After the Fact | Turning Surplus Food into Millions of Meals

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TRANSCRIPT

Evan Ehlers, founder and executive director, Sharing Excess: When you look at these displays in grocery stores, these pyramids of perfectly round tomatoes, there's this thought of, how does all of that get bought in a day? And the truth is, it doesn't.

A whole lot of perfectly edible food ends up in the landfill, but also they have to pay money to throw good food away. It's like the world's dumbest problem.

In this year alone, we anticipate distributing over 100 million pounds of food.

It has been staggering how much excess is out there. Every level that we reach for it, we just see there's more and more.

Dan LeDuc, host, The Pew Charitable Trusts: Welcome to "After the Fact.” For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that up to 40% of the nation’s food supply goes to waste each year. Evan Ehlers had an idea: in his words, “rescue” that wasted food and get it to hungry people. From that idea sprang his organization, Sharing Excess, which is doing just that—in Philadelphia and beyond—with amazing success.

Evan Ehlers: At Sharing Excess, we work with food businesses, like grocery stores, wholesalers, and farmers, to take surplus food that they aren't able to sell, and we redistribute that food out to food banks, shelters. Any kind of group you can think of that's feeding people and impacting lives, we will efficiently redistribute that excess food to people that need it.

The fact that 40% of the food we produce in the United States goes to waste—it's more than enough food to create over 100 billion meals every year.

Dan LeDuc: That's a lot of food. That's where the “excess” in Sharing Excess comes from, right?

Evan Ehlers: Absolutely. That food that we're talking about, I consider that to be the low-hanging fruit.

Dan LeDuc: To use a phrase.

Evan Ehlers: To use a phrase. Pun very intended here.

This is food that is still packaged. It's perfectly edible, and it's able to be easily delivered in a way that it can be redistributed.

Not all of the food that goes to waste in America can be repurposed. But there's that section of the food that we consider to be pre-consumer food waste or excess. That's really what we're after. If we just send transportation, and we have the right labor and logistics and people involved, we can get that food to organizations quite easily.

Dan LeDuc: It's an ambitious project. You are a young fellow. How did you get started in all of this?

Evan Ehlers: So I'm 28 years old now, but I started the organization officially about six years ago while I was a student in college at Drexel University. I had this day that changed my life. I realized that I had over 50 meal swipes left in my dining account that I knew I wouldn't be able to use before I had to go home for winter break.

Walking to classes, I would see what poverty and food insecurity looked like in Philadelphia in the same city, the same community that I was fortunate enough to have these 50 meals that I'm not using. It was kind of this light-bulb moment. So I went into the dining hall and I ended up swiping out all 50 of those meals, and I put them into the back of my car, and I started driving around Center City, Philadelphia, and giving the meals away to anyone I could find that needed a meal that day.

In 30 minutes, all of the food that I had in my car was gone. And I remember, especially, there was a mother with her children who was explaining this might be the only meal that they have that day. And they were just so grateful that I spent my time to do this and gave me a hug.

Food has this incredible way of breaking down barriers.

Dan LeDuc: Well, it's got to make you feel good. When do you take the next step that says, I could be doing more of this.

Evan Ehlers: After I gave out those initial meal swipes, I just couldn't shake this idea from my mind that there has to be so many other students who also have these leftover meal swipes that they're not using.

I started to advocate for a formal meal swipe donation program. When I looked at why all of this food was going to waste, what I really saw was there was a lot of inefficiency with getting this food to organizations that are feeding hundreds or even thousands of people. And, if we could just fix that middle mile, then there's a real opportunity to solve a logistical issue here.

Dan LeDuc: And so, Evan found his mission.

Evan Ehlers: Forty-seven million people do not have access to at least three healthy meals per day. And to me, when I saw the numbers and I really understood the scale of how much food goes to waste in America, it went beyond a personal experience of me with leftover food in my dining account. I saw this as a massive issue that I could probably spend the rest of my life trying to solve.

Dan LeDuc: We'll get back to Evan in a moment. But now we turn to Kristin Romens. She directs the Pew Fund for Health and Human Services, which supports Philadelphia-area nonprofits serving people with challenges rooted in poverty.

Kristin Romens, director, Pew Fund for Health and Human Services in Philadelphia: Food insecurity in Philadelphia is first and foremost the result of the city's high poverty rate. But there are other contributing factors, of course, including, you know, the rising cost of groceries or access to grocery stores.

There are ways to alleviate hunger. And I think the city has taken many of those steps. The Philadelphia School District has universal school lunches and breakfasts. But I think, you know, the core to much of this is access to public benefits, right, which are generally funded through federal dollars, some state and some local dollars, that give families access to significant economic supports.

The Pew Fund supports a number of organizations working on economic mobility, economic advancement issues in the city of Philadelphia. When we think about which organizations to fund, we do want to look at those organizations that are getting to the root cause of economic or financial instability, rather than just putting a Band-Aid on the problem. And we know that building assets, getting out of debt, access to jobs, access to public benefits, and having sustaining income are the important building blocks to true economic mobility.

Dan LeDuc: How would you describe economic mobility?

Kristin Romens: Economic mobility has a few components to it. First is a family's ability to meet its basic needs. Research supports the idea that meeting basic needs is a necessary foundation for families to achieve upward mobility.

And then economic mobility includes access to jobs, access to public benefits, and then has an asset component to it as well, right, the opportunity to build assets, to build wealth.

Dan LeDuc: So, of course, one of the things that the economic security offers a family is the chance to buy groceries and feed their children. We call it food insecurity. How do we begin to address that?

Kristin Romens: That's where an organization like Sharing Excess comes into the picture. They've identified this disconnect between food that would go to waste and are finding innovative solutions to connect food with the families who need it.

We became interested in Sharing Excess because it's innovative and adaptable, particularly in its use of technology. One of the things I love is that it has environmental benefits because it diverts food waste that would otherwise end up in landfills. They're activating volunteers to work in and contribute to the community. They are able to connect tangible actions that people can take with their big, ambitious vision.

Dan LeDuc: Evan told us about the impact Sharing Excess has had on the community, particularly as the organization has grown and they've learned more about how so much food can go to waste.

Dan LeDuc: You start with prepared meals that are in a dining hall at a university. But the food, before it ever gets to places like that, they're not sold, for some reason, they don't get to the grocery store from the distribution center.

Evan Ehlers: It was a quick transition from meal swipes to working with grocery stores. Originally where my friends were cashiers from college, they would convince their managers to let me come and pick up whatever food that they had available that day from their loading dock.

And I would go in my grandma's car that she passed to me before she passed on, and I would make this my daily routine in between classes to pick up whatever food that I could, and I'd deliver that food to whatever shelters or food pantries were nearby. And they would say, yeah, I'll take the bananas and the peppers and the meat, and then whatever else was left, I'd bring that to the next organization.

Dan LeDuc: So many of us will go to the grocery store, get what we need, and not think about what's still in the bin there at the produce section when we leave.

Evan Ehlers: When you look at these displays in grocery stores, these pyramids of perfectly round tomatoes, there's this thought of, well, how does all of that get bought

in a day? And the truth is, it doesn't. It's there for show. And what that ends up with is a whole lot of perfectly edible food in the landfill.

Dan LeDuc: What was the sort of initial reception from grocery stores and elsewhere?

Evan Ehlers: For food businesses, not only do they not want to see this perfectly great product that they worked so hard for go into the trash, but also they have to pay money to throw good food away. It's like the world's dumbest problem, especially for a food business that is already operating on thin margins.

For us, we have to make our operations as easily accessible for food businesses as possible. We've kind of modeled our approach after a waste management, for example, where they're going to be there every day. They're going to take whatever you have. They'll provide you all of the receipts and all the invoicing, and they make it a smooth process, where it can be integrated into a team's daily operations.

So that's what we've become over time, kind of like this social waste management process that comes before the food is bad. We're there to take it not only off their hands and off their loading docks, but off their waste bills and get them the tax credits that they can get from a federal or state level because we're a nonprofit 501c3. This was a big win-win for them.

Dan LeDuc: That's like a win all the way around. You're saving them money, not just in their disposal costs, but because they're contributing to society's good. They're getting tax benefits.

Evan Ehlers: Absolutely. It's one of those no-brainer solutions that really is just a matter of us getting to more places and to more businesses. And also, not to mention, all of the organizations and food banks and shelters and pantries that are saving money from this process as well, where they're not having to go and purchase that food, at prices that are going to stretch their budget so thin that they won't be able to afford the staff or the logistics to run their day-to-day programming.

Dan LeDuc: Sharing Excess had barely begun its work when pandemic hit.

Evan Ehlers: Once we had started creating this kind of localized network throughout the city, there was a huge meteor essentially that hit the food system that was COVID.

There was a huge increase in food waste because all of these businesses that were prepared to serve months' worth of inventory now were mandated to close their operations. And, at the same time, more people than ever were either laid off from

their jobs or furloughed or were shuttered in their own homes, and the food access points became restricted.

We were able to pick up the excess and make the most of it during that time. We grew to go from our grandma's cars to vans that we were renting and get some funding in the door so we can get a small warehouse in West Philadelphia that used to be a boxing gym. And we repurposed it into this multifaceted distribution center, where we could take in truckloads of food and redistribute it out quickly to dozens of organizations in a single day.

Dan LeDuc: We're talking about a much greater amount of food at a given time for you to deal with.

Evan Ehlers: We went from moving hundreds of thousands of pounds of food a year and then tens of millions of pounds of food a year.

It's kind of hard to wrap your head around that. But an entire tractor trailer of produce roughly weighs about 35,000 pounds. And so, if you were to think about a million pounds of produce, you can get about 30 truckloads of produce in that million pounds of food. That's an enormous amount of impact that we're able to make in communities. It's over 200 million dollars' worth of food that we've been able to redistribute.

Dan LeDuc: Tell us the story by the numbers.

Evan Ehlers: We started with 50 meal swipes from my dining account. We anticipate distributing a little over 100 million pounds of food in this year alone. It has been mind-boggling how quickly we've been able to scale and also equally staggering to think about how much excess is out there because every level that we reach for it, we just see there's more and more somehow.

As we started to build up this larger network, we really started to work with organizations that not only were feeding people but also were focusing on health care or education or protecting people that were in domestic violence situations, senior homes, assisted living facilities. And we have technology that makes this entire process so streamlined and efficient. We're tracking every pound of food that we rescue, so we know where it came from and where it went to.

And it creates a picture of progress. We can show not only the food that we're rescuing, but also all of the organizations and individuals that are benefiting from it. And this data is so important when we're trying to influence policy and major decision makers and policymakers around how to improve communities in simple ways that provide a win for everyone involved.

Dan LeDuc: When you're talking about the amount of food, that's just sounds daunting to keep track of.

Evan Ehlers: It started from the very beginning for us. I realized quickly hey, there's no way to really track what I'm doing here. So, I started out by buying these package scales and with every pound of food that I would weigh, I'd put, you know, this was 40 pounds of produce. This is 40 pounds of meat. And I add that all up.

And over time, that process of working on spreadsheets became an app that can be employed by our entire team to use on a daily basis. You're able to see where the food emanated from and what its end destination was.

So this data, we bring it back to the same stakeholders that are supporting us. We can show them down to the pound what the impact was, where it went, and, geographically speaking, who we're serving.

Dan LeDuc: Well, it sounds like the work you're doing in Philadelphia can be a model for other places.

Evan Ehlers: We have grown from our humble roots in Philadelphia to redistribute food in over 36 states.

Dan LeDuc: Wait a minute, you've told a remarkable story about Philadelphia. I knew you were expanding, but I didn't know it was 36 states.

Evan Ehlers: Now, we're not physically on the ground in 36 states, but we move food in 36 states. We've gotten pretty nimble with our programming here.

Where we are boots-on-the-ground is in Philadelphia and New York City, in the two largest terminal produce markets in the United States, where we sort and glean millions of pounds of produce from these markets on an annual basis.

But then outside of that, we're working with grocery stores and networks of retail rescue routes in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York City, northern New Jersey.

And outside of that, we're able to pick up full truckloads of surplus produce from manufacturers across the country, where maybe they have the same issue that we're seeing in Philadelphia, but all they need is a truck to pick it up. And we can coordinate that truck to pick up the food, in Texas, for example, and then deliver that food to the Texas Food Bank.

We're able to take this concept of sharing excess and make it ever-scalable, no matter where it is.

Dan LeDuc: It's a little dumbfounding to me to think that in five years you're in that large an area. That, to me, is a sign of the problem, but also the solution.

Evan Ehlers: When I originally started Sharing Excess, I knew I wanted to be something that goes beyond just food. Now that we're providing over a million meals every week, there's thousands upon thousands of people that are having that same experience I had with the meal swipes but just multiplied like a ripple effect.

I love walking up on one of our pop-ups in Malcolm X Park, for example, every Saturday, where we've been there for the last four years. And I just see the smiles on people's faces and our volunteers who have been looking forward to this day in the week for so long.

This is something that anyone can do anywhere. We're here to scale human compassion and to grow this basic innate concept that we all have in our hearts. If we share excess, if we make that something that is a part of human nature, the world will be better for it.

Dan LeDuc: Thanks for listening. To learn more about Sharing Excess and the Pew Fund for Health and Human Services, visit www.pewtrusts.org/afterthefact.

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For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."