Continuing the Feast: Food Rescue in Urban Events and Its Impact on Sustainable Food Systems

Christine A. Cleaver, Ed.D and Ronald J. Naples

New York University

Abstract

Urban festivals, conferences, cultural celebrations, sporting events, and large-scale hospitality activations are central to city life, yet they can also generate substantial food surplus. This paper examines food rescue at urban events as an underexplored intersection of sustainable event management, hospitality operations, urban food systems, and social equity. It advances a three-stage framework: prevent avoidable surplus, recover unavoidable surplus, and redistribute edible food safely and equitably. Current industry practices are examined through Levy's Waste Not 2.0 measurement system, the Javits Center's CULTIVATED total-food-utilization model, and the recovery of approximately 20,000 pounds of surplus food following six FIFA World Cup 2026 matchdays in Philadelphia. Profiles of City Harvest, Philabundance, the Honorary Kitchen, FoodRecovery.org, and Musically Fed illustrate the different roles required within an urban food-rescue network. The analysis identifies forecasting, food safety, labor, storage, transportation, recipient capacity, and fragmented industry standards as continuing barriers. It concludes with an event food rescue protocol and recommendations for planners, venues, associations, and policymakers. Urban events can become strategic nodes in sustainable food systems when rescue is treated not as an improvised charitable gesture, but as a planned operational process supported by data, contracts, partnerships, and accountability.

Keywords: food rescue, food waste, urban events, sustainable event management, food insecurity, hospitality, circular economy

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Urban events, festivals, conferences, cultural celebrations, sporting events, weddings, banquets, and corporate activations bring people together through hospitality. Food and beverage are often central to the attendee experience, but the same culture of generosity that makes an event feel abundant can create substantial surplus. Attendance fluctuates, consumption patterns are difficult to predict, special meals are frequently overproduced, and venues are understandably reluctant to run out of food. When recovery has not been planned, high-quality edible food may be discarded simply because the event has ended and the operational window has closed.

The scale of the broader problem is considerable. ReFED estimates that the United States generated approximately 70 million tons of surplus food in 2024, equivalent to about 29% of the national food supply. The estimated value of that surplus reached $380 billion, while associated greenhouse gas emissions were comparable to those produced by 51 million cars driven for one year. Yet just under 13% of food that could have been donated was actually donated (ReFED, 2026). Within foodservice, approximately 12.4 million tons became food waste in 2024, and 9.73 million tons—78.4%—went to landfills (ReFED, 2025). Event-specific totals are not yet well established, a data gap that itself reflects the limited attention paid to event food rescue.

Food waste is simultaneously an environmental, economic, and social issue. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that wasted food is responsible for 58% of methane emissions released from municipal solid-waste landfills. The EPA's Wasted Food Scale therefore prioritizes prevention, donation, and upcycling over composting, anaerobic digestion, incineration, and landfilling (EPA, 2026). This hierarchy is important for event professionals.

Composting has value, but edible food achieves a greater environmental and social benefit when it remains in the human food system.

This paper argues that urban events can become strategic nodes in sustainable food systems when organizers adopt a coordinated approach that prioritizes prevention, measures food surplus, rescues unavoidable excess, and partners with community organizations to redistribute food safely and equitably. Food rescue should not be understood as permission to overproduce. Rather, it is the final safeguard within a responsible system that first seeks to prevent waste and then ensures that unavoidable edible surplus becomes a community resource.

Food Waste in the Event Environment

Why Events Produce Surplus?

Event food production is shaped by uncertainty. Caterers and clients share the goal of nourishing every attendee with high-quality food and sufficient choice, but forecasting is an educated estimate rather than an exact calculation. Registration counts do not always equal actual attendance; attendees may skip meal functions; dietary preferences change; and alcohol service, weather, program timing, and the type of service all affect consumption. Planners and culinary teams may also overcompensate for gluten-free, vegan, keto, allergy-sensitive, or other specialized meals because failing to accommodate a guest has immediate service and reputational consequences. An additional emerging consideration is the growing use of GLP-1 medications, which are significantly altering eating behaviors by reducing appetite and portion sizes among many attendees. As adoption of these medications continues to increase, traditional catering assumptions based on historical consumption patterns may become less reliable, suggesting that event food production practices and forecasting models must evolve to reflect this new reality.

Hospitality norms add pressure. Planners rarely want food displays to appear depleted, and hosts often equate abundance with generosity and value. These expectations can encourage large buffets, oversized portions, excessive refresh rates, and production based on maximum rather than probable demand. Chef Eric Vaughn, Executive Director of Culinary Operations, Banquets, for Caesars Entertainment in the Las Vegas region, has described the shared desire of clients and operators to ensure that every attendee is well nourished (as cited in Pinchera, 2026). That legitimate service goal becomes unsustainable when abundance is not balanced with forecasting, flexible production, and measurement.

Robert Weddepohl of the Netherlands Chapter of Meeting Professionals International proposes a more demand-driven model. Strong mise en place, modular recipes, and onsite preparation allow caterers to scale production according to actual consumption rather than producing every anticipated portion in advance (Pinchera, 2026). Familiar examples include made-to-order omelets, pasta, bowl, or carving stations. This approach reduces risk while preserving guest choice and the visual energy of live preparation.

A Systems and Circular-Economy Perspective

A recent systematic review of 31 empirical hospitality studies found that effective food-waste management requires coordinated action across the entire service process. Pre-kitchen practices include forecasting, procurement, inventory management, storage, and employee training. Kitchen practices emphasize production and portion control. Post-kitchen practices include donation, redistribution, and composting. The review concludes that isolated interventions are less effective than an integrated system supported by measurement and staff education (Mutanda, 2026).

This finding provides an appropriate framework for events. An event is a temporary hospitality system embedded within a permanent urban food system. It draws ingredients, labor, equipment, refrigeration, transportation, and energy into a venue for a limited period. A circular approach asks planners to consider not only how food enters the event, but how unused food will leave it. Prevention, recovery, and redistribution must therefore be designed together,

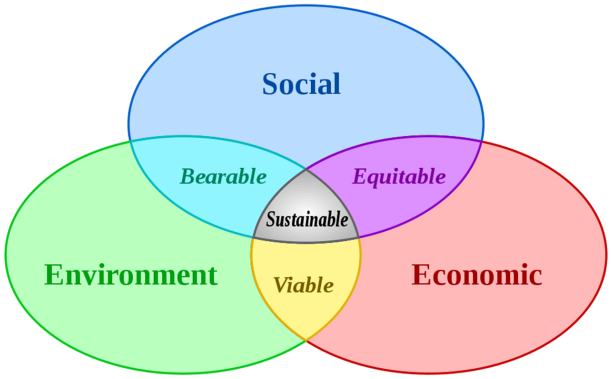
Stage One: Preventing Avoidable Surplus

Forecasting, Menu Design, and Planner/Venue Alignment

Prevention is the most desirable intervention because it avoids the financial and environmental costs embedded in food that is purchased, transported, stored, and prepared but never consumed. Planners can improve forecasting by maintaining consumption histories, distinguishing registration from actual attendance, collecting dietary information carefully, setting realistic guarantees, and reviewing program schedules for likely meal-function attrition. Culinary teams can respond with flexible batch production, smaller serving vessels that are replenished as needed, smaller plates, modest default portions with seconds available, and desserts or tasting portions that satisfy without encouraging plate waste.

Food rescue also reflects the triple-bottom-line approach to sustainability, which considers social, environmental, and economic outcomes together. As Figure 1 illustrates, a sustainable event practice should be environmentally responsible, socially equitable, and economically viable. Food-rescue systems can contribute to all three dimensions when they are supported by effective forecasting, safe recovery procedures, and meaningful community partnerships.

Figure 1 - *Triple-Bottom-Line Sustainability Framework Applied to Event Food Rescue*



The environmental dimension includes preventing edible food from entering landfills, reducing methane emissions, and conserving the resources embedded in food production. The social dimension includes addressing food insecurity, strengthening community partnerships, and distributing food with dignity. The economic dimension includes reducing unnecessary purchasing, production, hauling, and disposal costs. The intersection of these dimensions provides the foundation for the paper's three-stage framework: prevent avoidable surplus, recover unavoidable edible surplus, and redistribute it safely and equitably.

Planner–venue alignment is particularly important. During 2025, ReFED and the World Wildlife Fund tested U.S. Food Waste Pact low-waste event guidelines across six business events serving approximately 20,000 meals. The pilot emphasized shared action during discovery, design, delivery, and debriefing. Its central lesson is that waste cannot be managed by the kitchen alone: sales, planners, clients, banquet operations, culinary teams, and sustainability personnel all influence the result (U.S. Food Waste Pact, 2026). Questions about forecasting, measurement, donation, composting, and reporting should therefore appear in the request for proposal rather than being raised for the first time after food remains.

Levy's Waste Not 2.0

Measurement converts a general sustainability intention into operational information. Levy, which provides hospitality at sports, entertainment, cultural, and convention venues, uses Waste Not 2.0, a proprietary digital waste-tracking program designed to identify food-waste patterns and change behavior. Levy describes its strategy as preventing waste, reducing it at the source, and recovering surplus for diversion. Its broader approach also includes plant-forward menu design, sustainable sourcing, reusable serviceware, composting partnerships, and food donation (Levy, 2024a, 2024b).

Waste Not 2.0 is relevant to event management because a single donation total does not explain why surplus occurred. Useful measurement distinguishes preparation trim, overproduction, unserved surplus, spoilage, and plate waste. It also records the menu item, service format, quantity, time, and destination. Over repeated events, these data can reveal whether guarantees are consistently high, whether particular buffet items are routinely overproduced, or whether portion and replenishment practices should change. Measurement thus connects the post-event debrief to the next event's forecast.

Javits Center and Total Food Utilization

At New York City's Javits Center, the CULTIVATED hospitality program provides a complementary prevention model. Its one-acre rooftop farm can supply as much as 21,500 pounds of produce annually, while a 3,500-square-foot greenhouse supports year-round growing. CULTIVATED describes its culinary approach as total food utilization: excess or cosmetically imperfect produce can be transformed into pickles, purées, soups, and other menu components rather than discarded. The program also incorporates food recovery and sustainable packaging (CULTIVATED, n.d.; Javits Center, n.d.).

The Javits example expands the meaning of event food rescue. Rescue can happen before food becomes surplus by designing menus that use whole ingredients, creating secondary uses for trim or imperfect produce, and connecting culinary decisions with venue sustainability infrastructure. It demonstrates that an urban venue can operate as both a hospitality site and a participant in a localized food system.

Stage Two: Recovering Unavoidable Surplus

From Final Whistle to Food Bank: Philadelphia World Cup 2026

The six FIFA World Cup 2026 matchdays held at Philadelphia Stadium provide a timely example of food rescue at the mega-event scale. The venue welcomed an average of 68,316 fans per match—nearly 410,000 people across the six matches. Following matchday operations, approximately 20,000 pounds of unused food were redirected to community organizations instead of being discarded (FIFA, 2026). The recovery offers a rare public account of the operational steps required to move event surplus into an urban food-rescue network.

Aramark, the stadium's food-service operator, managed surplus onsite. Staff gathered dry products from concession locations and separated refrigerated leftovers from incoming deliveries. The food had to be consolidated, stored, palletized, and collected within a 24-hour turnaround so it maintained acceptable quality and reached the appropriate recipients. The process was complicated by the fact that recovery from one match occurred while deliveries for subsequent operations continued to arrive (FIFA, 2026). This is precisely the temporal and spatial pressure that distinguishes events from routine foodservice.

The initiative depended on a network rather than a single organization. FIFA supplied the tournament sustainability framework; Aramark managed the food onsite; Musically Fed and FoodRecovery.org participated in recovery coordination; Garden of Health received a substantial

portion for distribution; and several other organizations, including the Everywhere Project, served community members. Approximately 900 boxed lunches were distributed through the Everywhere Project, including through its LOVE Park meal service (CBS Philadelphia, 2026; FIFA, 2026). The participating organizations connected a temporary global event to established local food-support systems.

The World Cup case demonstrates that donation is not an informal act performed after the final guest leaves. It is a reverse-logistics operation requiring advance planning, assigned responsibility, food-safety controls, cold storage, packaging, loading access, transportation, documentation, recipient capacity, and rapid communication. Its success also illustrates the value of event-literate intermediaries. Musically Fed's involvement helped bridge the operational world of live events with community organizations capable of receiving and distributing food.

Stage Three: Redistributing Food Through Urban Networks

No single organizational model can complete every part of food rescue. Urban systems include food banks with warehouse capacity, direct-service meal programs, volunteer transportation networks, technology platforms, and intermediaries familiar with event operations. Examining several organizations illustrates how these roles complement one another.

City Harvest: Mature Urban Recovery Infrastructure

Founded in 1982, City Harvest pioneered large-scale food rescue in New York City. It rescues surplus from businesses and delivers food without charge to a network of pantries and soup kitchens. Its fleet and established routes make it well suited to a dense urban environment where timing, traffic, loading access, and refrigeration can determine whether food is usable. City Harvest reports having rescued more than one billion pounds of food since its founding and now supports hundreds of community food programs (City Harvest, 2026). The organization

represents a mature recovery partner with established donor procedures and distribution relationships for an event planner.

Philabundance: Regional Food-Bank Capacity

Philabundance serves a nine-county region in Southeastern Pennsylvania and Southern New Jersey. Its scale, infrastructure, and network of partner agencies allow it to receive and distribute large quantities of rescued and donated food. The organization reported distributing approximately 44 million pounds of food in 2025 and has invested in infrastructure and technology to strengthen its partner network (Philabundance, 2026). Its use of platforms such as MealConnect illustrates how technology can help match donors with receiving organizations while documenting recovery.

The Honorary Kitchen: Relationship-Based and Dignified Service

The Honorary Kitchen, founded by Tracee Patterson in the Denver area in 2023, represents a smaller, relationship-centered model. Patterson describes dignity, compassion, and personal connection as central to its work. The organization currently receives support from local restaurants and supermarkets and seeks to expand its ability to accept banquet and event surplus. Patterson identifies refrigerated transportation as an important capacity need because vehicles, temperature control, and distribution range determine whether an organization can safely move beyond sandwiches and packaged foods to full prepared meals (T. Patterson, personal communication, June 22, 2026). This example underscores an equity issue often overlooked in event planning: the willingness to donate does not automatically create recipient capacity.

FoodRecovery.org and Musically Fed: Coordination Infrastructure

FoodRecovery.org, formerly MEANS Database, operates a national online platform intended to make it easier for organizations with surplus food to connect with nonprofit

recipients. The platform addresses a persistent coordination problem: a donor may have food, and a community organization may need it, but the two must be matched by location, timing, quantity, food type, transportation, and storage capacity. FoodRecovery.org reported redistributing millions of pounds of food and supplies through its network in 2025 (FoodRecovery.org, 2026).

Musically Fed adds event-specific expertise. Its work centers on unused food from concerts, tours, festivals, and other entertainment operations. The Philadelphia World Cup partnership demonstrates how this expertise can extend to sporting mega-events. Technology and event knowledge serve different but complementary functions: a platform can identify and connect partners, while an event intermediary understands credentials, production schedules, back-of-house access, strike timelines, and the urgency of removing food safely from a temporary operation.

Operational, Legal, and Ethical Challenges

Food Safety and Liability

Food safety is the first operational condition of successful rescue. Donatable food must remain protected from contamination and be held at appropriate temperatures. Planners and venues must agree which products can be accepted, who will determine suitability, how food will be labeled, how long it can remain in storage, and who will transport it. Food displayed for guest self-service may not be eligible even when it appears untouched, while unserved food maintained under culinary control may be acceptable. Recipient organizations should define their own requirements before the event.

Liability concerns are frequently cited as a barrier. The federal Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act of 1996, as expanded by the Food Donation Improvement Act of

2023, provides liability protection for qualifying good-faith donations of apparently wholesome food and apparently fit grocery products. Protection is not absolute and does not cover gross negligence or intentional misconduct. It also does not replace compliance with applicable food-safety rules. Planners should use authoritative federal and local guidance and consult qualified counsel when necessary rather than relying on informal assurances (USDA, n.d.).

Labor, Storage, and Transportation

Recovery creates work at precisely the moment an event team is closing kitchens, clearing rooms, reconciling inventories, and beginning strike. Staff must identify eligible items, find containers and lids, label products, move them to refrigeration, and deliver them to a loading point. A driver may need venue credentials, a scheduled dock time, and a vehicle capable of maintaining safe temperatures. These requirements may create costs, but they are predictable costs when included in the contract and banquet event order.

Food Dignity and Community Capacity

Donation totals alone do not demonstrate equitable impact. Food should be appropriate, appealing, safe, and usable by the receiving community. Organizations need sufficient refrigeration, storage, transportation, staffing, and distribution channels. They may be unable to accept a large quantity with little notice, even when need is high. A responsible partnership asks the recipient what it can use rather than transferring the operational burden of unwanted or impractical food. Dignity also means communicating about recipients as community members and partners, not as a venue for disposal.

Toward an Event Food-Rescue Protocol

The evidence and cases reviewed suggest that rescue should be built into the event lifecycle. Table 1 translates the prevention–recovery–redistribution framework into actions for event planners and venues.

Table 1 - *Event Food-Rescue Protocol Across the Event Lifecycle*

Stage	**Planner and venue actions**	**Suggested evidence**
Discovery and RFP	Ask about forecasting, measurement, donation partners, composting, storage, and reporting. Evaluate the venue's willingness and capacity.	Written RFP responses; sustainability policy; partner list
Contracting and design	Identify ownership of surplus; select a recipient; define eligible foods, containers, labor, refrigeration, transportation, and costs. Design menus and service formats to prevent waste.	Contract clause; preliminary recovery plan; menu review
Pre-event planning	Confirm guarantees, dietary counts, dock access, credentials, contact information, pickup time, staff assignments, and emergency contingencies.	BEO; contact sheet; food-safety and logistics checklist
Event delivery	Use batch preparation and intentional replenishment. Track prepared, served, unserved, donated, composted, and discarded food. Protect donatable food from contamination.	Waste log; temperature records; production and attendance data
Recovery and transfer	Package, label, refrigerate, palletize, and move food to the collection point. Complete transfer within the agreed window.	Donation receipt or transfer record; weight by food category
Debrief and reporting	Compare guarantees, attendance, production, consumption, recovery, and	Post-event report; lessons learned; verified impact metrics

Stage	Planner and venue actions	Suggested evidence
	disposal. Revise future forecasts and report outcomes accurately.	

Industry and Policy Recommendations

First, event-industry associations should establish explicit guidance on edible food donation. Sustainability resources frequently address cost control, carbon, materials, and composting, but food rescue is often treated only indirectly. Associations such as PCMA Professional Convention Management Association, MPI (Meeting Professionals International), ILEA (International Live Events Association), IACC (International Association of Conference Centres), AHLA (American Hotel & Lodging Association), and the NRA (National Restaurant Association) can help normalize consistent RFP (Request For Proposal) questions, contract language, food-safety practices, measurement definitions, and reporting metrics.

Second, venues should maintain standing relationships with more than one community partner. A single nonprofit may not be available or capable of accepting every food category after every event. A network that includes a food bank, prepared-meal organization, transportation partner, and composting provider creates resilience and respects the EPA preference for donation before lower-tier disposal options.

Third, planners should measure prevention and recovery separately. A declining donation total can be positive if it reflects improved forecasting, but negative if edible food is simply discarded without measurement. Recommended metrics include food prepared per attendee, unserved surplus per attendee, plate waste, pounds donated by category, pounds composted, pounds landfilled, pickup completion time, recipient organizations, and estimated financial

savings. Claims about meals served or emissions avoided should identify the conversion methodology.

Fourth, municipalities and event destinations can incorporate food rescue into event permitting, venue licensing, destination sustainability programs, and supplier directories. Philadelphia already advises commercial properties to prioritize reduction, donation, and composting. Cities can extend this approach by connecting event organizers with qualified recovery partners and by clarifying local food-safety and transportation requirements (City of Philadelphia, 2021).

Finally, researchers should develop event-specific evidence. Comparative case studies across conferences, festivals, weddings, and sports events are needed to determine which service formats, forecasting methods, technologies, contract provisions, and partnership structures produce the best results. Research should examine not only pounds diverted, but food quality, recipient experience, labor requirements, cost, carbon impact, and the durability of community partnerships.

Conclusion

Urban events are commonly understood as temporary sites of consumption. They can also become sites of sustainability innovation. Levy's Waste Not 2.0 demonstrates how measurement can identify and prevent waste. The Javits Center's CULTIVATED program shows how menu design, local production, and total ingredient utilization can reduce surplus before an event begins. The Philadelphia World Cup case demonstrates that even a mega-event can recover significant quantities of food when the caterer, event owner, intermediaries, food banks, and community organizations work through an organized system.

The central lesson is not that events should create excess food for charitable purposes. The goal is to produce more accurately, use ingredients fully, and design service around realistic demand. When safe, edible surplus remains, however, discarding it represents a failure of planning and connection. Recovery should be treated as a defined part of event operations, with the same attention given to timing, staffing, transportation, safety, and accountability as any other production function.

Continuing the feast requires a shift in perspective. Surplus food is not merely a waste stream at the end of an event; it is a resource moving through an urban system. When event professionals plan for its full journey—from purchasing and preparation through consumption, recovery, and community distribution—they reduce environmental harm, control costs, strengthen local partnerships, and contribute to a more equitable food system.

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