



Fresh Rescue Champions Project

FINAL REPORT

Developed Spring 2024 by researchers from the Johns Hopkins University and the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) Center for Social Design in collaboration with Albertsons banner store Department Managers and Associates for the Fresh Rescue Champions Project.



Fresh Rescue
Champions

The authors of this paper are researchers affiliated with Johns Hopkins University (JHU) Bloomberg School of Public Health and Krieger School of Arts and Sciences and the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) Center for Social Design. The use of “we” in this report refers to these university researchers. However, this project reflects a partnership with Albertsons employees, who informed and contributed to every stage of the research process and strategy development. Their expertise and insight into wasted food, food donations, and other aspects of retail supermarket processes, procedures, and dynamics laid the foundation for everything written here. We, the research team, are grateful for their knowledge, dedication, and passion.

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Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

To learn more about the RECIPES Network, please visit wastedfood.american.edu



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. retail sector generated approximately 4.99 million tons of surplus food in 2022, sending 34.5% to the landfill or incineration, and donating only 19.5% (ReFED, 2023). Retailers recognize that the food they discard could be helping community members in need to live better, healthier lives. They recognize the considerable environmental benefits and cost savings they could achieve by improving donation and reducing waste. Yet, the solutions are not always simple, and regardless of the plans set at corporate headquarters, success often rests on the day-to-day actions of frontline workers.

Through [Albertsons Companies' Recipe for Change initiative](#), the company is working to accelerate food donations and reduce food waste to landfills (Albertsons Companies, n.d.). Within that initiative, the Fresh Rescue Program aims to divert high quality food that might otherwise be discarded to donation in the local community.

This report describes a novel approach to improving food rescue: leading with the expertise of frontline workers. The Fresh Rescue Champions Project asks, how might unlocking the expertise, creativity, and motivation of supermarket employees transform food donation? How can worker-engaged approaches further benefit retailers and employees? To address these questions, we convened a cohort of 10 frontline employees from Albertsons banner stores in the Mid-Atlantic area (henceforth, Fresh Rescue Champions, or Champions) to co-design a set of strategies to improve the food donation program. The project is rooted in the idea that when given the opportunity to think closely about needs, frontline workers can utilize their lived experience and expertise to develop strategies that are different in both concept and details from those developed in a corporate office.

The Fresh Rescue Champions project was led by researchers at the [Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health](#), [Johns Hopkins Krieger School of Arts and Sciences](#), and the [Maryland Institute College of Art \(MICA\) Center for Social Design](#), in partnership with Albertsons, and with funding from the National Science Foundation as part of [the Multiscale RECIPES for Sustainable Food Systems research network](#). This report provides an overview of the project and the four resulting strategies to improve food donation at Albertsons banner stores.

Our project was guided by the human-centered design process, combined with approaches and expertise from anthropology and public health.

Human-centered design is a collaborative, creative process dedicated to understanding the experiences, behaviors, and needs of people at the heart of a challenge, and designing interventions to better serve them. It involves those individuals at every step as co-creators and experts. In brief, our process involved the following:

Planning: Developing our approach, selecting Champions, and building relationships.

Research: Gathering data about food donation processes and challenges from the perspectives of Champions, other Associates, Albertsons leadership, and Donation Partners—the food banks and pantries that pick up food from each store.

Synthesis: Identifying common themes in the data and using them to develop a set of insights, defining connections or tensions.

Ideation: Guided brainstorming using “How might we...” questions based on research insights to generate ideas for potential food donation interventions.

Prototyping: Selecting ideas and developing models to test desirability, usability, and feasibility.

Implementation: Using feedback to evolve the prototypes into detailed strategies for implementation in stores.



After reviewing the research findings, the Champions identified multiple barriers to donation, including a need for more and clearer guidance and communication about what can or should be donated; a need for clear guidance about corporate priorities regarding donation (e.g., are donated items viewed negatively, since they were not sold?); a need to build a culture of donation across the company, including the opportunity to strengthen donation norms through gamification; a need to know more about what happens to donated food after it leaves the stores; and a need for improved communication overall, including helping Associates feel safe and welcomed to provide input and feedback.

Based on this brainstorming, **the Champions prioritized and guided development of four strategies to improve food donation at Albertsons:**

Conduct new trainings for the Fresh Rescue Donation Program: These trainings, provided to all employees at all levels, will ensure alignment of communication, expectations and processes, and help strengthen the company's culture of donation.

Utilize updated donation guidelines with posters and detailed handouts: To standardize information about the Fresh Rescue Donation Program within departments and across stores, we co-created posters to hang in each department with department-specific donation guidelines, and detailed donation guidelines available for reference.

Strengthen connections between Donation Partners, Associates, and stores: This strategy has four components, developed with input from Donation Partners:

- **Immersive training:** Department Managers and other key Associates in charge of food donation would receive a fixed number of paid training hours annually designated for on-site training at the Donation Partner location.
- **In-Store Teach-In:** Donation Partners will regularly give in-store presentations for Associates about their activities and community needs.
- **In-Store Customer-Facing Events:** Donation Partners will regularly set up tables in the front of stores to share with customers and Associates about their activities and community needs, and about the Fresh Rescue Donation Program.
- **Donation Partner Onboarding Form:** Form to collect standardized information from all Donation Partners at the time of onboarding.

Run a donation incentives contest: To build engagement in and motivation for donating, and solidify donation behaviors, stores will compete for prizes when most departments meet their donation goals every quarter (or 12 weeks).

Additionally, **the Champions highlighted the need for open, clear, timely and accessible communication and feedback** as essential to the success of all of four strategies and to the Fresh Rescue program generally.

After pilot testing, using the knowledge gained, the strategies may be rolled out across all Albertsons banner stores. We recommend continuing to collect data before, during, and after implementation to evaluate and improve the implementation process, and to document the strategies' impacts on donation and other outcomes. Further, evaluation research may help Albertsons untangle the separate impacts of the strategies themselves, and the employee-engaged processes used to develop them.



In 2022, Albertsons donated 80 million tons of food (Albertsons Companies, 2023, p. 18), **reflecting considerable commitment and effort by numerous associates and leaders throughout the company. And, as with all retailers, Albertsons still landfills massive amounts of good quality food that could have been donated and eaten by community members. The Fresh Rescue Champions project breaks new ground by going directly to the workers involved in day to day donations, mobilizing their expertise and creativity to design strategies directly targeted to the top food donation-related barriers experienced at store-level.**

The final strategies were informed by employees' extensive expertise, collected by academic researchers through numerous store visits, interviews with employees at store, division, and national levels, and Champion convenings. In addition to the future benefits for improving food waste, employee-engaged strategy development has another important benefit: the Champions described considerable satisfaction and professional growth as a result of participation.

In the future, we hope that the strategies presented in this report will be piloted and eventually rolled out across all Albertsons banner stores. Further research will enable capturing the outcomes of this initiative, for workers, for improving food donation, and reducing food waste.



Donations are often stored in banana boxes or other order boxes.

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. retail sector generated approximately 4.99 million tons of surplus food in 2022, sending 34.5% to the landfill or incineration, and donating only 19.5% (ReFED, 2023). Retailers recognize that the food they discard could be helping community members in need to live better, healthier lives. They recognize the considerable environmental benefits and cost savings they could achieve by improving donation and reducing waste. Yet, the solutions are not always simple, and regardless of the plans set at corporate headquarters, success often rests on the day-to-day actions of frontline workers.

Through Albertsons Companies Recipe for Change initiative, the company is working to accelerate food donations and reduce food waste to landfills. Within that, Albertsons' Fresh Rescue Program aims to divert high quality food that might otherwise be discarded to donation in the local community.

This report describes a novel approach to improving food rescue: leading with the expertise of frontline workers. The Fresh Rescue Champions Project asks, how might unlocking the expertise, creativity, and motivation of supermarket employees transform food donation? How can worker-engaged approaches further benefit retailers and employees? To address these questions, we convened a cohort of 10 frontline employees from Albertsons banner stores in the Mid-Atlantic area (henceforth, Fresh Rescue Champions, or Champions) to co-design a set of strategies to improve the food donation program.



The Fresh Rescue Champions Project was sparked in May 2022 during an informal dinner conversation at the ReFED Food Waste Solution Summit between Suzanne Long of Albertsons Companies and Roni Neff of Johns Hopkins University. Long had spoken on the conference mainstage about Albertsons goals to reduce food waste and the importance of workers in food waste and donation outcomes (Long, et al. 2022). Neff, along with colleagues at Johns Hopkins University (JHU) and Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), had National Science Foundation (NSF) funds through the Multiscale RECIPES for Sustainable Food Systems national food waste research network to study worker-engaged food waste solutions. Between May 2022 and April 2023, we worked with Long and other members of corporate leadership to develop goals and the scope of work for this project. Working with a corporate retailer of the size and reach of Albertsons—the second largest supermarket retailer in the country—presented an exciting opportunity for potentially large-scale impact.



Albertsons Companies' Recipe for Change Initiative & Fresh Rescue Food Donation Program

Albertsons Companies Recipe for Change initiative supports food waste reduction through improved inventory management, planning, ordering, and receiving practices. Under Recipe for Change, the Fresh Rescue Food Donation Program ensures edible food that might otherwise be discarded is donated (Gattuso, 2005). Initially introduced in 2005, the Fresh Rescue Program was designed to collect and distribute perishable foods to America's Second Harvest affiliates (Gattuso, 2005). The company recently began implementing an updated

version of the Fresh Rescue program across its more than 2,200 stores, renewing its dedication to the program, emphasizing partnerships with local food banks, and updating guidelines for eligible food items, food safety protocols, and employee training. Additionally, Albertsons actively engages in initiatives such as the Food Waste Reduction Alliance (FWRA) and Pacific Coast Food Waste Commitment (PCFWC) and utilizes ReFED's "Retail Food Waste Action Guide" to support retailers in their sustainable practices.



Central to our collaboration was (and is) the idea that Albertsons supermarket employees (henceforth, Associates) would be co-researchers and co-designers throughout the process.

Frontline supermarket employees are the true experts: they have a depth of experience and expertise related to wasted food, and they determine what food is donated or discarded on a daily basis. Yet, their voices are not always heard or heeded in efforts to enact change. This project is rooted in the idea that when given the opportunity to think closely about needs, frontline workers can utilize their lived experience and expertise to develop strategies different from those developed in a corporate office. Unlocking the expertise, creativity, and motivation of supermarket Associates presents a significant opportunity toward achieving food donation and broader food waste objectives and impact.



The Fresh Rescue Champions Project brought together a team of Albertsons Associates, a group of Department Managers whom we call the “Champions”, alongside public health and anthropology researchers from the JHU Bloomberg School of Public Health and Krieger School of Arts and Sciences and design researchers from the MICA Center for Social Design. The Champions work

across diverse departments (bakery, deli, meat, produce, and Starbucks) from four Albertsons banner stores (two ACME and two Safeway) across the Mid-Atlantic region in Delaware and Maryland. The Champions worked as co-researchers and co-designers alongside the MICA and JHU team over our ten-month process.

Our diverse team worked collaboratively to achieve three interrelated goals:

- **Improve** the existing Fresh Rescue donation program at Albertsons banner stores;
- **Explore** how an employee-centered model might work within a limited number of Mid-Atlantic banner stories, and potentially more broadly within Albertsons divisions and stores across the country;
- **Challenge** power imbalances that often occur in retail corporations that result from top-down decision making.

Fresh Rescue Champions Project: Community Norms

Establishing trust and respect with and among the Champions was critical to open and generative thought, feeling, and idea sharing and thus to the project’s success. At the start of the project, the Champions and the JHU and MICA research team collectively articulated “Community Norms” – ground rules and commitments that guided how we wanted to work together, show up for, and support each other. Our nine norms (summarized here) were referenced at the start of each Champion meeting:

1. Be **honest and respectful**.
2. Demonstrate commitment through **accountability and active participation**.
3. Give each other **grace**.
4. Create a **safe and judgment-free environment** through **support and community**.
5. Connect and work **as a team**.
6. Embrace **flexibility and fluidity**.
7. **Share** clearly.
8. **Listen** actively, be **responsive**, and show **gratitude**.
9. Have **fun!**



As outcomes of our research, the research team and Champions co-designed and co-tested the desirability, usability, and feasibility of four strategies to improve Albertsons' Fresh Rescue Food Donation Program:

- Conduct **new trainings** for the Fresh Rescue Food Donation Program
- Utilize **updated donation guidelines** with posters and detailed handouts
- Strengthen **connections between Donation Partners, Associates, and stores**
- Run a **donation incentive contest**

In this report, we describe the process and findings that led to developing these strategies and provide detailed descriptions of each one. This report represents only a summary of our collective work; we also provided Albertsons corporate leadership with further rich data and findings, along with detailed recommendations for piloting and implementing each strategy in stores. Our shared hope and intention is that these strategies will be piloted and fully implemented, the results documented, and the impact evaluated over the coming months.

Although we undertook this process with Albertsons and with the Champions in specific ACME and Safeway stores in the Mid-Atlantic, we hope that our process, findings, and the strategies can inform and inspire work in other retail supermarkets across the United States and in other countries with similar retail structures. From the start, Albertsons committed to sharing these findings widely across the industry, in support of the wider collective effort to improve food donations and reduce wasted food.



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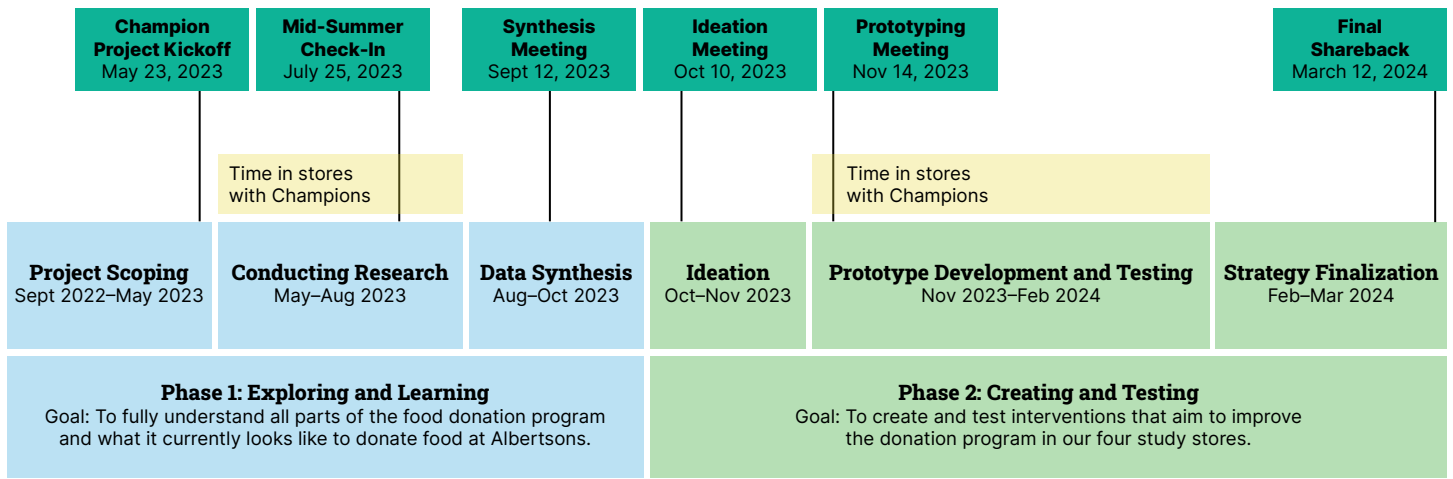
METHODS

The Fresh Rescue Champions Project was designed in two phases:

- **Exploring and Learning:** Fully understand all parts of the food donation program.
- **Creating and Testing:** Create and test strategies to improve the donation program in four stores.

Our team, including the Champions, undertook this work from May 2023–April 2024, meeting as a full team at six in-person gatherings at the MICA Center for Social Design studio in Baltimore. We, the researchers, also made numerous trips to the stores in Delaware (Bear and Newark) and Maryland (Baltimore and Westminster) and to Donation Partner facilities. Donation Partners included the food banks and food pantries that pick up food from stores on a weekly basis.

Meetings with the Champion cohort



Project process & timeline



Our research was guided by the “human-centered design” process (see below), combined with qualitative research approaches and expertise from anthropology and public health.



Our process involved the following steps:

- **Planning:** Scoping the project process, meetings with Albertsons leadership, selecting Champions, setting goal and expectations, and conducting initial store visits;
- **Research:** Conducting over 50 hours of immersive research in stores and at Donation Partner facilities through a combination of qualitative methods, including over 40 in-depth interviews; many hours of observations and work-alongs with Champions, other Department Managers and store Associates, Store Directors, Operations Specialists, Division and National-level Leadership; and interviews and volunteer experiences with Donation Partners;
- **Synthesis:** Assembling and sorting over 600 pages of transcribed interviews, over 100 pages of written notes, and over 300 photos and videos; identifying common themes around participant statements and observations; and drawing connections or tensions between these data and themes;
- **Ideation:** Articulating open-ended, solution-oriented “How Might We...?” questions based on our research insights to serve as prompts for guided brainstorming exercises in which Champions generated ideas for potential food donation-related interventions;
- **Prototyping:** Collectively grouping and prioritizing the many ideas; selecting a few and developing models of each in order to test their desirability, usability, and feasibility in the four stores;
- **Implementation:** Integrating feedback gathered during prototype testing; evolving prototypes into more detailed strategies for implementing in stores.

Human-Centered Design

Human-centered design (HCD) is a collaborative, creative process dedicated to understanding the experiences, behaviors, and needs of people at the heart of an issue or problem (in this case supermarket employees and Donation Partners) and designing interventions that better serve their needs and/or alleviate challenges they are facing. HCD views problems through the perspective of the people directly impacted by a problem or issue, positions their lived experience as expertise, and involves the affected people—in this case the Champions—in every step of the design process as co-creators and experts. The HCD process is qualitative in nature and may also be referred to as “design research.”





Planning

After our initial planning with corporate leadership and visiting each of the four stores to recruit our cohort of Champions, we had our first meeting with the Champions in May 2023, where we focused on building relationships, described the research process, and elicited feedback from the Champions about when, where, and how to conduct interviews and observations with store personnel and what to ask during our research.

Research

Between June 2023 and August 2023, we completed in-store research, which involved conducting interviews and observing the day-to-day work of Champions and other store Associates, including Department Managers and Store Directors. We also interviewed non-store Albertsons employees, such as members of District, Division, and National corporate leadership. Additionally, based on Champion recommendation, we visited each store's Donation Partners and documented the process after items leave the store.

Throughout data collection, we sought to understand Associate roles, responsibilities, and chains of command; the end-to-end process of food coming into, being in, and leaving the store; the current state of the Fresh Rescue program, including program roll-out, goals, processes, evaluation methods, and incentives; Albertsons and banner stores' histories, cultures, and feelings about food donation; Donation Partners and their relationships to their affiliated Albertsons banner stores and the food they receive from Albertsons stores.

Research by the Numbers

44 Total interviews & conversations

- 30 Interviews with Department Managers and Store Associates
- 04 Interviews with Store Directors
- 05 Interviews with Operations Specialists, Division, and National Leadership
- 05 Conversations and Volunteering Experiences with Donation Partners

50+ Hours of store and Donation Partner visits

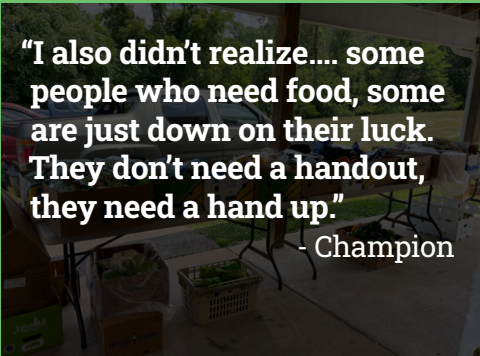
600+ Pages of transcribed interviews

100+ Pages of written notes

300+ Photos and videos from research

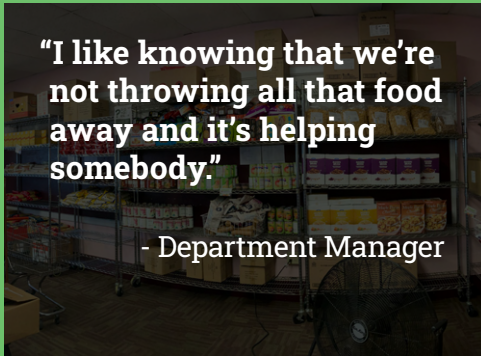
Shareback About Donation Partners

The Champions had many questions about what happens to donations after leaving the store. Some distrusted that the food would go to those who needed it. The report-back from our visits to Donation Partners shifted the conversation. Champions frequently referred back to a photo of cars lined up hours before a food pantry opened as particularly impactful in affirming that their donation efforts mattered.



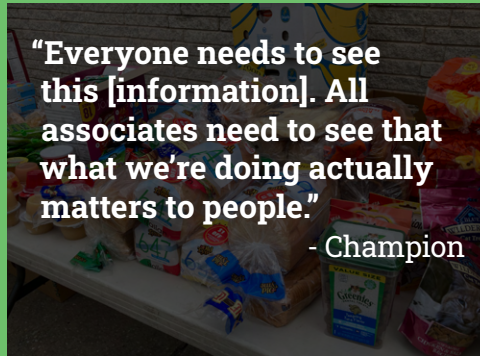
"I also didn't realize.... some people who need food, some are just down on their luck. They don't need a handout, they need a hand up."

- Champion



"I like knowing that we're not throwing all that food away and it's helping somebody."

- Department Manager

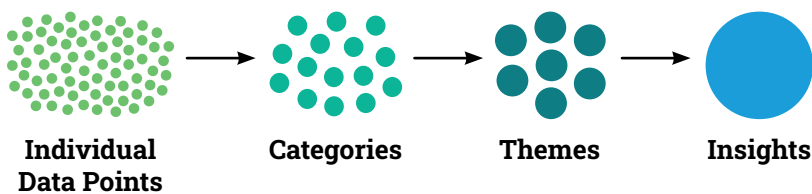


"Everyone needs to see this [information]. All associates need to see that what we're doing actually matters to people."

- Champion

Synthesis

We synthesized the data in order to create what is known in HCD as “insights” (see below). To create the insights, we first sorted the data (i.e., quotes from interviews, photos, and notes) into categories, then sorted those categories into themes, and then connected and summarized multiple themes to create insights. In September 2023, we met with the Champions to co-create insights and to conduct a “gut check,” ensuring our findings aligned with what they knew to be true.



Summary of Insights

Albertsons entered into partnership with our research team, recognizing that speaking with Associates could uncover uncomfortable realities. As a result of our research and synthesis, we generated a total of 15 insights (see right), summarized below. We emphasize that while the following insights were collected at Albertsons stores, the challenges they reflect are endemic to most retailers and/or large businesses and organizations. The process and strategies presented in this report provide an example of how Albertsons and other corporations may move forward in addressing these challenges.

What are insights?

In human-centered design, an insight is a statement that describes a specific phenomenon in the data, tying multiple themes together. Insights are grounded in the data and identify real life tensions, conflicts, or problems. They are used during the ideation process to generate ideas for potential solutions.



- **Some Associates had positive perceptions of the Fresh Rescue Program. However, many Albertsons banner stores have varying histories with food donation** and Associates have seen food donation come and go over the years. As a result, many Associates were unsure of corporate leadership’s dedication to the program.
- **Many Associates felt that they received insufficient communication and guidance about the Fresh Rescue Program** when it was rolled out, as well as mixed messages and expectations from corporate leadership about how many they should be donating. This has created anxiety, confusion, and inconsistency in donation practices amongst Associates.
- **Associates highlighted the following factors that lead to increased loss, decreased donations, unequal employee burden, and an overall weak donation culture:** standardized corporate decision-making, leadership reliance on imperfect metrics, limited Department Manager autonomy, an unstandardized donation process, low incentives for donating, and—to some extent—low staff capacity. This left some Associates anxious, apathetic, or frustrated about the Fresh Rescue Program.
- **Many Associates wanted more frequent donation pickups to minimize the amount of food that is composted or thrown away.** However, most Donation Partners have limited capacity themselves, and thus can only pick up donations once or twice a week. Additionally, Associates wanted more transparency about and communication with their stores’ Donation Partners.
- **Associates noted that they must improvise and innovate to make donations fit within the already-crowded existing store layouts** (which varies across stores), leading to inconveniences, inefficiency, and confusion, and thus reduced donations.
- **Associates often had a difficult time deciding what foods were eligible for donation**, particularly those without date labels. On one hand, Associates want to give Donation Partners food that is safe, fresh, and appealing; on the other hand, they are committed to the stores’ top priority of selling the highest quality products for maximum profit. Associates pointed out that prioritizing donations in the context of a for-profit business is paradoxical, and noted that it would be helpful to have clearer guidance on what items may be donated versus sold.

Focusing on the insights that we, the research team, and the Champions could have the most impact on, we selected four to transform into “How Might We...?” opportunity questions. How Might We’s reframe insights and allow us to identify opportunities for potential interventions. Each question doesn’t necessarily align with any single insight, but rather draws from ideas we observed in multiple insights.

- How might we **ensure the communication Associates receive about food donation goals and priorities is both clear and consistent?**
- How might we **make the food donation process more collaborative, easy, and fun** so donations are more of a priority alongside other shrink management approaches?
- How might we **create food donation evaluation criteria that incorporate food safety and quality standards, donation partner priorities, and Associates’ professional experience?**
- How might we **create interactive, responsive, and safe spaces for Associates to learn about and provide ongoing feedback and input on food donations?**

Ideation

In October 2023, we met with Champions to brainstorm interventions to address the How Might We questions (outlined above). During the session, we challenged them to brainstorm as many ideas as possible, prioritizing quantity over quality. For example, in one activity, we had Associates draw as many ideas as possible in a two-minute period. In another, we asked Champions to imagine how they would create solutions if they were addressing the How Might We through the perspective of well-known organizations (e.g., Nike, Ben and Jerry’s), celebrities and characters (e.g., Michael Jordan, Cinderella), and situational prompts (e.g., What if we had unlimited resources? What if we were in the year 3023?)

Through the ideation process, the Champions and research team created over 400 ideas. The Champions then voted to gradually narrow down to five ideas, using criteria they created for prioritization. These five ideas would then be built out in the next phase of the project:

- Develop a **direct, hands-on training program** for the Fresh Rescue Program
- Create clear and specific **donation guidelines**
- Build **relationships between Associates and Donation Partners**
- Create a **program that incentivizes Associates to donate food**
- Establish a **means for Associates to communicate and provide feedback** about the Fresh Rescue Program

On the surface, the first two ideas may seem similar to Fresh Rescue initiatives already underway, but the Champions made clear that more work was needed in these areas. While these strategies may not seem completely novel or ground-breaking, the innovation lies within how each idea was prototyped and tested, taking on forms reflective of the true needs of the Champions and other Associates.



Additional Ideas for Consideration

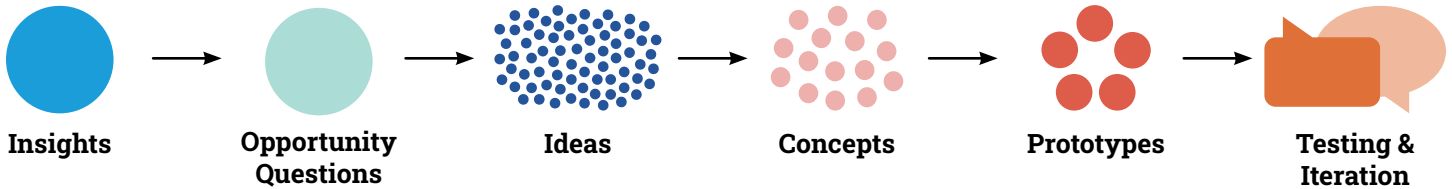
Although we only chose five ideas to move forward due to team capacity, the Champions were also enthusiastic about others, which could be valuable for future strategy development. Some examples include:

- More specific communication-related ideas such as establishing regular one-on-one and/or group meetings between Associates and leadership to discuss the donation process or developing a website or suggestion box for Associate feedback and ideas
- Designing standardized bins and containers for donation
- Creating designated areas for storing donations
- Holding an annual donation gala or showcase
- Designing a book of tips, tricks, and recipes to reduce waste and improve donations
- Planning a campaign with celebrity spokespeople to promote the Fresh Rescue Donation Program
- Developing an AI system to assess the quality of potential donated foods

Prototype Development

In November 2023, at our next meeting with the Champions, we focused on further developing our prototypes. The Champions fleshed out the details (who, what, when, and where) and potential features of each of the five ideas, using activities such as storyboarding, card sorting, and sticky note brainstorming.

After the prototyping session, we summarized the Champions' input to begin creating first drafts of each prototype.



What are prototypes?

In Design Research, a prototype is a model or activity created to test the desirability, usability, and/or feasibility of a concept or idea. Prototypes vary based on the details or features being tested and may not look like the final product.

Prototype Testing by the Numbers

12 Store visits
3 rounds of testing with each of the 4 study stores

24 Conversations with Champions

25+ Conversations with Store Directors, Receivers, and other Associates

09 Conversations with Donation Partners

Prototype Testing

In January and February 2024, we tested each prototype's feasibility, usability, and desirability by conducting multiple rounds of interviews with Champions, other Associates, Store Directors, Donation Partners, and Albertsons corporate leadership. After each round of testing, we used the feedback to update each prototype and inform the next round of testing.

Based on the feedback we received during prototype testing, we developed four concrete strategies and one recommendation to help improve food donation (and reduce food waste) at Albertsons stores.



FINAL STRATEGIES

The following outlines each of the four strategies co-designed and tested by the research team and Champions.

Strategy 1: Conduct New Trainings for the Fresh Rescue Donation Program

The Champions recommend that Albertsons conduct new trainings about the Fresh Rescue Donation Program for all employees at all levels, to ensure alignment of communication, expectations, and processes. Champions felt strongly that hands-on trainings would be most effective in building knowledge and engagement among Department Managers and Operations Specialists. At other levels, virtual training may be sufficient.

“We definitely need training... It’s good that we all know. If you don’t inform everybody and everybody’s working toward it, it doesn’t happen. It [will] always be an uphill battle.”

– Department Manager

We created preliminary curricula for eight training programs adapted to the needs of District, Division, and National corporate leadership, Operation Specialists, Store Directors, Department Managers, Receivers, and Cashiers/Courtesy Clerks. The trainings cover:

- The importance of the Fresh Rescue Food Donation program
- Donation food safety and quality
- Food donation processes (and challenges)
- Donation incentives
- Strengthening connections with Donation Partners
- Overview of roles and responsibilities, and chain of command
- Including time and space for those being trained to ask questions and provide feedback

Further, the training program should prioritize strengthening the culture of donation at Albertsons by demonstrating leadership’s commitment to food donation and building Associate motivation and engagement.

To roll out the program, Albertsons will further develop the curricula and train those responsible for delivery, ideally using multiple modalities and engaging techniques.

The image displays three pages from a training outline document.
Page 1 (left): Titled 'Strategy 1: Conduct New Trainings for the Fresh Rescue Donation Program', it outlines the purpose of the training, key principles (e.g., strengthening culture, providing information, including time for questions), and delivery methods (e.g., hands-on, relevant information, video).
Page 2 (middle): Features a 'Training Hierarchy for the Fresh Rescue Donation Program Rollout' diagram showing roles from Receivers/Courtesy up to Department Managers. Below the diagram is a table of contents listing sections like 'L-Level Leadership Training' and 'L-Level Corporate Management Training' with corresponding page numbers.
Page 3 (right): Focuses on 'L-Level: Department Manager Training', detailing objectives such as reviewing guidelines, emphasizing connections between donation partners, and reviewing the chain of command. It also includes a 'Table of Contents' for this specific section.

Figure 1. A sampling of the training outline document

**Strategy 2:
Utilize Updated Donation Guidelines with Posters and Detailed Handouts**

To standardize information about the Fresh Rescue Donation Program within departments and across stores, the Champions recommend that Albertsons hang posters in each department with department-specific donation guidelines. Each department should also keep detailed donation guidelines available for reference.

Building on Albertsons' earlier materials, we created new Posters and Detailed Handouts that respond to the Associates' nuanced questions and concerns about department-specific donation rules (e.g., Which cakes may be donated, and how long may they be refrigerated and/or frozen before pickup?) and the process for donating (e.g., Should items be scanned before or after being placed on the reduced-price rack?).

The Guideline Posters provide simplified overviews of donation guidelines and processes in a format that is relevant to each department, and are intended for use on a daily basis.

The Detailed Handouts are more comprehensive and are intended for use as a reference tool for complex or unusual questions about how to determine if a product should be donated, and donation procedures.

“If I could, I would just educate everybody and say, look, this is what Fresh Rescue is all about. If we put that kind of effort into it, it will make this program really, really run. People like being a part of stuff.”
— Champion

Fresh Rescue Food Donation Program
DONATING DELI ITEMS

ITEM TYPE	TIMING	STORAGE
1 Items prepared in-store with vinegar, dairy, or fresh ingredients	Picked up within 24 hours past the date label.	Store at 41° F or less while awaiting pickup. Do not freeze.
2 Pre-packaged shelf-stable items	Picked up within 7 days past the date label.	Store at room temperature while awaiting pickup.
3 Deli meat and cheese, hot and cold proteins made and packaged in-store	Picked up or frozen within 24 hours past the date label.	Store at 41° F or less if pickup is within 24 hours. Otherwise freeze them.

Items prepared in-store without vinegar, dairy, or fresh ingredients
Pre-packaged refrigerated items

Recovery Programs: Follow protocol for recovery programs (such as rotisserie chicken into shredded chicken) before donating. If a recovered item (like shredded chicken) did not sell, it can be donated.

Vendor/Warehouse Credit: Always check if an item can receive credit before donating it. Do not rescann items as "Donation" after they have been scanned for credit.

Mispicks: Donate mispick items that meet these guidelines.

DO NOT DONATE ITEMS IF THEY ARE:

- Discolored, moldy, or contains bugs
- Leaking fluid
- Damaged or soiled*
- Irregular or bad odor
- Not in original or store-made packaging*
- Refrigerated items not stored properly at 41° F
- Missing product code or date label*
- Involved in a recall

*Individually wrapped items from a damaged package can be donated and do not need their own date labels.

For more detailed donation guidelines, please see the detailed Fresh Rescue Donation Guidelines Handout.

Additional Guidance

Vendor/Warehouse Credit: If an item can receive credit, ensure it does. If the credit has been received and it is ok with it being donated, then the item may "Donation" after it has been scanned for credit. If not, it cannot be donated.

Recovery programs: If an item can be recovered (shredded chicken or chicken salad), then do that recovered or there is already a large stock of the product is a recovered item, like it was first another product for sale, but did not sell and it is donated.

Mispicks: Mispick items (such as brand name) store but sold at other Albertsons banner stores) donated.

Please DO donate:

Item type	Storage requirements
Items prepared in-store with fresh ingredients, dairy-based ingredients, or vinegar This includes: • Salads • Sandwiches • Mayo-based salads and dressings	Must be picked up within 24 hours past the date label. Store at 41° F or less while awaiting pickup. These items cannot be frozen due to diminished quality.
Items prepared in-store without fresh ingredients, dairy-based ingredients, or vinegar This includes: • Olives packaged in-store • Flatbreads and pizzas	
Pre-packaged refrigerated items This includes: • Hummus, dips, and spreads	Must be picked up or frozen within 24 hours past the date label.

Please do NOT donate items if they are:

- Moldy or contain bugs/insects
- Give off an irregular or bad odor
- Discolored
- Leaking fluid
- However, you may donate frozen items that have the potential to leak when thawed, because frozen items will remain frozen after they are donated.
- Involved in a recall
- A refrigerated item that has not been stored at 41° F or less or has been stored outside of refrigeration for more than 4 hours
- Packaging is expanded/bloated
- Packaging is damaged or soiled to where it is opened and the food is or could be compromised
- For products that contain a bag inside a box: If the outer box has been damaged or opened but the bag inside is still intact, you can donate it.
- For products that contain individually wrapped items: If the outer package has been opened or damaged, but the individually wrapped items are still intact, you can donate them.
- Not in their original or store-made packaging
- Usually have a product and/or date label or code but it is missing
 - For individually packaged items that come in a larger box: the date may be listed on the box. It is still okay to donate if individually packaged items do not have a date as long as the date is listed on the larger box.

[See next page for additional guidelines]

Figure 2. Example of Donations Poster (Deli Department)

Figure 3. Example of Detailed Handout (Deli Department)

**Strategy 3:
Strengthen Connections between Donation Partners, Associates, and Stores**

Throughout this project, the Champions and other Associates emphasized their lack of knowledge about their stores’ Donation Partners, and the Champions reiterated the impact of learning about where donated food went after it left the stores. With this in mind, this strategy cultivates an engaging relationship between Donation Partners and Associates, enhances the donation culture in stores, improves transparency in the donation process, and encourages store Associates at all levels to actively participate in the Fresh Rescue program. This strategy consists of (a) three opportunities for Associates to learn about Donation Partners and (b) an onboarding form for new Donation Partners. In addition to Associates, at least one of each study store’s Donation Partners reviewed and provided input during the testing and development of this strategy.

(A) Donation Partner Learning Opportunities

- **(i) Paid Immersive Training with Donation Partners:** Department Managers and/or other key Associates in charge of food donation would receive a fixed number of paid training hours per year designated for on-site training at one of their store’s Donation Partner’s locations (e.g., food bank, food pantry, or other distribution site). The immersive training could include activities such as assisting with pantry set-up, unloading food from donors, food distribution, and/or clean up.
- **(ii) In-Store Teach-In:** To build Associate understanding of Donation Partners’ missions, operations, and impact, Donation Partners would visit stores and deliver brief 15 to 20 minute presentations to Department Managers and other Associates twice per year. This presentation would increase the reach of the strategy to Associates who are not eligible to complete the Paid Immersive Training opportunity, and would allow all Associates the time to ask questions and gain thorough understanding of where their store is donating food.
- **(iii) In-Store Customer-Facing Event:** Donation Partners would host customer-facing tables or booths in the front of stores at least twice per year. The tables would provide information about the organization and how they collaborate with the store, helping to build understanding of community needs and strengthen buy-in for donations among both Associates and customers.

“This kind of event would have a positive impact and demonstrate what the company does for the community and can improve value in the job. I would make sure as many associates as possible can interact with the Donation Partners at their table.”
— Store Director

(B) Donation Partner Onboarding Form

This form fills a gap by collecting standardized information from all Donation Partners at the time of onboarding. The form serves as an acknowledgment of food safety protocols and gathers information including food preferences, pick-up schedules, and interest and willingness to participate in in-store events and host Immersive Trainings.

Background Information

Your organization's name: _____
 Organization's mailing address: _____
 Qualified 501(c)(3)? Yes No
 Primary point of contact: Name: _____ Email: _____ Phone number: _____
 Preferred mode(s) of communication: Email Text Phone Call
 Delivery driver: Name: _____ Phone number: _____

Available days and times for pickup:

Day	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
Time							

Donation Preferences

Please indicate which of the following items you accept (check all that apply):

Product	✓	Reason for not accepting (if applicable)
Floral arrangements, plants, gardening items		
Vitamins		
Over the counter medicine (ibuprofen, cough medicine, etc.)		
Pet products (refrigerated/un-refrigerated pet food, pet toys, pet shampoo, etc.)		
Home, health, and beauty products		
Baby products (formula, diapers, etc.)		
Food items without a label (e.g. Date label is hard to read, was removed or is not present)		
Yogurt parfaits		
Seafood items		

Would you be willing to hold a brief information session with employees at our stores to showcase your organization's positive impact on the community and discuss opportunities to improve donations?
 Yes, I'm interested Maybe, I'd like to learn more No, thank you

If yes, please indicate your preferred day(s) and time(s) for the session:

Figure 4. Donation Partner Onboarding Form

Strategy 4: Run a Donation Incentive Contest

To build engagement in and motivation for donating, the Champions prioritized a Donation Incentive Contest. The contest uses structured and clearly communicated incentives to solidify behavior change for Department Managers and other Associates involved in the food donation process. The Champions recommended running the Incentive Contest at least for the first 12 months of the re-rollout of the Fresh Rescue Donation Program; after 12 months, it may be possible to taper down the contest or gradually remove it altogether.

During the contest, Department Managers will identify weekly donation goals in communication with their Operation Specialists. If all but two departments in a store meet their weekly donation goal, the store earns a point. Based on Associate feedback, we recommended testing two models by which stores could win: based on receiving points each week in a quarter (highest number of points wins); or based on receiving points for 12 consecutive weeks, regardless of the quarter cycle. Stores that win would receive recognition, as well as pizza parties or other incentives (e.g., in-store coupons, other free food from outside vendors).

“You gotta have fun with it! Need to make people feel appreciated and that everyone plays a part.”
— Department Manager

Recommendation:

Enhance Communications and Feedback Mechanisms

Open, clear, timely, and accessible communication and information are important to the success of all aspects of the Fresh Rescue Program. Improving communication and feedback will also benefit other aspects of Associates’ work, with impacts on overall store effectiveness.

The Champions and other Albertsons Associates described numerous challenges related to communication and feedback, such as difficulty getting clear information about donations, untimely responses to their questions or requests regarding food donation policies and processes, and limited opportunities for and receptivity to their ideas, input, and feedback, both in their jobs in general and with regards to food donation policies and processes.

Associates also recognized that improving communication in a massive company such as Albertsons is difficult, in part because of the need to standardize operations and information dissemination protocols. That said, Associates noted that developing and maintaining thorough communication systems in the Fresh Rescue Program could be a model for other Albertsons programs and operations.

Perhaps the most important lesson from this project overall is that Albertsons Associates bring a wealth of expertise and insight to their work, which is not being fully utilized. Improving communications and feedback loops would enable the company to learn from and leverage Associate expertise. Our team decided that rather than creating a separate strategy focused on communication, as originally intended, there was greater benefit to wrapping in good communication as a necessary component of all strategies and as a broader recommendation for Albertsons to utilize in practices beyond Fresh Rescue.

Thus, beyond the communication improvements specific to each strategy, we also recommend prioritizing the following principles related to communication and feedback:

- **Supporting a culture of ongoing, interactive, communication and feedback.** Culture shifts may be partly shaped by top-down messaging indicating a leadership priority of welcoming and responding to Associate input and helping Associates feel safe in sharing input without fear of recourse. Dissemination of the Champion-developed strategies may also demonstrate that Associates’ ideas and expertise are valued.
- **Developing clear processes, spaces/opportunities, and points of contact** for Associates to raise questions, share ideas and input, provide feedback, and ensure accountability, responsiveness, and follow through;
- **Providing Associates with access to appropriate and accessible technology** (e.g., phones, iPads, computers) to enable ongoing and timely communication and feedback (including an option for anonymity).

NEXT STEPS

Finalizing Materials and Pilot Testing

While the content of each strategy is finalized, some additional materials and details (training materials, additional graphics for posters, and some logistical details) need to be developed prior to piloting. Once those are completed, we recommend rigorous pilot testing to assess effectiveness and implementation of each strategy, to determine effects on the amount and quality of donations, and to gain insight into adaptations that may be needed in different contexts. The strategies were developed to be implemented together as a package (see below). We recommend piloting the strategies in a variety of stores (e.g., stores from each of top 10 banners; mix of high and low volume stores; urban, suburban, and rural stores; stores that are currently donating more or less).

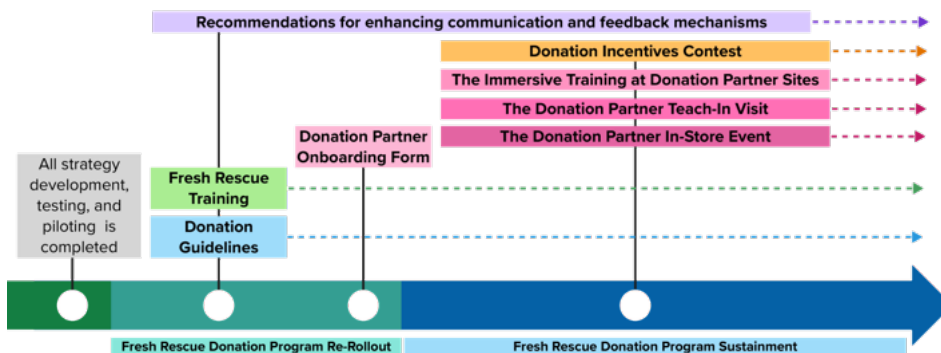


Figure 5. General timeline for strategy implementation

Wide Scale Implementation

Using knowledge gained from pilot testing, strategies may be rolled out across all Albertsons banner stores. It will be important to collect data before, during, and after implementation to evaluate and improve the implementation process, and to document the Fresh Rescue Program's impacts on donation and other outcomes. Further, evaluation research may help Albertsons untangle the separate impacts of the strategies themselves, and the employee-engaged processes used to develop them.

Maintaining Worker-Centered Approach in Future Work

We strongly recommend that Albertsons' implementation of all strategies presented here and in the future centrally involve store-level workers' input, perspectives, opinions, and repeated feedback. The research process and resulting strategies presented here would not have been possible without the expertise of the Champions at every stage. This worker-centered approach is both innovative and effective, resulting in uniquely tailored results and interventions that non-workers simply cannot generate. We further encourage other retailers to adopt worker-centric research processes and strategy development, which stand to result in improved ecological and economic outcomes. It is important to note that worker-centric projects require creating an environment of collaboration, trust, and cheer to maximize employees' willingness to contribute with honesty. Leadership might consider hiring external facilitators to lead research sessions with store-level employees.

The Impact of the Project on the Fresh Rescue Champions

This project had a profound impact on the participating Champions, both in terms of how they understand wasted and donated food and how they view their role as changemakers in the company. Throughout the process, the Champions shared sentiments about how they appreciated the chance to share their unfiltered opinions without worrying that their words may be misconstrued by corporate leadership. Many Champions described the project as fun and exciting, and said they enjoyed the chance to take part in the sessions outside their stores at MICA's campus. At the end of the project, Champions shared sentiments about how fulfilling this project was and how they feel hopeful for the future of food donation at Albertsons.

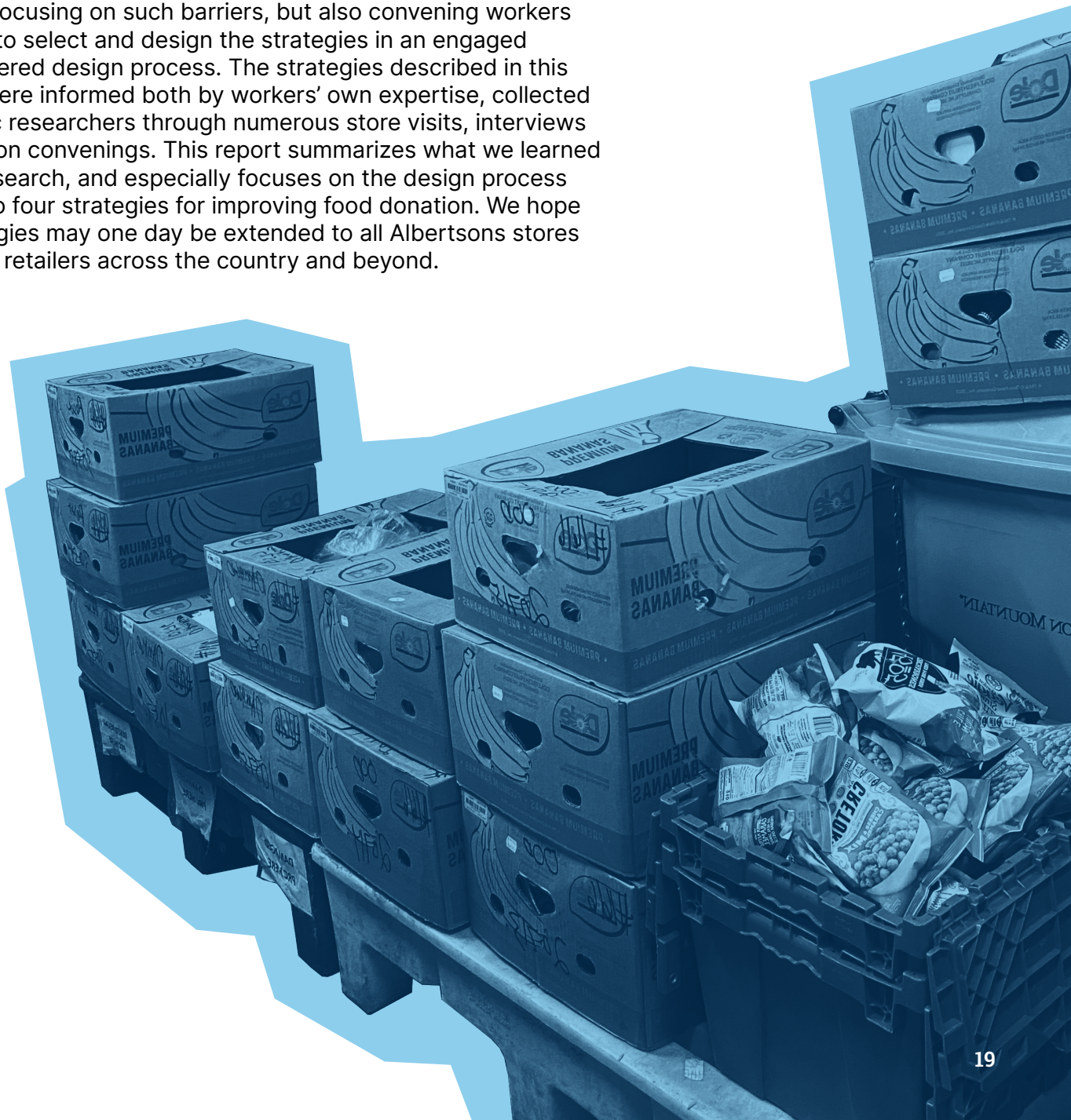
"I think everybody feels the energy . . . I think everybody is excited to be a part of something. In 25 years, this is probably one of the biggest, most exciting things that I've been involved in . . . We gotta leave our kids with something. And we can wait for somebody else to fix it or we can take the initiative and do it. I think we are in a position for change and I think we can do that."

– Champion

CONCLUSION

Over the course of a year, 10 frontline Associates from Albertsons banner stores across the Mid-Atlantic joined with researchers from the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) and Johns Hopkins University (JHU) to design food donation strategies informed by the needs and concerns of retail workers.

Across the Albertsons chain, approximately 80 million pounds of food were donated in 2022 (Albertsons Companies, 2023, p. 18), yet there remains the potential to waste less and donate more. Success in mobilizing this massive shift will depend on the workers tasked with the everyday decisions about what food should be donated and manually separating the food for donation pickup. Few, if any, food rescue programs are designed to address the specific barriers prioritized by frontline workers. This project breaks new ground by not only focusing on such barriers, but also convening workers themselves to select and design the strategies in an engaged human-centered design process. The strategies described in this document were informed both by workers' own expertise, collected by academic researchers through numerous store visits, interviews and Champion convenings. This report summarizes what we learned from that research, and especially focuses on the design process leading up to four strategies for improving food donation. We hope these strategies may one day be extended to all Albertsons stores and to other retailers across the country and beyond.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Fresh Rescue Champions Project has been a collective and collaborative effort.

First and foremost, we want to recognize the Fresh Rescue Champions. At the core of this project is our commitment to centering and uplifting the lived experience and expertise of Albertsons' Associates and they have been the heart of this collective endeavor. Bobby, Charles, Dave, Don, Erin, Hayden, Kelly, Kenitta, Kevin, and Kim have put their hearts into this project. They have been the experts, co-researchers, and co-designers on this project. Among them collectively is over two centuries of professional expertise in retail supermarket business. They know every detail, every item, every process and policy in their departments and stores and have shared generously and with tremendous professionalism, all on top of their very demanding jobs. Even more, their heartfelt commitment to food donations—and to the impact they have on their communities and on the environment—is reflected in the passion and thoughtfulness they've put into evolving the strategies they've proposed for improving the program. There are too many other Albertsons Associates across ACME and Safeway to list here who also contributed their input, advice, ideas, and time to this project. The insights and ideas shared herein are richer because of their contributions.

The research team from JHU and MICA has been a true dream team across anthropology, design, and public health. We could not have asked for more fearless and phenomenal team leaders in Kaitlyn Harper and Steffanie Espat who have kept this complex project moving and organized, have kept us all focused and motivated, and have remained unwavering in their commitment and attention to detail, all while maintaining such thoughtfulness, goodness, and humor. Thank you to our tireless JHU and MICA student research fellows—Alice, Ana, Dipthi, Eli, Jordan, and Yaseer—for reminding us that the future will be brighter (and less wasteful) in your hands.

We are also grateful to our trusted partners at Albertsons—especially Suzanne, John, James, and Joe—for their openness and willingness to embark on this collective journey with us. It's not common to have a large corporate retailer so willing to open their doors to us, provide direct access to their employees, share data, share policies and processes, share challenges and aspirations, and share with other retailers in the spirit of a greater good. We're grateful for your receptivity to the Champions ideas and for your commitment to advancing them. Thank you also to Bill, Fred, Joan, and Kurt, the Store Directors from the four participating banner stores who provided us access and time for our many store visits throughout the project.

We would be remiss not to express gratitude to the many Donation Partners who make the food donation process possible, and particularly to those who shared their wisdom with us throughout the duration of this project, including Maryland Food Bank, Food Bank of Delaware, Deeds of Faith Food Pantry, Westminster Rescue Mission, The Door, and Rose Hill Community Center. Visiting, seeing, and learning about their experience, challenges, and ideas not only informed our research but also was deeply moving and inspiring for us and for the Champions. The herculean tasks they perform daily, oftentimes while relying on limited funds and volunteer personnel, to make available much-needed food for people experiencing food insecurity is a testament to their commitment, kindness, and professionalism.

Last but certainly not least, thank you to the National Science Foundation (NSF), for their generous support. This work was supported in part by [NSF Grant # 2115405](#) SRS RN: Multiscale RECIPES (Resilient, Equitable, and Circular Innovations with Partnership and Education Synergies) for Sustainable Food Systems. And **thanks to our many amazing colleagues and friends in the RECIPES network for their encouragement, inspiration, and support—we couldn't imagine converging with a better community.**

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