

NAME IN THE NEWS

Ku'ulei Williams:

Head of Aloha Harvest rescues food for those who need it most

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Aloha Harvest trucks pick up quality edibles that restaurants, caterers, groceries, food distributors and other purveyors would otherwise pitch, and make same-day deliveries to agencies serving the needy.

Last year, the nimble nonprofit delivered more than 2.2 million pounds of perishables and non-perishables to more than 170 nonprofits — serving some 52,000 people. There were 320 donors (Starbucks, ABC stores and Meadow Gold Hawaii ranked among the top 10, with each contributing more than 11,000 pounds).



Ku'ulei Williams, who heads Aloha Harvest, is proud of the effort. But she points out: “It’s only a fraction of the leftover quality food” on Oahu. Each year, more than 273,000 tons go to either the city’s HPOWER waste-to- energy facility or Waimanalo Gulch Sanitary Landfill.

Honolulu’s City Council Public Works, Infrastructure and Sustainability Committee is now drafting a proposal (Bill 9) that aims to step up leftovers donations. In support of the measure, Williams said, “There are so many who could use this food. ... We (Aloha Harvest) are in hopes that there would be an ‘incentive’ provided to food establishments to encourage the rescuing of food to a nonprofit such as Aloha Harvest.”

With free door-to-door pickup and delivery, and the opportunity for donors to get a tax deduction, a bit of incentive is already in place. Even so, not every establishment is eager to change long-standing food-handling routines, Williams said.

“When I talk to some of the executive chefs about food rescue they say: ‘Oh, this is too much work. I just can’t do it.’ And so education on my part is to say: “Well, your staff is going over to this bin and they’re throwing good food away. We donate pans to you folks. And if you put the food in here instead ... it’s going to save the company money, and you get a tax write-off.” Oftentimes, she said, new donor partners are struck by the simplicity of the transaction.

Williams’ island roots are tied to her mother, a Kauai native who taught her about her family’s Hawaiian heritage. Her father was a Marine. She spent most of her childhood in Southern California. Twenty-two years ago Williams and her husband, Ron, who serves as pastor of Community Church of Honolulu, moved their family to Oahu. The couple has two grown sons and three grandchildren. Williams, who has worked in various nonprofits over the years, became Aloha Harvest’s executive director in 2008.



QUESTION: How did Aloha Harvest get started?

ANSWER: It's modeled after the successful City Harvest program in New York. In the spring of 1999, Hau'oli Mau Loa (a private grant-making foundation) conducted a feasibility study that determined a similar program would work here and was needed. In November 1999, Aloha Harvest was established.

Q: How has it evolved over the years?

A: In 2004, when I first began working at Aloha Harvest, as office manager, we were picking up approximately 308,000 pounds per year and delivering that food to about 61 agencies. We had one driver and two office staff ... now I have four drivers and three office staff that work with me.

Our greatest growth period occurred four to five years ago. Everything almost doubled during this time and (fiscal) 2012-13 was the first time we exceeded 2 million pounds of food rescued in one year. Since then we have continued at this level.

Q: What touched off that spike?

A: Part of it was that we changed our tagline to "Rescuing Food to Feed Hawaii's Hungry." It had been "Partnering with You to Feed Hawaii's Hungry," which is very close to Hawaii Foodbank's "Helping to Feed Hawaii's Hungry." People thought we were part of the Foodbank, which is structured differently.

With the new tagline more people were saying: "Oh, my gosh, there's an organization out there that rescues food from hotels and restaurants and everything? I didn't even know that that existed. That's awesome."

The food Aloha Harvest delivers is in high demand. Our top requested foods: fresh produce, meats and prepared foods. We also get a lot of requests for beverages, staple goods and dairy.

Q: How does the average workday unfold?

A: The drivers begin at 5:30 a.m. We have two 16-foot refrigerated trucks, and our drivers cover the island. Route A is the Honolulu area. Route B alternates windward, central and Leeward Coast. Each truck has approximately 35-45 scheduled food pickups each day and throughout the day delivers the food to anywhere from five to 15 agencies, depending on how much food and types of food — we never know from day to day what we will be rescuing.

Drivers also have additional call-ins dispatched to them from the office, which could be two to 10 more food pickups. ... It takes a lot of coordinating and logistics to run our operation.

Q: What do you enjoy most and least about the work?

A: I most enjoy our mission — making a difference for so many people each day. Providing for them a very basic need in life — food. Many do not know where their next meal will come from. ... We get to help the agencies meet the needs of their clients. I also enjoy all the people we work with. In this line of work relationships are key.

What is most challenging ... would be the constant need to find funding to keep our operation going. It's always on my mind. If a grant request comes back less than what our proposal was, then where do we find the money to meet this shortfall? (This year, Aloha Harvest received a \$200,000 grant from the Legislature and another \$100,000 from the city.)

Q: Since there is no liability when donating food — due to the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Act (signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1996) — why don't more outlets donate?

A: I believe, there's a need to educate food establishments and the general public about the law.

Yes, there's no liability to the food donor or recipient — as long as there is no gross negligence when donating food and the food is donated to a nonprofit organization. Surprisingly, many food establishments are still not aware this ... many still think they are liable — not so.

We supply food containers to food donors, if they need them. They safely hold food and are labeled for ease of recognition when Aloha Harvest picks up donations. ... It's a win-win situation. The company saves money and helps to meet a great need in our community.

Q: How do you gauge all that poundage?

A: Some food donors provide their total donated poundage; some products are donated in original packaging that provides weight (our drivers calculate totals); and some is by estimations from our drivers. Due to condensation in our trucks, it's very difficult to keep weight scales from rusting out quickly. At events, we use luggage scales.

Q: Aloha Harvest does not have a warehouse for storage?

A: We do not store any food, and we do not charge our agencies for the food.

What we pick up each day, we deliver that same day. ... We track all food donations

daily and see the distribution of the food as our fiduciary responsibility — to spread it out as much as possible. Our routes are set up very efficiently. ... Our drivers are very familiar with each of our agencies, what their levels of capacity are and their program type. Their goal is to make a delivery to each agency three to five times per month.

Q: Does Aloha Harvest work in tandem with other food-related nonprofits such as the Hawaii Foodbank?

A: We hope to someday work more closely with Hawaii Foodbank since we do service many of the same agencies. However, our structures are different — they are a food “bank” (with a current Oahu warehouse inventory of 1.2 million pounds of grocery items) while we are food “rescue.” We do refer business to each other when those opportunities arise.

All of our agencies have to be nonprofit 501(c)(3) approved ... to receive food donations.

Q: What does the future look like for Aloha Harvest?

A: We're still growing. We'll need more vehicles, more diversified routes, more staff. This year our board will be working on our strategic planning for Aloha Harvest. It's time to set new goals and projections. ... We are in high demand, and the need to rescue more food is important.

Our work not only helps to feed the hungry, it also improves the efficient use of the local food supply, reduces the dependence of the state on imported food, reduces the load on the waste management system, and is a practice that promotes responsible stewardship of our environment.