’t work in order to deliver fresh food as quickly as possible, Chee said.

“The people that work for Aloha Harvest, in my perspective, really have the heart for what they do,” Chee said.