

# City Harvest: How to Build Mission-Aligned Partnerships to Scale Food Rescue

AN INTERVIEW WITH

**Rebeckah Piotrowski, Director of Institutional Partnerships, City Harvest**

Rebeckah Piotrowski is Director of Institutional Partnerships at City Harvest, New York City's largest food rescue organization, helping to feed the nearly 1.2 million New Yorkers who are struggling to put meals on their tables. Amy Ahearn from Acumen connected with Rebeckah Piotrowski to understand how they have built and funded such a comprehensive and mission-aligned model that provides food at scale to New Yorkers.



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*This interview was produced as part of [The ReFED Nonprofit Food Recovery Accelerator](#).*

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**AMY AHEARN:** *Could you start by introducing yourself and giving a brief overview of City Harvest?*

**REBECKAH PIOTROWSKI:** My name is Rebeckah Piotrowski and I'm the Director of Institutional Partnerships at City Harvest. I coordinate our fundraising efforts with foundations and government agencies, and manage those wider partnerships.

City Harvest is New York City's largest food rescue organization. We rescue nutritious food that would otherwise go to waste

and then we deliver it free of charge to soup kitchens, food pantries, and other community partners. Throughout the five boroughs of New York City, we work to serve nearly 1.2 million New Yorkers who are experiencing food insecurity.

City Harvest was founded in 1982 and helped to start the food rescue movement when a group of New Yorkers recognized that New York City had an abundance of excess food that was going to waste, while also recognizing that a large number of people were simultaneously struggling to



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feed themselves. That practical purpose has stayed with us as our core mission: we want to rescue surplus food and serve it to the people who need it the most. Over the past 36 years, we have rescued and delivered over 750 million pounds of nutritious, amazing food.

*AMY: That's incredible. How do you capture City Harvest's impact today? And where are you hoping to go in the future, in terms of impact and scale?*

REBECKAH: We look at our impact in a few different ways. One of the main metrics we use is the amount of food that we're rescuing and delivering, which has grown dramatically since our founding in 1982. This year we anticipate that we will rescue and deliver 64 million pounds of food, which equates to 175,000 million pounds of food every day.

We have 22 trucks delivering that food throughout New York City on a daily basis. We look at food security needs in particular neighborhoods and the gaps in supply. Those gaps are still incredibly high. City Harvest is in the third year of a five-year strategic plan and by the end of that plan, our aim is to grow to rescue and deliver 75 million pounds of food annually by 2020 to help meet those needs.

*AMY: I'm interested in hearing more about the types of strategic partnerships you develop for City Harvest. What types of partnerships are you most excited about?*

REBECKAH: Our institutional partnerships team manages the relationships we have with over 235 different foundations. For instance, we have a strong partnership with the Robin Hood Foundation, who is one of our main institutional supporters. We work really closely with them to understand what's going on across New York City.

I also look at new partnerships and new possibilities. We are starting a partnership with One City Health and Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn focused on how food distribution and delivery can be used to support their diabetes prevention and treatment programs. There's a number of these health-related partnerships happening across the city and the country focused on the connection between nutritious food and individual health.

Another partnership that we're involved in is with a nonprofit called Brighter Bites, a school-based program that started in Texas and have since grown. We are their New York City partner. Their programs couple nutrition education, which Brighter Bites staff delivers, with food distribution at

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the school. City Harvest provides eight to twelve varieties of fresh produce at each distribution. Families receive a range of amazing fruits and vegetables that they might not have access to, or might not have the money to purchase, or might not want to purchase because they're afraid their kids won't like it and don't want to spend money on something that will go to waste. That's another really exciting partnership.

We are always thinking about how we can be iterating upon what we're doing, but the core of our mission has never changed: it's about food rescue and delivery. We're always looking at how we can have an increased impact through partnerships.

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*AMY: That's great. We've been asking foundations like the General Mills Foundation and Walmart Foundation, and retail partners like Kroger, what they think successful partnerships with nonprofits look like. I'm curious from your perspective as a nonprofit, what are some of the elements of successful partnerships? What advice would you have for other nonprofits as they start to pursue partnership opportunities?*

REBECKAH: A real partner is one that you're going to have a thoughtful dialogue with. We all have our own objectives. We want to make sure that on Day One we're aligning on what we hope to achieve as a result of the partnership. We believe that establishing great partnerships means getting clear on expectations and establishing what each party is bringing. We want to make sure that every partnership is a joint endeavor and that people have the ability to iterate and work well together.

Any project will have its ebbs and flows or challenges that happen along the way. Being able to be clear about what you're facing and how you're deciding to move in a different way is important. Having that flexibility and understanding on both sides is important. In our case, managing the logistics of picking food up from hundreds of different stops every single day and then getting it to the place on time is a huge undertaking. We make sure to be clear with our partners about some of the challenges we face in the hopes that they can be understanding and that can allow for learning on how we could be doing something better or differently.



IMAGE CREDIT: CITY HARVEST

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*AMY: What brought you to this work to begin with? It looks like you've had experience all around the world. What brought you to City Harvest?*

REBECKAH: My background is in the international humanitarian sector. Before coming to City Harvest, I was working for an organization called Action Against Hunger, which focused on nutrition and food insecurity issues globally. I found that work very compelling, but at some point, I started thinking about food insecurity in the U.S. A lot of the reasons for food insecurity that I was witnessing in countries like South Sudan or Pakistan are very different from what is happening in the U.S. City Harvest's mission speaks to me in that sense because we do have

the infrastructure, governance, and literal food that people need here, so City Harvest's mission of taking food that would otherwise go to waste and then giving it to the people that need it most really resonated with me. When I was thinking about moving from the international sector to doing something more locally, this was absolutely the perfect fit.

*AMY: That's a fascinating journey. I've heard that City Harvest thinks about iteration and innovation in a really interesting way. Can you talk about that?*

REBECKAH: For me, fundamentally, City Harvest has a practical approach to solving problems. Innovation can sometimes be a buzzword that people use in many different



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IMAGE CREDIT: CITY HARVEST

ways. It can seem airy and vague. If you're talking about transformation, sometimes that gives the impression that you have to throw away everything you've been doing and start over.

City Harvest has always approached innovation in a very practical sense. We realize that if we want to be doing even more, we need to be doing it better, and we find solutions that way. I think it's coming at it from a slightly different angle.

On the fundraising side, I often look at the work our teams are doing and have to tell them that the work they are doing on the ground is something that should be sold as innovative. To them, it might just seem like something they did as a quick fix, but what they actually might be solving is a problem that we've been seeing and been frustrated with for years and years. If you look at it externally, and from a different perspective, it might satisfy the requirements of being an innovation, but we don't set out to do that.

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*AMY: It sounds like your teams have such deep on-the-ground experience with these issues and pain points, that when they come up with solutions, they're grounded in reality. How do you then take that work and package it for a funder in a way that gets them excited?*

REBECKAH: It ends up being quite subjective. Funders have different things that they're interested in and want to see more of.

If we take something like Plentiful, which is our mobile platform for food pantries, it has a number of amazing functions. For us, the most important element is that it helps bring clients dignity by streamlining operations so they don't have to wait in line for an hour or more just to access food. That's hugely important to us, but for other funders, they're really interested in the fact that it gives us more data on where and how people are actually accessing food, which will allow us to also manage our deliveries in an impactful way. For us, it's being able



IMAGE CREDIT: CITY HARVEST

to understand all sides of what we're talking about and then ensuring we're really highlighting those pieces that we know will align with what the funder is most interested in.

*AMY: Give me a sense of the scale of City Harvest's current operations. How do you achieve that impressive number of deliveries that you shared at the beginning?*

REBECKAH: We have about 160 staff members that work out of two different locations. One of our locations is a food

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rescue facility that is a 45,000 square foot warehouse. It has a freezer and a refrigerator and is temperature controlled. It has a space for us to process an incredible amount of food every single day.

We also have 22 trucks so there is a lot of logistical oversight that goes into understanding how to pick things up and where to drop them off very quickly so that the food doesn't go bad. It's a scale and a volume that is particular to New York City. We have 2,500 different food donors and more than 400 different community partners and we really would not be able to deliver 64 million pounds of food every year without that kind of operation.

**AMY: A strategic choice that many nonprofits have to think about is how they will scale their impact. It sounds like City Harvest is obviously deeply embedded in New York City, but I'm curious how you think about scale and expansion. Are you looking to achieve market penetration within one urban area? I'm sure you've been approached by other cities who want you to bring your model elsewhere. How do you think about scaling your impact?**

REBECKAH: We were founded with a very clear mission and we have stuck to that mission. We are about ending hunger in

New York City through food rescue and delivery. From our perspective, we have been more than happy to share what we do with other cities. We have had people visit our facility from places as far-ranging as Greece and Japan and we will tell them exactly what we do and how they can do it, too.

We still have a lot to do here in New York City. As we continue to grow and scale, we cannot lose sight of our core mission. We can't lose sight of what we're good at and be pushed in a different direction by a funder to do something that's outside of our abilities. It would be easy to see the connections between food insecurity and education and workforce development and housing and all of these other issues, which are very, very important, but at City Harvest we do food recovery and delivery well and that's what we're going to keep doing.

**AMY: That discipline is tough to come by, but it's so important. What advice would you have for other nonprofits who might be looking to build a new solution in the food rescue or food recovery space? What would you say they should start by doing or anything they should avoid?**

REBECKAH: It's always wise to start with a landscape analysis and see what else is out there and where there might be potential

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partnerships. There might be an opportunity to take something that someone else has designed and evolve it.

We're conscious of avoiding duplicative efforts and, instead, are making sure that we're all helping one another learn and grow across the sector. There are a lot of massive problems that we're all trying to solve, so as much as we can, we need to build cross-sector collaboration and maximize the sharing. I think that's the place to start and then we build from there.

**AMY:** *As you look across the landscape yourself, are there any untapped opportunities or challenges you think more people should be working on?*

REBECKAH: The intersection between healthcare and food is really interesting. Healthcare professionals are now thinking about writing produce prescriptions. A lot of people are starting to do interesting work in this space and there's a lot of learning, but it's an area where there is great opportunity for serious impact.



**AMY:** *You also talked about the importance of offering dignity to the end recipient of rescued food. I'm curious if you have any advice for others about how they should think about designing solutions that offer dignity or choice or convenience to them?*

REBECKAH: It goes back to the human-centered design approach, and making sure that you're involving the people that you want to serve or support at every step. Avoid making assumptions about what you think they need or how you think they'll use something. Instead, be on the front lines testing things with the end-user throughout the development, whether that's a product or a program.

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*AMY: As you've rolled out programs and services across different boroughs in New York, have you made any adjustments for different communities?*

REBECKAH: There are a few examples. We have a kosher initiative where we source kosher food and then make sure it goes to kosher agencies serving those communities. There's a high number of kosher individuals throughout New York City who experience food insecurity, but we also know that people who keep halal can access food at these kosher agencies. We ensure that what we're allocating to our partners is culturally relevant and appropriate. Our agency operations team really does a great job understanding where the partners are located and what products might be better suited for them.

*AMY: Do you have any other advice you would share with others?*

REBECKAH: One of the things City Harvest does really well is focus on our expertise and strengths and build from that. It can be really easy to get distracted and go down many different paths and try to solve everything at the same time, but if organizations keep that core mission at the center of everything they're doing, and incrementally build on that in ways that make the most sense for them, it will often work out better.

*AMY: Thank you so much, Rebeckah. This was really helpful.*