

WORLD FOOD DAY 2020: GILLINGS #FOODHEROES

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Food insecurity impacts over 1.4 million people in North Carolina.¹ Since the onset of the pandemic, these numbers have increased. World Food Day, on October 16th, is a day on which the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations promotes awareness of world hunger and the need to provide healthy food for all the world's citizens. This year's World Food Day, also the 75th anniversary of the FAO, is a good day to reflect on the weaknesses in our food systems that COVID-19 has brought to light—but it is also an opportunity to celebrate and learn from “food heroes” who are making our food systems more resilient in the wake of the pandemic.

Gillings' own food hero, Dr. Alice Ammerman, is working with the Food Recovery Task Force to do just that. The task force is part of the North Carolina Local Food Council, which includes Dr. Angel Cruz from NC State, Jared Cates with the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, and Ethan Phillips, a student in Health Policy and Management. The team has a wide array of experiences working in local food systems and they are using these experiences to reduce food waste across the state.

The EPA reported that 41 million tons of food were wasted in 2017—roughly 40% of all food produced.² This waste occurs at multiple stages in the food system. From farm to fork, everyone along the chain holds responsibility. From an environmental perspective, this is devastating. If food waste was a country, it would be the third largest contributor to greenhouse gases each year.³ From a public health perspective, this is a lost opportunity. We are literally throwing away a solution to food insecurity.

While fully solving the problem of food insecurity will require addressing systemic problems and institutional inequities, immediate food needs can be met in a straightforward manner through food banks and similar organizations. By donating excess food to these organizations, food vendors such as restaurants, caterers, and college dining halls have a unique opportunity to be a part of the solution. Instead, much of their excess food goes to waste.

Last year, local food councils brought this issue before North Carolina Local Food Council state leadership. In response, the Food Recovery Task Force was created. Dr. Ammerman and the task force began by looking at barriers to recovering this excess food. They surveyed food vendors and learned that vendors *want* to donate this food, but they worry about their own lack of knowledge regarding how to do this safely while not incurring liability should someone get sick. North Carolina does have safety regulations for the recovery of these prepared foods, limiting vendor liability if someone becomes sick from donated food. However, these regulations are not easy to interpret. Without clear, consistent guidelines for how to apply the regulations, vendors find it safer to avoid donation altogether.

As a solution, Dr. Ammerman's team has partnered with a group at North Carolina State University to create standardized procedures for prepared food recovery. These procedures translate complex regulations into simple steps businesses can take to donate food safely. Once approved by the state Department of Health and Human Services, these guidelines could revolutionize food recovery, bringing prepared meals to food insecure individuals across the state. In addition, the guidelines could be used as a template for other states to improve food recovery across the US.

The results from this work have significant implications for the future of food recovery, and it is important to remember how it all started—with local food councils. These are places for community members passionate about local food systems to meet, discuss ideas, and work towards change. In this way, coalitions like our local Orange County Food Council—and people like Gillings' food hero, Dr. Ammerman—embody the spirit of World Food Day by fostering grassroots efforts to improve access to safe and nutritious foods, while pushing for food systems which are more just and sustainable for all.

On World Food Day 2020, make a commitment to addressing hunger in your community. Find your local food council at <http://www.nclocalfoodcouncil.org>, and be a #foodhero!

1. Feeding America. (2020). Map the Meal Gap. Accessed October 8, 2020. <https://map.feedingamerica.orgcounty/2018/overall/north-carolina/>.
2. US EPA, OLEM. (2017). Food: Material-Specific Data. Overviews and Factsheets. US EPA. <https://www.epa.gov/facts-and-figures-about-materials-waste-and-recycling/food-material-specific-data>.
3. FAO. (2015). Food Wastage Footprint & Climate Change, UN FAO, Rome.