



What is Northern Illinois Food Bank?

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Hunger Connection Branch

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Like corporate food warehouses, NIFB has coolers, freezers, forklifts, pallets and receiving docks. But something very different happens within the doors of Northern Illinois Food Bank. Each year, hundreds of trucks filled with donated food arrive at the docks of NIFB. Donated food items come from manufacturers, growers, wholesalers, grocers and even restaurants. Additionally, individuals, businesses and civic organizations conduct food drives to benefit NIFB.

With limited staff and on a tight budget, NIFB provides fresh and packaged food to more than 520 food assistance sites, including soup kitchens, pantries, childcare agencies, shelters, after-school snack programs. Collectively, they are the food safety net for hundreds of thousands of poor people in the 13 counties northern Illinois served by NIFB – from urban and suburban areas to very rural areas.

Food banks like NIFB pay to transport food donations from the manufacturer. Then staff and volunteers receive, weigh, sort and even repackage these donations so they can be used to serve families in need.

Because of the speed in which the food is distributed, staffers continually work to keep the warehouse inventory full. NIFB actively solicits food manufactures, encouraging them to donate excess food...rather than dumping it or selling it on the secondary market. However, corporate donations follow food industry trends, and since food banks can't control the types of items donated, available foodstuffs can vary from week to week. Therefore, NIFB handles more than just donated products. Other important components of the inventory include government USDA product and purchased food and non-food items.

As one of eight food banks that are the sole distributors of USDA product for food pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters in Illinois, NIFB follows stringent guidelines for allocating government supplied food, in addition to frequent inspections and an annual organization-wide audit.

Balancing a menu with donated goods and USDA products means looking for ways to save partner agencies money by purchasing truckload quantities of other foods, working with other food banks to gain additional purchase power, and providing high-demand items for a low cost. Through agency surveys, NIFB has deemed nearly 40 items staples to the lives of many agencies. Some of these items include rice, canned vegetables, canned fruit, peanut butter, jelly, pinto beans, macaroni & cheese, and tuna.

With nearly two million pounds of food and non-food items distributed monthly throughout northern Illinois to its partner agencies, NIFB has found that tracking donations is fine-tuned to pinpoint accuracy. Every single item, from a box of Rice-a-Roni, a can of creamed corn, a gallon of bleach or a bottle of soda is recorded and tracked into the hands (and eventually the bellies) of those who need it.

Even with the titanic proportions of foodstuffs they handle, NIFB and the other food banks continue to work to increase hunger awareness. Although people generally know hunger is a problem, it's easier for most to understand severe starvation abroad, rather than the impact of low-grade malnutrition. What goes unnoticed, for example, is the number of children who go hungry daily. In fact, children comprise the largest segment of the population both affected by hunger, and aided by the efforts of the NIFB. Food donations are always needed, regardless of the season; hunger in Illinois is a year-round problem.