

How I redistribute food to the hungry

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By Kuulei Williams
Executive Director of Aloha Harvest

I've been executive director at [Aloha Harvest](#) since 2008, but involved since 2004.

Not that many people knew about us back then, and we weren't experiencing a whole lot of growth. We decided we needed more visibility so for the last four years we've been focusing on that.



Kuulei Williams, executive director of Aloha Harvest

TINA YUEN

We started a “Got Food?” advertisement about four years ago, and those are displayed at Ala Moana Center and Kahala Mall, as well as in Mana Magazine, Farm and Food magazine, and Green Magazine.

Maybe three years ago we changed our tagline because it was close to the food bank's mission. People were confused.

It used to be “partnering with you to feed Hawaii’s hungry,” now it’s “rescuing food to feed Hawaii’s hungry.” It depicts what we do better.

We what we pick up that day we deliver the same day. No one else does what we do.

We don’t charge for our pickups or delivery, The food is given to us for free and given out for free. We don’t store anything. What we pick up we deliver that very same day.

We work with all food distributors when they are rotating their stock in the warehouses. We work with not only local business but big businesses including Y. Hata & Co., Frito-Lay and Pepsi Beverage Company.

I have four drivers and two 16-foot refrigerator trucks. We’re looking for another full-time driver and part-time driver.

Prior to 2012 we only had one truck. We grew and added a van, which we soon outgrew as well, so we rented a second truck. Then we realized, this is reality, not an occasional thing. That’s when we purchased the 16-foot trucks.

Each truck was \$73,000 and we bought them in 2012. What started that was the Omidyar Foundation did a match grant. Aloha Petroleum, HMSA, and quite a few others helped with the purchase.

Each truck has anywhere from 35 to 45 pickups scheduled and between that, they’re dropping off food at agencies. They see anywhere from five to 15 agencies a day. Between that, the office is getting phone calls about donations.

When you see it on paper you don’t really get the logistics and coordination it takes to make this happen. There’s seven on staff, including me, with two others in the office.

We are open seven days a week. It’s a 24-hour kind of thing — I’m up as early as 4 a.m. sometimes talking with my drivers. I’m always dispatching jobs to my staff.

Actively right now we’re working with about 300 donors, including regular calls and doing special events.

Over the past 15 years, we’ve had over 1,000 donors.

People don’t realize when we’re dealing with that many donors and agencies. I think we’re averaging getting food to 134 of the 177 agencies daily.

One year we got like 20 something palettes of kidney beans so we had to figure out which agencies could use them. It was quite a challenge.

Sometimes there are big barrels of watermelons, corn, potatoes, or onions from produce distributors and farmers. The drivers have to separate it and break it down to distribute them.

One of my dreams is to have a warehouse staging area where we can take those palates of food and have volunteers break down donations into smaller boxes, because that’s taking place in the truck right now. I’d love to start with one on the Windward side because the homeless population is really growing there.

Another challenge is that agencies start closing at 3 p.m. It gets harder for them to find agencies that will take the food if we're later in the afternoon.

If they know their event ahead of time, we can put a driver on call to be able to pick up the food after their event.

Funding is probably our biggest challenge.

Our budget was around \$300,000 in 2008 and our budget this fiscal year is about \$640,000.

We're kind of at a point of, "Where do we go from here? Do we look at growing bigger? Do we stay where we are? Our trucks are almost maxed out so do we purchase another?" There's so much more out there that is being thrown away that we could be picking up. So finances are a big part of it. With our budget increasing, we have to find other ways of having funding because grants are getting harder and harder to come by. That's why we went for our first City and County of Honolulu Grants in Aid grant, and were lucky to get one.

When businesses throw food away it goes to pig farmers, and the pig farmers are actually overloaded. So much perfectly good food is going to the pigs. We should be feeding our people instead of the pigs.

A lot of people tell us, "You're enabling them," but if you look beyond that perspective you realize a lot of people out there have lost their job or home with the downturn of the economy and the cost of living.

I remember hearing someone say, "I never thought I'd go to a food bank to get food for my family." It's not only those on the street — there are a lot of families that just simply don't have money for groceries.

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As told to PBN reporter Lorin Eleni Gill