

Feeding It Forward: helping the hungry and the climate through food recovery

By Chris Benz

The non-profit organization, Feeding It Forward, fills a unique niche in Napa County, recovering prepared and perishable food that otherwise might end up in the landfill, and redistributing it to those who need it. During the holidays, this mission feels particularly important as we sit down to seasonal feasts while others may be going hungry.

The organization was founded in 2018 by David Busby as a volunteer effort to recover prepared food from special events. As contributions and the need for service expanded, a hard-working staff of two was hired: Director of Programs & Operations Anya Elidi-Stubbs and Program Coordinator and Driver Christian Vargas.

In 2024, Margaret Perry joined the team as the Executive Director. She had worked in economic development and as a Chamber of Commerce chief executive officer. For her, Feeding It Forward's mission resonates deeply.

"This job checks every box for me," she explained. "It's more than a position – it's a calling. I grew up in poverty as the youngest of 11 children."

According to Perry, relying on food stamps and food pantries can be humiliating and embarrassing, despite the essential role these services play. Moreover, as we recently observed, federal funding for such programs can be upended by political headwinds. The Feeding It Forward model is a great option.

"When we do a food distribution, we don't ask questions," Perry explained. "No documentation is required. This is because we don't rely on federal funding that has those requirements. It's simple. If you're hungry, we'll give you food."

Feeding It Forward currently collects perishable and prepared foods from approximately 75 locations. These include smaller grocery stores, the Napa Farmers Market, the school district, hospitals, restaurants, and hotels. They also recover from special events, including Bottle Rock and La Onda. This year, these two events yielded 18,000 pounds of food and non-food items that were then distributed to local organizations that feed Napa County residents. This enormous amount of food recovery and waste prevention was recognized by the Napa County Chamber of Commerce, which chose Feeding it Forward as its 2025 Collaborating Community Champion.

Food is collected and distributed seven days a week. It goes to over forty-five local organizations, such as homeless shelters, food pantries, Cope Family Center, and St. Thomas Aquinas, which, in turn, distribute it to people needing food. Many of these organizations make up the Napa County Food Access Coalition, which shares when and where to get free food on its website, <https://napafoodaccess.org/>.

Perry is also passionate about reducing waste. "My friends call me the 'Conservation Cop' because I'm rigorous about composting food scraps and not using disposable foodware."

Feeding It Forward tracks the climate benefits of every food donation. According to CalRecycle, up to 40% of food is wasted, either unsold or uneaten. That means all of the energy used and climate pollutants emitted to produce that food were also wasted. If the food ends up in a landfill, it generates methane, a greenhouse gas up to 150 times more warming than carbon dioxide. As of the end of October, Feeding It Forward had recovered over 150,000 pounds of food in 2025 and reduced emissions equivalent to driving 420,000 miles.

The need to reduce methane emissions by food recovery was recognized when California passed SB1383. Under the bill's Mandatory Edible Food Recovery requirements, which took effect in 2022, jurisdictions must recover 20% of edible food and redistribute it to those in need. Feeding It Forward receives funding from Napa County to help with this task.

However, there is more food available for recovery than the organization's single driver and van can handle. They have ordered a second, all-electric, refrigerated van and are hoping to get funding to hire a second driver.

You can help play Santa for Napa residents by supporting Feeding It Forward.

1. Donate through the Give Guide at <https://www.candogiveguide.org/nonprofits/feeding-it-forward/>
2. Organize a food drive. Protein (chicken, turkey, ground beef) is really needed.
3. Call (707) 927-3213 to donate holiday party leftovers.

Chris Benz is a retired winemaker and co-founder of Napa Climate NOW!

Napa Climate NOW! is a local nonprofit citizens' group advocating for smart climate solutions based on the latest climate science, part of 350 Bay Area. Info, napa.350bayareorg

Photo caption: Feeding It Forward Executive Director Margaret Perry and Director of Programs & Operations Anya Elidi-Stubbs at work.

Photo credit: Chris Benz

